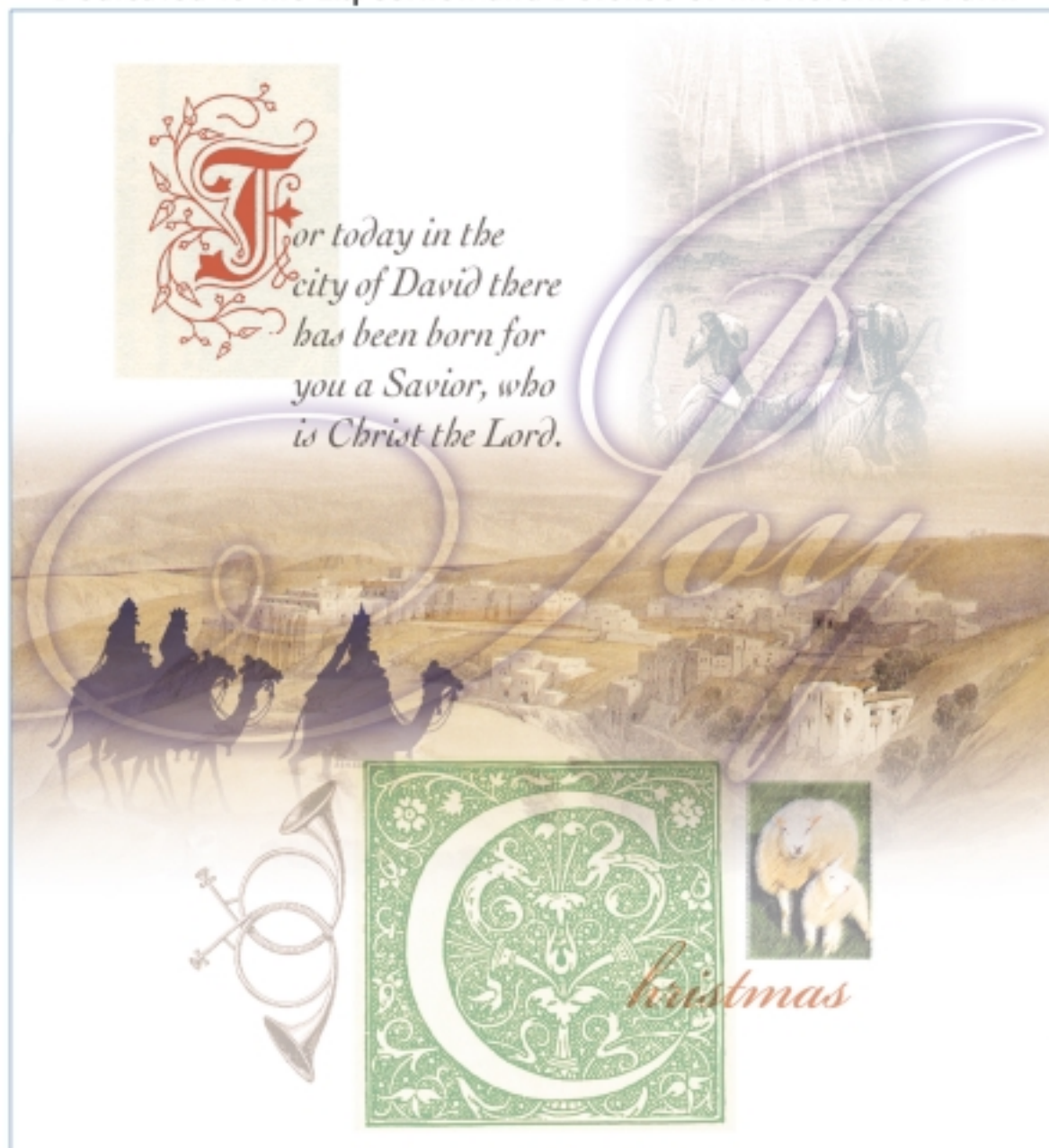


December 2005 • Volume 55 • Issue 11

The Outlook

Dedicated to the Exposition and Defense of the Reformed Faith



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- Grace to You and Peace
- The Virgin Mary
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"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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Christmas - Glory and Shame

In the midst of the perennial debate about whether the church ought to set aside a special day to celebrate the birth of our Lord, one finds some interesting statements. It is often remarked that the early church did not celebrate Christmas” But I recently read an addition to that: “*they were too ashamed.*”

Unfortunately, as historical research often goes, it is difficult to verify that statement. But it would be quite understandable if this were true.

Christmas, indeed, ought to shame us. It certainly does show the incredible glory of God – who is not only the author of the miracle of salvation, but who comes Himself to rescue us – but that glory is precisely also our shame. God Himself had to come to this earth. None of the angels, though they are mighty beings, could endure carrying the eternal wrath our sins deserve. No creature could have this kind of love – where the One who is first grieved becomes the victim all over again and must love those who are His enemies with a mind-boggling sacrifice.

The Impossible Made Possible

The riches of Christmas are first of all a challenge to our own utter poverty. We were in such terrible straits no one less than God in His unfathomable ways of mercy and grace could save us (Isaiah 55:7-9).

The very birth of our Savior at-tests to this and ought to humble

us. He is born without the help of a man, born from a virgin. There is glory there – but also shame.

The miraculous birth of our Lord is a climax in a long history of similar miracles. Earlier there is another birth in the same vein – that of John the Baptist. He is born to parents who had no hope of receiving a child and were “well along in years” (Luke 1:7).

This has to be seen in light of the old covenant, where fertility in land and home was due to the LORD’s favor, while sterility and miscarriage was a divine punishment or chastisement upon sin and disobedience. Such were the contours of the old covenant. It was a concrete demonstration that sin and disobedience bring death and sterility, and mankind is powerless to address these consequences. Those who sin do not have the power to rescue themselves – for sin leads to death in all of its facets. Sin enslaves and its grip is iron.

God breaks through this sterility. He does it in the birth of Samson, one of the shadows of Christ. “You are sterile and childless, but you are going to conceive and have a son” (Judges 13:4). Where man has no hope, God brings hope. Where man is pow-

erless, God remains powerful. Samson’s entire life is a testimony to the God who is greater than the sin of His people. We see the same thing in the birth of the herald – John the Baptist. The dead end of our sin is no dead end for God.

And we see it *par excellence* with the birth of our Lord. Now not even a couple is involved. No man makes any contribution at all. It is a sign that God alone is at work with a grace that truly is sovereign. “With God nothing is impossible” the angel said to Mary. We need to see that truth stamped on the entire life of Christ – not only His birth, but also His death. From a human perspective, Jesus may seem to only another failed Jewish rebel, a good teacher who went just a bit too far. But in Him, God came to the aid of those who are at the end of their ropes.

This, however, needs to be our confession. We cannot treat the encouragement that “with God nothing is impossible” by itself, as if it were a nice reassurance and all will be fine. It demands a corollary: the confession that we are in over our heads and that things, indeed, are impossible for us. Not just unlikely, or difficult--but impossible.

Do we see it and confess it?

***The One who is first grieved becomes the victim
all over again and must love those who are His
enemies with a mind-boggling sacrifice.***

How Great Our Need

It is impossible for us to deal with our own sin. They are no mere mistakes that can be rubbed out and replaced (even if we could do otherwise). We have acted treacherously and arrogantly towards the glorious God. It is one thing to swat a fly; another to take the life of a pet; and something far more serious to murder an unborn child. But we have raised our fists against the Most High God! The curse of God, an inescapable punishment, is justly ours. It is impossible for us, on our own, to love God, though there could be no one more worthy of our love. We hate the very life-style we are to love, and love the life-style we are to hate. It is impossible for us to escape the deceitfulness of sin and the deception of the devil. Perhaps we can fool ourselves with things that are called “the betterment of society.” But no man can change his nature anymore than a leopard can change his spots (Jeremiah 13:23).

It was Martin Luther who said the incarnation consists of two miracles: first, that God became man; the second, that the heart of man should believe this. Not simply because the incarnation is something difficult for our minds, but because it is difficult for our hearts. We are so dead(!) set against the LORD that left to ourselves we would spurn the offer of his grace. We are of the darkness and we hate the light. That is the shame we must confess. Will you confess you need nothing short of a miracle?

God Provides the Impossible

But there is more! God has provided! The virgin birth declares it so wonderfully! With God nothing is impossible!

It is good to connect Christmas with Good Friday and Easter. We need to do that and fight against the false gospel that sees merely a baby in a manger. Christ was born *to die*, to die for me. But yet we can still be too simplistic. We can speak of things such as the forgiveness of sins far too easily and far too generally.

