

Editor's Notes

In October 2021 the faculty of the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary presented a conference on the doctrine of preaching. That the conference treated the *doctrine* of preaching means that it did not touch on matters of style and delivery, but rather on the nature and content of the preaching, as set forth in Scripture and the Reformed confessions. The four main articles in this issue of the *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* contain the written version of those speeches.

The first article underscores that the preaching of the gospel, by one who is properly called to that work, is the voice and work of our exalted Lord Jesus Christ, through which He works faith and all graces in His people. Because Christ works through the preaching, it is powerful, to declare both God's judgment on sinners and His salvation of His people. Preachers and hearers alike will realize that a right understanding of the preaching's nature and power affects how they preach and listen.

In the second article, Prof. Brian Huizinga graphically sets forth that which must be the point of all preaching. Every sermon must display the glory of the Triune God, and every sermon must bring the hearer to see the sufficiency of the person and work of Jesus Christ as our only Savior from sin. As a professor of seminarians, his word to the seminarians and all preachers is, "Get to the point!"

Prof. Ronald Cammenga begins his article by drawing attention to the difference between indicatives and imperatives, and later indicates that the proper conjunction must be used to state properly the relation between an indicative and an imperative. This makes all the difference in how one preaches the commands of the gospel. That commands must be preached cannot be questioned; the Scriptures contain numerous commands. But *how* the commands (imperatives) of the gospel are related to the facts (indicatives) of the gospel can be the difference between the true gospel of sovereign grace and the false gospel of man's works.

Finally, Prof. Barrett Gritters emphasizes the importance—no, the *absolute necessity*—of the preacher applying the gospel. Application, he teaches us, is not a matter of adding imperatives to a sermon, or of showing how we must live. Application is more basic than that: it is speaking the word of the text to the heart of God’s people. As a sermon without the gospel is no sermon, so a sermon without application is no sermon.

This issue features ten book reviews. A special thanks to those who contributed to them.

As I take up the editorship of this journal, I pray that God will continue to use it as a good witness of His sovereign grace, of the commitment of the Protestant Reformed Churches to orthodoxy in teaching and orthopraxy in life, and of the fruits of the labors of the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary.

Our printer again informs us that it cannot produce the printed version of this journal as quickly as it once could, due to lasting effects of COVID on the printing industry. We trust that the contents of this issue will make the wait worthwhile.

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“The Lion Hath Roared”: The Nature and Power of Preaching

Douglas J. Kuiper

What is the nature of true preaching? For now, the question is not, What is the *content* of true preaching? The content of true preaching is the *gospel*. That man has not truly preached who has not set forth the gospel. The following article will develop that point more fully. The question now is, What is the *nature* of the preaching of the gospel?

The question is relevant. For one thing, every week God’s people sit under the preaching of the gospel. What is it under which we sit? And why do we do sit under it?

Second, the question is relevant because the Reformed confessions speak highly of the preaching of the gospel. They teach that the preaching of the gospel is a mark of the true church of Jesus Christ, a key of the kingdom of heaven, and the chief means by which the Holy Spirit works faith.¹ Because these are our confessions, we must understand them; specifically, we must know what they say about the nature of the preaching of the gospel.

Third, the question is relevant because much passes for preaching today that is not really preaching. One man entertains an audience with stories having a Bible theme. Another claims to be having a conversation (“dialoguing”) with his audience. And these consider themselves preachers! But the preaching of the gospel as the Old Testament prophets did it, as Jesus did it, as the apostles did it, and as faithful preachers today must do it, is of a far greater and more exalted character than entertainment and conversation.

The purpose of this article is to explain the *nature* of the preaching of the gospel. In sum, preaching is the work of the exalted Jesus Christ by His Spirit, through men officially called to preach, by which He declares to His people the fullness, the sufficiency, the completeness of all His saving benefits. Having set forth the nature of true preaching,

1 Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 65, 83, 84; Belgic Confession, Art. 29; Canons of Dordt, 1:3, 14; 2:5; 3-4:6, 8, 10; 5:14.

this article will note the *power* of true preaching. Finally, the article will point out some implications of this understanding of preaching, both for the preacher, and for those who sit under the preaching.

The goal of this article is to enable God's children to recognize true preaching when they hear it, and to identify what is not true preaching when they hear that. Recognizing true preaching, one will know that he is hearing the voice of our Savior, his soul is being fed, and he is enjoying communion with God.

Preaching's Nature

A surprising number of systematic theologies explain what preaching is but do not provide a succinct definition of preaching.² To use Herman Hoeksema's definition, then, is not merely to look close to home for a definition, but is to use a helpful definition from a theologian who actually provided one. Hoeksema says: "Preaching is the authoritative proclamation of the gospel by the church in the service of the Word of God through Christ."³

Hoeksema expands on the four aspects of this definition. The first regards its content, which the next article will treat. The second is that the gospel is authoritative proclamation. The third is that the *church* carries out this activity of preaching. True, the church must call a man to proclaim the gospel on its behalf; but through him the church preaches. Fourth, Hoeksema underscores that the preaching serves the word of God through Christ. This regards the power of the preaching, a point relevant to this article. Hoeksema means that the preaching is a means of grace, a means by which God carries out His purpose of

2 The following do not provide an explicit definition of the preaching of the gospel in that portion of their dogmatics in which they treat the means of grace: Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 4, *Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, ed. John Bolt, transl. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 441-460; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1941), 610-615; and Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, nd), 3:466-479. This omission is due at least in part to the fact that Bavinck and Hodge treat the *word of God* as means of grace, rather than the *preaching* of that word; see Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1966), 635.

3 Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 637.

saving His people. The starting point, then, is that true preaching is the authoritative proclamation of the gospel.

Scriptural Evidence

Many Scripture passages demonstrate this point; five will be noted. First, true preaching is the sounding forth of the voice of Jesus Christ. Our Savior said, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me” (John 10:27). He was not merely saying that some people heard and followed Him while He was on earth. Rather, He set forth a general principle that holds true throughout time. For, first, He speaks of His sheep, His elect, who are found on earth throughout all times. Second, He was referring to an ongoing activity of hearing, knowing, and following—an activity that continues as long as Jesus Christ lives and works. He lives and works yet today. *How*, then, do His sheep hear Him today? By the work of the Spirit in the preaching of the gospel.

Consider also the inspired words of the apostle Paul: “How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in him (of) whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach except they be sent?” (Rom. 10:14-15a). The quotation is from the KJV. The proper Greek translation is not “how shall they believe in him *of* whom they have not heard,” but “*whom* they have not heard.”⁴ One who hears the preaching, therefore, does not merely hear *about* Christ; he hears *Christ*.

Scripture teaches this also in the Old Testament. David said in Psalm 22:22, “I will declare thy name unto my brethren: in the midst of the congregation will I praise thee.” But Psalm 22 is a messianic Psalm, in which David speaks typically and prophetically of Jesus Christ, as Hebrews 2:12 makes clear. The Lord Jesus Christ, exalted in heaven, declares God’s name to His spiritual brothers and sisters, including those in the church on earth. That divine name that He declares is God’s revelation regarding the fullness of salvation in Christ. How does the exalted Christ make this revelation known to His people? By the work of the Spirit illuminating and causing us to

4 When the direct object of the verb *akouoo* is a person, this verb takes its direct object in the genitive.

understand the Scriptures. One means to that end, the *chief* means, is the preaching of the gospel.

Other passages in the book of Hebrews also underscore that the preaching is the voice of Christ to His people. The book opens by telling us that God has spoken unto us by His Son (Heb. 1:2). Hebrews 3:7, 3:15, and 4:7 quote and apply Psalm 95:7, “Today if ye will hear his voice.” And note Hebrews 12:25, in which the inspired writer exhorts his readers, “See that ye refuse not him that speaketh,” which speaker is the living God as revealed in “Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant” (12:24). The context of this last passage contains a reference to God speaking to Israel from Sinai: as God spoke to Israel from the mountain, so He speaks to His church today.

Finally, Amos 3:8 also teaches the authority of the declaration of the gospel, and the fact that in that declaration God’s voice is heard: “The lion hath roared, who will not fear? The Lord GOD hath spoken, who can but prophesy?” The passage speaks of hearing Jehovah’s voice. Because Jesus is truly God, and is the chief prophet from God to us, one who hears Jehovah’s voice hears it in and through Jesus Christ. Notice also the direct connection between the prophet hearing that voice, and the prophet declaring what the voice said: “Who can but prophesy?”

Preaching: The Voice of God in Jesus Christ

That a man expounds the Word of God to a congregation, and in doing so the congregation hears *Christ’s* voice, needs explanation. When listening to a sermon, do we not hear a man’s voice? Do we not hear the pitch, the tenor, the volume of one particular man, in distinction from another man? May we truly say that through a man’s preaching *Jesus Christ Himself* addresses His church, declaring His love for the church, calling His people to faith and repentance, and warning His people of the dangers of sin?

That we hear Christ’s voice in the preaching is a *spiritual* reality, not a physical one. We do hear the pitch, tenor, and volume of an earthly man’s voice. But through every true preacher, the believer hears the spiritual voice of Christ in a way similar to our eating earthly bread and drinking earthly wine in the Lord’s Supper, while being nourished with Christ’s spiritual body and blood.

Four points help us understand this spiritual reality. First, we hear Christ’s voice because the content of the preaching is Jesus Christ, in His person and work, as our only and all-sufficient Savior. Preaching that does not have Christ as its content is not the voice of Christ. In making known God’s name (Ps. 22:22), Jesus Christ makes Himself known as the revelation of God.

Second, true preaching is the voice of God in Christ because Jesus Christ is the one who raises up men, calls them, and equips them to preach. Believing Christians are to witness to Christ in words and deeds, and to speak that which accords with Scripture. But preaching is *more* than that. Preaching is the *authoritative* declaration of the gospel by a man whom Christ has called through the church: “How shall they preach except they be sent?” (Rom. 10:15).

Third, true preaching is the voice of God in Christ because Christ speaks by His Spirit. John 15:26 teaches that the Spirit testifies of Christ as the one whom the Father and Son sent into the church. The testimony of the Spirit about Christ is Christ’s own testimony about Himself, and the Father’s testimony about Christ, through the Spirit (John 15:26). Because of this, the Spirit works faith through the preaching (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 65, 67).

Fourth, all who hear the preaching hear the gospel. Yet not all of them hear Christ addressing them personally. By nature we are dead in sin, unable to hear Christ. What makes possible our hearing Christ’s voice in the preaching is the Holy Spirit’s work in us, regenerating our hearts, giving us spiritual ears to hear, creating faith, and working in us a delight in spiritual things. By virtue of this work in elect believers, when believers hear the gospel proclaimed, we know that we have heard our Lord and Savior.

Preaching: The Call of God in Jesus Christ

Because the preaching is the authoritative proclamation of the gospel and the sounding forth of the voice of Jesus Christ, its nature is also that of a divine, saving call. What is God doing with His voice in the preaching? He is calling His people out of sin and unbelief into covenant fellowship with Himself.

Scripture teaches this. First Corinthians 1:9 teaches that God calls us: “God is faithful, by whom ye were called unto the fellowship of

his Son Jesus Christ our Lord.” Scripture also indicates that this call comes by the gospel: “Whereunto [unto salvation] he called you by our gospel” (2 Thess. 2:14). By referring to Christ’s gospel as “our gospel,” the apostle refers to his activity of preaching the gospel. By the preaching of the gospel through men whom He has appointed, God calls His people.

So the preaching of the gospel is not merely the sounding forth of the voice of God, in that it proclaims some divine sound that none can understand. Rather, it is the expression of God’s will to save His people. By the preaching, Christ brings us into fellowship with Himself and with God. To that end, the Holy Spirit works faith by the preaching. Probably many of us who sit under the preaching forget about this purpose. Certainly, they who despise the preaching ignore it. And men who consider themselves preachers, but forget the purpose of preaching, will go wrong in their own preaching. If a preacher fails to understand that he is God’s mouthpiece to call the people to communion with God in Christ, he will not prepare a meaty, purpose-driven sermon. When the preacher understands what preaching is, he will diligently prepare himself to bring God’s Word, and will come to the pulpit with purpose.

