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The Greatest Need in the Church for 2005

The year is still young enough to make the question of what the church needs most in 2005 an appropriate one. Our answers may vary. The Church has many pressing needs. A vacant church may think its most pressing need is a new minister, whereas, a church in a changing community may think the greatest need is addressing those changes taking place around her. These different answers reveal the fact that this question is always appropriate. The need that I have in mind, however, is the same as our greatest need in past years and will remain our greatest need in the years to come. The greatest need

of them all is the need for more prayer, especially intercessory prayer.

All true Christians pour out their hearts in supplication to God. One cannot be a prayerless Christian. Such would be a contradiction of terms. One of the first things said about Saul after his conversion on the road to Damascus was, "Behold, he prays." Prayer, as the song says, is "the Christian's vital breath, his native air." The cessation of prayer, if that were possible for one who is born anew, would mean the suffocation of his spiritual life.

Yet, it seems that many Christians today are getting along on a minimum of prayer. The fact that spiritual life is waning in many churches, the ineffectiveness of much kingdom work, and the lack of enthusiasm for solid Reformed teaching, cannot be satisfactorily explained in any other way. The promises that God has attached to prayer-soaked religious work are so large, abundant, and emphatic that the streams of our spiritual life are sure to reach high levels and our work in the kingdom is certain to abound in fruitfulness when God's servants deem prayer to be as vital as the work for which they are praying.

Why is there less prayer than in former times? The answer is that



Volume 55, No. 1 (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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many factors in modern life are hostile to prayer. First, we are apt to stress the practical side of life at the expense of the intellectual and spiritual. We must be up and running, doing this and that; marking things off of our “to do” list if we are to have any sense of accomplishment. We are inclined to count as lost the time spent in reflection and meditation.

Second is our overemphasize of the public side of life. We stress that which is social at the expense of that which is personal. Martin Luther once said that the best time of the day for him was the three hours each morning he spent in prayer. Three hours!! Each day!! I have noticed times when the organist delays the “Amen” at the end of the silent prayer in our worship services. If that prayer is longer than thirty seconds, people begin to shuffle and cough because the prayer is taking too much time. We are no longer comfortable with lengthy time spent with God. We are far too busy text messaging, debating on various email discussion groups, and changing the ring on our cell phones to spend time in prayer.

Third, our age of rapid communication is one of feverish haste. The person who is constantly driven, whether by internal impulses or outward circumstances, seldom takes the time to pray. Prayer requires mental composure. It must have spiritual concentration. It takes time and thought to converse with God. When Christians imagine that they must “keep busy” even to the neglect of the quiet hour, they are robbing themselves of the very strength they need to carry on in the

Lord. If we are to do fruitful work for the kingdom in 2005, whether at home, the church, or the school, we must take the time to replenish our spiritual streams. Prayer and meditation are indispensable for the cultivation of that spirit of concentration in which all truly effective work in the spiritual world must be performed. Without constant prayer the Christian cannot be in the proper spiritual mood and attitude for his work in the kingdom.

We need more intercessory prayer not only to make our work for Christ more concentrated and fruitful, but also to increase our interest in religious work. The Church of today does not need more activity. Some of the things we do are very trivial; many of them are secondary. It requires very little spirituality to arrange for social events within the church. Yet many churches focus more attention upon those kinds of activities than they do on the study of God’s Word. These activities are not wrong in and of themselves, but all too often they take the place of the primary task of the Church: the winning of souls, the spiritual training of the youth, the diligent study of Scriptures, the consolation of the sick and shut-in, the care of the needy, the faithful exercise of discipline, the Scriptural administration of the sacraments, and the proper government of all the affairs of the church in accordance with the Word of God.

Those primary tasks of the church require much prayer, lest they degenerate into a mechanical performance of formal duties. Much fervent prayer is needed, for example, to make our consistory meetings and classis meetings alive. Prayer

would make activities of the church which we often consider to be dull, like family visiting, vital and fruitful. It would make our Bible discussions more eager, our admonitions to the wayward more tender, our visits to the sick more inspirational, and our efforts on behalf of the needy more spiritual.

The most cogent argument for the indispensability of prayer is the fact that it has pleased God to make His blessing depend on the prayer of the saints. Through prayer we acknowledge our total dependence upon Him. Prayer glorifies God. The Heidelberg Catechism teaches us that prayer is the “chief part of our thankfulness to God.” What a solemn thought it is that God has made the salvation of sinners, the progress of His truth, and the preservation of His Church depend upon the prayers of His people. It is, therefore, no exaggeration to say that the whole course of the Church during this year will depend upon the measure and manner of our prayers.

Let 2005 be a year of much and mighty prayer and it will be a year of unprecedented spiritual prosperity for God’s Church. Such praying cannot be done by the leaders of the church alone. Every member of the church must perform his/her share of this our first obligation to God and His Kingdom.

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Another Year With God

“Therefore, know that the Lord your God, He is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and mercy for a thousand generations with those who love Him and keep His commandments.” (Deuteronomy 7:9)

As you read this article, you will already know more of God’s providential dealings with men than I do. Articles are, of course, written some time in advance of publication. As I write, we have not even reached the 4th of July 2004. Many events hidden from me are fully known to you. For instance, the United States just handed over “sovereignty” in Iraq to an interim Iraqi government. Will this work or end in chaos? You have a much better idea than I do. I wonder if President Bush will be re-elected. For you this is old news. The Dow closed today at 10,435.48, but will it be above 10,000 when you read this article? The list goes on and on. My favorite baseball team, the Red Sox, are six and a half games behind the Yankees in the American League East. I have no idea who will win the 2004 World Series, but all of you do. All this is common knowledge to you, but it is hidden from me as I write this article.

I think you get the picture. We only know what God has ordained for the future when it has come to pass.

The Heidelberg Catechism asks in question 28: “What does it profit us to know that God created, and by His providence upholds all things?” The answer is: “That we may be patient in adversity, thankful in prosperity, and for what is future have good confidence in our faithful God and Father, that no creature shall

separate us from His love, since all creatures are so in His hand, that without His will they cannot so much as move.”

I want to highlight the words, “and for what is future have good confidence in our faithful God and Father...” This good confidence is impossible if we base our assurance on circumstances. This is a very unstable foundation for hope. If we simply hope for the best we will be profoundly worried and despairing when trials come, as they certainly will.

We are told to place our confidence for the future not on circumstances but on our faithful God and Father. Certainly, God is faithful. He can be relied upon. He will never change in His love towards us.

The faithfulness of God: what a wonderful comfort. Our God will be the same in 2005 as He was in 2004. Has He loved and cared for His people in the past? Sure, He has. Has He ever let His people down? Of course not. If God were suddenly to abandon us to all the terrors of this sinful world, to sink or swim as we can, God would have to change. He would, in effect, have to become a different God. This can never happen.

When God says, as He does in Deuteronomy 7.9 that His mercy extends to a thousand generations, He points us to the future, even the far future. It means that God will be

faithful to us all our lives. It means He will be faithful to our children and our more distant descendants as long as they trust in God through the Lord Jesus Christ. God’s promises have no expiration date. We do not have to fear for ourselves or our covenant children.

God promises to guard us from evil. He guards us from the evil of our own hearts and the evil that surrounds us. We read in II Thessalonians 3:3, “But the Lord is faithful, who will establish you and guard you from the evil one.” The Greek word used here for “establish” has two meanings. The first is “to make stable, place firmly, set fast.” The second is “to strengthen, make firm.” When we believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, God is faithful to ensure that we never fall away from His grace or become too weak to endure either temptations or trials. He will not, at some point, suddenly let us go.

Sometimes Christians endure horrible trials. We know from experience that the horrible things that can happen to an unbeliever can also happen to any one of us. This is true, but God’s purposes are different. With the unbeliever, God deals harshly - a small foretaste of the wrath of God they will experience forever into eternity.

When these same events happen to Christians, their purpose is entirely different. They are trials which our faithful God knows are necessary for the strengthening of our faith. We read in Psalm 119:75, “I know, O Lord, that your judgments are right, and that in faithfulness you have afflicted me.” When God afflicts us in this coming year, He



does so out of faithfulness. He sends trials for our good. As His children, we need the occasional spanking. We also need His faithful discipline so that we will mature in our faith.

Hard times are not punishments. The punishment for sin is everlasting damnation in hell. Christ already suffered this for His people on the cross. God's faithful afflictions are loving, and are designed to keep us in the faith and growing in grace.