The promises of Christ, all of them, from forgiveness to eternal glory, are something miraculous! To see them as anything less than miracles is to fail to see them for what they are.

The test of whether or not you see the child in the manger aright is whether or not you have put your whole weight upon the God who comes to do what no man can do, detesting any righteousness or goodness you might claim in yourself. The very nature of the birth of our Lord is a radical call to consider your own strength and wisdom as rubbish and live out of God’s incomparably mighty power alone. With me, all things are impossible, but with God they are not! – both when it comes to the guilt of sin and the power of sin. It means that as we struggle against sin and as we deal with the sin of others, we daily flee from our own approach, denying our “natural” reactions, and diligently seek the purity, love, and humility that are given in Christ. And we trust that, in Christ, God is already doing what is impos-

sible – making those who were dead alive, alive to righteousness and to Him.

It is the age-old sin of pride. The world has turned Christmas into a lukewarm sentimental festival of good will. It cannot face the challenge of Christ. It will not admit that it needs Him. It will not heed the call of Immanuel, first proclaimed by a young woman in the time of King Ahaz, to turn from reliance upon human strength and to trust in the God who is with us.

It is our danger, too. What keeps us from truly enjoying Christmas? What allows our celebration to turn into some superficial worldly party? Our own pride.

First, see and confess the shame. Weep and mourn. Then there will be joy and glory!

Rev. Marc Jagt is the pastor of the Canadian Reformed Church in Nepean, Ontario, Canada.

We Confess

An Exposition & Application of the Belgic Confession

Article 28: Of the Communion of the Saints

When we look at the ecclesiastical landscape of our time is it any wonder that the Church has lost its relevance to modern man? With scandals involving money, sex, and power; with its meddling in the realm of political agendas; and with its irrelevant message of “don’t drink, don’t smoke, and don’t go with girls that do,” why are we surprised? The visible church is a mess.

Nevertheless, we, as historically conscious, confessional Protestants, believe that Christ has created a visible Church, that is, a congregation of those whom the Lord has redeemed. To say this in our Christian “culture,” though, either elicits the response, “I agree, I’m a member of the invisible Church,” or, “I don’t need the Church because I have a personal relationship with Jesus.”

As we said in our last article, while Christ does save individual sinners, He does so in order to bring them into communion with His Body, the Church. We not only confess, “I believe a holy catholic Church,” but also, “the communion of saints.” The Church, then, is central to God’s redemptive plan, and therefore needs to be central to our Christian faith and Christian life. “But the Church is full of hypocrites.” That is exactly for whom the Lord died and why *you* need to be there!

Here we want to examine briefly Article 28 of our Belgic Confession of Faith. In one of the more strongly-worded articles, the meaning of the phrase “the communion of saints” (Apostles’ Creed) is explained in order to place before us and the world, the necessity of Christ’s Church here on earth.

Outside the Church There is No Salvation

Article 28 opens with the shocking statement, “We believe, since this holy congregation [mentioned in Article 27] is an assembly of those who are saved, and outside of it there is no salvation...” Yet what sounds shocking and “Catholic” to our ears was simply the received language of the Church and affirmed by our Protestant forefathers. This opening phrase of the Belgic Confession was the common way of speaking about the visible Church among the Reformers.

For example, in 1561 Theodore Beza was the chief spokesman for the Reformed churches of France at the Colloquy of Poissy, which was intended to unite the divided Roman and Protestant churches in the Kingdom of France. In debating on the necessity of reforming the church in France in terms of “restoring the ruins of Jerusalem,” Beza confessed the Reformed churches’ belief in the Church, which was “the company and community of the saints and without which there could be no salvation.”

What is so illuminating for us who live in an anti-ecclesiastical culture is that the phrase “outside the church there is no salvation” (Latin, *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*) was never rejected by Reformers. So where did this phrase come from? It is commonly said to have been first penned by Cyprian, bishop of Carthage (200-258). Yet, even before Cyprian wrote this phrase, Origen, in his sermon on the story of Rahab, said, “Let no one deceive himself. Outside this house, that is, outside the Church, no one is saved (Latin, *extra ecclesiam, nemo salvatur*). If anyone goes outside, he is responsible for his own death.” The circumstances and intent of Origen’s words are not clear to scholars, unlike those of Cyprian.

The events leading up to Cyprian’s claim were some of the most volatile in the early church. During the serious persecution of Christians in Rome and North Africa under Caesar Decius in 250 A.D., many Christians renounced their faith and purchased a *libellus*, an official document saying they had offered sacrifice to Caesar as Lord.

After this brief period of persecution Cyprian delivered an address entitled *On the Lapsed* in June 251. In it he said no human could forgive the apostasy of those who renounced their faith; only God could. He later softened his view and agreed with Cornelius, bishop of Rome, that if these apostates repented they could be received back into the church.

This led to serious opposition by Novatian, a presbyter in the church in Rome who set himself up as bishop of Rome. He and his primary

follower, Novatus, claimed that they were the true church. The Novatian sect, then, drew a large following during the ensuing years. The next great issue was what to do with those of the Novatian sect who desired to return to the Church? To this question Cyprian set his pen to write and said that since there is no salvation outside the Church, those who were baptized in a Novatian church had to be rebaptized.

During this time, Cyprian saw the nature of the church being an institution. In distinguishing the church from the Novatian sect he pointed to the succession of bishops from Peter to Cornelius to prove the Novatians were outside the Faith. Another of his famous sayings was that “the church is in the bishop” (Latin, *ecclesia in episcopo*) because the bishop defines the church and guarantees the orthodoxy of the church.

For Cyprian and his stress on the importance of the bishop, “Outside the church there is no salvation” meant “outside the bishop of Rome, there is no salvation.” And his phrase, “You cannot have God for your father unless you have the Church for your mother” had the same meaning: the church traced to Rome is the mother of the faithful and all in fellowship with Rome are her children.

So what did the Beza, the Reformers, and the Belgic Confession mean when they said “outside the church there is no salvation?” Certainly they reinterpreted this phrase to mean something other than “outside the Roman Church there was no salvation.”

As Reformed Christians we mean that salvation is found in the Church, but the Church that Christ established, with the pure preaching of the Word, pure administration of the sacraments, and church discipline (which we will discuss in relation to Belgic Confession, Article 29).

What this means for us is this. We must keep a simple distinction in mind as we speak with non-Christians as well as non-Reformed Christian friends. This distinction is between the *ordinary* and *extraordinary* work of God. We must keep clear what God does and what God can do, or, what He has promised to do and what He has not.

The ordinary promised means by which God saves sinners is His visible Church because there is a necessary link between salvation in Christ and His body, the Church. To it was given the keys of the kingdom, the preaching of the Gospel and discipline (Matthew 16:18-19 cf. Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 83-85; Romans 10:14-17). To it those being saved were added daily (Acts 2:47). For it Christ died (Ephesians 5:25-27). For this reason the Church is described as the temple of God (1 Corinthians 3:16; Ephesians 2:11-22) and the mother of the faithful (Galatians 4:26).

God has ordained that salvation is offered for the world not at home, the beach, nor in the flock of a hireling (John 10:12, i.e. false Church);

therefore, salvation is available where Christ’s voice is heard. Christ is present in His fold, so that “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me” (John 10:27). To illustrate this, imagine that you wanted to buy a bike. The obvious place to go is the local bike shop. Certainly you would not go to the local bakery to buy a bike. In the same way, if you wanted to expose a non-Christian friend to salvation in Christ, there is a place where you are promised he will hear about it: the Church. You would not take your friend to the mall because Christ has not promised to save there.

So the distinction should be clear: extraordinarily God *can* save outside of His Church, but the point of this phrase is what God *has* promised to do. The Holy Spirit is sovereign, but He has been pleased to bind Himself to the particular means of the Church’s called, ordained, and sent preachers (Romans 10:14-17). This phrase, then, is not saying outside the Church no one will ever be saved or that no saved person is outside the Church, but it is pointing us to what Scripture clearly promises.

The Duty of Joining

For this reason, then, Article 28 continues, saying,

...no person of whatsoever state or condition he may be, ought to withdraw from it

Salvation is available where Christ’s voice is heard.

There are five duties listed in Article 28 in light of salvation being found in and through Christ's Church: joining, maintaining, submitting, bowing, and serving it.

[the Church], content to be by himself; but that all men are in duty bound to join and unite themselves with it; maintain the unity of the Church; submitting themselves to the doctrine and discipline thereof; bowing their necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ; and as mutual members of the same body, serving to the edification of the brethren, according to the talents God has given them.

There are five duties listed in Article 28 in light of salvation being found in and through Christ's Church: joining, maintaining, submitting, bowing, and serving it.