Preaching: Heraldng the Nearness of God’s Kingdom

No examination of the nature of the preaching of the gospel is complete without an examination of the New Testament Greek words that are translated “preach.” Two different words are so translated. From one of them we get our word “evangelize.” This word refers to the good news, the gospel, that is preached. The other emphasizes the nature of this activity; it is the word “herald.” In Bible times, the word referred to a forerunner whom the king sent, days or weeks before the king himself visited a city or province, to speak in the king’s name and to announce his imminent arrival. Hearing the news that the herald brought, the people would make ready: they would clean up the town, and smooth the roads (Is. 40:3,4). The inspired writers of the New Testament used that same word to refer to the nature of the preaching. It is our King’s authoritative declaration that He was coming soon. Matthew used this word to refer to the preaching of John

the Baptist: “Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 3:2). The same word is used to refer to Jesus’ preaching (Matt. 4:17).

That the kingdom is near means several things. Briefly, first, it means that God Himself, our King in Jesus Christ, is near us. Second, it means that His kingdom is near: it is manifest in His church on earth and is in our hearts. Third, it means that He is quickly bringing to pass that day when His kingdom comes in all its fullness; He is quickly unfolding His saving purposes in Jesus Christ.

All this He declares to us in the preaching. We can appreciate the need for this. We forget that God’s spiritual kingdom is in and around us, and that the final fulfillment of that kingdom is coming quickly. God’s kingdom seems so far away. We see earthly things, not spiritual; and our battle against sin and temptation can lead us to think that God’s kingdom is far off. But God announces to us in the preaching that He is near, that He is fulfilling all the promises that He made, and that soon we will enjoy perfect covenant fellowship with Him.

When John the Baptist and Jesus spoke these words, they were teaching that Jesus Christ, the King of the kingdom, had already come in the flesh, and would soon lay down His life on the cross in order to establish that kingdom as a kingdom of righteousness. At that time, the kingdom was near. It is even nearer now, for Jesus Christ is risen and has poured out His Spirit.

Preaching: Shining Forth Heaven’s Light into Earth’s Darkness

In this last explanation of the nature of preaching, consider analogies and figures that Scripture uses to refer to God’s Word. Psalm 119:105 reads: “Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.” Likewise, 2 Peter 1:19-20 teaches that Christians have a more sure word of prophecy, a more sure word that Jesus is the Christ, the exalted Lord and Savior: “We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts: Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation.”

Neither of these passages refer to the preaching of the gospel exclusively; both refer to God’s written Word, to Scripture. But if God’s inspired, written Word has the power to guide, the faithful preaching

of that Word also has such power. The proclamation of Jesus Christ in the gospel as it is preached sets forth God's glory in the face of Jesus Christ.

Sin makes such illumination necessary. We doubt God's promises and endure temptations to sin against God's law. These manifest the presence of our old man—always present, even though he no longer has dominion over us. By the preaching, God assures us that His promises are true and shows us that way of holiness in which we must walk.

All of this is to say that the preaching of the gospel is exalted and noble in character. This is not how we view it by nature. The Jews considered the preaching of the gospel to be empty and the Gentiles thought it foolishness (1 Cor. 1:22). Today many despise it. Regarding its content, it is despised: Jesus was dead but is alive? Really? Regarding its nature, it is despised: God speaks to us through a man? Really? But Scripture speaks highly of the preaching.

Take Amos, the Old Testament prophet, as an instance. In distinction from the preacher in the New Testament church, Israel's prophets were given new revelations directly from God. What they spoke to the church in the Old Testament was essentially the same gospel that God had revealed to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, but God revealed to them some new aspect or development of that gospel. By contrast, the preaching of the gospel in the New Testament does not consist of receiving and imparting new revelation, but of expounding the completed revelation of God in Scripture.

This important distinction notwithstanding, both the speech of the Old Testament prophets and the preaching of faithful pastors today are authoritative. Amos said: "Surely the Lord GOD will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets. The lion hath roared, who will not fear? The Lord GOD hath spoken: who can but prophesy?" (Amos 3:7-8). The speech of the Old Testament prophet was authoritative: it was the declaration of that which Jehovah had spoken. Likewise, faithful gospel preaching is authoritative. The preacher is sent by Christ through His church (Rom. 10:15) to teach God's Word (Eph. 4:11, 1 Tim. 4:11). So New Testament preaching, like Old Testament prophecy, is the roaring of the lion. When Amos said, "the lion hath roared," he meant that God gave a new prophecy. When the prophet then spoke that word faithfully, and when the

preacher today does, the people know what that lion, the Lion of Judah’s tribe, said and says.

Because both Old Testament prophecy and New Testament preaching have this authority, they powerfully accomplish the purpose for which God sent the preacher or the prophet.

Preaching’s Power

Irresistible Power

That the preaching has power follows from the exalted character of preaching. If preaching is lowly, if it is merely a man’s activity, it has no power. That it *has* power is the fallacy of the teaching of the well-meant offer of the gospel, particularly in its assumption that a man by his own free will can choose to believe what the gospel declares. Likewise, the fallacy of the altar call is that it supposes that a preacher, a mere human, has the power to stir up human reason and emotions so that one makes a choice for Christ and becomes saved. Such is a low view of preaching. It assumes that the power is not in the word itself, but in the man who brings it, or in how he delivers it.

The power of preaching is much greater than this. The power of preaching is the power of God’s Word, which power is limitless, efficacious, and irresistible. By the word of Jehovah were the heavens made (Ps. 33:6, Gen. 1). By the word of His power, the exalted Lord Jesus Christ upholds all things (Heb. 1:3). By the word of God, the dead will be raised; He once called things that were not as though they were, and will do so again (Rom. 4:17). God’s word accomplishes that for which God sends it (Is. 55:10-11), and does so in such a way that no man, and no creature, can refuse what God commands. When God commanded the sun to shine, the sun did not refuse to shine, but it shone. Likewise the word of God in the preaching of the gospel accomplishes God’s purpose.

It does so because the Holy Spirit works through it. Paul understood that the power of his preaching was not inherent in him: “And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man’s wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power” (1 Cor. 2:3-4). Again, he said to the Thessalonians, “For our gospel came not unto

you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance” (1 Thess. 1:5). By this last phrase the inspired apostle states one aspect of the power of the gospel: it works assurance, confidence.

Condemning Power

By speaking of the preaching of the gospel as a key of the kingdom, the Reformed confessions indicate that the preaching has power. Preaching is the power of Christ to open the door of the kingdom of heaven so that believers enter, and to shut it to keep God’s children in. Again, it is Christ’s power to open the door of the kingdom of heaven (as that kingdom is manifest in the church on earth) to let unbelievers depart, and to shut the door to keep unbelievers out. This is not only the teaching of the Heidelberg Catechism (Q&A 84) but also of Matthew 16:19.

And it is the idea of Amos 3. The prophet, we noted, spoke of the nature of prophecy as being akin to the roaring of a lion. But notice the context. Amos brings a word of judgment to the northern kingdom of Israel. He does not say: “I have a new word from God for you, and you will be pleased to hear it; it will comfort you by telling you that your sins are forgiven, and will build you up in faith and godliness.” Rather, in Amos 3:9-15 the prophet indicates that Jehovah is coming to judge the ten tribes for their wickedness. Even the phrase, “the lion hath roared,” speaks of judgment. That Jehovah roared does not merely mean that He spoke with great volume, nor with great authority, but that He spoke of certain judgment. When does a lion roar? When it has caught its prey; its roar declares victory over the animal that it has killed. The prophet had asked the Israelites, “Will a lion roar in the forest, when he hath no prey? Will a young lion cry out of his den, if he have taken nothing?” (3:4). The questions are rhetorical; the answer is clearly, “No.” The lion’s roar indicates that the lion has accomplished his purpose and considers himself the victor over his prey. Such was Jehovah’s roar, and such is the power of the preaching. By it Jehovah announces the certainty and nearness of the judgment that He would bring on Israel for their sin.

Astounding power! Humbling power! Let us remember that power as we sit under the preaching! “What sin of mine is God exposing?” we might ask. Then, let us turn from that sin, lest God’s judgment

come upon us! That judgment could take the form of punishment, wrath, and destruction. It took that form for the nation of Israel as a whole, which was carried away captive. Or that judgment could take the form of chastisement, as it did for the elect of the nation whom God spared from complete ruin.

The same idea, particularly regarding the destruction that the preaching works as the tool of God, is taught in Hebrews 6:4-6. Those of whom the text speaks, considered from an earthly viewpoint, have come so close to salvation that the Spirit says they have tasted the word of God. But they have fallen away. The Holy Spirit then explains this truth by an analogy: “For the earth which drinketh in the rain that cometh oft upon it, and bringeth forth herbs meet for them by whom it is dressed, receiveth blessing from God: But that which beareth thorns and briars is rejected, and is nigh unto cursing; whose end is to be burned” (7-8). God has a twofold purpose in sending rain: to cause crops to grow for food and to prepare kindling to be burned. Likewise, He has a twofold purpose in the preaching of the gospel: to work faith in His elect and to harden the hearts of the reprobate. Of this latter, Pharaoh was a prime example: by sending Moses to Pharaoh repeatedly, God sovereignly worked the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart. This was also the effect of God’s Word through Amos and others on those who were departing from God’s ways and would not listen.

This aspect of the power of the preaching should work an awe and reverence for God in the hearts of His children. But the power of the preaching is also to save.

Saving Power

That the preaching has power comforts believing sinners, for the preaching’s power is to soften, to pull down strong holds (2 Cor. 10:4). We build in our own hearts a strong wall of unbelief, a wall of making excuses for sin, a wall of defiance of God’s law. But the Holy Spirit can chisel through that strong wall, and undermine it so that it collapses, and bring me to repentance! The preaching has saving power!

This power is a declaratory power: the preaching declares who is in God’s kingdom and who is not. But it is more than that; the preaching has the power to edify. To those who are in the kingdom, the preaching is God’s means to build up in faith and godliness, to cause us to

confess that Christ's righteousness is imputed to us and His life is in us. For to God's people, the preaching is a means of grace, the means to salvation. For this reason Paul was not ashamed of the gospel, "for it is the power of God to salvation to everyone that believeth" (Rom. 1:16). The Heidelberg Catechism explains that it is this power by which the Holy Spirit works faith (Q&A 65).

That the preaching works faith does not mean that the Holy Spirit through the preaching creates the bond of faith that unites us to Christ. Faith in that sense is worked immediately, that is, without means. If it were true that the Holy Spirit worked faith by the preaching in the sense of uniting us to Christ, we who are united would no longer need the preaching. But preaching is the Spirit's means to work faith, in the sense of faith's activity, that is, its knowledge and confidence. This faith is continually worked in us; it has a source that continues to bestow knowledge and confidence. As a spring continually sends forth good water by which my thirst is quenched and life is sustained in me, so true gospel preaching is the Spirit's means continually to cause that faith to come to expression in our lives.

What power true gospel preaching has! It is a means of grace, that is, it is the effectual and powerful means by which the Holy Spirit works grace! By sitting under the preaching and receiving it in faith, we grow in our conviction that we are righteous in Christ; we desire more and more to live a new and godly life; we long ever more fervently for the coming of our Lord!

The preaching has power, not to do what I want or what you want, but to do what God intends it to do—to realize His decree of election and reprobation. For this purpose God provides the preaching, and for this purpose God sends preachers. His word is omnipotent, effectual, irresistible. This is a high view of preaching!

Implications of This View of Preaching

That such is the nature and power of the preaching has an implication for the preacher: He must *preach* the *word* (2 Tim. 4:2). We preachers must take our calling seriously. That the preaching is God's power is no reason to slack off and expect God to work mightily through us. Study! Exegete! Understand how the passage applies! Let us prepare our sermons earnestly and diligently! We are rational,

moral creatures; we are called to work; and our work is that of studying the Scriptures. The exalted character of the preaching must encourage preachers to that end.