We read in Lamentations 3:22, 23: "Through the Lord's mercies we are not consumed, Because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness." The only reason we are not consumed is because the Lord is faithful. Jeremiah then goes on to say, in effect, that we will never be destroyed. Why? Because God's mercies are new every morning, His faithfulness is great. God faithfully shows His grace to His people. He ensures that they shall never be destroyed.

This means that however much God allows us to be tested and tried, His purpose will never be our destruction, but rather our growth. He faithfully renews His mercies every day.

Another verse repeats this thought. We read in I Corinthians 10:13, "No trial has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tried beyond what you are able, but with the trial will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it." You will notice that I have replaced the word temptation with the word trial. This is permissible in the Greek. Why won't

we be subjected to trials too great for us to bear? This verse says God is faithful to His people and will not allow us to face trials greater than we can bear without His help. His faithfulness will keep us through our trials and out the other side.

Even when we sin, God is faithful to His promises to forgive us. John writes in I John 1:9, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." When we come to God confessing our utter sinfulness before Him, He has promised to forgive us. He faithfully keeps this promise.

Having seen God's faithfulness to us, how should we respond to the year 2005? The answer is found in Philippians 4:11 13, "I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

God calls us to contentment. The Greek word Paul uses for contentment means something like "to have enough." He learned that he could be content to reckon he had enough regardless of his circumstances. He trusted God to provide whatever he needed. Whatever he did not have was because God in His wisdom and mercy knew it would not be good for him.

This kind of contentment in the midst of trials did not come from Paul's own character. He freely admits it comes from God. Therefore, he adds the words, "I can do all things through Christ who

strengthens me."

The ability to be content with whatever God sends our way is a gift from God. It is an ability that we should beg of Him when we find ourselves worried or desperate. This grace of God allowed Job to declare in Job 13:15, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him."

Therefore, everything that comes to us in this coming year will be for our ultimate good. As Question 1 of the Heidelberg Catechism says, God "so preserves me, that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; yea, that all things must work together for my salvation."

Just because the future is unknown to us does not mean it is dark and dangerous. Our faithful God is in control and watches over us.

In the midst of this muggy summer heat, New Year's Day seems farther off to me than it really is. But whether we are talking about the day I am writing, the day you are reading, or perhaps some distant day when this magazine is discovered in a dusty corner of an attic, God's promises are always true. The future for Christians is always bright and each day is a day closer to heaven.

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We Confess

An Exposition & Application of the Belgic Confession

Article 19: Of the Hypostatic Union of the Two Natures in the Person of Christ

“When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead” (Rev. 1:17). When the Apostle was brought into the presence of Christ he was humbled and awed in silence. This is the effect of being in the presence of our Savior. It is no different for us when we open the Word and seek to learn of him. Through the written word we are brought, by the power of the Holy Spirit, into the very presence of Christ Himself. This is most evident when we study the sublime mysteries of the faith such as the subject before us.

Two Distinct Natures

Article 19 of the Belgic Confession confesses what we believe about the “Person” of Christ. Here we ponder the wonder of who Christ is in Himself, as God and man. This teaching is called the “hypostatic union.” The word “hypostatic” comes from the Greek word, *hupostasis*, which can be translated as person. What this designation means to express is the union of Christ’s divine and human “natures” in the one “person” of Christ. Our Confession expresses this, saying,

We believe that by this conception the person of the Son is inseparably united and connected with the human nature; so that there are not two Sons of God, nor two persons, but two natures united in one single person; yet each nature retains its own distinct properties.

In confessing that Christ has two “natures,” we are taking our stand with the Church against the heresy known as Eutychianism (also known as the Monophysites: confessing Christ to have one [*mono*] nature [*physis*]). Eutyches was a fifth century leader whose teaching over-emphasized the divine nature of Christ so that there was really not one Person but one nature. He taught that the eternal Son absorbed the human nature at the Incarnation. All that really remained was the divine nature. Orthodox theologians rightly perceived that this meant that Jesus Christ was a “third thing” (Latin, *tertium quid*). Christ would then be neither very God nor very man. However, if Jesus’ humanity became divine, He would not be *homoousian*, of one substance, with our flesh, and thus Christ would not be a human like us.

We confess with the Church that although the Son of God “inseparably united” Himself to a human nature, nevertheless, “each nature retains its own distinct properties.” As the Athanasian Creed says, Christ is “one, not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by taking of the manhood into God. One altogether, not by confusion of substance, but by unity of person” (lines 34, 35). The Chalcedonian fathers rejected Eutyches in 451 A.D. when they said that the Son, our Lord Jesus Christ is “to be ac-

knowledged in two natures, inconfusedly, unchangeably...the distinction of the natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person and Subsistence...”

His Divine Nature

Since we confess that Jesus Christ has two distinct natures, what is His divine nature like? As the Confession says, “...the divine nature has always remained uncreated, without beginning of days or end of life, filling heaven and earth...” This is an affirmation of the Athanasian Creed, which says that Christ’s divine nature is “God of the substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds ... Perfect God ... Equal to the Father as touching His Godhead” (lines 30, 31, 32).

In saying that His divine nature is “uncreated, without beginning of days or end of life,” our Confession quotes from Hebrews 7:3. There the author of Scripture gives the intriguing statement that Melchizedek, in not having a recorded familial genealogy, nor account of his birth or death, resembled the Son of God, who is literally without beginning of days and end of life. This verse, along with Micah 5:2 (“whose origin is from of old, from ancient days”), was already quoted in Article 10 to prove the deity of Jesus Christ.

The Confession says that as to His divine nature, Christ fills heaven and earth. Here we have an allusion to Jesus’ own words in Matthew 28:20 where He promised His apostles, “Behold, I am with you



always, to the end of the age.”

Our Heidelberg Catechism interprets these words in harmony with the Belgic Confession, in Q&A 47, saying:

But is not Christ with us even unto the end of the world, as He has promised? Christ is true man and true God. According to His human nature He is now not on earth, but according to His Godhead, majesty, grace, and Spirit, He is at no time absent from us. (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 47)

Thus our Lord Jesus Christ is as truly and fully God as God the Father, being eternally begotten by Him and one substance with Him.

His Human Nature

Since this eternal Son became a man, what is His human nature like? The Confession says,

...the human nature has not lost its properties but remained a creature, having beginning of days, being a finite nature, and retaining all the properties of a real body. And though He has by His resurrection given immortality to the same, nevertheless He has not changed the reality of His human nature; forasmuch as our salvation and resurrection also depend on the reality of His body...

Christ's human nature was created, had beginning of days, is finite, and retains all the properties of a true body, despite having given immortality to His human nature by His resurrection. We see how real Jesus' humanity was in Scripture when it teaches us that He grew in wisdom and in stature (Luke 2:52), that He knew from experience what exhaustion was (Mark 4:38), what hunger was (Matthew 4:2), and what thirst was (John 4:7). He could be happy and He could also be angry and grieved (Mark 3:5).

Traditionally, we have described the true humanity of Christ stating that He is "...man of the substance of His mother, born in the world... perfect man, of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting... inferior to the Father as touching His manhood" (lines 30, 31, 32).

This confession of Christ having not only a true human body but also a "rational soul" is essential to affirm, for it is the term our fathers in the early church used in their battles over the true humanity of Christ. At the third ecumenical Council in Ephesus in 431, the controversy with Apollinarius was officially settled.

Apollinarius was a bishop in Syria and champion of Nicene orthodoxy. He erred in saying that humans are made up of three parts: body, soul (*anima animans*, which all animals have), and spirit (*anima rationalis*, a rational soul which differentiates

humans from animals), and that in Jesus Christ, the eternal Word (Greek, *logos*) took the place of the human spirit (Latin, *anima rationalis*). Jesus does not remain fully human in this analysis. He, like Eutyches' Christ, becomes a *tertium quid*, a "third thing." The result would be that Jesus would not derive His thoughts, emotions, and will from the human nature but from the divine! We believe, with Scripture, the fathers, and our Confession that Jesus is as human as any human could be, sin excepted.

Our Lord's Two Distinct Natures are United in a Single Person

In confessing that Jesus Christ has both a divine and human nature we are on the precipice of profound mystery, confessing that these two distinct, separate natures are nevertheless united in one, single person. Our Confession expresses this union of natures this way:

But these two natures are so closely united in one person that they were not separated even by His death. Therefore that which He, when dying, commended into the hands of His Father, was a real human spirit, departing from His body. But in the meantime the divine nature always remained united with the human, even when He lay in the grave; and the Godhead did not cease to be in Him, any more than it did when He was an infant, though it did not so clearly manifest itself for a while.