Joining

Those who are saved are brought into the community of the saved. As Scripture says, the members of Christ are brought into the Body of Christ (Acts 4:32; Romans 12:4-5; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31). The idea of "church membership" is assumed in the Bible because Christians belong to Christ and to each other. This is illustrated in that the Book of Life is the heavenly archetype of the earthly registers of members found in Scripture (Hebrews 12:23 cf. the lists in the books of Numbers and Chronicles; Psalms 87:4-6).

Second, salvation is in terms of the Lord adding a "countable" people to a definable group (Acts 2:41, 47,

3:4). And this number, the disciples, distinguished from "the rest" (Acts 4:23, 5:13). This is visibly signified in the sacraments of baptism, which is the crossing over the boundary of the world *into* the covenant community, and the Supper, which is the visible sign of maintaining communion in the community (Acts 2:41; 1 Corinthians 12:13, 10:16-22, 11:20-34).

Third, the pastors and elders of the church are to take heed to the flock of God (e.g., Acts 20:28). It is assumed that these leaders had no doubt as to whom those people were. In fact, there were even lists of Christian widows eligible for the church's benevolent ministry (1 Timothy 5:9). Finally, church discipline is described as effecting a change of status/relationship between an individual and the Church, and the Lord (1 Corinthians 5).

Maintaining

The members of Christ and His Body, then, are to "maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3). The peace that we have been given from God in our justification (Romans 5:1) is to affect us to passing that peace to each other as the family and household of God (Ephesians 2:19; 1 Timothy 3:15).

Submitting

Furthermore, as members we are to submit to the doctrine and discipline of Christ's Church (Hebrews

13:17). Notice that the Confession teaches that we commune together as Christians by submitting together in the Church. You are obligated, according to Scripture (1 Corinthians 9; Galatians 6:6ff), to care for the poor and to support the ministry of the Word, in its broadest sense, with your money reflective of what God has given you. You are obligated to support the work of Christ with the various gifts and talents God has given you (Romans 12; Ephesians 4) with your time and prayers, your fellowship and edifying words, even your admonitions for the love of the brother or sister who is departing from the way of the Lord.

Bowing

As servants of Christ we are also to bow under His yoke, which is "easy" (Matthew 11:30). What this means is that we are to be lifelong followers of Christ for He did not come to make converts, but disciples. We cannot be "content to be by [ourselves]," but we must be students in the school of Christ.

Serving

Finally, we commune together as Christians by serving in the Church (Ephesians 4:12, 16; 1 Corinthians 12:7, 27). As Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 55 says, "...each one must feel himself bound to use his gifts readily and cheerfully for the advantage and welfare of other members." This intimate fellowship and participation in things with others which the Creed expresses in the phrase "communion of saints" (Latin, *sanctorum communionem*; Greek, *hagion koinonian*), is vividly described in John Donne's "Meditation 17," which says in part,

Study/Application Questions for Article 28

1. How does our understanding of the statement, “Outside the church there is no salvation,” differ from Rome as well as non-Reformed evangelical Christians?
2. May a true Christian be a “lone ranger” in the world? (cf. Heb. 10:24-25)
3. The Confession of Faith speaks of the obligation of “joining” the visible church. Is this biblical? Is it necessary? Explain your answers.
4. What do the following metaphors for the Church teach us about membership in the Church? Vine/Branches (John 15), Shepherd/Sheep (John 10), Temple/Stones (1 Pet. 2), Body/Members (Rom. 12), Bride/Husband (Eph. 5).

...The church is Catholic, universal; so are all her actions; all that she does belongs to all. When she baptizes a child, that action concerns me; for that child is thereby connected to that body which is my head too, and ingrafted into that body whereof I am a member. And when she buries a man, that action concerns me...No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.

The Duty of Separating

As a result of joining the Church, the Christian necessarily separates himself from others, as Article 28 concludes, saying,

And that this may be more effectively observed, it is the duty of all believers, according to the Word of God, to separate themselves from all those who do not belong to the Church, and to join them-

selves to this congregation, wheresoever God has established it, even though the magistrates and edicts of princes were against it; yea, though they should suffer death or any other corporal punishment. Therefore all those who separate themselves from the same or do not join themselves to it act contrary to the ordinance of God.

We are called not only to union with each other, but separation from the world in the sense that we no longer live as the world wants us. The apostle powerfully conveyed this to the sinful congregation of Corinth, saying, “Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers...What agreement has the temple of God with idols...be separate from them...” (2 Corinthians. 6:14-16). For the glory of God we are obligated to live lives of separation and holiness. That means that we find no fellowship with the ungodly and

unbelievers *and*, as in times of apostasy and reformation, that we come out from among those who manifest themselves as belonging to the false church.

This part of Article 28, historically, is especially speaking of those who were called the “Nicodemites” during the Reformation. Named after Nicodemus who came to Jesus “by night” for fear of being put out of the synagogue (John 3:2 cf. 12:42), the Nicodemites were those mostly in France who claimed to be followers of the Reformers and the restored gospel, but who refused to leave the Roman Catholic Church for fear of “the magistrates and edicts of princes” and because they might “suffer death or any other corporal punishment.” In addressing them, our Confession shows the centrality of the Church of Christ to the faith and life of God’s people, and the world.

Rev. Daniel R. Hyde is the pastor of the Oceanside United Reformed Church in Oceanside, California.

“Grace to You and Peace”

It is that time of year again. With the Thanksgiving holiday behind us, we once more make the month long journey toward Christmas. For about thirty days, we see decorations on homes and businesses; we hear Christmas music in the grocery store; we get Starbucks coffee served in red cups; and we watch the mall reach its zenith as the epicenter for human activity in our communities. In the midst of the commercialism, craziness and comedown, however, most of us still manage to find time to enjoy some form of family tradition. Cards are sent, parties are attended, and pleasure is taken in watching the anticipation build in the hearts of our little ones.

Yet, for the Christian, there is much more to Christmas than both the materialism we chide and the memories we cherish. Christmas, of course, marks an annual remembrance of the greatest drama ever staged: the coming of the Son of God into the world in order to accomplish redemption on our behalf. It is a festive holiday that celebrates God’s promise of peace on earth. While ‘peace on earth’ is a slogan in our culture that gets a lot of mileage during the Christmas season, true peace on earth comes at a very high price. True peace must be made between God and man. This requires God’s justice to be satisfied. Without sin being dealt with, there can be no peace. Without the righteousness that God requires from the sinner, there can be no reconciliation.

The joy of Christmas comes from

knowing that God Himself has made that peace for everyone who believes. Jesus Christ paid the price for peace by coming in the form of a servant, living a life of perfect obedience to God’s law, and going to a Roman cross of shame to face the unmitigated wrath of God for every person He represented. This is the peace that was promised to our first parents, Adam and Eve, after the fall, that One would come to crush the Serpent’s head.

This is the peace proclaimed by the prophets, that Israel’s true deliverance would come through Immanuel. This is the peace that was announced to the shepherds by the heavenly host of angels. This is the peace that, as Paul says, is ours “since we have been justified by faith” (Romans 5.1). Peace that comes to us by grace alone, through faith alone, because of the work of Christ alone.

While believers now enjoy this peace because of Christ’s first advent, they will experience this peace in its fullest measure at Christ’s second advent. When the King returns, He will bring everlasting peace on earth as He ushers in the glory of the age to come. This present evil age, with all of its sorrow and suffering, will finally and forever come to an end for God’s people. In that day, “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away” (Revelation 21:4).

In the meantime, as those living between the two advents of Christ, we have the blessed privilege of hearing God’s salutation of peace whenever we gather together for worship. As God’s covenant people, we call upon His name in the invocation at the beginning of every worship service. In response, the Lord greets His people. As God’s ambassador, the minister raises his hands and – not with magical powers, but as a divinely appointed emissary – blesses the people with God’s blessing. God’s own words, such as those found in every one of Paul’s salutations, are used: “Grace to you and peace...”

Hearing these words at the beginning of every worship service, we are reminded that we are assembled together in the presence of God; we are reminded that God responds to the cry of His people; we are reminded that we are forever at peace with God. By these words “grace to you and peace” we are also able to look back to what Christ has done in His first advent and look forward to what He has promised to do in His second advent.

Of all the salutations in the New Testament, probably the most clear in this regard is Paul’s greeting to the Galatians: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.” (Galatians 1.3-5) These words of peace are ours because Christ “gave Himself for our sins.” We look back, not merely to a na-

Looking Above

A Series on the Revelation of Jesus Christ
Revelation 5:8
“Elders and Prayer”

tivity scene of baby Jesus meek and mild, but to the whole mission He accomplished. Without the horror and offense of the cross, the manger is meaningless – something our sentimental culture fails to understand.