Yet, all our hard work and diligent effort is not what makes the preaching powerful. Having done our work earnestly and diligently, and having prayed as we did our work, we must then go to the pulpit praying that God will work mightily through us, by His Spirit. This example the apostle Paul set in 1 Corinthians 2:1-5. Why was he present in weakness and why did his preaching demonstrate the Spirit and power (or, the Spirit’s power)? “That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God” (v. 5).

That this is the nature and power of the preaching also has implications for the hearer. We must sit under the preaching with fear and reverence. Do not despise the preaching! This admonition Scripture sets forth repeatedly. It is the application to us of the short injunction in 1 Thessalonians 5:20: “Despise not prophesyings.”

Even more, it is the repeated admonition of the Holy Spirit, on the basis of the unbelief of the Israelites in the wilderness: “Today if you will hear his voice, Harden not your hearts, as in the provocation and as in the day of temptation in the wilderness,” said David in Psalm 95:7-8. The inspired writer to the Hebrews quotes this passage in Hebrews 3:7-8, 3:15, and 4:7. To this repeated quote he adds more admonitions against departing from God in unbelief (3:12-13), and to labor to enter God’s rest (4:11). In Hebrews 10:23-25 he admonishes us to “hold fast the profession of our faith (literally, hope) without wavering,” and not to forsake “the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is.” In Hebrews 12:25, he says, “See that ye refuse not him that speaketh.” From all these passages, this point is underscored, that the day to repent, believe, and obey when one hears the gospel is *today*.

In order that we not despise God’s word in the preaching, we must bear patiently with the weaknesses and even the sins of that man who is called to preach. This last sentence does not condone any preacher who has committed a gross sin, or is living in sin; nor does it imply that his sins must not be addressed in a godly and biblical manner. But it means simply this: He is an earthen vessel (2 Cor. 4:7), a weak man, a sinner, himself in need of hearing the very gospel he brings.

As we sit under the preaching, we must look past the brokenness of the pot and behold the glory of the gospel which that pot contains.

Finally, note an implication for the church of Jesus Christ as a whole. What a gift of grace from God is the preaching of the gospel! The gospel itself is precious; so the delivery of that precious gift is also precious. The preaching of the gospel is a means for our upbuilding and growth, a means for spiritual strengthening. The days in which we live are dark. Our Lord comes soon, and all the events that accompany His coming are being realized. The spirit of antichrist is present, as is apostasy and lawlessness. In such days, we go from strength to strength. Let us delight in communion with God, in dwelling close to Him, particularly in our worship of Him and hearing Him speak to us in the preaching!

Getting to the Point: The Gospel We Preach

Brian L. Huizinga

The purpose for which the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary exists is not to produce distinguished scholars or visionary leaders but *gospel preachers*. While the supporters of the seminary must know this fundamental purpose of the seminary, it is most important that conviction of this noble task to train gospel preachers lives daily in the consciousness of those who labor in this institution.

What then is “the gospel” that we are called to teach and preach? A common answer quickly given, especially among the youth in a catechism class, is “the gospel is the Bible.” But if the gospel is the Bible, did Adam, Eve, and their children have the gospel? They did not have the Bible, not even one chapter. And if the gospel is the Bible, does that mean that someone can turn to any passage in the Bible and simply read the gospel explicitly stated? The end of Genesis 19 recounts the story of Lot’s daughters luring their father into a drunken stupor and then incestuously defiling him in order to gain children. That is the Bible. Is it the gospel?

The gospel is the good news of God’s salvation of sinners in Christ Jesus. Our English term “gospel” is derived from the old English “God-spell,” which refers to the spell, or the story, of God. The word “gospel” in the KJV is the translation of the Greek *euaggelion*, from which we get our word “evangelism.” The term means “good-message,” “good-news,” or “glad tidings.”

To illustrate, a *gospel* is something that is declared abroad after victory in warfare. When the people of a small kingdom are terribly dismayed because a mighty adversary comes to taunt them, bully them, and finally rout them, but then, remarkably, the smaller kingdom prevails in a hotly contested battle, a gospel goes out as good news: “We have prevailed! Victory and peace are ours! Spread it far and wide to every ear and home: the enemy has been conquered and driven away! Go to sleep in peace tonight.”

The gospel is the good news of God's salvation of sinners in Jesus Christ. Adam and Eve did not have the Bible, not even one chapter, but they received the word of the gospel in the promise of God, which was also represented before their eyes in animal sacrifices. And while the bare facts of the revolting story of Lot and his daughters do not announce good news but vile corruption, there is nevertheless a revelation of the gospel of Jesus Christ and God's covenant faithfulness in the story of the life of Lot. The challenge is always to discern that gospel word.

Gospel means good news.

My purpose in this article is to explain *the gospel we preach*. Because the entire article comes down to one point, like the sharp and unmistakable tip of an arrow-head, the title of this article is "Getting to the Point: The Gospel We Preach."

The Three Points

The proper content of the gospel we preach can be set forth by visualizing a short horizontal line with three points; at the left end a point, at the right end a point, and in the middle a point. The three points represent a trinitarian conception. The first point on the far left is God, not simply God the Father as the first person of the Trinity, but the eternal, triune God who exists as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He is the God of our salvation who eternally *conceived* and *ordained* our salvation, and then *reveals* it. The second point in the middle is Jesus Christ, not simply God the Son as the second person of the Trinity, but the man Jesus Christ who lived on this earth as the Son of God incarnate. He is the Mediator and Savior who *accomplished* our salvation. The third point on the right is the Holy Spirit, not simply God the Spirit as the third person of the Trinity, but the Spirit of Christ, by whom the exalted Christ in heaven *applies* salvation to the elect.

The Triune God

First, when we hear the gospel, we hear glad tidings about our *God*. This is, in part, why the Bible speaks of the gospel as "the gospel of God," as in Romans 1:1, "Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated unto the gospel of God." When the gospel reveals reconciliation in Christ Jesus, the gospel is revealing the *God* of

salvation because, as 2 Corinthians 5:19 teaches, “*God* was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself.” When the pure note of the gospel is sounded forth as a cry, it will always lift our hearts above all men, all institutions, and all things visible and invisible, unto God as *our God* enthroned above the universe. Isaiah 40:9 reads: “O Zion, that bringest good tidings [gospel], get thee up into the high mountain; O Jerusalem, that bringest good tidings [gospel], lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid; say unto the cities of Judah, *Behold your God!*”

The content of the gospel is God: the triune God, the eternal God, the Creator God, the covenant God. If the gospel means “good news,” then the gospel word must point us to God and His grace. We need good news from and about none other than God, for against God we have sinned in our actual sins and in our original sin in Adam. God is the ruler of the universe, whose law we have all grossly transgressed. God is the judge of mankind, the one with whom we all have to do, whether we like it or not, and the one who can destroy both our soul and body in hell. God is the one who commands, “Love me with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength.” Wherever the gospel goes in all the world, whether to Adam and Eve in their figs leaves, or to Caesar’s household in Rome, or to you and me, the gospel always comes to those who by sin are alienated from the life of *God*, to those who are in themselves violators of the will of *God*, and to those who lie in the midst of darkness and death in a world under the curse of *God*.

Therefore, to hear the good news of the gospel is to hear of *God*. He is the God of infinite wisdom who, before all worlds, in His eternal counsel, appointed His own Son, Jesus Christ, to be the Head and Mediator of His elect. He is the God whose decree of election is the fountain out of which all salvation flows toward those who are His peculiar treasure. He is the God of love whose heart beats eternally in love for His Son and all those given to His Son, so that God loves us, believers, forever and ever. No matter what sorrows He brings by His hand of providence, He loves us. When He brings tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, sword, death, life, angels, principalities, powers, things present, things to come, height, depth, or any other creature, He brings all these in love for us. He always has, He always does, and He always will love us. He tells us

this in the gospel, and He signifies and seals it unto us through the bread and wine that we take in our hand in the precious sacrament of holy communion. He is the God of the unbreakable promise that He unfolds with increasing clarity and depth until it is brought to fulfillment, in principle, in Christ Jesus' incarnation, and will one day be finally fulfilled in glory. He is the God of infinite power and holiness who will bring fiery judgment upon all those who deny Him, oppose His church, scorn His Christ, and malign His Word. In the way of judgment upon the ungodly, God will mercifully deliver His people.

God! The content of the gospel is God!

Sermons that do not teach the worshippers the knowledge of *God* are bad sermons. Good sermons lift up the heart of the worshipper to behold, magnify and adore *God*. Every preacher and every consistory that oversees preaching should ask the question: Are these sermons constructed and delivered with this fruit, that the worshipper goes home saying, "God! My God! I have beheld my God. I love Him more, adore Him more, and want to serve Him more."

Jesus Christ the Savior

Secondly, when we hear the gospel, we will hear the good news about Jesus Christ the Savior, and what He has done to *accomplish* our salvation. This is the second or middle point in the line. There is a reason the first four books of the New Testament are called "Gospels." They reveal the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Christ, whereby we are saved. First Corinthians 15:1-4 gives a succinct description of the gospel: "Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand; by which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain. For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures."

The gospel proclaims Jesus Christ, the Son of God who was appointed Savior before all worlds, promised throughout the Old Testament, conceived by the Holy Ghost, and born of the virgin Mary into the humility of our humanity. The gospel proclaims His obedient life, especially His ministry during which He not only taught and performed

miracles, but through great suffering fulfilled every jot and tittle of the will of the Father with a perfectly submissive heart of love. He obeyed. The gospel proclaims the death of Jesus and its inexpressible agony. The gospel proclaims Christ as our *substitute* who stood in our place, who represented us before the law of God, unto whom God imputed the guilt of all our transgressions, and whom God punished with everlasting death so that we will never be punished. The gospel proclaims that Christ by His perfect work and once-for-all sacrifice obtained for us eternal redemption and all the blessings of salvation, so that He could declare from the cross, “It is finished.” The gospel proclaims the victorious resurrection of Jesus and His exaltation in glory as our advocate.

The Spirit of Christ

Third, when we hear the gospel, we hear the good news of the Spirit, even in the Old Testament, and especially in the New Testament. This is the third, the far right, point on the line. Hearing the gospel, we hear the good news of what the exalted Christ continues to do on earth by His Spirit, working in His church and in each elect sinner to *apply* salvation.

What horribly bad and distressing news the gospel would deliver to poor sinners if the gospel declared that Christ has accomplished everything necessary for our salvation, but that it is up to us to come and get that salvation, to take possession of that salvation, to make ourselves partakers of that salvation. Before that salvation is applied unto us, we are dead. We have no more ability to come and get that salvation and apply it to ourselves than a dead man lying on the street has to get up and walk into the hospital to seek medical treatment. In fact, we are worse than the dead man on the street because in our spiritual death we hate and actively oppose God, we spurn Christ, and we argue against the truth that we are sinners who need salvation. The gospel reveals that the salvation ordained by God and accomplished by Christ is graciously and effectually *applied* to the elect sinner by the Spirit in its entirety, so that the sinner actually is saved and enjoys all the blessings of salvation.

The very word “gospel” in Scripture implies this. How could there be good news if there is no sovereign and gracious application

of salvation to us by the Spirit? That the gospel includes the Spirit and all His work of applying salvation is the teaching of the Heidelberg Catechism. In connection with faith, the Catechism asks, “What is then necessary for a Christian to believe?” The Catechism answers: “All things promised us in the gospel, which the articles of our catholic undoubted Christian faith briefly teach us” (Lord’s Day 7, Q&A 22). What are all these things promised in the gospel? They are those things contained in summary form in the Apostle’s Creed. This creed not only teaches us to confess faith in “God the Father and our creation,” and in “God the Son and our redemption,” but also in “God the Holy Ghost and our sanctification” (Lord’s Day 8, Q&A 24). The gospel includes the good news of the Holy Spirit and His work on behalf of a “holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting” (Lord’s Day 7, Q&A 23).