In confessing the union of the two natures in one person we are stand-

Our Lord Jesus Christ is as truly and fully God as God the Father, being eternally begotten by Him and one substance with Him.

Study/Application Questions for Article 19

1. Was Jesus Christ God from the moment of conception, or did he become God later?
2. Because we believe that Jesus' humanity is at the right hand of God (cf. Apostles' Creed) and not omnipresent, our Lutheran brethren often accuse us of Nestorianism. How does Q&A 48 of our Catechism answer that charge?
3. In reference to what our Confession says about the humanity of Christ, is Jesus' human nature the same as our now that he has been raised? (Think about the implications of your answer)
4. When his dead body lay in the grave, where was Christ's divine nature?

ing with the Church against the heresy known in church history as Nestorianism. Nestorius' trouble began with the phrase *theotokos* (Greek, "bearer of God," or, "mother of God"). The Church had called Mary *theotokos* in the context of the Arian controversy about whether the Son of God was eternal God. It was not used as a title of worship for Mary, but was used to make a statement about the child she bore. The focus was not that Christ received His divine nature from Mary, but that the child in Mary's womb was fully divine, that Jesus is God. Nestorius thought that this term would lead to confusion so he called Mary *christotokos*, "bearer of Christ." By this term, Nestorius sought to establish that Mary did not give birth to the divine Logos, but to the man Jesus who was united with the deity. He preached provocative sermons, saying, for instance, that a woman could not carry the deity for nine months in her womb, or that the deity could hardly be wrapped in

diapers, nor could God have suffered, died and been buried.

He was charged at the Council of Ephesus in 431 A.D. with teaching that Jesus was two persons, one divine and one human, almost as if Jesus was schizophrenic. The eternal Son of God, in Nestorius' view, came to live in the man Jesus as in a temple. An analogy would be that the Son was like oil and Jesus like water. When you pour them both into one container the oil simply rests on top of the water. There is no union, only division and distinction. The fathers at Chalcedon had Nestorius' teaching in mind when they said that the Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, is "to be acknowledged in two natures ... indivisibly, inseparably ... not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, and only begotten, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ..." The Athanasian Creed says, "Who, although He is God and man, yet He is not two,

but one Christ. For as the reasonable soul and flesh is one man, so God and man is one Christ" (lines 35, 36).

Your Salvation Depends on This Mysterious Doctrine

Although we cannot comprehend this mysterious doctrine, we must apprehend it by faith. As the Athanasian Creed says, "Furthermore it is necessary to everlasting salvation that we also believe rightly the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ ... This is the catholic faith, which except a man believe faithfully, he cannot be saved" (lines 29, 44).

We must apprehend it by faith to appropriate the benefits that the Person of Christ won for us. Our Confession concludes on this note. Because we, with the fathers at Chalcedon, confess that Christ's two natures are not confused or changed (against Eutyches/Monophysites) and without division or separation (against Nestorius), Jesus Christ is both consubstantial with His Father according to His divine nature, and thus has conquered death, and consubstantial with us according to His human nature, with a true human body and rational soul (against Apollinarius), and thus has died for us.

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What Really Unites Us

I have always been a little jealous of Reformed Churches referencing their creedal standards as The Three Forms of Unity. That is what Creeds or Confessions are for - to unify us in the Body of Christ. Contrary to how we think of our Standards, they are not a proposition set forth to be debated as an open question. They are that upon which we stand together. I submit to you in this article that the Word of God is ultimately our three forms of unity. That is, the Word read, the Word preached, and the Word heard. Here are truly The Three Forms of Unity. Without this, you lose the UNITY, and ultimately you lose the Church.

In the luxury of our heritage, with churches, books, preaching, and covenant families, we may easily forget the prominence of the Word of God in worship. We take for granted the abundance of Bibles in many translations, as well as free pulpits from which to expound the Word of God. Tapes and CDs, radio and TV are easily at hand.

These blessings were often obtained through the spilled blood of the Reformation saints. Though Scripture teaches the centrality of the Word read, preached, and heard, in the dark ages with the blessing of the Roman Church the Word was taken away from the Church of Christ. The common man lived in ignorance of God's Word.

Sadly, we are not free of such ignorance of God's Word. In our society, however, it is more often a self-willed ignorance of the Word. Most

professing Christianity today is built around Advent, Christmas, Lent and Easter, or a certain generic spirituality in time of war or tragedy, what is sometimes called "civil religion." Even Hollywood offers its version. Yet in their contentment with their holidays and ceremonies, they will be ignorant of anything amiss. As they relish the pageantry, liturgy, music, and decorations, they are at the same time oblivious to the fact that the Word of God barely functions in their midst.

Rome took away the Word of God and placed superstitious, idolatrous liturgy in its place. The Reformers liberated us from that bondage and gave us back the Word of God. The heirs of the Reformation have removed it from their midst voluntarily. The cry is for music groups, entertainment, showy rituals, smells and bells. Not teaching and preaching, but humanistic therapy for dysfunctional families. Not doctrine, but dance and drama. Not sanctification, but social action for the latest cause. One can almost imagine the voices crying out, much as the women at the tomb, "the church has taken the Bible, and we know not where she has laid it."

Sola Scriptura is more than a slogan of the Reformation. The awakening that burst forth at the Reformation was a revival based on the Word of God. Hus, Wycliffe, and Luther would not appear radical to us, for we have the Bible. But when Rome's power depended on keeping the Word from the masses, it meant death to those who would dare to translate it, preach it, or

teach it. But the Word could not be contained, being as it is, sharper than a two-edged sword. It is the power of God unto salvation. It is, as James says, the implanted Word, which is able to save your souls.

The Reformation, therefore, centered on the Word of God. Translating Scripture in the common language served to expose the tyranny of Rome. It was the power of Luther's preaching based on Scripture that drew ever larger crowds, making him a threat to the Roman Church. Not surprising, therefore, in the emerging Reformation churches, the Word of God became the foundation. In public worship, the reading of the Word in the language of the people, and especially the preached Word, became the focal point of that worship. Architecturally, the central pulpit became the focal point, not divided chancels with an altar as the focal point.

This watershed aspect of Scripture alone gives the dynamic context for Luther's famous statement before the Imperial Diet of Worms, Germany. Confronted with the greatest earthly powers, the pope and the emperor, Luther witnessed the good confession:

"I cannot submit my faith either to the pope or to the council, because it is clear as day that they have frequently erred and contradicted each other. Unless, therefore, I am convinced by the testimony of Scripture, or by the clearest reasoning, unless I am persuaded by means of the passages I have quoted and unless they thus render my conscience bound by the Word of God, I cannot and I will not retract."

Then, with every eye upon him, to the assembly who held his life in their hands, Luther declared: "Here I stand; I can do no other; may God help me! Amen!" Thus it was, that one of God's greatest warriors stood on the Word of God.

Such doctrine must affect the worship of the church. That Word read, preached and heard is our three forms of unity. No altars, no elevated theater for ritual, no divided chancels, but a large central pulpit, often with a large pulpit Bible, open and visible. What was symbolized was the reality of the centrality of God's Word.

The Word Read

Scripture itself commands and gives example of meditating upon the Word, hiding the Word in one's heart, and blessings resulting from such reading. This first point teaches us that we should read Scripture in worship, with a proper attitude.

First of all, the reading of the Word of God is to be a part of public worship. We have a vivid example of that in Nehemiah 8, when all the people were gathered in front of the Water Gate. Ezra opened the book of the law to read it, and all the people stood up. Jesus gave us a further example in Luke 14:16-21 when He began His public ministry. Jesus read a messianic text from Isaiah, and then gave the most forceful one-sentence sermon on it imaginable. This pattern of reading the Word continued with the apostles, as they would read the word in public worship and then expound it.

Second, such reading is also to be done in family worship as we can

see in Deuteronomy 6:6-9 and Psalm 78:5. What a duty and a privilege for families and fathers as heads of families! Here is the grand motive for all education as we know it. Not better jobs with higher pay, not social status, but being able to read the Word of God. This is part of the baptismal vow. That is why schools are important: to teach children to read the Word of God.

Third, Scriptures are also to be read in secret, or private worship. We are to search the Scriptures, meditate upon them, hide them in our heart.