But we also look forward to the completion of our redemption, that is, to be delivered from “the present evil age” in the resurrection. Only then will true peace on earth be realized, when all things are made new. Not a superficial peace that comes from mere warm and fuzzy thoughts about the world coming together with chestnuts roasting over an open fire. Rather, a true peace that comes when the King returns with a sword to forever stamp out evil and suffering.

So, as we make our way into this festive season, let us rejoice that the Son of God invaded human history and came into this world to save us from sin, death, and hell. And let us remember that we have something for which all of the world longs and gropes. We have peace – peace with God presently and peace on earth in the future. And this same peace is announced to us, morning and evening, every Lord’s Day. May God give us a passion to bring that message of peace to the culture in which we live, so that we might see others be the recipients of those blessed words: “Grace to you and peace.”

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In our last article, we considered the responsibility of elders in teaching, taking note that it was an elder who directed John to the Lion of the Tribe of Judah—the Lamb slain—as the One who has prevailed and is worthy to open the scroll and to loose its seven seals (Revelation 5:5).

In this article we want to consider the role of the elders in prayer, taking as our basis Revelation 5:8, “Now when He had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each having a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.”

The elders have in their hands golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. God has given us the interpretation of the golden bowls of incense: they are the prayers of the saints.

But why are the prayers of the saints pictured in terms of incense? The imagery comes from the Old Testament tabernacle, and specifically from the altar of incense that stood in the Holy Place just before the Holy of Holies. You can read about that in Exodus 30:1-10. Sweet incense was to be burned upon the altar every morning and evening, arising before God as a perpetual incense, a pleasing aroma to Him. Like the perpetual incense that ascended before the Lord from the

altar, so the prayers of the saints are to ascend before the Lord perpetually, morning and evening.

We find the Apostle Paul doing exactly that in the New Testament. He prays for the churches perpetually. Continually his prayers arise as a sweet aroma to the Lord morning and evening, day and night. He says to the Romans, “without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers” (Romans 1:9). He says to the Corinthians, “I thank my God always concerning you...” (1 Corinthians 1:4). He says to the Ephesians, “I do not cease to give thanks for you, making mention of you always in my prayers...” (Ephesians 1:16). He says to the Philippians, “I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine making request for you all with joy...” (Philippians 1:3-4). He says to the Colossians, “We give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you...” (Colossians 1:3). He says to the Thessalonians, “We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers” (1 Thessalonians 1:2).

Are you getting the point? As the incense from the altar of incense arose continually before God, so the prayers of the saints are to arise continually before God, and that by virtue of our union with Christ. Even as Christ “makes intercession for us” (Romans 8:34), so we are

called to “be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God” (Philippians 4:6). Even as Christ “ever lives to intercede for us” (Hebrews 7:25), so we are called to “pray without ceasing” (I Thessalonians 5:17).

The prayers of the saints are portrayed in terms of incense to impress upon us the fact that the saints are to be always in prayer.

But why is the incense—the prayers of the saints—carried in golden bowls? What is the significance of that? The golden bowls tell us that the prayers of the saints are precious in God’s sight. They arise like incense—a sweet aroma—before Him and are precious in His sight. Made of precious metal, the golden bowls full of incense indicate that the prayers of the saints are precious in God’s sight.

And why are they precious in His sight? The prayers of the saints are pictured to us here in terms of golden bowls full of incense, and they are directly related to the opening of the seven seals. Revelation 5:8 leaves us with the distinct impression that the prayers of the saints of God are in some sense responsible for the loosing of the seven seals. Those seals are opened not only *in response* to the prayers of God’s people; they are opened *because* of the prayers of God’s people. The saints pray, and the seals are opened.

What is the significance of that? Remember what the scroll, sealed with its seven seals, represents: it represents the history of redemption! In other words, your prayers

set in motion the history of redemption. You pray, and the history of redemption progresses.

Now of course God is sovereign; it is His will that is carried out; He not only ordains the times in which His people pray, He also ordains the prayers themselves. But do not let the sovereignty of God over prayer lead you to miss the point. He has chosen the prayers of the saints as the very means by which He sets in motion the history of redemption!

Indeed, there is power in prayer! How does James put it? “The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit” (James 5:16-18). The heavens were shut up, refusing to send rain on the earth for three and a half years—and that by the prayer of one man! The heavens were opened again, giving rain, causing the earth to produce fruit—and that by the prayer of one man! Again, God is sovereign. He moved Elijah to pray, and through the prayers of Elijah, God worked His purposes. God is sovereign, but He uses prayer as the means by which He accomplishes His purposes, even the progression of the history of redemption.

The prayers of the saints, then, are intricately bound up with the loosing of the seven seals, even setting in motion the loosing of those seven seals. The prayers of the saints set in motion the history of redemption. There is power in prayer!

Not convinced? Then consider Revelation 8:1-6. Again, you have the prayers of the saints pictured in terms of incense. This time they are intricately bound up with the sounding of the seven trumpets, once again setting in motion the sounding of those seven trumpets. What are those trumpet blasts, but the warnings of God to an unrepentant and unbelieving world? The prayers of God’s people are bound up with the sounding of the seven trumpets, sending forth God’s warnings to the world. There is power in prayer!

Still not convinced? Then consider Revelation 15-16, where the seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God are poured out upon the earth. Those same golden bowls, symbolizing the prayers of God’s people in Revelation 5:8, are now equated with the wrath of God upon the wicked in Revelation 15 and 16. Are you getting the point? The prayers of the saints are intricately bound up with the seven bowls of God’s wrath, even setting in motion the pouring out of that wrath! There is power in prayer!

Three times the book of Revelation

The prayers of the saints, then, are intricately bound up with the loosing of the seven seals.

connects the prayers of God's people with the history of redemption! Three times the book of Revelation connects the prayers of God's people with the pouring out of His wrath and judgment! Three times the book of Revelation connects the prayers of God's people with the redemption of His people! The prayers of the saints are connected with the loosing of the seven seals in chapters 4-7! The prayers of the saints are connected with the sounding of the seven trumpets in chapters 8-11! The prayers of the saints are connected with the pouring out of the seven bowls of wrath in chapters 15-16! Indeed, there is power in prayer!

God has chosen the prayers of His people as the means by which seals are opened, trumpets are sounded, and bowls are poured out. You pray, and seals are being opened. You pray, and trumpets are being sounded. You pray, and bowls are being poured out. You pray, and God's kingdom advances! His kingdom comes not by sword, not by political rule, not by cultural transformation, but by prayer!

To be sure, we are not permitted to pray for God's wrath to fall upon our enemies. We pray for their salvation. Remember Christ's prayer on the cross, "Father, forgive them!" Remember the prayer of the first martyr, "Father, forgive them." We pray for our enemies. But we pray for them, knowing full well that God uses such prayer either to bring about their salvation, or to set in motion His wrath upon them. Prayer advances the kingdom, even to the day of consummation.

In that connection, I want you to notice one last thing. Notice who

holds the golden bowls of incense. Notice who holds the prayers of the saints. The twenty-four elders.

The elders of the church must be in prayer for the congregation. The undershepherds of the church must be in prayer for the flock. James reminds us, "Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him" (James 5:14). It is not only the minister that must be visiting and praying, but the elders as well! Elders, you must be praying for the flock. You must be visiting them, and you must be praying for them. As one preacher has put it: prayerless elders are an abomination, and a scandal to the office of elder!

But even as the elders of the church must be in prayer for the congregation, so the congregation must be in prayer for the elders. Why? Because the elders carry a great weight; they have been entrusted with the keys of the kingdom, and whatever they bind on earth is bound in heaven, and whatever they loose on earth is loosed in heaven. It is an awesome task entrusted to the elders. They need the prayers of the saints. Even as a prayerless elder is an abomination and a scandal to the office, so the prayerless saint is an abomination and a scandal to the name Christian.

It is by prayer, both the prayers of the elders, and the prayers of the saints, that the kingdom of God advances. Those prayers set in motion the loosing of the seven seals. Those prayers set in motion the sounding of the seven trumpets. Those prayers set in motion the pouring out of the seven bowls. Those seals are being opened from

the time of Christ's first coming to the time of His return. Those trumpets are being sounded from the time of Christ's first coming to the time of His return. Those bowls are being poured out from the time of Christ's first coming to the time of His return.

God works in and through the prayers of the saints. God's people are a praying people. Are you among them?!

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From the Editor

In this past year we have had over 110 articles written by over fifty different writers from ten different federations/denominations.