For the individual believer, the good news of the Spirit is that Jesus comes by His Spirit to raise dead sinners and call us out of the kingdom of darkness and into the kingdom of light. The good news is that Jesus comes by His Spirit to create saving faith in us, and to work and strengthen that faith. Wonder of wonders, that in a world of unbelief, we are made believers! The good news is that Christ by the Spirit carries God’s declaration of our righteousness into our heart and consciousness, so that to be justified by faith is to know we are right with God. The good news is that Christ by the Spirit sanctifies us, so that we are continually delivered from the enslaving power and corruption of sin. Do not doubt that. Sin, such as sexual lust, is a terrifying power. How many Christian magazines contain ads for resources to help men who are enslaved in pornography? One finds sanctifying power in the Spirit of Christ! Pride, jealousy, hatred, covetousness, and self-righteousness rise up against us and prevail daily. Is there no help for us? By the Spirit, God works in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure, so that we are able to cleanse ourselves from all the filthiness of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God (2 Cor. 7:1). The good news is that Christ by His Spirit preserves us. Although we are so weak in our faith and we suffer melancholy falls, we never lose our salvation, but are finally ushered into the gates of paradise.

Furthermore, we ought always to remember that the good news is not only what Christ does in *us* by His Spirit, but also what Christ does in and for *His church* (“I believe an holy catholic church”). Wherever the church is found on earth she is threatened by worldliness, evil magistrates, vain philosophies, false doctrines, wolves who enter the sheepfold, the cunning craftiness of deceivers, and internal hatred, envy, and strife among brethren. The good news is that Jesus Christ, by His Word and Spirit, never fails to gather, defend, and preserve His church over against hostile powers.

In summary, the gospel reveals the God who conceived, ordained, and reveals our salvation; the Christ who accomplished our salvation; and the Spirit who applies salvation.

Relating the Three Points

Picture again those three points on the horizontal line. Now relate them by taking the middle point and pulling it straight down so that we have a triangle, which is roughly the shape of an arrow-head pointing downward. One point, the top left of the triangle or arrow-head, is God. A second point, the top right of the triangle or arrow-head, is the Spirit. A third point, the bottom of the triangle, or the sharp tip of the arrow-head pointing downward, is Christ. The whole triangle or arrow-head represents the content of the gospel. The very sharp tip of the arrow of the gospel is that which makes the gospel the gospel, and that which makes the arrow-head functional and effective. It is Christ and what He accomplished in His life, death, and resurrection. To be even more specific, the very sharp tip of the arrow-head is the cross. The whole point of preaching is to *get to the point* of Christ and Him crucified. The sharper the arrow, the deeper it penetrates into the heart.

Demonstration

Scripture teaches that the crucified Christ is the point. First, consider the testimony of each person of the Trinity. Of the Father we read in Matthew 17:5, “While he yet spake, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them: and behold a voice out of the cloud, which said, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him.” God had taken Christ up to the Mount of Transfiguration to prepare and encourage Him for the darkness of the cross that loomed. Peter,

James, and John were on the mount with Jesus. What could be more astonishing than hearing the very voice of God communicated audibly from heaven! The disciples heard God speak! Yet, God directed their attention to the transfigured Christ and spoke those three words that are easy to overlook, “Hear ye Him!” God the Father, speaking from heaven, did not say, “Hear ye Me!” He certainly did not say, “Hear ye Moses and Elias!” But: “Him! Peter, James and John, church of all ages, hear ye *Him*, my Son, the Christ! *Hear Him!*” The preaching of the gospel must get to the point of Christ so that we can hear Him.

Of the Spirit, we read that Jesus said in John 15:26, “But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of me.” The Holy Spirit who performs mighty works of salvation always makes a testimony, and His testimony never changes: “Christ! Behold, hear, and know Christ!” Jesus says, “The Spirit shall testify of *me*.”

Of Christ Himself, we read His own astonishing claims. Jesus made claims about Himself that allow for no peers or equals: “I am!” “I am the bread of life” (John 6:35). “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12). “Before Abraham was, I am” (John 8:58). “I am the door of the sheep” (John 10:7). “I am the good shepherd” (John 10:11). “I am the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25). Reflect on that statement. Jesus did not say, “I *see* a resurrection” or “I *know* of a resurrection” or “I *perform* a resurrection.” He said, “I *am* the resurrection.” Who can say that? Either He is God, or he was the most delusional mad-man who has ever opened his mouth. But He *is* the resurrection. That is why all the Marys and Marthas of the church can wipe away their tears of grief and sorrow. He also said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6), and “I am the true vine” (John 15:1). It is impossible for any man to preach the gospel properly if he does not get to the point, which is the person and work of the one who claims that everything that belongs to the grand and glorious gospel is concentrated in Him.

“He is,” said the Father. “He is,” said the Spirit. “I am” said Christ. The point of the gospel!

Secondly, consider the following marvelous statements of the inspired apostle Paul: “For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel: not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect. For the preaching of the cross is to them that

perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God” (1 Cor. 1:17-18). Again, “But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness; but unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:23-24). Amazing! The power of God unto salvation is not simply preaching about God, but the preaching of the cross. A preacher properly preaches God by preaching the word of Christ’s cross.

Elsewhere the apostle said, “For I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man’s wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God” (1 Cor. 2:2-5). What is the demonstration of the Spirit and power? It is certainly not the enticing words of man’s wisdom and moving rhetoric. But neither is it found merely in preaching about the person and marvelous works of the Spirit. The power is in the preaching of Christ and Him crucified.

To the Galatians he said, “But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world” (6:14). God forbid that I or anyone should make the tip of the arrow-head of the gospel anything but the crucified Christ!

Explanation

Scripture teaches that everything the preacher proclaims *about God* and everything the preacher proclaims *about the Spirit* must get *to the point* of Christ and Him crucified. God reveals Himself in all His justice, wrath, holiness, loveliness, faithfulness, and sweet grace in Christ, especially in His cross. Moreover, the whole application of salvation from regeneration to final glory, worked by the Spirit, proceeds from and thus always points back to Christ and His cross.

If the sermon does not get to the point, the minister did not preach the gospel as God intends it to be preached. God can still use for edification a point-less sermon of good instruction, but no minister or consistory should expect spiritual growth in the body under a regular dose of point-less preaching. A minister can preach a text that speaks

glorious things of God, His manifold mercies, His compassions that fail not and are new every morning, His faithfulness which is great, that He is our portion and we hope in Him, and that He is good to them that wait for Him, but if the preacher does not bring the congregation to see how the text's beautiful descriptions of God are revealed in *Christ* and Him crucified, he does not get to the point. We simply do not understand the God of our salvation, and His consuming wrath and tender mercies, if we do not behold Christ. We behold God when we stand in the shadow of the cross, and look up at that burnt offering, that holy heart, that precious life.

Likewise, the minister can preach a dynamic and gripping message on the Holy Spirit as the breath of God. He can take the congregation down into the valley of dry bones and preach the supernatural, the powerful, the delightful, the astonishing, the mysterious, and the ineffable works of the Spirit, works that are not inferior to the work of creation or the resurrection from the dead. But if the preacher does not relate the Spirit's work to Christ and His cross, he did not get to the point.

Who is sufficient for these things? Who has ever preached a flawless sermon? Who has ever perfected the art of crafting and releasing a gospel arrow with a perfect head? The preacher in his preaching needs Christ and His cross as badly as anyone in the audience! All our imperfections notwithstanding, the calling is clear: It must be our firm resolution of heart that in all our preaching we get to the point. This I will teach in seminary (God help me!), even as I was taught (God be thanked!).

Implication

Only when the minister gets to the point is the doubled-edged sword of the gospel *offensive*. According to John 6, that was true in Jesus' own ministry. The Galileans were crowding Him, the heavenly manna come down from God, like sea gulls crowding a loaf of bread on the beach. However, as soon as Jesus got to the point and taught His cross and death by saying, "you must eat my flesh and drink my blood," they found His words revolting and scattered to look for another savior. That sharp point of the cross with all that it entails is *the* stumbling block before man. It is the most foolish thing to man. It speaks of judgment—terrible, destructive, divine wrath that burns

and consumes. It damns the sins that the bosom finds so pleasurable. It rules out all the wisdom and strength of man, and exposes the horrible folly of human pride and self-salvation. The gospel pins an arrowhead to every chest, “You are a sinner; repent! You are a sinner who has no hope in yourself; trust in Christ!” Then the gospel paints the portrait of an accursed tree where hangs a despised and rejected man of sorrows, and it declares salvation, liberation, hope, and peace in Him! The Jews stumble. The Greeks scoff at the folly of it. To natural man, nothing is more worthy of derision. The gospel is offensive to unbelief, even the unbelief of our sinful flesh, but only when the preacher *gets to the point* and preaches Christ.

When the message gets to the point of Christ and Him crucified, it is a gospel sermon as the power of God unto salvation. Let us therefore glory with Paul in the cross! Let us not limit the cross, or think too narrowly of it. We can limit the cross in various ways. If we view the cross only as *removal*, we shrink the cross. Jesus suffered in my place to remove my sins and the curse due to me. But He did more: Christ by all His holy works of perfect obedience to the law *acquired* righteousness and the fullness of eternal salvation for me.

Moreover, we limit the cross if we isolate it and thereby sever it from Christ’s other saving acts. When we hear “cross,” we should not think only of the six hours at Golgotha. The victorious resurrection that follows is inseparably connected to the cross, because a dead savior in the grave is no savior. Read the book of Acts and notice how often the apostles made the resurrection the heart of their preaching. Additionally, it is important that we do not forget the life of Christ that preceded and culminated in the cross. The cross cannot be severed from Christ’s *lifelong* suffering and obedience. Lord’s Day 15 of the Heidelberg Catechism explains what Jesus removed and obtained by His suffering. It begins, “That He, *all the time that He lived on earth*, [emphasis added] but especially at the end....” Christ was not only obedient *on the cross*, but obedient His whole life *unto* the death of the cross, for the apostle teaches in Philippians 2:8, that Christ was “obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.”

If we limit the cross so that we do not see Christ *acquiring* righteousness and all of salvation for us, or if we limit the cross so that we do not see Christ’s *lifelong* obedience, then we do not see the

full Christ. Then this repugnant notion might begin to creep in: It is my works, my life of obedience, my fulfillment of the law that obtains or acquires various aspects, elements, or experiences of salvation. Yes, we do good works, and we must do good works, but our works do not and cannot obtain or acquire salvation.

When we preach the gospel and get to the point of Christ crucified, we are not preaching something small and paltry, but something full, rich, wonderful, comforting, and peace-instilling: Christ, His glorious and eternal person, His mighty works strong to save, His cross. We need to know Christ in all His fullness. The lofty calling of the preacher is to exhibit with great joy the Christ who is fairer than the fairest. We must all know that we are in Him, bone of His bones and flesh of His flesh, today, tomorrow, and forever.

There is something beautifully simplistic about the gospel with its sharp tip. We complicate the gospel with our own wisdom, strange expressions, unprofitable tangents, shoddy exposition, and itch for something new. But the gospel is simple and it corresponds to the simplicity of our misery: sin. To be sure, sin is complicated, messy, entangling, multifaceted, deeply-rooted, and far-reaching in its consequences. What horrific, fiery damage one little sin, one little slanderous word of the tongue, can unleash! But identifying our problem is not complicated: sin. So the gospel is simple: Christ. To be sure, that Christ is God in the flesh in whom are hid all the treasures of knowledge and wisdom is beyond our comprehension. So is the work that He does, coming not merely to repair what we broke in Adam, but to elevate the whole universe and elect mankind to heights no eye has seen, no hear has heard, and no heart has ever imagined. But to identify our comfort is not complicated. A child can do it. It is Christ.