We also need to consider HOW should we read the Word and with what kind of attitude do we come to Scripture. The Confession says the Bible is to be read "with godly fear."

If many fail to be faithful in the reading and hearing of the Word, even more fail here. Many, I fear, are unaffected by the reading or singing of God's Word. What pastor has not looked out on a congregation only to see supposed worshipers stone silent during the singing or staring out the window as the Word is being read? At most, there is a superficial grasp of the content.

Question 157 of the Westminster Larger Catechism has an expansion of this point:

Q.157. How is the Word of God to be read?

Scripture itself commands and gives example of meditating upon the Word, hiding the Word in one's heart, and blessings resulting from such reading.

A. The holy Scriptures are to be read with an high and reverent esteem of them; with a firm persuasion that they are the very Word of God, and that he only can enable us to understand them; with desire to know, believe, and obey the will of God revealed in them; with diligence, and attention to the matter and scope of them; with meditation, application, self-denial, and prayer.

Can you conceive of what could happen in the church if all who professed Christ really dealt with His Word in this way? If you want revival and spiritual prosperity for Christ's church, if you want unity within the Body of Christ, here is where to start. Come to the Bible with the right attitude! So we are to read the Word of God in public, family and private worship; and we are to do so with a godly attitude.

The Word Preached

I always liked the story of a church where one of the parishioners didn't think much of the preaching. Desiring to say something good rather than critical, each week he would greet the pastor with, "That was a good text you had today." You cannot criticize (at least with impunity) the Word of God. The preaching, however, can be worthy of criticism. Nevertheless, God has ordained preaching as central to public worship.



The preaching of the Word is a Divine ordinance appointed to continue in the church till the end of the world. In addition, it is central to God's plan of salvation. In evangelism, church growth, and missions preaching is pre-eminent. Romans 10:14-15 brings out the relevancy, permanency and centrality of preaching God's plan of redemption.

There is no calling upon the name of the Lord without faith, no faith without hearing of the Word, no hearing of the Word without preaching of the Word, and no preaching, we might add, without the sending of Christ and His Church. In Acts it is the Holy Spirit who directs the church to set apart those who were called to preach.

We would emphasize that the spotlight is NOT on the preacher, NOR on the sermon, BUT on the preaching of the Word of God. It is the implanted Word, as James calls it, that is effectual to save. God's grace is seen in His condescending to us to reveal His Word through human instruments.

The Westminster Larger Catechism again gives a good summary.

Q.159. asks: How is the Word of God to be preached by those that are called thereunto?

A. They that are called to labor in the ministry of the Word, are to preach sound doctrine, diligently, in season and out of season; plainly, not in the enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit, and of power;

faithfully, making known the whole counsel of God; wisely, applying themselves to the necessities and capacities of the hearers; zealously, with fervent love to God and the souls of his people; sincerely, aiming at his glory, and their conversion, edification, and salvation.

***The spotlight is
NOT on the
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the Word of God.***

The central place of preaching in God's plan of redemption teaches us that private reading of the Bible, or private Bible study is not sufficient for true and continual spiritual growth and development. We may not absent ourselves from the public worship of God or the preaching of the Word of God in public worship. The grace obtained from personal Bible reading depends upon the grace of the preached Word. Think of Christ opening the Word to the men on the Road to Emmaus, or Philip expounding Isaiah to the Ethiopian eunuch. The Word must be explained and commented upon and put into present day context by a man designated for that purpose by Christ Himself.

I feel very uncomfortable stressing

this point and yet I must. I believe with all my heart this is what our Savior intended as the means of conversion. It makes me seem important, though I know that is not what it really means. I am just an unworthy instrument; none of this gives glory to me. In fact, I don't really begin to understand why preaching should be so special.

As far as I can see there is no inherent value in preaching above other things. All preaching has, and it is a big "all," is God's command and promise. There is a divine imperative. Don't ask me for a reason why this works better! It is not answered by human wisdom. It is efficacious because God wills to do it this way! We just have to surrender to His way. Because God ordained the preaching of the Word as the primary means of salvation and sanctification, therefore it must be effective to those ends. Thus does Isaiah say: "So shall My word be which goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to me empty."

The Word Heard

The third and last consideration we will take up with respect to the Word concerns HEARING. The Confession's words are: "the sound preaching and conscionable hearing of the Word, in obedience unto God, with understanding, faith, and reverence...." The definition of this "conscionable hearing" in the Confession is four-fold.

First, the Word preached is to be heard in obedience to God. This is no academic exercise; it is not entertainment; it is a life and death matter. Jesus declares: Not everyone who says to Me, "Lord, Lord," (and we might add, not everyone

who hears) but he who does the Father's will.

Second, the Word is to be heard with understanding. Scripture knows of two kinds of knowledge. There is bare knowledge, historical knowledge, and there is knowledge as in wisdom. "Wisdom" is when one truly perceives how knowledge is related to God and our life.

In the parable of the soils, one soil (beside the road) was hard. The seeds sown there were picked up by the birds. The seed is there, but the hardness of the heart prevents understanding. Loving evil instead of God, the knowledge is perverted; thus there is no understanding.

Third, the Word is to be heard with faith. If it is true that whatever is not of faith is sin, then something as central as preaching, without faith on the part of the hearer, is not worship (it is not "conscionable hearing of the Word"). If you look at Hebrews 4 you will see this explicitly taught, although it should be clear even by implication that without faith, there is no mediator, and without a Mediator, there is no true worship. Proper hearing is hearing in faith.

Fourth, hearing is qualified by the word reverence. Knowing the nature of preaching, that it is God's Word proclaimed, and God is speaking through His Word, reverent awe is the only possible attitude to take in worship.

Can you see then, how utterly crucial your hearing is in the part of worship we call preaching? The spotlight is really on you. It is not so much how well the preacher preached, but how well did you

hear? Is your hearing obedient, with understanding, faith, and reverence? Or is it routine, an occasional show, an academic exercise, a half-hearted ritual you hope will be a sort of "insurance policy?" The stakes are awfully high!

Application

Let me mention a few things by way of application:

First, get yourself and your family under the faithful preaching of the Word, frequently and regularly. Anything less is inexcusable in the eyes of God. Faithlessness here is a denial of the covenant! If you have any love for your family, they will be with you among the people of God whenever the Word of God is being soundly preached, and you will find a church home where that is the case! If such is not the case, you had better question your own relationship to Jesus.

Second, get unbelievers under the preaching of the Word. This, whatever value other forms of evangelism might have, this is still the primary, God-ordained means of evangelism. Qualitatively and quantitatively, this is the way of fruitfulness. The lost are drawn to the light of Jesus under the preaching of the Word. Many who do not know if they are saved, find assurance based upon true faith while under sound preaching. And, of course, babes in Christ mature under the preaching of the Word.

Third, be a hearer of preaching in the way God prescribes in His Word. Especially, be a doer and not a hearer only! Obedience is the hallmark of conscionable hearing of the Word of God. Read Psalm 1 and James 1 to learn the difference

between a living hearer and a dead hearer.

Fourth, let this truth about preaching make you victory oriented as a soldier of the cross. Right doctrine cures a multitude of ailments, and truth about God-ordained preaching should cure us of discouragement. If the frail, fallible church and imperfect preaching of a perfect Word is the way God has ordained to build His kingdom, then we, in spite of our weakness, should be joyously confident. "Nothing can stop the faithful, God-owned preaching of the Word of God from conquering the world, because it is nothing less than the sword in the mouth of the King of kings and Lord of lords by which He will defeat all His enemies and erect and develop His kingdom in the earth in human history before the return of Christ."

Finally, be reminded, that these points of exposition are our "three forms of unity." The reading, the preaching, and the conscionable hearing of the Word of God. That which grounds our worship, is the basis of our unity. May God grant us a vision for such a result. Remember this: It is not man's word, it is God's Word. Therein resides its power and efficacy.

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The Tale of Two Cities

Is God in control? Or are we victims of circumstance? Fatalists believe whatever happens will happen. If God does not control our lives then everything is uncertain. If He is our God then we can be confident of the future. It is not easy to see God's plan for the world amid the falling institutions and loyalties of our time. But God has a plan! When we look at current events through the eyes of faith, reading newspapers, watching the news, hearing what is happening around the world, we still can see "the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living" (Psalm 27:13).