You may have noticed some changes that took place this year. The most obvious one is that we went to color covers and color pictures. Less obvious, but still noticeable is the fact that most of our issues are now thirty-two pages instead of twenty-four. Hopefully not obvious at all, was the fact that we added a third proof-reader.

Something that we did not change was the mandate and desire to promote and defend the Reformed faith. I am thankful for a strong board at Reformed Fellowship that is determined to make the magazine work to that end — the defense and promotion of the Reformed faith.

In the past that has not always been easy. I recall a time when our past editor, Rev. Vanden Heuvel spoke at our annual dinner making a plea to our Associate Members for financial assistance in order to republish our best selling book, *With a Shepherd's Heart* by Dr. J. Sittema. Fortunately, the funds came in and we were able to reprint Dr. Sittema's book.

Through your generous contributions we have been able to do yet another printing of the same book, giving it a new cover. We also have some other projects in the

works: We are updating some of our Bible Study material; looking into publishing more Bible Studies, as well as other books that will benefit the church; and we soon will have all the issues of *The Outlook* available on CD. We are selling Bible studies and other material through our website as well as at Amazon.com.

Obviously none of this would be possible without your generous contributions. Without your generous gifts *With a Shepherd's Heart* would never have been reprinted, nor would any of the other projects be possible. In fact, without your generous gifts, *The Outlook* would have folded several years ago.

You make it happen! For that, I thank you!

With our new cover designs we are trying to attract younger readers hoping to get them interested in reading the same articles that defend and promote the Reformed faith that you have enjoyed for many years. We need your help to do it. Won't you consider giving a contribution of the Reformed Fellowship in order that we can keep up the work that we believe has been a blessing to the church? Would you also consider giving a gift subscription of *The Outlook* to a young family that you know so they also can enjoy the articles that appear in our magazine?

In His service,
Rev. Wybren Oord, Editor

The Virgin Mary (2)

Without compromising the core principles of the Reformation -- grace alone, faith alone, Scripture alone -- can we honor and still understand the role of the blessed Virgin Mary in the history of redemption? To phrase the question in another way: Why does the Reformed tradition show little or no interest in the virgin Mary?

Are we afraid to praise and esteem the virgin Mary, lest we be accused of sympathizing with the church of Rome? Yet, when we recite the Apostles' Creed in church services, Mary's name is mentioned. We confess that the virgin birth is a foundational truth of Christianity. We accept as Gospel truth Article 18 of The Belgic Confession, which states... "The Son took the 'form of a servant' and was made in the 'likeness of man,' truly assuming a real human nature, with all its weaknesses, except for sin; being conceived in the womb of the blessed virgin Mary by the power of Holy Spirit without male participation" (Cf. Heidelberg Cat. L.D. 14, q.a. 35).

In his 1930 major treatise on the virgin birth of Christ, J. Gresham Machen, founding president of Westminster Theological Seminary, wrote: "Let it never be forgotten that the virgin birth is an integral part of the New Testament witness about Christ, and that that witness is strongest when it is taken as it stands...The blessed story of the miracle in the virgin's womb is intrinsic to the good news of the Gospel. Only one Jesus is presented in the Word of God; and that Jesus did

not come in the world by ordinary generation, but was conceived in the womb of the virgin by the Holy Ghost."

Perhaps we are more like the 16th century Scottish Reformer John Knox, whose deep anti-Marianism is shown by an incident that happened in his early life as a Protestant. Having been delivered from "the puddle of papistry," as he called it, he was captured by the French and endured for nineteen months the brutality and confinement as a galley slave. A Scottish commentator said about Knox's horrendous suffering, "Chained to a floating hell, he began his apprenticeship as an apostle of the liberty of the children of God."

It seems that Knox was allowed to write at times. On one occasion, he tells us, the Catholic chaplain of Knox's ship held up a beautifully painted wooden statue of the Virgin Mary and encouraged Knox and the other prisoners to genuflect and show proper reverence. When the statue was forcibly placed in Knox's hand for him to kiss it, he grabbed it and immediately threw it overboard into the sea. "Let our Lady now save herself," he said. "She is light enough; let her learn to swim!" Never again, Knox adds, was he forced to "idolatry" by kissing and bowing to the image of the virgin Mary.

The Reformers' Reject the Veneration of the Virgin Mary

The severe criticism of the Reformers was not due to the attention paid to the Virgin Mary by the

church of Rome. It was due to the extravagant devotional practices and distortions which led to scandal and revulsion crying out for the need of reform. Late medieval abuses in the faith life of the church of Rome appeared to the Protestant reformers to concentrate too much on Mary, thus detracting from the Savior's redemption of humanity.

One example of abuse was the belief that the virgin Mary's milk was food for the soul. Sometime in the 12th century St. Bernard de Clairvaux, founder of the Cistercian order, claimed that he had an extraordinary vision in which he saw the Mother of God nourishing his own sinful soul with loving milk. Since the virgin Mary's milk was Christ's food, her milk becomes in this sense one of the aspects of Christ's humanity.

Since Christ was a baby like all babies, He too was in need of His mother for nourishment. Both Mary as the nourisher and Mary as the life-giver to all humankind was seen, therefore, as nourishing the sinful soul with her loving milk. Mary's milk was considered, together with her tears, among the most precious blessings of Christianity. Marina Warner, in her exhaustive book on the Virgin Mary, *Alone of All Her Sex*, provides a list of cities that possessed relics of Mary's milk. In Bethlehem, tourists can still visit the Milk Grotto, where Mary spilled a few drops while she was nursing, and where, to promote lactation, cakes of the milky soil can be bought.

Desiderius Erasmus, the eminent 16th century Dutch humanist, made

fun of the many sites in which Mary's milk was venerated. It is attended, he said, by custodians "holding out a begging-board like those used in Germany by toll-collectors on bridges." John Calvin also raged against this surfeit of milk: "There is no town so small, nor convent...so mean that it does not display some of the Virgin's milk...There is so much that if the holy Virgin had been a cow...all her life she would have been hard put to it to yield such great quantity."

Another example of spiritual abuse was the belief in the ongoing intercessory prayer of Mary and the saints. At times it had become scandalous in the Middle Ages, through a deadly mixture of superstition, heresy, and commercialization. Consequently, it was singled out as a special object of criticism in the confessions of the Protestant Reformation.

The Geneva Confession of 1536, citing the Lord's Prayer as the divinely given model of how to pray, asserts, in opposition to Roman Catholic doctrine and practice: "We reject the intercession of the saints as superstition invented by men contrary to Scripture, for the reason that it proceeds from mistrust of the sufficiency of the intercession of Jesus Christ."

The Views of Martin Luther and John Calvin

The Reformers resisted the deification and veneration of a human being. Luther gave up Marian intercession when he could not find explicit scriptural warrant for it in the Bible. Yet we need to remember that one of the most important images for Luther is the one of the

servant mother Mary, who in humility proclaims God's love and affirmation of His people.

Luther believed that the virgin Mary conceived Christ in her mind by faith before she conceived Him bodily in the womb. He wrote: "Because Mary the Virgin conceived and gave birth to Christ, therefore Christ was a real, bodily visible human being, and not only a spiritual reality--yet she conceived him and bore him spiritually. How so? Thus: she believed the word of the angel, that she was to become pregnant and give birth. With that very faith in the angel's word, she conceived and gave birth to Christ in her heart spiritually, at the same time that she conceived and gave birth to him in a bodily way."

Calvin also highly esteemed the virgin Mary. He refers to her as "the treasurer of grace," the one who kept faith as a deposit. Through her, Calvin says, we have received this precious gift from God. This is how Calvin commends a proper reverence for Mary while warning against the excessive devotion of Catholic piety: "She deserves to be called blessed, for God has accorded her a singular distinction, to prepare his Son for the world, in which she was spiritually reborn. To this day, we cannot enjoy the blessing brought us in Christ without thinking at the same time of that which God gave us as adorn-

ment and honor to Mary, in willing her to be the mother of His only-begotten Son."

Herman Bavinck (1854-1921)

In the tradition of Calvin, the influential Dutch Reformed [GKN] theologian Herman Bavinck, strongly opposed the veneration of the virgin Mary. However, he still saw the preparation and fulfillment of the incarnation in the election and favour shown to Mary as the Mother of Jesus.

Because of the virgin Mary's vital role in the incarnation, she is blessed among women; she received an honor that was given to no other creature. She is highly honored with undeserved grace, above all peoples and angels. And Bavinck comments that whoever denies it does not take seriously the incarnation of God.