Illustrating the Point

1 Corinthians 10:31: Explaining the Meaning

Let us apply the point of the arrowhead. Suppose the text for the minister's sermon is 1 Corinthians 10:31, "Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God." In preaching this text, the preacher must situate himself in the context and must expound and develop the main concept of the glory of God. Then he

must explain the calling to do all things, even our mundane eating and drinking, to the glory of God. He must explain “doing all to the glory of God” so clearly, and with direct connection to our life and experience, that everyone knows exactly what a life devoted to the glory of God looks like. But the preacher may not merely *explain*. In keeping with the form of the text, which is a command, he must *exclaim*: “Do all the glory of God!” When you eat, when you drink, and in whatever you do, do all to the glory of God! That call must ring in the auditorium and in the ears of God’s people. We must hear it through the whole week, at the breakfast table, on the job site, in the classroom, before those who mistreat them, while on the computer, or on a date on Friday night. Do *all* to the glory of God!

But if all we hear in the sermon is what we must do, then we go home feeling terribly discouraged and fearful. The bar has been set so high, to heaven itself, and yet we cannot reach above our frame. We say to ourselves, “Everything? *Everything*? Even my eating and drinking must be done to the glory of God? I don’t do that. I want to, but I don’t. Even when I consciously aim for God’s glory, my doing is so tainted with sin. I need more! Preacher, give me more!” To be sure, the Spirit uses the preaching of that command to work obedience to it (see the following article), but never apart from the gospel.

1 Corinthians 10:31: Getting to the Point

The preacher must get to the point of the gospel by showing the people Jesus. Jesus came under this command, “Do all, even eating and drinking, to the glory of God!” He heard it His whole life, from childhood to the cross, when He ate and when He drank, when with friends and before foes. He heard that command when everyone forsook Him and fled, when the way for Him became so agonizing that He began to sweat in the garden, when Pilate mercilessly scourged Him, and the soldiers cruelly buffeted and mocked Him. He heard that command when all the vials of God’s wrath from heaven were being poured out upon Him for our sin of failing to do all to the glory of God. He heard that command as our substitute, standing in our place, called to do what we could never do. And He did it. That is the gospel: He did it! He reached all the way to the bar in heaven! With a perfect heart of love for and praise to God, He did everything to the glory

of God, even in His last agonizing hours when all men everywhere would have cursed God.

For us, that means forgiveness! In His perfect obedience is forgiveness for all our daily failures. In His perfect obedience is righteousness before God so that legally it is as if we have perfectly kept that command. We need to know what Christ did for us as a completed act in the past (not merely what He is doing right now inside us, which is not yet perfected), and out of that knowledge of faith springs so much gratitude, joy, and yearning to serve Him. Sanctification! In His perfect obedience He obtained for us the quickening Spirit. When the command comes flowing out of that gospel, the Spirit works through the command to produce within us the willing choice and ability to live for the glory of God. When we hear the command, “Do all to the glory of God!” we not only hear our duty, but our privilege in the bond of God’s covenantal love.

Conclusion

“Get to the point!” The fundamental calling for which the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary exists is to train men to be gospel preachers. The task is to prepare seminary graduates to be able to stand in the pulpit and to preach a sermon that will explain the words of the text in such a way that the congregation is brought to the point, or better, the point is brought to them in their hearts. That the graduate can parse Hebrew verbs or recite the entire history of the Marburg Colloquy is not enough. Can he preach the gospel?

Please continue your prayers for the seminary. Who is sufficient for these things? May God be our sufficiency, and through our instruction give us gospel preachers who “get to the point.”

“Thou Shalt and Thou Shalt Not”: Preaching the Commands of the Gospel

Ronald L. Cammenga

God is a commanding God. The very first words spoken by God outside of Himself were commands: “Let there be light: and there was light” (Gen. 1:3). “Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters” (Gen. 1:6). “Let the dry land appear” (Gen. 1:9).

God *commanded*. And each time He commanded, by the power of His word of command, what He commanded came to pass. It came to pass instantly! It came to pass just as He had commanded! When God said, “Let there be light,” the light shone, and it shone as brightly as God intended it to shine. Reflecting on the creative work of God, the psalmist affirms that “[b]y the word of the LORD were the heavens made; and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth...For he spake, and it was done; he *commanded* and it stood fast” (Ps. 33: 6, 9).

The apostle Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 4:6, “For God, who *commanded* the light to shine out of the darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” Paul compares God’s creation of light on the first day of the creation week to the light of regeneration that He causes to shine in the hearts of the elect. God commanded the light to dispel the darkness on the first day of creation. Without the command of God, there would have been no light and no dispelling of the darkness. Just so, God’s word of command accomplishes the work of spiritual re-creation. By His commanding word, the darkness and death of sin are dispelled and, in their place, God commands light and life.

Ever since the fall of man into sin, God has commanded the light to shine out of the darkness that grips the human race. At His command, the light of the gospel has shined into the dark world of fallen mankind, as it does today and will do until Christ’s second coming. That light is Jesus Christ, who said of Himself, “I am the light of the world”

(Jn. 8:12). Because He is the light of the world, men are commanded in the preaching of the gospel to believe in Jesus Christ. But “this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil” (Jn. 3:19). Nevertheless, by the preaching of the gospel God is pleased to dispel the darkness into which every man is born and in which he lives his earthly life. Through the gospel, God speaks His powerful creative word. Through the gospel, the life that He irresistibly commands into existence, He maintains, strengthens, and preserves. One important aspect of the preaching of the gospel is the commands of God’s Word.

I am an ordained minister in the Protestant Reformed Churches in America (PRCA) and I teach in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary. In all the subjects that we teach in the seminary, we aim to demonstrate to aspirants to the ministry that what we teach is in harmony with Scripture and the Reformed confessions. That is also my aim in this article. Additionally, it is my purpose to show that what I teach is in accord with what has always been taught in the PRCA over the span of her history. In order to demonstrate both of the above, I will include quotations from the creeds, reference others in the Reformed tradition, and cite Protestant Reformed theologians of the past. It is my hope that our readers will be persuaded that what I am presenting is not something novel. This has always been the position of the PRCA, as well as the broader Reformed tradition.

A Grammar Lesson

I begin with an important lesson in grammar. Grammar and some understanding of grammar will be helpful in answering the question, What is the place of commands in the preaching of the gospel? Is there a place for commands in the preaching? If so, what is that place? What are the safeguards to preserve the important function of commands in the preaching of the gospel? How do the commands of Scripture relate to the rest of Scripture? And how important is it to preserve commands in the preaching of the gospel?

This grammar lesson begins with verbs. Verbs are action words; they tell us who or what a subject did, is doing, or will yet do in the future. Every sentence must contain at least one verb in order to be a complete sentence. Most verbs are simple declarative verbs. Some examples would be:

In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth. (Gen. 1:1)

But the midwives feared God. (Ex. 1:17)

So, David prevailed over the Philistine with a sling and with a stone.

(1 Sam. 17:50)

I am the vine, ye are the branches. (Jn. 15:5)

Verbs and the sentences in which they occur are of four kinds. A verb might be an *indicative* verb. An indicative verb states a fact. It usually indicates that something has happened and often the result of what has happened. The four examples above contain indicative verbs.

Besides the indicative, a verb may be an *imperative*. An imperative verb expresses a command, issues a call to action, or makes known a wish or desire. Imperatives express what our duty is, what obligation we are under, what we ought and must do. Imperatives are of two kinds. Some imperatives are positive commands.

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart. (Matt. 22:37)

Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. (Matt. 22:39)

Worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness. (Ps. 29:2)

Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church.

(Eph. 5:25)

Imperatives can also be negative, forbidding a certain behavior, desire, thought, or word. These are mainly the kind of imperatives found in the Ten Commandments. But these negative commands or prohibitions, are found in many other parts of Scripture as well.

But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it. (Gen. 2:17)

Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image. (Ex. 20:4)

Ye shall make no league with the inhabitants of this land. (Judges 2:2)

Entreat me not to leave thee. (Ruth 1:16)

We call negative commands *prohibitions* because negative commands forbid something, usually a certain behavior.

Scripture also contains *interrogative* clauses and sentences. These are sentences in which a question is asked. Typically, interrogative sentences are concluded with a question mark.

Where is Abel thy brother? (Gen. 4:9)
Woman, why weepest thou? (Jn. 20:15)
Why standest thou afar off, O LORD? (Ps. 10:1)
What shall a man give in exchange for his soul? (Mk. 8:37)

And there are *exclamatory* clauses. Exclamatory clauses express surprise, emphasize and underscore something, or indicate strong emotion or feeling about something. Often exclamatory sentences end with an exclamation point. In Scripture such sentences also often begin with “Lo!” or “Behold!”

Lo, children are the heritage of the LORD! (Ps. 127:3)
Behold, there was a great earthquake! (Matt. 28:2)
LORD, how are they increased that trouble me! (Ps. 3:1)
Behold, I make all things new! (Rev. 21:5)

Although there are four main types of sentences in Scripture, God’s Word is primarily made up of indicatives (present, past, or future) and imperatives. The Bible is mostly composed of statements of fact and commands. This is true of the passages that set forth the saving work of Christ—that state what He did, is doing, and promises yet to do as our Savior. On the basis of what Christ has done, is doing, and promises to do, Scripture also sets forth the calling of those for whom Christ has died and in whom His Spirit is working.

What, then, do the indicatives and imperatives indicate?

The indicatives set forth the finished work of Jesus Christ, that which He has accomplished by His doing and dying. They also include what He is doing through the Holy Spirit presently and what He promises in His Word that He will yet do as He gathers His church and works in the hearts of the individual members of the church. These are the indicatives of the gospel. They include the indicatives that we confess in the Apostles’ Creed.

[He] was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary;
Suffered under Pontius Pilate; was crucified, dead, and buried; He
descended into hell;
The third day He rose again from the dead;
He ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God the

Father Almighty;

From thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead.¹

Included in the indicatives of the gospel is the perfect life of holiness that Christ lived to the glory of the Father. Included is also all that He suffered throughout His life and especially at the end of His life in the agony of the cross. There He bore the righteous judgment of God for the sins of His people, accomplishing a complete atonement for their sins. Among the indicatives of the gospel are Christ’s victorious resurrection, His ascension into heaven, and His session at God’s right hand from which He rules over all things until His return in judgment.

Included in the indicatives of the gospel are the *future* indicatives. The gospel not only proclaims what Christ has done in the past, and what He is presently doing, but also what He promises yet to do for His church. The future indicatives include the promise that Christ will come again at the end of the ages, on the clouds of heaven, accompanied by the angels. Included is His promise that He will raise all men from the dead and conduct the final judgment. Further, He will make all things new, a new heaven and a new earth. He will then also cast all His and our enemies into everlasting condemnation. And He will deliver and save us, bringing us into the glory of heaven, where He will perfect our salvation and realize the everlasting tabernacle of God with us in the covenant perfected (Rev. 21:3).

The imperatives of Scripture and the calling to which God’s people are exhorted by these imperatives make up the second important part of the gospel.

Imperatives are commands. They express our duty toward God and the neighbor. Commands are precepts. They put us under obligation and point out what we must be and do. They indicate how we are to live according to the will of God. Attached to the commands are also all the warnings, admonitions, rebukes, and threatenings of Holy Scripture. These enforce the commands and apply the commands practically to the lives of the people of God.

1 “Apostles’ Creed,” in *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005), 9.

Commands Must Be Preached—The Old Testament

The commands and warnings of Scripture must be preached from the Reformed pulpit. Reformed ministers must not draw back from issuing the imperatives of God's Word, binding the will of God upon the hearts and minds of their hearers. From the viewpoint of sheer numbers, if the commands and warnings were removed from Scripture, a significant percentage of Scripture would be excised. The content of the Bible would be reduced drastically. The Bible would be diminished to a slim volume. Revelation 22:19 warns "any man [who] shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy" that "God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book."