We are not the first ones to raise questions in dangerous times. St. Augustine (354-430) still has a relevant message for our 21st century. But what can this great North African church father tell us in our age of terrorism? He saw a world in ruins. Christopher Dawson remarked that St. Augustine's age marked "the failure of the greatest experiment in secular civilization the world has ever seen." Ancient Rome was crumbling before the advance of the hordes from the North. When the news of the sack of Rome reached Africa, followed by thousands of desolate refugees, St. Augustine became deeply troubled about what seemed an irrational and Satanic act. Why should the city of such great beauty and revered throughout the centuries be surrendered to the ravages of barbarians?

Supporters of the old pagan religions attributed the fall of Rome to Christianity. They believed the gods

had withdrawn their protection from Rome. St. Augustine denied their accusation. He showed that Rome was punished because she worshipped, not because she neglected, such deities. His response to the pagans was a philosophy of history - an attempt to explain the events of recorded time from a Biblical perspective. In his classic *The City of God* he shows that the history of mankind is not the result of change, nor climate, nor human passions. It depended upon the acceptance or non-acceptance of God.

St. Augustine points out that history revolves around the tale of two cities: The earthly city and the heavenly city, also called the city of man and the city of God. St. Augustine wrote: "Mankind is divided into two sorts: such as live according to man, and such as live according to God. These we mystically call the 'two cities' or societies, the one predestined to reign eternally with God, the other condemned to perpetual torment with the Devil."

The City of Man

The modern city of man bears a striking resemblance to the builders of the tower of Babel (the word means: at the gate of the gods). Babel was the city of confusion, the city of the ungodly, devoid of true justice. Its residents attempted to build an enormous tower, which must have required a major organizational effort, perhaps a totalitarian society. They had to operate on the frontiers of technology to build this tower. They did this as a way to make a name for themselves. It had nothing to do with the modern ex-

pression referring to reputation; it meant becoming independent. They desired to exclude God from His creation rather than looking to God for their identity. They took pride in their ability to construct a tower that reached into the heavens. They viewed themselves as gods. The construction of the tower was seen by God as a challenge to His authority. He said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them" (Genesis 11:6).

Like the builders of the Tower of Babel, human beings today have an extraordinary high view of themselves. They want to storm the heavens. They believe in either the innate goodness of man, or in a malleable human nature that can be made good by wise policy and a suitable environment. They believe profoundly in the "redeeming" power of institutions, like the United Nations, the European Union, or whatever, to change and to transform reality. They pretend that we can solve all problems - old and new - with technology and guarantee prosperity. In his most recent book *The Great Disruption* Francis Fukuyama argues that man can not live in the rubble of anarchy for long. His social nature and self-interested reason leads him to "renorm" social life, to invent new moral rules for getting along with his fellow man. In other words, the besetting sin in the city of man is the sin of putting himself in God's place.

Man's independence can lead only to one end - spiritual and material death. Any separation from God is death. Francis Schaeffer said

We see the devaluation of man everywhere today, and it is a result of the humanist philosophy that was supposed to exalt him.

there is death in the city of man because man has turned away from God.

We watch our Western culture being destroyed. It has become a secularized, godless culture, a man-centered culture through and through. This is an age of spectacular progress in the material sphere while at the same we witness an unprecedented decline in the spiritual component in our culture and our personal lives. We live in a society that has rejected its Christian heritage and is proud to be disengaged from God. Secular universities have become an environment and culture in which God no longer has anything to say. He is either declared dead or ignored. Certainty is sought in science. The idolization of science and technology is driven by an apostate religious motivation. Resistance against and rejection of Christianity is increasing. Decisions are made in public and private life on the basis of one's own wisdom.

Prominent newspapers take on a condescending attitude when they write about religion. Christians in the media admit that, if they press for the inclusion of a Christian voice or the reasoned comment from a Christian (especially a conservative Protestant), they are marginalized.

When man says farewell to God, life becomes cheap and brutal. We see this devaluation of man everywhere today, and it is a result of the

humanist philosophy that was supposed to exalt him. People with no regard for either God or other human beings are killing each other every single hour in our cities, often for nothing, frequently as little as something as a pair of sneakers or a necklace. Millions have been killed by abortion - in most instances, simply for the convenience of the mother. James M. Boice points out that not only do we behave like animals in our cultural rush to free ourselves from God, but "in our rebellion we end up doing things even the animals would not do. I do not know if baboons kill their young. They may. But they do not systematically murder them for their own convenience, as we do our young."

In the city of man people think they can live without restraints. Paul Gauguin, the famous French painter, believed that man ought to be autonomous, completely free. What troubled him was that two plus two always equals four. He wanted to be so free that on a Tuesday morning at eight o'clock he could say 2 and 2 equals four and a half. But he had to live within the restraints of the created order. He could not change it. No one can live without any restraints.

Instead of living without restraints our permissive society has become an addicted society - addicted to gambling, and even to shopping. In *Beyond Fate*, Margaret Visser says, "Our society, relative to most other societies on earth, is rich

enough to contain many people who say they 'live to shop' and really believe it.' Shopping for them becomes entertainment, vitality, even identity and self-worth."

The City of God

St. Augustine argued that from the first rebellion of the fallen angels against God "two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self." History is one long tale of the fierce clash between these two cities. Babel's residents desired to make a name for themselves. Jerusalem, the City of God, is where God comes first. As St. Augustine put it, "Those who wish to follow God allow Him to go before and they follow: they do not make Him follow while they go before." In this city the cross of Christ is the prominent symbol. The empty tomb is its hope.

The supreme Lordship of Christ is accepted over every department of life. In the City of God people are free, having intrinsic worth, living in relationship with others while creatively engaged in work and leisure to the glory of God. It is a city of sacrificial love, characterized by the love of God and for God. Love for God is the motive for all Christian actions, values and norms. We see then technology in the light of revelation, in the service of God and man. The City of God is always different in its ambitions, seeking heavenly peace and calling people out of the nations to come to God. This does not mean that the citizens of the City of God are no longer citizens of the earthly city, but they do not derive their ultimate comfort,



satisfaction, ambition, or hope from it. The Lord is sovereign over the city of man and the city of God.

We are involved in the life of the city of man. We are surrounded by the culture of Babel. We live in both spheres. While we live in the city of man we still have a task to fulfill. Our job is to build houses, marry, have children. We are to work for the welfare of the city and not our own. (Jeremiah 29: 4-7). We don't flee the city of man in which we live. We pray for the good of the city and for its repentance. The prophet Jonah thought that the wicked city of Nineveh was beyond hope. But God proved him wrong. Nineveh did repent. The repentance of modern Babel is yet possible, and God's representatives must work for that goal.

The New Jerusalem

Christians are not permanent citizens in the city of man. They are sojourners to the New Jerusalem, the eternal City of God. We are "resident aliens." The new Jerusalem will be established at the end of time, but not by human effort. It is the creation of God, the city of the predestined. Nothing can ever remove God's people from communion with their God. This means that the story of the temptation and the fall and the building of the Tower of Babel can never happen again. Christians are like Abraham, the father of all believers, who "looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Hebrews 11: 10).

Christians journey out of bondage to liberation. It is the story about hope and freedom, the freedom illustrated by the Exodus. It is a

picture of a journey of people out of bondage to liberation. The prospect of the new city is firmly fixed as the center of the hope and fears of God's people and will continue in this role literally into eternity. We look forward to the New Jerusalem, to that moment when all the nations of the world will be gathered in her, where God will be all in all.

The city of man will be destroyed. At the last judgment mankind will witness the triumph of God over evil. It is in the hope of this final triumph that the course of the world becomes intelligible. Then we may see the rise and fall of empires and the apparent prosperity of the wicked in the light of the coming of the New Jerusalem. When the Lord returns the destiny of the two cities will be made clear.

As St. Augustine described it, "After the resurrection when the final, universal judgment has been completed, there shall be two kingdoms, each with its own distinct boundaries; the one Christ's, the other the devil's; the one consisting of the good, the other of the bad - both, however, consisting of angels and men.

Our Calling

We are no longer living in a Christian culture. On the contrary, our culture is busy shedding the last vestiges of the Christian faith. In

fact, it is becoming anti-Christian. Our taxing times should lend urgency to preaching and living the Gospel. We may be tempted to privatize our faith and withdraw from the world. However, there is nothing in St. Augustine and Scripture to suggest that we may escape from the world. While we eagerly look forward to our Lord's return we must continue to be stewards of His creation.