Karl Barth (1886-1968)

The Swiss theologians Karl Barth, who developed the so-called neo-orthodox theology that had a real impact on western theology of the 20th century, called the Mariology of the church of Rome its "central doctrine."

He said that its complex Mariology contrasts sharply with the virtual absence of Mary in Protestant evangelical thought. The gulf seemed to Barth so wide that he wrote: "In the doctrine

Because of the virgin Mary's vital role in the incarnation, she is blessed among women.

and worship of Mary there is disclosed the one heresy of the Roman Catholic Church which explains all the rest.”

The Virgin Mary: the First Pentecostal

In our time, some Pentecostals have given the virgin Mary a vital role in their theology. An article on the virgin Mary in the *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* (pp. 584f.) describes her as “the first Pentecostal.” The author says that she is closely associated with the Holy Spirit, for Luke specifically mentions that she and other women were present in the Upper Room with the apostles prior to the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Feast of Pentecost. The author also argues that the coming of the Spirit at the time of Jesus’ conception was a foreshadowing of the coming of the Spirit upon the entire community on Pentecost. “Thus Mary is regarded as one of the first to receive the ‘baptism in the Spirit’ even prior to Pentecost.”

But how could the virgin Mary be the “first Pentecostal?” The Bible is silent about this description of her. Abraham Kuyper comments on Acts 1:14 that we find in this text that the Apostles are named first, then the other women, and finally the mother of Christ. The Apostles, neither on Pentecost nor on any other day, ever mentioned Mary’s name in preaching Christ. Neither in the Acts nor in the Epistles of the Apostles is any kind of honor ascribed to her. Her opinion is not asked for upon any occasion. She disappeared from the Scriptures inconspicuously.

Mary disappeared from the Scriptures inconspicuously.

The Virgin Mary in the New Testament

The sober witness of Scripture versus the exuberance of the Roman Catholic veneration of Mary is a remarkable contrast. The actual amount of direct information found about Mary in the Bible is very small. She is mentioned in all four gospels and alluded to by Paul (Galatians 4:4). Outside the dialogue with the angel and “the Magnificat,” Mary utters a grand total of twenty-two words in recorded Scripture. She was a chaste, godly woman. She was a virgin at the time of the angel’s visitation (Matthew 1:18; Luke 1: 26-27).

The Bible in no way presents the idea that Mary remained a virgin throughout her life (Matthew 12:46; John 2:12; 7:5). She was a woman steeped in Scripture. She also saw herself in need of salvation and a Savior (Luke 1:47-50). She was uniquely involved in the life of the Lord, present at important times in His private and public life. She appears in the Gospels as a woman who is highly esteemed, acts like a normal mother, is spiritually more responsive than others but needs to grow as a woman of faith. The virgin Mary is never exalted, never venerated, never in any way, shape, or form placed in a position where she could possibly obscure the Christian’s single-minded devotion to her Son (Mark 3:31-35).

The New Testament is the story about Jesus, the Savior and the Light of the world. The account of Simeon meeting the infant Jesus and Mary and Joseph in the temple illustrates this truth. Simeon blessed them, and told Mary about what was in store for her. A sword will pierce her soul (Luke 2:35). The fulfillment of this prophecy was during the crucifixion. It was there that Mary would see her Son die on the cross an agonizing death. The Gospels do not exclude Mary from the history of redemption, but the attention is not drawn away from Jesus, because all what Mary did and said was a witness to the mystery of the incarnation.

The Magnificat

We cannot remove Mary from the context of the Gospel. The miracle of salvation -- the coming of the Son of God--does not happen apart from Mary, but via the annunciation and also via her response, her readiness to be the servant of the Lord. “I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May it be to me as you have said.” Mary is also in the spotlight because her faith, her joy and praise. When she visits Elizabeth, the latter speaks of the privilege that the mother of the Lord comes to her (Luke 1:43) and calls her “blessed...among women” (Luke 1:42).

Mary responds with the Magnificat. The Magnificat is Mary’s spontaneous hymn of praise of God taken directly from Scripture (Luke 1:

46-55) This hymn closes with the words: “He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers.” These words are an allusion to Genesis 22:17-18 in which after Abraham offered to sacrifice Isaac in obedience to God’s request. There God promised Abraham “...through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed...”

If there is any doubt about Mary’s acquaintance with the Old Testament, that should be dispelled by a study of the Magnificat. It catches not only the spirit but also the vocabulary of Hannah’s prayer at the dedication of Samuel (1 Samuel 2:1-11). The parallels are obvious as each of these women, though in very different circumstances, celebrated God’s gift of a son.

For Martin Luther the Magnificat had a vital place in the church’s liturgy. Luther wrote about the Magnificat, “it would be good if it were sung twice” in church services. Centuries later the American Lutheran theologians David S. Yeago wrote: “The Magnificat is the church’s song because it is the song of the specific Jewish woman Mary, whom God’s election and promise have set in the midst of the church as the prototype of the church’s faith and prophecy--and therefore as the archsinger of the praise of God’s mercy in Christ.”

Yeago suggests that we should sing the Magnificat at home, and sing it at Evening Prayer in

the congregation. Luther also urged us to pray the Magnificat. He wrote: “If you want to pray for all on earth, take the Our Father. Here [in the Magnificat] you have the general thanksgiving for all things, also for your own affairs.” For Luther, Mary embodied a humble servant of God’s unconditional love in Jesus Christ. For him Mary affirms a theology of grace that reveals our unrighteousness yet God’s affirmation of His people under the cross.

When we praise and esteem Mary, it is God whom we praise for His gracious favor shown to her.

The New Testament testifies that the choice of Mary to become the mother of the Son of God was an act of God’s mercy. The angel’s annunciation is not a proposal, but a word of sovereign grace revealed to Mary. Her response of faith to the word of grace, “I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said” is not to achieve merit. Mary’s faith is the gift of God’s grace (cf. Ephesians 2:8,9). She is the object of God’s gracious predestination, and this divine choice is the source of both her blessedness and her fertility. So when we praise and esteem Mary, it is God whom we praise for His gracious favor shown to her.

Conclusion

I suggest that we should not be afraid to praise and esteem the virgin Mary. I believe that as Reformed Christians we need to recover a truly Biblical appreciation of the virgin Mary. Mary does not figure in the story of salvation only through the bare fact of her pregnancy; becoming the mother of the Son of God makes her “blessed among women.” Without compromising the heritage of the Reformation we can understand and honor the Virgin Mary in ways that are Scripturally based. Everything depends how we talk and write about her. But one thing we may never do. We may not think of the mother of the Son of God in isolation from her Son, an object of devotion by herself. We must refuse to think of Mary as the example of the cooperation of man with grace. How can Mary cooperate with Jesus while she herself needs salvation? She is neither our co-redemptrix nor our intercessor. The New Testament proclaims that Christ is the only mediator.

The two opposites in redemptive history are not Eve and Mary, but Adam and Christ. When the apostles preached, they proclaimed that there is only one name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12). The apostle Paul clearly states: “For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.” (1 Tim. 2:5) Consequently, with the Reformers we must continue to insist that the heart of the Gospel is

not only the Scriptures alone, and by faith alone, nor through our merit but there is another key phrase as well: Christ alone.

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From the Bookshelf

Rev. Zachary Anderson
Seventh Reformed Church
Grand Rapids, Michigan

With a Shepherd's Heart: Reclaiming the Pastoral Office of Elder
By John R. Sittema

Pastors have the privilege and duty of reading scores of books on the subject of church leadership and management. Elders usually don't have this luxury or time. For this reason alone John Sittema's book ought to receive a wide distribution among Elders and those who desire to serve. Often, an elder serves without significant training and is left to muddle through somehow. Now, let us hope that those who receive this august responsibility find in their hearts that God has called them to it. In meek humility, let them serve with Rev. Sittema as their companion and teacher. Let them not trust their instincts or the opinions of those who have gone before them. However good those sources may be, they are not to be compared with the Holy Bible and its insistence on giving them the first and final word for their calling. Everywhere we turn churches are failing because of professional ministers and compliant elders who want their pastor to simply "do it." A strong elder board will solve that problem. Gentlemen, get this book and a strong elder board will emerge.

What We Believe: An Exposition of the Apostles' Creed
By Cornelis P. Venema

There have been and always will be fresh resources to explain the Apostles' Creed. What distinguishes Dr. Venema's volume is a timeless and less sectarian approach. This birds' eye view of the faith presents the reader with a brief panorama of our beliefs and how they have been presented, preserved and promoted through history. Venema would have us see that the Reformed faith, by and large, fits well with all streams of Christian history faithful to God's word. That makes this book an excellent resource for high school study (such as a catechism class), new members in the church, and a first doctrinal guide for teachers. Don't hesitate to give this book to your pastor: he will read it and enjoy handing it out to those with basic questions about our faith. Don't hesitate to give it to a teenager: especially if you hope that such a one will find confidence that our faith isn't just a culture or tradition. One suggestion I have for reading this work: start with reading the study questions, then read the chapters. Christians ought to know the answer to each of these questions! If you don't yet, you will when you are done.