The Old Testament contains command after command. In its pages are found the moral law of God, known as the Decalogue or the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments were given twice by God to the children of Israel—so indispensable was the law to the life of the redeemed people of God. First, it was thundered by God Himself from Mt. Sinai shortly after Israel came out of Egypt, as recorded in Exodus 20. At that time, God also inscribed the law with His own finger into the two tablets of stone, which He delivered to Moses. For safekeeping, the tablets were deposited in the ark of the covenant, the only piece of furniture in the Most Holy Place of the tabernacle. The fact that the Ten Commandments were kept in the ark of the covenant is an indication of their importance. Among other things, it emphasized the truth that only they who honored God's law and strove to live in obedience to it could approach unto and enjoy fellowship with the holy God. The unholy and disobedient, who refused to walk in conformity to God's law were banished from God's presence—typically and eternally.

The importance of the law is also underscored by the fact that it was given a second time as the children of Israel were preparing to enter the promised land. The entire generation that had been brought by God out of the bondage of Egypt and had witnessed the ten plagues of judgment, which God visited upon Pharaoh and his people, were no longer alive. Everyone above twenty years of age had perished in the wilderness during the forty years of wandering. They had died under God's judgment for believing the evil report of the ten spies. On account of the repetition of the Decalogue, the last book of the

Pentateuch is called “Deuteronomy.” The name “Deuteronomy” is derived from the Latin and means literally “the second law,” referring not to a second law per se, but to the second *pronouncement* of God’s law as found in Deuteronomy 5. Before an entirely new generation that had not been present at the foot of the mount when God first gave His law, and as one of his last acts as their leader, Moses rehearsed the Ten Commandments before the congregation of Israel prior to their entrance into the land of Canaan.

In addition to the moral law of God, the Pentateuch contains all the civil and ceremonial laws, that were also given by God to Israel. The civil laws governed Israel’s life as a nation. The men of Israel were not to plow their fields with an ox and an ass yoked together (Deut. 22:10). Israelite farmers were not to muzzle the oxen that were treading out the corn (Deut. 25:4). When harvesting their fields, they were not to reap the corners of their fields nor glean that which had fallen on the ground (Lev. 23:22). These were to be left for the poor and the strangers sojourning in the land. Such laws would be similar today to our tax laws, or speed limit laws, or the laws fixing the minimum age for purchasing alcoholic beverages, voting, and driving a car. They are laws established for maintaining good order in society. The only difference, of course, was that besides regulating Israel’s life as a nation, the Old Testament civil laws were typical. They pointed to Christ, Christ’s saving work, and to the spiritual realities of the kingdom of Christ.

Besides the civil laws of the Old Testament, there were also the ceremonial laws. These included the laws that governed the peculiar form of worship practiced by God’s people in the old dispensation. Among these laws was the rite of circumcision as instituted by God with Abraham in Genesis 17. Later, the Passover celebration was added to circumcision. Still later, God instituted the Aaronitic priesthood (Ex. 40). Connected to the priesthood was the tabernacle (later the temple) with its compartments and special furnishings, all of which were prescribed by God when Moses was on Mt. Sinai and all of which had symbolic significance for Israel’s worship. As part of the laws for worship in the Old Testament were also the components of Israel’s sacrificial system, including the type of sacrifice that was to be offered up at a particular time of year or for a particular type of sin

or on account of a certain kind of ceremonial uncleanness. Besides the laws governing all the various types of sacrifices, there were also the laws connected to Israel's stated solemnities—the annual feasts and festivals, including the three pilgrim festivals: Passover, tabernacles (booths), and Pentecost.

Then there are all the commands, warnings, and threatenings that are scattered throughout the Old Testament canon. The book of Proverbs abounds in such, directed often by a covenant father to his son:

My son, hear the instruction of thy father, and forsake not the law of thy mother. (Prov. 1:8)

My son, despise not the chastening of the LORD; neither be weary of his correction. (3:11)

My son, keep thy father's commandment, and forsake not the law of thy mother. (6:20)

Reprove not a scorner, lest he hate thee: rebuke a wise man, and he will love thee. (9:8)

Hear counsel, and receive instruction, that thou mayest be wise in thy latter end. (19:20)

Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it. (22:6)

Buy the truth, and sell it not; also wisdom, and instruction, and understanding. (23:23)

The Old Testament prophetic writings abound in commands, admonitions, warnings, and threatenings. As Israel's apostasy worsened, the commands became sharper. Take the prophet Isaiah, for example:

Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow. (Is. 1:16-17)

Go and tell this people, Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not. Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and convert, and be healed. (6:9-10)

Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the LORD's

hand double for all her sins. (40:1-2)

Sing, O barren, thou that didst not bear; break forth into singing, and cry aloud, thou that didst not travail with child: for more are the children of the desolate than the children of the married wife, saith the LORD. (54:1)

As is the case with Isaiah, so also with the prophet Jeremiah. Commands were an important part of his prophetic ministry and the word that God called him to proclaim:

Say not, I am a child: for thou shalt go to all that I shall send thee, and whatsoever I command thee thou shalt speak. Be not afraid of their faces: for I am with thee to deliver thee, saith the LORD. (Jer. 1:7-8)

Cut off thine hair, O Jerusalem, and cast it away, and take up a lamentation on high places; for the LORD hath rejected and forsaken the generation of his wrath. (7:29)

Thus saith the LORD, Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches: but let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the LORD which exercise lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth: for in these things I delight, saith the LORD. (9:23-24)

Thus saith the LORD; Take heed to yourselves, and bear no burden on the sabbath day, nor bring it in by the gates of Jerusalem; neither carry forth a burden out of your houses on the sabbath day, neither do ye any work, but hallow ye the sabbath day, as I commanded your fathers. (17:21-22)

Thus saith the LORD; Execute ye judgment and righteousness, and deliver the spoiled out of the hand of the oppressor: and do no wrong, do no violence to the stranger, the fatherless, nor the widow, neither shed innocent blood in this place. (22:3)

Thus saith the LORD; Refrain thy voice from weeping, and thine eyes from tears: for thy work shall be rewarded, saith the LORD; and they shall come again from the land of the enemy. (31:16)

But fear not thou, O my servant Jacob, and be not dismayed, O Israel: for, behold, I will save thee from afar off, and thy seed from the land of their captivity; and Jacob shall return, and be in rest and at ease, and none shall make him afraid. (46:27)

Especially in connection with the commands that they voiced, the Old Testament prophets made use of the oft-repeated phrase, “Thus saith the LORD.” Especially when issuing the imperatives, the rebukes, the warnings, and threatenings, the prophets took pains to underscore the fact that they were not bringing their own word, but the word of God. The prophet was indeed Jehovah’s mouthpiece, nevertheless the command that he spoke was not an expression of his own will, but a proclamation of Jehovah’s will: “Thus saith the LORD!”

Commands Must Be Preached—Christ and the Apostles

No one issued more commands than did the Lord Jesus. This undoubtedly was in part the explanation for the people’s comparison between Jesus’ instruction and that of the scribes, that in distinction from the scribes, Jesus “taught them as one having authority” (Matt. 7:29). Jesus’ preaching was filled with imperatives:

Watch ye and pray always. (Lk. 21:36)

Remember Lot’s wife. (Lk. 17:32)

But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness. (Matt. 6:33)

Judge not, that ye be not judged. (Matt. 7:1)

Ask and it shall be given; seek and ye shall find; knock and it shall be opened unto you. (Matt. 7:7)

Enter ye in at the strait gate. (Matt. 7:13)

Beware of false prophets, which come in sheep’s clothing. (Matt. 7:15)

Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden. (Matt. 11:28)

Go ye therefore, and teach all nations. (Matt. 28:19)

Get thee behind me, Satan. (Lk. 4:8)

Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not. (Mk. 10:14)

Search the scriptures. (Jn. 5:39)

Throughout the New Testament epistles, the apostles issued divine imperatives:

Pray without ceasing. (1 Thess. 5:17)

Be not unequally yoked together with unbelievers. (2 Cor. 6:14).

Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. (1 Jn. 2:15)

Husbands, love your wives. (Eph. 5:25)

“Thou Shalt and Thou Shalt Not”: Preaching the Commands of the Gospel

Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands. (Eph. 5:22)
Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering. (Heb. 10:23)
Be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess, but be filled with the Spirit. (Eph. 5:18)
Let brotherly love continue. (Heb. 13:1)
Be not carried away with diverse and strange doctrines. (Heb. 13:9)
Be ye doers of the word and not hearers only. (Jam. 1:22)
Be not many masters. (Jam. 3:1)
Put on the whole armor of God. (Eph. 6:11)
Grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Pet. 3:18)
Let no man deceive you. (Eph. 5:6)
Try the spirits whether they are of God. (1 Jn. 4:1)
Come out from among them, and be ye separate. (2 Cor. 6:17)
Provoke not your children to wrath. (Eph. 6:4)
Follow peace with all men. (Heb. 12:14)
Fight the good fight of faith. (1 Tim. 6:12)
Remember them which have the rule over you. (Heb. 13:7)

These are some of the imperatives that are joined to the indicatives of God’s Word. They are among the imperatives that belong to the preaching of the gospel, that is, the preaching of the whole counsel of God. One of the imperatives that binds every servant of God—*servants* are *always* bound to obey the one whose servants they are—is indicated in 2 Timothy 4:2, “Preach the word!” And as Paul immediately goes on to teach, included in the preaching of the word is reproof, rebuke, and exhortation. He also foretells the time when “they will not endure sound doctrine,” especially the sound doctrine applied practically, in season and out of season, by reproof, rebuke, and exhortation. We are living in those days—days of lawlessness immediately before the rise to power of *the* lawless one, the Antichrist himself, as described in 2 Thessalonians 2.

One of the outstanding features of the Antichrist is that he will set aside the authority of God’s law and replace it with his own laws. He will “call evil good, and good evil [and] put darkness for light, and light for darkness” (Is. 5:20). We witness this very thing in our own day. It is said that the God of Christianity is not the only God and the only source of salvation. Men contend that other religions make truth

claims that are equally as valid as those of Christianity. Judeo-Christian ethics are challenged by self-proclaimed atheists and adherents of the false religions. Feminists loudly accuse Christianity of suppressing women and minorities. The truth claims of Christianity and Christianity's insistence on an absolute standard of right and wrong are widely dismissed. Naturalists and evolutionists deny that there is a sovereign Creator to whom we owe our existence and obedience.

Within Christianity God's law is increasingly dismissed as the ultimate authority over the faith and life of the Christian. The first commandment is set aside. It is maintained that we are all worshipping the same God, albeit in different ways. The sixth commandment and its prohibition of murder is dismissed. Abortion on demand is defended as the right of a woman to choose. Who has the right to tell her what she may or may not do to her body? She alone has ultimate control over her own body, and it is her choice whether or not she will carry her baby full-term. The seventh commandment is set aside. Homosexuality and transgender are championed as equally valid lifestyle choices for Christians. In many ways the church outstrips the world's rebellion against God.

The mystery of iniquity is hard at work, while at the same time God is sending strong delusion on many so that they believe the lie. What is that lie? It is the first and fundamental lie that Satan spoke to Adam and Eve in Eden, after he had already spoken the lie among the angels in heaven, occasioning the fall of a third of them (Is. 14:4-23; Ez. 28:12-19). It is the lie that Satan is God and that God is not God. We must not be deceived. These attacks on the Ten Commandments, and more besides, are to be expected as Antichrist and the false church endeavor more and more to displace the authority of God and replace it with the authority of man in every sphere of earthly life.

Indicatives and Imperatives Joined by Conjunctions—Another Grammar Lesson

One more important part of speech is a conjunction. A conjunction joins things. It joins two thoughts, two phrases, or two sentences. Conjunctions are usually very small, indeclinable parts of speech. Some significant conjunctions include: and, but, or, nevertheless, therefore, wherefore, for, and because.