To be stewards in a Babel culture does not mean to seek peace and harmony at the expense of the Gospel. We may not accommodate the gods of Babel - materialism, scientism, technology, consumerism, hedonism, and appeasement, just to note a few. Scripture calls us to be "in the world," even though we are not to be "of the world." In *Beyond Culture Wars*, Michael Horton notes that separation from the world is not physical rather it is a matter of divorcing our dependence on the things of this world.

We should live for the Lord within our present culture. More than ever before we need to bear witness to the Word of God, and stand for righteousness and truth. We should be concerned for the lost without the Savior, the poor and needy, justice and responsible stewardship. The cost of influencing our society is high. In the midst of a culture in which idols are served, we are called to fight the good fight of faith. Will we

Babel's residents desired to make a name for themselves. Jerusalem, the City of God, is where God comes first.

win the battle? We are not called to be successful but to be faithful. The nearer the end of history the more difficult it will become for Christians who want to be men and women of “the Book.” Scripture does not allow for triumphalism. We should not pretend that we can change the direction of our culture. But we should not be discouraged. The darkness of our culture cannot extinguish the light of Christ.

The assurance of our Lord’s return and His ultimate victory will help us to live boldly in the midst of a Babel culture. There are no shortcuts. There is no cheap grace. We are called to carry a cross before we will receive a crown. We are called to practice truth even when it is costly. This is the only way the world will take seriously our proclamation of the Gospel. In *Death in the City* Francis Schaeffer points out that “all too often the only antithesis we have exhibited to the world and to our own children has been talking about holiness or our talking about love; rather than the consideration and practice of holiness and love together as truth, in antithesis to what is false in theology, in the church, and the surrounding culture.” We cannot do it on our own. We must really believe that God is there and look directly to Him for help.

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Looking Above

A Series on The Revelation of Jesus Christ

“The Church in the Midst of the World: Called Back to Christ”
Revelation 3:14-22

The last of these seven letters, the letter to the church of Laodicea, is the most sobering of them all. In every other letter we read of at least something for which Christ commends the church. Even the church in Ephesus, the first of the seven letters, though in danger of losing its lampstand, is still commended. But there is nothing - absolutely nothing - in the church of the Laodiceans for which Christ commends it. The church in Laodicea, a church in the world, has compromised so thoroughly with the world that she has become no different than the world.

The City of Laodicea

The city of Laodicea, though small, grew rapidly under Roman control, and became exceedingly wealthy. It was the home of the rich and famous. The city had become rich through its export of black wool and also for what was called “Phrygian powder” - a powder that was ground locally in Laodicea, made into a salve, and then used to treat diseases of the eyes. Through such industry, the city had become so wealthy that when it was devastated by an earthquake in the year 60 AD, it refused help from Rome. Laodicea boldly and proudly told Rome, we are rich, we are wealthy, we have need of nothing!

The city did, however, have need of one thing: a source of good water. The neighboring town of Hierapolis

was famous for its hot springs, which were medicinal in nature. People would travel from miles around to bathe in the hot springs. Another neighboring city, Colosse, was built at the foot of a great mountain range that was nearly always snow-capped. Colosse was well supplied with cold water from the mountain streams that flowed year round. This cold water was good to drink. Though Hierapolois had its hot springs and Colosse its cold mountain streams, Laodicea had no good source of water. Thus Laodicea had to pipe the water in, resulting in lukewarm, tepid, barely drinkable water.

That background gives you something of the flavor of the city of Laodicea: rich, wealthy, a strong economy built on black wool and eye salve, but a city with very poor water.

The Church in Laodicea

Evidently, the Christian church that arose in Laodicea quickly took on the character of the city; and the church became like the world.

Consider the words of Christ to the church of the Laodiceans: “I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth” (3:15-16). Based on the geography of the area, you get the



point: the church was not hot, that is, it was of no benefit like the hot springs of Hierapolis; nor was the church cold, that is, it was of no benefit like the cold mountain streams of Colosse. It was lukewarm - that is, it was useful for nothing! Lukewarm, tepid water is not good to the taste, there is nothing refreshing about; nor is it good for the body, there is nothing medicinal about it. It is useless, disgusting, even nauseating.

So had the church of the Laodiceans become. They became lukewarm, tepid, useless. They became an ineffective, stagnant, complacent group of people. With a little compromise here and a little compromise there, they slowly became like the world. They were called to be the church in the world; instead they let the world into the church.

Laodicea's compromise resulted in Christ's judgment: "So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth" (3:16). William Hendriksen points out that here we find an emotion or feeling in Christ, which we find nowhere else in the Scriptures. "We do not read that He is grieved with them. Neither do we read that He is angry with them. No, He is disgusted ... and not just slightly disgusted, but thoroughly nauseated." Christ was nauseated to the point of wanting to vomit them out of His mouth! Their religion was a sham, a pretense, an hypocrisy - they were about to be vomited out of Christ's mouth. He would bear with them no more!

The tragedy in all of this is that the church had deceived herself into thinking that she was in a good condition. Note the beginning of verse

17, "Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing..." Evidently, the members of the church had compromised with the world, thereby becoming rich in the world.

In Colossians, Paul had wrote to warn not only the Colossians, but the Laodiceans as well. He warned them of the dangers of falling back into relying upon their own works for salvation. He warned them about those who were creeping into the church, teaching false doctrines of reliance upon oneself. He warned them of those who were coming into the church trying to make them forget about Jesus Christ. Evidently, the warning went unheeded. The church at Laodicea had wrapped the cloak of good works about themselves, and said, "We have need of nothing! We are self-sufficient, we have everything we need! We don't really need Christ. Oh, it is nice to drop His name here and there and from time to time to mention His cross, but we really don't need Him all that much, and we really don't need His cross all that much."

This was the church's assessment of itself. "We are rich, we have become wealthy, we have need of nothing!" Again, we learn that it doesn't matter so much what the world thinks of the church; it doesn't matter so much what our neighbors think of the church; it really doesn't even matter what

you or I think of the church; what matters is what Christ thinks of the church. The church of the Laodiceans thought they were healthy - they thought they were rich - they thought they were wealthy - they thought they had need of nothing. But now Christ, "the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the Creation of God" speaks and He gives the true assessment of the church of the Laodiceans: "You do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked" (3:17).

The church became like the world and she knew it not. She was wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked, and all the while she thought she was rich, wealthy, and in need of nothing! Does not the church that is falling away always have a high opinion of herself?! Does not the church that is in danger of becoming apostate always have a high view of herself?!

The Church Today

Do not the words that Christ speaks to the church of the Laodiceans ring true today?! Has not the church of our day allowed the world to come into the church? Has not the church of our day by and large become like the world? The modern church is concerned that the gospel might offend, and so we water it down! The modern church says, we are a Christian church, and yet it proclaims messages that could just as easily be heard in a

The church at Laodicea had wrapped the cloak of good works about themselves, and said, "We have need of nothing!"

Jewish synagogue! The modern church says, we are a Christian church, but rarely, if ever is the name of Christ even mentioned, let alone His work on the cross!

The modern church is quickly becoming a church that proclaims “a God without wrath, who brings men without sin, into a kingdom without judgment, through a Christ without a cross.” Look over the Atlantic; the churches are empty! Why?! Because by and large, they have compromised and sold out on the gospel; they have no more message to bring. Even the unbeliever is discerning enough to recognize a church that offers nothing more than what the world has to offer.

By and large, the modern church has fallen in to an “easy-believism,” where everybody is a Christian - an easy-believism that sugarcoats the gospel, allowing its hearers to deceive themselves into thinking they are Christians, when in fact, they are not. This is nothing new! It is one of Satan’s oldest ploys. Get them to believe they are Christians, when in fact they are not, and then cause them to fall asleep in their complacency. Let them live thinking they are fine Christians and thinking they are a good church. Let them deceive themselves and I will devour them! This is what happened at the church of the Laodiceans - they fell prey to one of Satan’s oldest ploys. They deceived themselves.

Evidently, many in the church of Laodicea had so deceived themselves and were in danger of meeting a horrible end. Yet, even in careless Laodicea, Christ had preserved some for Himself. In large measure they had been sucked in by the false

Christians. In large measure they had been sucked in to agree with the compromises which the church had made; or at least if they didn’t agree with the compromises, they were willing to tolerate them; they were willing to live with them.

Christ says to them in verse 18, “I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed. Anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see.” With these words Christ wakes His own in the church. He says, “You will find no riches nor wealth in the world! I am all you ever need! I am the gold refined in the fire, find your wealth in Me! Clothe yourself not with black wool of Laodicea, but in the perfect white garments of the Lamb that was slain! Anoint your eyes not with the Phrygian powder of Laodicea, but the Light of the World!”