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See our back cover for ordering details.

Paedocommunion in History (2)

Eastern Orthodoxy

Before we continue the story of the church's practice in the West, we need to pause a moment to comment on the distinct development of the practice of the eastern church. Even though the formal schism between the eastern and the western church did not occur until 1054 A.D., for our purposes it is important to observe that the eastern church came to practice a form of paedocommunion throughout its various branches and continues to do so until the present day. The precise dating of the emergence of this practice as a universal norm of the eastern church is not easily determined. However, upon the basis of a developed sacramentology, the eastern church came to administer communion to infants upon the occasion of their baptism and thereafter.

The teaching and practice of the eastern church is fairly clear. The seven sacred "mysteries" or sacraments are the necessary and indispensable means for imparting the grace of new birth and life in Christ to their recipients. In the liturgy of the eastern church, which grants even less of a role to the preaching of the gospel as a means of grace than historic Roman Catholicism, the drama of redemption is reenacted by means of elaborate rites that make considerable use of icons and symbolic actions that represent the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

The mystery of holy baptism is a rite that effectively grants new birth and life to its recipients whether as adults or infants. The baptized member of the church is immersed three times, and then immediately receives the further "mysteries" of "chrismation" and the "Eucharist." Baptism is understood to be the entrance into all the mysteries of the church and qualifies its recipients to receive sacramentally the fullness of God's grace in Christ and the Holy Spirit. In chrismation, the bishop or priest anoints the baptized person with oil, making the sign of the cross and blessing the newly baptized Christian with "the seal of the Holy Spirit." After the mysteries of baptism and chrismation, the baptized member is also immediately given the body and blood of Christ by "intinction" (dipping of the bread into the wine). Unlike the practice and teaching of the Roman Catholic church, the mystery of the Eucharist must be communicated in both kinds or elements, is administered by intinction, and is given to infants upon their baptism and chrismation.

Without concurring in the particular features of the Roman Catholic understanding of "transubstantiation," the eastern church also insists that the bread and wine are really changed into the actual body and blood of Christ. Since the baptized child is granted entrance into the kingdom of God and born again by the Holy Spirit, he or she is properly to be admit-

ted to the sacrament of the Eucharist, which provides the necessary and indispensable nourishment of participation in the body and blood of Christ.

The historic practice of eastern orthodoxy since the fourth century and thereafter, therefore, certainly lends support to the argument that paedocommunion enjoys the sanction of church history. However, the basis for the practice of eastern orthodoxy raises questions concerning how this practice should be evaluated. Since our interest here is primarily historical, we will reserve comment on this subject until we have considered the further history of the practice of paedocommunion in the western church.

Medieval and Contemporary Roman Catholicism

The story of the practice of paedocommunion in the western church since the fourth and fifth centuries of the Christian era is a complicated one. In the writings of advocates of paedocommunion, this story is often told in an unduly simplistic manner.

For example, it is argued that, whereas the early church practiced paedocommunion, the medieval Roman Catholic Church gradually came to withhold the sacrament from infants and children because of the development of certain doctrinal convictions regarding the sacrament of the Eucharist. Because the developing Roman Catholic and medieval doctrine of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper contained tenets that militated against the continu-

ation of the practice of paedocommunion, this practice began to disappear in the western church.

What is clear from the history of the Roman Catholic Church is that paedocommunion ceased to be a widespread practice by the eleventh century, and its present teaching and practice allows for the first reception of holy communion at the age of seven or eight, but usually reserves its reception until the administration of the sacrament of confirmation to baptized children of the faithful who are in early adolescence (usually at the age of twelve). A number of factors played a role in the development of Roman Catholic practice, including the cessation of paedocommunion.

The main stages in the development of Roman Catholic practice are rather clear. In the period prior to the eleventh century, there is evidence that paedocommunion was practiced. The liturgies used in the Spanish Roman Catholic church—for example, the Gregorian sacramentary and Mozarabic liturgy — recognize and provide for the practice.

However, in the period leading up to the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, the practice of paedocommunion began to diminish. This Council codified a number of features of the Roman Catholic Church's high sacramentalist and sacerdotalist conception of the communication of God's grace. At the Council, the dogmas of transubstantiation and the real presence of Christ in the sacramental elements were affirmed. In response to the reluctance of

some of the faithful to participate in the sacrament due to the sacredness of the rite and the miracle of Christ's real presence, the Council stipulated a practice of yearly confession and communion by all the faithful at Easter. One of the Council's actions that bears especially upon the subject of paedocommunion was the further stipulation that children receive communion for the first time at the age of seven or older. These conciliar decisions played an important role in shaping the practice of the medieval Roman Catholic Church. They also confirm that the practice of paedocommunion was in decline throughout the church.

In the period subsequent to the Fourth Lateran Council, the principal features of Roman Catholic practice in relation to paedocommunion assume a settled form that continues to the present day. Unlike the eastern church, which administers simultaneously the three mysteries of initiation into the body of Christ (baptism, chrismation, and the Eucharist), the western church distinguishes them, at least in the instance of children. Though adult converts receive all three sacraments together, in the twelfth and subsequent centuries the Roman Catholic Church increasingly separated baptism from the emerging practice of "First Com-

munion" between the ages of seven and nine, and from the sacrament of confirmation during early adolescence.

Ordinarily, the sacrament of confirmation became the occasion for the admission of the faithful to the sacrament of communion. While retaining the eastern church's emphasis upon the initiatory character of the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and holy communion, the western church began to emphasize the importance of catechetical instruction and preparation for the sacrament of confirmation, which was increasingly viewed as preparatory to reception to the Eucharist.

Unlike the eastern church, which permitted the priest to officiate at the sacrament of confirmation, the western church insisted that this sacrament must be performed by the bishops of the church. Thomas Aquinas, who exercised an influence greater than any other medieval theologian, taught that, though baptized children have right of access to communion, this right is similar to a person's reception of an inheritance; the faithful have the right of inheritance before they actually take possession of it. Preparation for and reception of the sacrament of confirmation was viewed as an important means to cultivate the kind of faith and discernment re-

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quired for meaningful participation in the body and blood of Christ.

By the time of the Reformation in the sixteenth century, the traditional practice of the Roman Catholic Church was largely fixed and continues to the present. At the Second Vatican Council, some reforms were introduced into Roman Catholic practice, but these did not substantially alter the established features of this practice. When the children of the faithful are baptized, they are cleansed of original sin, born again by the Spirit of Christ, and received into the body of Christ. Subsequent to baptism, such children may receive their “First Communion” at the age of seven or older, though the Second Vatican Council cautioned against too strict a rule regarding the age of such children (and the age of those who are thereafter confirmed). Masses for children of the faithful are described and encouraged.

However, the Council also emphasized the importance of more rigorous course of catechesis in preparation for the sacrament of confirmation. In its description of confirmation, the Council reiterated the traditional view that it was to be administered by a bishop, and noted that it includes the elements of anointing with oil to symbolize the confirmand’s sealing with the Holy Spirit and the imparting of an “indelible mark” upon the faithful. Though the practice of the contemporary Roman Catholic Church evidences considerable diversity, the reception of “First Communion”

coincides typically with confirmation. Due to the intimate connection between baptism and communion, children may receive their first communion before confirmation. However, the usual practice reserves the regular participation in the sacrament of communion to those who have been confirmed in the faith.

The Reformation

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communion were the eastern orthodox churches, the Armenian church and the Bohemian Hussites. The general practice of the western church permitted children to come to their “First Communion” between the ages of seven and nine, though most did not partake of the sacrament until they received the sacrament of confirmation, usually at the age of twelve.

During the period of the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, debates about the sacra-

ments of the church, including the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, were often extended and contentious. Despite the many points of dispute regarding the sacraments, the Lutheran and Reformed churches maintained the practice of admitting children to the Lord’s Table only after they were confirmed (Lutheran) or made a profession of faith (Reformed) before the church. Though the churches of the Reformation followed the predominant practice of the western church by not admitting infants or very young children to the Lord’s Table, they did so for reasons that were consistent with their general understanding of the sacraments. Since we will consider in greater depth in a subsequent article the testimony of the Reformed confessions, our comments on the practice of the Reformation will be brief.