In Scripture, indicatives are connected to imperatives by conjunctions. The indicatives of the gospel do not stand alone, unconnected to the imperatives. Rather, the one follows the other and is closely linked to the other. Often the conjunction is expressed; at other times it is implied. But it is always there, whether stated or implied, properly relating the indicatives of the gospel to the imperatives. Conjunctions always relate the imperatives of God’s Word to what J. Gresham Machen called Christianity’s “triumphal indicative.”²

The great indicative of the gospel is: Jesus Christ is God’s own Son, who has suffered and died as the substitute for all those given to Him by the Father. That is the great indicative that the gospel proclaims! That *is* the gospel—what makes the gospel “good news.” The triumphal gospel indicative is that Jesus Christ has died and is risen again! Glorious light that penetrates the darkness! Well-grounded hope that displaces despair! Joy, enduring joy, that dispels every fear! Peace that transcends the storms and troubles! Confidence that surmounts all unrest and uncertainty!

What follows from this indicative as its result and purpose is expressed by the conjunction “therefore.” Because of Christ’s suffering and death, *therefore*, live unto God in holiness of life. Because Jesus is risen, *therefore*, devote yourself to Him as your Lord. Because of His so-great salvation, *therefore*, out of love and gratitude to God, live in thankfulness and obedience! That is the great gospel imperative. It is the imperative that must be sounded in the preaching of the gospel.

This is *the way* in which the commands of God’s Word are to be preached. This is the proper relationship between the indicative and the imperative. This is the way in which the imperatives must be preached over against every form of legalism and works-righteousness. They must be preached this way over against the various forms of antinomianism that, at the very least, minimize the importance of the imperatives, or worse, deny outrightly that there are any imperatives connected to the gospel.

The antinomian reasons that since we are saved by grace, apart from our works, works do not have a large place or any place at all in the life of the Christian. Christians ought not to be commanded,

2 J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1981), 47.

exhorted, or admonished to do anything. They are free from the law in every sense. And they certainly must not be reproved, rebuked, or threatened because they do not keep the commandments of the law. Martin Luther called this viewpoint “blasphemous impiety.”³ Theodore Beza called it “the Devil’s logic.”⁴ And so it is.

What this comes down to is that obedience to the law is motivated by gratitude—love and thankfulness to God. It is from this viewpoint that the commands of Scripture are to be considered *gospel* commands. They flow out of the gospel. They are the believer’s response to the salvation proclaimed in and worked by the gospel. Love for God and Christ motivate the Christian to obedience. “If ye love me, keep my commandments” (John 14:15). Take note of the imperative. Jesus does not say that if you love Him, the fruit of that love will be that you will keep His commandments. That certainly is true. True as that is, Jesus issues the imperative: “If you love me, *keep* my commandments.”

Neither are love and duty mutually exclusive. Love does not remove the necessity for the imperative and God’s use of the imperative, “Keep my commandments.” Neither are love and duty two unrelated spiritual realities. The commands of God’s Word flow forth from and have their source in the gospel of grace. And gratitude to God for His grace proclaimed in the gospel is that the believer responds by keeping God’s commandments.

I have a duty as a Christian husband to love my wife. The apostle binds this duty upon me and all believing husbands with the imperative found in Ephesians 5:25, “Husbands, love your wives.” Does the fact that this is my duty preclude that joyfully and thankfully I fulfill this duty? That I do so, not only out of my love for her, but out of love and thankfulness to God who has given her to be my wife? Clearly, that is not the case, as every godly husband knows from personal experience. Husbands and wives have the duty to bring up their children in the fear of the Lord. The apostle binds that duty upon covenant parents in Ephesians 6:4, “And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.” Every

3 Cited in John Scott, *Luther and the Lutheran Reformation* (New York: J. & J. Harper, 1833), 2:127.

4 Cited in R. Alderson, *No Holiness, No Heaven!: Antinomianism Today* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1986), 2.

Christian parent knows that their duty before God is also their great privilege. Every minister of the gospel has the solemn duty faithfully to preach the gospel of grace. With the apostle Paul he confesses that “necessity is laid upon me; yea, woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel!” (1 Cor. 9:16). At the same time, this is the joyful privilege of every preacher of the gospel, who with Paul stands in amazement that “unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach...the unsearchable riches of Christ” (Eph. 3:8).

Reasons for Preaching Commands—The Reformed Tradition

Commands, including admonitions, prohibitions, warnings, and rebukes, ought to have an important place in the preaching of every Reformed minister of the gospel. God’s Word preached ought to reflect the place that commands, admonitions, prohibitions, warnings, and rebukes have in God’s Word written.

The question is: Why? Why ought Reformed ministers to give to the commands of Scripture their rightful due? Why should they be as forceful in preaching the law’s commands as the prophets were in proclaiming them? What is God’s purpose in the preaching of commands? Why will He have the commandments “so strictly preached”?⁵ How does God use the preaching of the imperatives of the gospel in the church? What is the serious consequence for the church when ministers do not sound the biblical commands in their preaching? How does the church suffer when the preacher is muzzled and intimidated by prominent members of the church so that he does not boldly set forth the commands of God’s Word? What happens to a church in which the imperatives of the gospel are changed into indicatives? When the “Thou shalt” and the “Thou shalt not” of God’s law are not proclaimed as “Thus saith the LORD”?

It is clear, both from our Reformed confessions and from the teaching of our spiritual forebearers, that preaching commands, admonitions, prohibitions, warnings, and rebukes is a positive means of grace in the lives of God’s people. God is pleased to use such preaching for the spiritual benefit of the members of Christ’s body, those who have been regenerated and are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. They and

5 “Heidelberg Catechism” Q. 115, in *The Confessions and the Church Order*, 134.

their children are blessed—richly blessed—under the preaching of the imperatives of the gospel as those imperatives are properly preached, not as bare commands, but as the expression of gratitude on the part of the redeemed.

It ought to be no surprise that God is pleased to use the preaching of the commands of His Word to work the obedience that is commanded. He does the same with the command to elect sinners to repent and believe. Just as God is pleased to use commands for our justification, we should not wonder that He is pleased also to use commands for our sanctification. This is indeed the case. Just as Jesus' call, "Lazarus, come forth," was the means by which Lazarus was raised to life and delivered from the power of death, so by the command of Christ through the gospel, sinners are delivered from their spiritual death and raised up to new life. Now they can and they must walk in God's ways. And now they can and must keep His commandments. And now for the first time "his commandments are not grievous" (1 Jn. 5:3).

There are compelling reasons on account of which God is pleased to use the preaching of commands in a positive way in the lives of the people of God.

In the first place, the main purpose for preaching the law, as well as the commands that are derived from the law, is to proclaim the glory of the Lawgiver. The fundamental principle of Reformed worship is that all the church's worship must be directed to the glory of God. As this is the chief end of man, this is also the supreme purpose of congregational (corporate) worship. Since all the worship of the church is aimed at the glory of God, so surely is the preaching of the Word, which is the centerpiece of Reformed worship.

Because God is the sovereign Lord God, He requires that His will must be proclaimed and bound upon the hearts of His people as one of the clearest expressions of His absolute sovereignty. In demonstration of His absolute sovereignty, He wills that His law, and all the warnings, rebukes, admonitions, and threatenings that are based upon the law, are to be preached in the congregation and on the mission field. Just as the laws enacted by a king are a demonstration of his authority as the king, so the King of kings requires His servants to proclaim His will as a testimony to His authority over all His creatures.

The introduction to the Decalogue underscores this truth: “I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.” The idea is: “I am the LORD thy God. I demonstrated my sovereignty over all when I delivered you out of Egypt and destroyed the Egyptians by ten terrible plagues, after which I miraculously caused the walls of water that I had made so that the Israelites could pass over the Jordan River on dry land to come crashing down and destroy Pharaoh and his army. As your LORD God, I now command you to love and serve me by obeying my will and keeping my commandments.” The Westminster Larger Catechism asks, “What is the preface to the Ten Commandments?” The first part of the answer is:

The preface to the Ten Commandments is contained in these words: *I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.* Wherein God manifesteth his sovereignty, as being JEHOVAH, the eternal, immutable, and almighty God.⁶

Is there any truth that fallen man resents and against which he rebels more than the truth of the sovereignty of God? At the same time, is there a truth that the church and the world of our day more need to hear?

Secondly, God wills that His law is preached, including the commands that are derived from the law, in order to impress the members of the church with His holiness. As the holy God, He hates sin in every form. His eyes are too pure to behold sin, and He cannot look upon evil (Hab. 1:13). As the holy God, He is completely separated from sin and the sinner. So many of the Old Testament laws, especially the laws that were concerned with ceremonial uncleanness and purity, were intended to impress the Israelites with the holiness of God. Is there anything more needed in our day than the exalted sense of the holiness of God? If we and our children are going to imitate the angels who cover their faces and proclaim the thrice-holy God or the Old Testament high priests who had a gold plate upon their mitre in which was inscribed “HOLINESS TO THE LORD,” among other things it will be necessary for us to be confronted with the holiness

6 “Westminster Larger Catechism” Q&A 101, in *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1958), 184-185.

of God in His law. In explanation for His purpose in giving the Ten Commandments, God informed the children of Israel, “And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation” (Ex. 19:6). That remains His purpose still today.

In the third place, God wills that the law is preached in order to impress us with our sins and sinful natures. This is God’s purpose not just once in our lives, perhaps when first we are regenerated and converted, but throughout our lives. This is another important purpose of the commands of Scripture. We ought not to respond to those who make this the *only*, or virtually the only, purpose of the preaching of commands by denying altogether that this is one of the purposes of preaching the commands of the law. The Heidelberg Catechism asks, “Why will God then have the ten commandments so strictly preached, since no man in this life can keep them?” The first response to the question is “that all our lifetime we may learn more and more to know our sinful nature....”⁷

That in the law God intends to confront us with our sins and sinful natures is the explanation for the negative form of most of the Ten Commandments. Most of the commandments begin with, “Thou shalt not.” Why the negative? Because this is our tendency as fallen men and women. By nature we are inclined to serve other gods, to take God’s name in vain, to hate the neighbor, to want what he or she has and so much more. The very form of the Ten Commandments is intended by God to confront us with our spiritually lost condition.

Fourth, the commands of Scripture must be preached in order to impress upon believers the importance and urgency of God’s will. Parents may teach their children all about the dangers of crossing a busy street. But when parents add the command, “Never cross the road before you look each way twice,” the seriousness of the matter is impressed upon the children. “Never run across the road.” “Never try to beat a car coming toward you.” These are important and necessary commands that parents must speak to their children. The commands drive home to the children the necessity of obedience, coupled with warnings of the terrible consequences of disobedience, to their parents. So, too, do the commands and warnings of Scripture impress on the

7 “Heidelberg Catechism” Q&A 115, in *The Confessions and the Church Order*, 134.

“Thou Shalt and Thou Shalt Not”: Preaching the Commands of the Gospel
children of God the importance of obedience and the seriousness of disobedience to the will of their heavenly Father.

In the fifth place, preaching the commands of Scripture serves to impress upon the people of God one of the most outstanding aspects of the Christian life. The Christian life is a life of *obedience*. In the end, the Christian distinguishes himself from the children of this world by the fact that, whereas the ungodly refuse to bow before the authority of God’s law, the Christian submits to the will of God. He is not his own lord, to live, do, and speak as he pleases. He is a servant—a slave, really. How often do not the Scriptures speak of the believer as a servant of God? In Psalm 116:16, the psalmist declares, “O LORD, truly I am thy servant; I am thy servant, and the son of thine handmaid: thou hast loosed my bonds.” What follows from this truth? The very next verse makes that plain: “I will offer to thee the sacrifice of thanksgiving, and will call upon the name of the LORD” (v. 17). In Psalm 119, in which almost every verse contains a reference to the law of God, some fifteen times the writer identifies himself as the servant of Jehovah.

In a special way, this is true of the minister of the gospel, whom Scripture frequently refers to as a servant of the Lord. Paul does this in 2 Timothy 2:24-26:

And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient. In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth; and that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will.

Of special note is that, as the servant of the Lord, the minister “must not strive, but be gentle.” In the qualifications for elders listed in 1 Timothy 3, the elder may not be a “brawler.” A brawler is not necessarily one who uses his fists. He may also be a man who uses his tongue or pen in a sharp, quarrelsome, hurtful way. For one who is a servant of the Lord, this sort of behavior ought not to characterize him.