Jesus gently reminds His own — those that find themselves in the midst of what is quickly becoming an apostate church — that these words of warning come out of love for their souls. Verse 19, “As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent.”

Rev. Brian Vos is the pastor of the Trinity United Reformed Church in Caledonia, Michigan. He also serves as the President of the Board of Reformed Fellowship.

Soundbites

1991

January 1991

“Every revival that has been blessed by God occurred when the doctrines of sovereign grace were faithfully proclaimed.”

Reformed Evangelism
Paul T. Murphy

“To reform a person from what he is to what he ought to be requires pain, patience and perseverance.”

The Reformed Paradigm
Norman De Jong

March 1991

“Synod ‘90 sent a shock wave... by reaching over into your congregation to make it an ‘equal opportunity employer.’”

Synod-ocracy
Cause and Cure - I
Lester De Koster

“The function of ancient praise was not so much to raise the emotions as to lift the heart and mind to God.”

Ancient Praise
W. Robert Godfrey

April 1991

“The community of true faith cannot tolerate a situation in which we read the Bible very differently, or, as in the case of the 1990 synodical decision with its grounds, we don’t read the Bible at all.”

Confusion Reigns
Edward Heerema

June 1991

“The drift toward a more liberal, main-line church orientation begins

(Continued on page 24)



Evaluating the New Perspective on Paul (15)

Justification and a Final Judgment According to Works (Part Two)

According to the reformational understanding of justification, the final judgment, though it involves God's public acquittal of the believer, is not to be understood as a kind of final or future justification. Because justification is a definitive pronouncement of the believer's acceptance with God on the basis of the saving work of Christ, the final judgment *publicly confirms* but does not *determine* the believer's salvation and acceptance with God. Good works, which play an important role in the final acquittal of believers, are not the basis or reason for their acquittal, but the evidences and tokens of the genuineness of their faith. These works, which are themselves the fruits of God's gracious working by His Spirit, are rewarded, but this reward is a reward of grace and not of merit. Believers will not be vindicated in the final judgment unless their faith has been active in good works. However, this does not mean that the good works that faith produces are the ultimate reason for their salvation and acquittal.

The question that must now be addressed is whether this understanding of the relation between justification and the final judgment is in accord with the apostle Paul's writings. One way to put the question would be to ask, is this reformational view one that is born merely out of desire to protect the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone? Or does it rep-

resent a fair treatment of Paul's understanding of the final judgment and the role of good works?

The Necessity of Sanctification

Before directly addressing the apostle Paul's understanding of the final judgment in relation to good works, we need to observe that his epistles clearly teach that believers, who are justified freely on account of the righteousness of Christ, are sanctified through union with Christ. Those who receive Christ for righteousness also receive Him for sanctification (1 Corinthians 1:30). However emphatic may be the apostle's declaration of free justification, he nowhere countenances the conclusion that this is at the expense of the work of the Spirit of Christ in renewing believers in the way of obedience to the "law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2). Expressed theologically, the apostle Paul affirms that the gospel of God's grace in Christ includes both the benefits of justification and sanctification. Antinomianism, which teaches that the free grace of God permits the believer to live indifferently with respect to the requirements of the law, is expressly rejected as a false conclusion that fails to appreciate the fullness of what salvation brings in the life of the believer. Though justification is a principal benefit of the gospel, it may not be separated from the grace of renewal by the working of the Spirit of sanctifica-

tion. Salvation includes not only the grace of acceptance with God but also the grace of transformation after the image of His Son (Romans 8:29).

Without attempting to canvass comprehensively Paul's epistles with respect to this teaching of the necessity of sanctification, we need only consider a few instances where the apostle emphasizes the indispensable place of the obedience of faith in the Christian life.

One of the more remarkable instances of this emphasis is to be found in Romans 6 and following, a section of the epistle that follows immediately upon the heels of the apostle's treatment of the theme of free justification.

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. (Vv. 1-4)

In this transitional portion of the argument in Romans, Paul anticipates a possible response to his preceding exposition of God's "super-abounding grace" in Jesus Christ. If salvation is a free gift, which is granted solely upon the basis of the obedience of Christ (Rom. 5:12-21), the conclusion

seems to follow that the more we sin, the more God's grace is magnified. What possible motive or reason for obedience remains, if we justified by faith alone apart from works performed in obedience to the law? Remarkably, without backtracking from his insistence upon the grace of free justification, the apostle simply reminds his readers that those who are united to Christ by faith are thereby *participants in His death and resurrection*. By virtue of their incorporation into Christ, they have died to sin and are being raised in newness of life (v. 5). Through union with Christ, believers are "set free from sin" and made alive to God (vv. 7, 11). Therefore, to conclude that believers may live as they please because they are saved by grace alone represents a fundamental failure to comprehend what it means to be united with Christ.

The believer's new life in union with Christ is not an optional "extra," but an integral aspect of all that is entailed by being united to Christ by faith and indwelt of His Spirit. Consequently, the apostle sums up his response to any attempt to use the grace of God as a license for sin in the opening part of Romans 8: "You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness" (vv. 9-10).

This theme of "life in the Spirit" is sounded at various important points in Paul's epistles. Fellowship with Christ, who is "become a life-giving Spirit" (II Corinthians 3:17; cf.

1 Corinthians 15:45), necessarily means that the believer no longer lives in the environment of the flesh but in the environment of the Spirit. In his letter to the Galatians, which primarily argues that believers are justified by faith and not by the works of the law, Paul insists that those who are no longer "under" the curse of the law may not use their new freedom as an opportunity for the flesh (Galatians 5:13).

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Believers have been crucified with Christ so that the life they now live is no longer their own because Christ lives in them (Galatians 2:19-20). Accordingly, they must "walk by the Spirit" and bear the "fruit of the Spirit [in] love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23). The same faith that receives the gracious promise of God and is opposed to the way of justification by works, is also a faith that "works through love" (Galatians 5:6). Just as in Romans 6, so in Colossians 3 the apostle appeals to the reality of the believer's union with Christ in His

death and resurrection as a basis for his exhortations to believers to live in a distinctive manner: "If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on the earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory." Within the setting of this reality of incorporation into Christ, crucified and risen from the dead, the apostle urges believers to "put to death" the passions and ways of the flesh (v. 5), to "put off the old self with its practices" (v. 9), and to "put on the new self which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator" (v. 10; cf. II Corinthians 3:18).

Because justified believers are being progressively sanctified in union with Christ whose Spirit indwells them, the apostle Paul is also able to speak of their salvation as a still future reality. Indeed, only those in union with Christ who continue in the way of faith and obedience will obtain the end of their salvation, eternal life (Romans 6:22). The urgency of such persistence in the Christian life is the setting for Paul's use of the metaphor of the Christian life as a race. As he reminds the Corinthian church, not all athletes who compete in the race obtain the prize. What is required is the kind of self-control and persistence in the course that will enable the athlete to finish the race and not be disqualified (I Corinthians 9:24-27). Believers are exhorted to work out their own salvation, because it is God who works in them both to will and



to do for His good pleasure (Philippians 2:12). Full participation in Christ, not only in the likeness of His death but also in the likeness of His resurrection, will only be obtained when perfection is reached in a yet future state of glory. For this reason, the apostle confesses that he has not already obtained this, nor is he perfect, but “I press on to make it my own, because Jesus has made me his own” (Philippians 3:12).

Thus, the fullness of salvation includes more than God’s act of free justification, which frees the believer from condemnation and death. It also includes an incorporation into Christ after whose likeness the believer is being conformed. Since this saving incorporation into Christ and His likeness has a future end or goal in view, Paul speaks of the believer’s “hope of salvation,” which suggests that from the vantage point of the future salvation is yet to be obtained (I Thessalonians 5:8, 9). The salvation of believers is, accordingly, nearer than when they first believed, though not yet their complete possession (Romans 13:11). Because salvation, whether in its present, partial realization or its future, consummate perfection, involves a complete transformation after the likeness of Christ, it can be described as an ongoing, yet-unfinished, process (cf. I Corinthians 1:18; II Corinthians 3:18).