John Calvin’s comments on the subject of paedocommunion in his *Institutes* provide a fairly representative statement of the Reformation view and practice. In Calvin’s understanding of the sacraments, the sacrament of baptism differs from the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. Whereas baptism is a sign of new birth and incorporation into Christ, the Lord’s Supper is a means of nourishing the faith of believers in communion with Christ.

Baptism is properly administered to the children of believers, who are recipients of the gospel promise together with their parents. By contrast, the Lord’s Supper is a sacramental means of strengthening the faith of believers and is given “to awaken, arouse, stimu-

late, and exercise the feeling of faith and love, indeed, to correct the defect of both.”

Calvin emphasizes that the sacraments are an effective means of grace whereby the gospel promise in Christ is communicated to believers. However, the efficacy of the sacraments does not diminish the obligation on the part of their recipients to receive them by faith. Just as the Word requires the response of faith, which the Holy Spirit works in the believer, so the sacraments require the response of faith, apart from which they are of no benefit to their recipients. In the case of the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, Calvin insisted that the body and blood of Christ must be received by the “mouth of faith,” and that those admitted to the Supper were required accordingly to be prepared by a prior instruction in the evangelical faith. Only those children of believers who had professed their faith (at the age of ten to twelve) were to be received at the Table.

In one of his most explicit statements on the question of paedocommunion, which was written in reply to the Anabaptist charge that it was inconsistent to baptize infants but refuse them admission at the Table, Calvin argues that

[t]his permission to admit children to the table was indeed commonly given in the ancient church, as is clear from Cyprian and Augustine, but the custom has deservedly fallen into disuse.... For with respect to baptism, the Lord there sets no definite age. But he

does not similarly hold forth the Supper for all to partake of, but only for those who are capable of discerning the body and blood of the Lord, of examining their own conscience, of proclaiming the Lord’s death, and of considering its power....

Because the Lord’s Supper differs from baptism, as a sign of inclusion differs from a sign of nourishment in faith, Calvin in-

The efficacy of the sacraments does not diminish the obligation on the part of their recipients to receive them by faith.

sisted that reception at the Table follow instruction in and profession of the faith by the children of believers.

The practice of the Reformed churches has followed the pattern established by Calvin. One of the few dissenters to the prevailing view, Wolfgang Musculus, attempted to argue for paedocommunion on the grounds of the children’s inclusion in the covenant of grace with their parents. Musculus’ dissent, however, was an exception to the rule among the Reformed churches of the continent and the British isles.

Since the sixteenth century, the Reformed churches have required a public profession of faith before admitting children to the Table of the Lord. Because the Lord’s Supper is a sacrament that nourishes faith, it requires the kind of faith that is able to remember, proclaim, and discern the body of Christ. The public rite of profession of faith is ordinarily the means whereby baptized members of the church are welcomed into full communicant membership.

Conclusion

Though we have provided only a brief sketch of the history of the Christian church’s practice in regard to paedocommunion, several observations are warranted by the evidence that we have considered.

First, the testimony to the practice of paedocommunion in the antiquity of the church does not compare to that for the practice of paedobaptism. Though the evidence for paedobaptism in the early history of the church warrants the inference that it was the earliest practice of the church, the evidence for paedocommunion warrants only the inference that it was a practice introduced into some sectors of the church by the middle of the third century. However, there is earlier and third-century evidence that indicates that paedocommunion may have been an innovation when it was first introduced.

Second, by the time of Augustine and thereafter, the practice of paedocommunion became increasingly widespread in the east-

ern and western branches of the church. The practice of paedocommunion in the eastern church, which continues to the present, was established during this period. The practice of paedocommunion in the western church became the prevalent one until the twelfth century. However, even in this period the practice of paedocommunion was not as universal in the west as it was in the east.

Third, any evaluation of the widespread practice of paedocommunion in the church during the period prior to the high middle ages and the Reformation must take note of the diverse reasons offered to encourage or to discourage this practice. Any assessment of the practice of paedocommunion may not ignore, for example, the close connection between a growing sacramentalism, which viewed baptism as a means of granting new birth to its recipients, and the admission of children to the Lord's Table. Those who would appeal to the practice of paedocommunion in this period have to reckon with the dubious sacramental views that encouraged the admission of children to the Table.

Fourth, the reasons for the decline of the practice of paedocommunion in the western church are complex. Advocates of paedocommunion often cite the emergence of the doctrine of transubstantiation and the growing fear of desecrating the consecrated elements if paedocommunion continued to be practiced. They also appeal to the practice of withholding the cup from the faithful, a practice that allegedly made the

participation of infants in the sacrament by means of intinction difficult, if not impossible. Though these factors may have played a role in the decline of paedocommunion, there are other factors that tend to be overlooked, for example, the long-standing conviction of the church Fathers, Augustine included, that insisted upon a believing and informed reception of the sacrament of communion. The development of the sacrament of confirmation and its association with the admission of believers to the sacrament has its roots in the earliest teaching and practice of the church. This development played a role equal to the articulation of the medieval doctrine of transubstantiation in restricting admission to the Lord's Supper to professing believers.

And fifth, the uniform conviction of the churches of the Reformation was that children of believers should be nourished at the Table of the Lord only after they had reached an age of discretion and were able to receive properly the sacrament. Though the Reformed churches continued the practice of baptizing the children of believing parents, they insisted that the Lord's Supper, which was not a sacrament of incorporation into but of spiritual nourishment by Christ's body and blood, required the attestation of the kind of faith that could remember and proclaim the death of Christ.

Though we have yet to give more careful attention to the teaching of the Reformed confessions regarding the proper recipients of the Lord's Supper, it should be apparent that the argument from

history for paedocommunion is at best inconclusive. If the Reformed churches were to admit children to the Lord's Table today, they would have to do so upon the basis of other considerations of a confessional or biblical nature.

Dr. Cornelis Venema is the President of the Mid-America Reformed Seminary. He also serves a contributing editor of *The Outlook*.

URCNA Classis Michigan

On October 11, 2005, Classis Michigan of the United Reformed Churches in North America met for the nineteenth time. Delegates from the dozen churches in this classis met at the Bethel URC in Jenison, Michigan. The officers of the day were: Chairman - Rev. Derrick Vander Meulen; Vice-Chairman - Rev. Wybren Oord; Clerk - Rev. Gene Crow.

The chairman began the meeting by reading Psalm 145 and presenting an exhortation on the theme *sola deo gloria*. After declaring classis constituted, Rev. Vander Meulen welcomed the delegates and also Rev. Bill Green, Rev. Ed Knott, Candidate Matt Nuiver, and Treasurer Dave Vander Meer.

The light agenda moved along very quickly. The Clerk reported on his activities since the last meeting which included an updated version of the Classis Rules of Procedure. In addition, the Clerk asked to be released from his position as the Clerk of Classis. The Classis appointed Rev. Wybren Oord to serve as the new clerk, effective at the beginning of the new year. In order to take on the new role, Rev. Oord was relieved of his duties as Church Visitor. New Church Visitors, Rev. Steve De Boer and Rev. Rick Miller, were unanimously elected.

Three churches within the classis, Allendale, Grace (Alto), and Covenant (Byron Center), gave reports of the activities going on within their churches. Two pastors and one

elder reported on the triumphs and the struggles that are taking place within the Church of Jesus Christ in each respective location. These items were then incorporated in the noon prayer.

Rev. Bill Green gave a report of the work of advancing the Reformed faith in Central America. Several solid Reformed books have been translated and are being promoted throughout the region. It was truly heartwarming to hear how the Spirit of God is drawing people to an awareness of Jesus Christ and the riches of the Reformed faith throughout Central America.

Delegates to classis became aware of the need for meeting even when a light agenda as several churches came with requests for advice on a variety of matters. One church asked for the thoughts of the delegates on the new catechism material that is being proposed by the URC church of Chino, California. Three churches asked for advice concerning discipline matters.

Delegates from one congregation asked for advice on the proper way to call a minister who was granted entrance into the URCNA under the status of emeritus pastor. A lengthy discussion took place as to whether or not a second colloquium doctum should take place. A motion to waive the colloquium doctum for the particular minister being considered was defeated. The result of that vote means that an emeritus minister in the URCNA, who received a colloquium doctum in June

2004 and whose ministerial credentials reside in a URCNA church, will have to be re-examined should the Lord lead him to take a call within the URCNA. Two ministered registered their vote against the decision of classis.

The next meeting of classis is scheduled for June 6, 2006 at the Covenant United Reformed Church in Kalamazoo, Michigan.

Respectfully submitted by,
Rev. W. H. Oord

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