A Final Judgment According to Works

Within the context of Paul’s insistence upon the necessary transformation of the life of the believer by the Spirit of Christ, it is not surprising to find that he links the procurement of the fullness of salvation in

the future with a final judgment according to works. The believer’s present enjoyment of salvation through union with the crucified and risen Christ (“already”) does not represent the fullness of salvation that will be enjoyed when the end comes (“not yet”). According to the apostle, the present experience of salvation is an anticipation and beginning of a more glorious future of consummate blessing. To

Even believers, who enjoy the grace of acceptance with God on the basis of Christ’s saving work, will be subject to a future judgment.

use the metaphor of harvest, the “first fruits” of Christ’s resurrection life, which are shared with believers through union with Christ by His indwelling Spirit (Romans 8:1-11), are the beginnings of the complete harvest, when all that believers presently enjoy in the form of an earnest or downpayment will be received in full (II Corinthians 5:4-5). The obtaining of salvation in its fullest measure will only occur within the setting of Christ’s coming and the final judgment.

The prospect of a final judgment is, therefore, a central and inescapable feature of the future. This final judgment is an unavoidable prospect for believers and unbelievers alike,

all of whom will be judged according to their works and their respective responses to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Even believers, who enjoy the grace of acceptance with God on the basis of Christ’s saving work, will be subject to a future judgment. Though they presently know that “there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1), this does not exempt them from a future judgment that will include their public acquittal before others. Nor does it require the conclusion that good works are not a necessary fruit of faith, which confirm the believer’s incorporation into Christ and full participation in His death and resurrection.

Some passages in Paul’s epistles speak of the final judgment in the most comprehensive terms. All people, whether Jews or Gentiles, whether believers or non-believers, will be judged by God. In the opening chapters of Romans, which present the universal sin and divine condemnation that hold sway over all flesh, the apostle emphasizes that all will be judged by God in “the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed” (Romans 2:5). At that time God “will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury” (vv. 6-8). This judgment will fall upon all who have sinned, whether those who sinned “under the law” or “without the law.” No one will be spared the judgment of God “on that day,” says the apostle, “when, according to my

gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus” (v. 16).

The point of the apostle’s insistence upon this universal judgment of God is to insist that all sinners, Jews as well as Gentiles, will not escape being examined by God and found guilty and worthy of condemnation. There is no possible escape available to anyone by means of the law. The advantage of having the law and oracles of God, which distinguishes the Jews from the Gentiles, will not safeguard those who do not do what the law requires, but rather live in disobedience to it. The principle the apostle enunciates in his argument is that all will be judged according to what they have received, and no one will be found acceptable to God by that standard: “For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law” (Romans 2:12).

In other passages, the apostle speaks of the final judgment particularly with respect to its application to those who obey or disobey the gospel. These passages describe the final judgment as the occasion for a separation between those who are saved and those who are not saved. In the case of non-believers who have disobeyed the gospel of Jesus Christ, the final judgment holds only a fearful certainty of divine wrath and displeasure. In a passage remarkable for its vivid

imagery, the apostle portrays the second coming of Christ as a time when Christ will be “revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus” (II Thessalonians 1:7-8). The coming of Christ promises rest to His beleaguered people, but terrible distress for those who have rejected Him. In the case of believers, the final judgment promises the fullness of salvation, provided they continue in the course of faith and obedience (II Corinthians 11:15).

Whether in those passages that speak of God’s judgment in the most comprehensive terms or in others that speak more particularly of the judgment of believers, it is clear that this judgment will be “according to” works. When defending his own apostolic ministry, Paul is not content to appeal to his own judgment concerning himself. Rather, he appeals to the judgment of the Lord who will either vindicate or condemn his ministry. In the face of opposition and division within the Corinthian church, he notes that it is the “lord who judges me” (and, by implication, all believers). There is a day coming, he adds, that will not be a day in a human court but in the court of the Lord. “Therefore,” he warns, “do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and

will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God” (II Corinthians 4:5). The clearest statement of a final judgment of believers, however, is found in II Corinthians 5:10: “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.”

If we consider the features of the apostle Paul’s teaching that we have considered thus far, the general pattern seems fully consonant with what we have summarized as the view of the Reformation. Because justification is always accompanied by sanctification in the lives of those who are in union with Christ by faith, the apostle insists that only those whose lives confirm the indwelling presence of the Spirit of Christ will be saved. Salvation, in its fullest and comprehensive meaning, includes the consummation of that saving work in the lives of believers that begins in this life but that is only perfected in the life to come. Justification, which is a principal benefit of the gospel, does not encompass the whole of the believer’s salvation. Those whom God justifies He also sanctifies. Consequently, no one will be saved who does not exhibit the fruits of the Spirit’s working in his or her life, and who does not persist in the way of new obedience. This is the context for Paul’s clear teaching that all will be judged in the future and that this final judgment will be according to works. The final vindication or acquittal of believers will be according to their works, which confirm and evidence the genuineness of their faith and participation in

No one will be saved who does not exhibit the fruits of the Spirit’s working in his or her life, and who does not persist in the way of new obedience.



Christ. However, despite this clear emphasis upon a final judgment and vindication that will be according to works, nowhere in Paul's writings is this final judgment described as a kind of completion or final chapter in the believer's justification. The grace of free justification remains the basis for the believer's confidence of acceptance with God.

Dr. Cornelis P. Venema is an the President of Mid-America Reformed Seminary where he also teaches Doctrinal Studies. Dr. Venema is also a contributing editor for *The Outlook*.

Editor's Report

Due to some unforeseeable circumstances, I was not able to make the Annual Meeting of the Reformed Fellowship to give my Editor's Report. I offer it to you at this time.

I continue to thank God for the privilege of being the editor of a magazine that is devoted to the exposition and defense of the Reformed faith. It is my prayer that 2004 found us faithful to our masthead and that in this coming year we may continue to provide our readers with articles that are pleasant, informative, and challenging. This past year we had forty-six different writers from a variety of Reformed and Presbyterian backgrounds produce over one hundred twenty-five different articles. Those articles included studies on the Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism and the Book of Revelation; reports on Classes, Synods, and Standing Committees; and a variety of topics from the Afscheiding to Zwingli. We also began a series on the riches of the Reformed faith which have proven to be very popular.

In addition, we were able to continue providing to our readers a very indepth study on the new perspectives on Paul, which we hope to be able to finish up next month with Dr. Venema's concluding summary statements. These articles, although lengthy and meaty, were among the most requested articles for reprint. It is our understanding that Dr. Venema plans to publishing these articles in book form this year. *The Outlook* is grateful for Dr. Venema's contributions to our magazine and honored to be able to

provide the impetus through which this book can be published.

Major changes took place in 2004. After thirty-two years of faithful service, Mrs. Mary Kaizer resigned as our secretary. We moved our inventory to a different facility. We were forced to find a new publisher. The most exciting change is that now we can be found on the web. Check us out at [www.reformedfellowship.net!](http://www.reformedfellowship.net)

Throughout the year we have tried to reduce expenses in a variety of ways. Unfortunately, we have not been able to keep up with the rising costs of putting a magazine together. In light of those rising expenses (and lower contributions), the Board has been forced to increase the subscription rate of our magazine as indicated on the back cover.

Our goal for the coming year is that we continue to provide our readers with articles that will encourage us in our Christian walk. We thank you for your continued support. Please continue to pray for us in 2005 that we may remain faithful in defending the Reformed faith.

In His service,
Rev. W. H. Oord

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I PETER *Pilgrims Among Pagans*

By Nelson D Kloosterman

This work includes 16 studies that involve the student in each verse of every chapter in I Peter. Each lesson includes a three or four page exposition of the text being considered where the context, content, and application of these verses are briefly but thoroughly presented.

Study questions follow each of these lessons. It should be noted that these are not pat questions with obvious answers. Rather, these studies would require both meditation and reflection, and yet one does not need to be a trained theologian to either lead or benefit from this study. Anyone who has a desire to lead others into a deeper understanding of the truths of God's Holy Word could easily use this material to guide their group to this end.

(Continued from page 18)

with disregard or reinterpretation of Scripture to promote any desired Agenda.”

Denominational Change

Derke P. Bergmsa

October 1991

“Will we have 400,000 by 2000? I doubt it very much. The Christian Reformed Church is at a crossroads... The wrong decision now and the work of many years and generations will be gone. Is anyone still listening? Does anyone still care? Must I write an article a year from now: Why we could not stay'?”

What is Next?

Henry Vander Kam

December 1991

“If Christ is not the Master and Lord of the church, we have no genuine congregation of the faithful.”

Christ Alone

Charles Krahe

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