A servant, really a slave, is one who submits to the will of another, to the will of his master. The attitude of the unbeliever is captured in Psalm 12:4: “Our lips are our own: who is lord over us?” In the dark days of the Judges, “every man did that which was right in his own

eyes” (Judg. 17:6). The humility of the people of God in every age is expressed in the words of Samuel, “Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth” (1 Sam. 3:10).

Sixth, the commands of God’s Word, especially the warnings, rebukes, and threatenings serve to impress upon Christians that obedience to God is antithetical. Obedience is not only positive: “Thou shalt!” But obedience is also negative: “Thou shalt not!” We must not only serve the one true God, but we are forbidden to serve any other gods beside Him. We must not only remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy, but we must refrain from being engaged on the day in our ordinary work or play. Children must not only honor and obey their parents, but they must never disobey or rebel against them. Husbands must not only love their wives, but they are forbidden to commit adultery with another man’s wife. We must not only be good stewards of what God has given us of the good things of the earth, but we may not covet or steal that which belongs to the neighbor. Obedience is always antithetical, both positive and negative.

In the seventh place, the purpose of preaching the commands of God’s law is to leave the wicked without excuse. Through the preaching of the law, the wicked are confronted with the will of God. They may be the wicked who have joined the church, or the wicked among the carnal seed of believing members of the church. Through the preaching of the commands of Scripture, they are confronted with that which pleases God, that which meets with His divine approval. Thus, they are left without excuse when they rebel against God, disobey His law, and break His commandments. Their guilt is aggravated because they have heard God’s will strictly preached and have refused to obey that will. Not only have they failed to obey, but instead they have deliberately disobeyed. Because they have clearly heard the will of God in the preaching of His Word, they aggravate their guilt and, for the same reason, their judgment will be worse in the day of days.

Eighth, yet another reason for preaching the commands of God’s law in the church is that this follows from Scripture’s description of the saving work of the Holy Spirit to write God’s law upon our hearts. We read, for example, in Jeremiah 31:31-33,

Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: not according

to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the LORD: but this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people.

Similarly, the prophet Ezekiel prophesies in Ezekiel 11:19-20,

And I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within you; and I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and will give them an heart of flesh: that they may walk in my statutes, and keep mine ordinances, and do them: and they shall be my people, and I will be their God.

The saving work of the Holy Spirit in the elect child of God is described as the Spirit’s writing God’s law upon our hearts, or as the Spirit’s giving us a fleshy heart in place of a stony heart so that we walk in God’s statutes and keep His commandments. If the whole great work of the Holy Spirit in us, the Spirit’s work of sanctification, can be described in terms of the law and of indelibly impressing God’s law upon our hearts, who can object to the preaching of the law as a positive means of grace? Who can object to the preaching of the law as that which calls forth the work of the Spirit in our hearts so that we do what the Spirit has put in our inward parts and written upon our hearts? Who can object to preaching that calls us to honor God’s law and actively obey His commandments, which are already engraved within us? What God does by His Spirit inwardly, He calls to outward manifestation by the preaching of the very law that He has stamped upon the hearts of those whom He has regenerated. If that were not true, it is unimaginable that the Old Testament Scripture would prophesy the saving work of the Holy Spirit in terms of the law of God.

Ninth, the commands must be preached in order to reflect properly the covenantal relationship between God and His people. God’s covenant is unilateral and unconditional. We do nothing as a condition on the basis of which God establishes His covenant with us. But having established His covenant with us, we are called to live faithfully

in the covenant. Out of love and gratitude to God, we are called to obey His will and keep His commandments. It is God's sovereign establishment of the covenant that enables and motivates us to do our part in the covenant. Our Reformed "Form for the Administration of Baptism" teaches:

Whereas in all covenants there are contained two parts, therefore are we by God, through baptism, admonished of and obliged unto new obedience, namely that we cleave to this one God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; that we trust in Him, and love Him with all our hearts, with all our souls, with all our mind, and with all our strength; that we forsake the world, crucify our old nature, and walk in a new and holy life.⁸

God's giving the law to Moses was not a republication of the covenant of works, as some are foolishly contending today. Altogether apart from serious objections to the traditional covenant of works theology, God's covenant with Moses was an aspect of the establishment of His one, everlasting covenant of grace. It emphasized a certain aspect of the truth of God's covenant of grace.⁹ What it underscored was the calling

8 "Form for the Administration of Baptism," in *The Confessions and the Church Order*, 258.

9 At times Scripture speaks of "covenants" in the plural (Rom. 9:4; Gal. 4:24; Eph. 2:12). Scripture does so, not because there are many different covenants. There is one covenant, but that one covenant was confirmed over and again. Additionally, often with the confirmation of the covenant, a different aspect of the covenant was on the foreground. When God established His covenant with Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:15, He set forth the identity of the Mediator. He would be the seed of the woman. He also set forth the essence of the covenant as enmity with Satan and friendship with God. In the covenant with Noah, the cosmic character of the covenant was on the foreground. In the covenant with Abraham, the essence of the covenant was reaffirmed, the unconditional nature of the covenant (while Abraham slept, God passed between the pieces of his sacrifice, Genesis 15:8 ff.), as was the truth of the inclusion of the children of believers in the covenant, Genesis 17. In the covenant with Moses, God underscored the calling of His people within the covenant. God's covenant with David joined the truths of covenant and kingdom. The Old Testament ends with the unfaithfulness of God's covenant people, preparing for God to send His own Son who is Immanuel, "God with

“Thou Shalt and Thou Shalt Not”: Preaching the Commands of the Gospel of God’s covenant people. It underscored our part in the covenant, which part is in love and gratitude to keep God’s commandments.

It is striking, in this connection, how often in the Old Testament God’s law and His covenant are identified. An example is found in Deuteronomy 4:13, “And he declared unto you his covenant, which he commanded you to perform, even ten commandments; and he wrote them upon two tables of stone.” In Deuteronomy 9:9, Moses speaks of the time that “I was gone up into the mount to receive the tables of stone, even the tables of the covenant which the Lord made with you...” What is the reason for the frequent identification of God’s covenant with the Ten Commandments? The outstanding reason is that the keeping of the law is the calling of all those with whom God enters into covenant. So seriously does God account the calling of His covenant people to obey Him.

Reformed Creeds and the Protestant Reformed Viewpoint

Scripture, our Reformed creeds, Reformed theologians of the past, and Protestant Reformed theologians have taught that God blesses the preaching of His law to the hearts and lives of His covenant people. God is pleased to use the preaching of the commands of His Word in order to accomplish the obedience that He commands. In answer to the question as to why God wills that the Ten Commandments be preached strictly, the Heidelberg Catechism includes in its answer, “that we may become more and more conformable to the image of God.”¹⁰ The preaching of the law is a positive means of grace in the church because believers, who by their regeneration have been renewed in the image of God, are made “more and more conformable to the image of God” under the “strict” preaching of the law. In regeneration, they have become new men and new women who *can* obey God’s law. By the preaching of the law, that new life is roused to activity, the activity of obedience.

In his exposition of the Ten Commandments, and of Lord’s Day 44 in particular, Herman Hoeksema endorses this teaching of the Heidelberg Catechism. He reiterates the 115th question when he asks, “Is

us,” in order to do the work of the Mediator of the covenant.

10 “Heidelberg Catechism” A. 115, in *The Confessions and the Church Order*, 134.

there any use in preaching the law to the Christian? If it is impossible for any Christian to keep the law perfectly, why must it be preached in the church?" His answer is that, besides deepening the believer's knowledge of sin, "the Heidelberg teaches us that the preaching of the law, *provided it is done properly*, must have the fruit of sanctification."¹¹ The proper preaching of the law promotes sanctification. Later, in this same chapter, Hoeksema comes back to this point. He says,

The proper preaching of the law has through the grace of God *a sanctifying influence upon the Christian*. As the Catechism has it: "likewise, that we constantly endeavor and pray to God for the grace of the Holy Spirit, that we may become more and more conformable to the image of God." The preaching of the law holds before us the perfect way of God. Through it Christ admonishes us to put off the old man, which is corrupt, and to put on the new man, which is renewed according to the image of God in true righteousness and holiness. It always holds before us the constant admonition of Scripture: "Be ye holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." This creates in the Christian a sincere longing for and endeavor to perfection, to fight the battle of faith even unto the end. It strengthens him in the sincere resolution to walk in all good works. But at the same time it makes him realize his own impotence to fight that battle and to overcome and have the victory. And therefore, the preaching of the law, through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, bears the fruit that the Christian daily seeks the grace of the Holy Spirit. He prays for grace to strive and to fight the battle. *And thus the preaching of the law, through the grace of the Holy Spirit, has a sanctifying influence upon the believer, the child of God.*¹²

Without question, Hoeksema teaches that "through the grace of the Holy Spirit," the preaching of the law has "a sanctifying influence upon the Christian."

The Westminster Confession of Faith states something quite similar:

Neither are the forementioned uses of the law contrary to the grace of the gospel but do sweetly comply with it; the Spirit of Christ subduing

11 Herman Hoeksema, *The Triple Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans 1970), 3:442. Emphasis added.

12 Hoeksema, *Triple Knowledge*, 3:449. Emphasis added.

and enabling the will of man to do that freely, and cheerfully, which the will of God, revealed in the law, requireth to be done.¹³

Notice again that the Holy Spirit uses the preaching of the law in the case of those in whom the grace of the gospel is at work, that is, regenerated believers, enabling them “freely and cheerfully” to do that “which the will of God, revealed in the law, requireth to be done.”

Of course, the preaching of the law to redeemed Christians is effective as a means of grace! Of course, the preaching of the law is effective in our doing what is commanded! For, who is speaking in and through the preacher? When the preacher issues the commands of God’s Word, who is actually commanding the people of God? The answer is, the Lord Jesus Christ, whose word is always effective and effectual. As the command of God was effective in the beginning to cause all things to come into being, (“For he spake, and it was done; he commanded; and it stood fast,” [Ps. 33:9]) so the word of God in the preaching of the law works to accomplish what God commands in the law. The Spirit works through the preaching of the first commandment so that the child of God loves, worships, and trusts in God and God alone. He works through the preaching of the fourth commandment so that God’s people remember to keep the Sabbath day holy, delighting in and enjoying to the fullest the rest of God on the Lord’s Day. He uses the preaching of the fifth commandment so that regenerated children and young people honor and obey their parents, while at the same time “patiently bearing with their weaknesses and infirmities, since it pleases God to govern them by their hand.”¹⁴ He makes the preaching of the seventh commandment effective in young people so that they keep themselves unspotted from the filth of this world. He works through the preaching of the same commandment so that husbands and wives are faithful to one another in marriage.

Two articles in the Canons of Dordrecht address the issue of God’s use of the preaching of the law, including its admonitions, rebukes, and threatenings. Article seventeen of the third and fourth heads of

13 “Westminster Confession of Faith” 19.7, in *Confession of Faith and Subordinate Standards and Other Authoritative Documents of the Free Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Free Church of Scotland, 1973), 30.

14 “Heidelberg Catechism” Q&A 104, in *The Confessions and the Church Order*, 129.

doctrine begins by asserting that as God uses means to support our natural life, so He is pleased to use the preaching of His Word as “the seed of regeneration and food of the soul.” The article concludes,

For grace is conferred by means of admonitions; and the more readily we perform our duty, the more eminent usually is this blessing of God working in us, and the more directly is His work advanced; to whom alone all the glory, both of means and of their saving fruit and efficacy, is forever due.¹⁵

Commenting on this article, Homer Hoeksema writes,

The fathers emphasize that God has intimately joined together grace and the means of grace, grace and admonitions. Because God has joined them together, those who instruct and those who are instructed should not tempt God by trying to separate them.¹⁶

The other article in the Canons of Dordt reads,

And as it hath pleased God, by the preaching of the gospel, to begin this work of grace in us, so He preserves, continues, and perfects it by the hearing and reading of His Word, by meditation thereon, and by the exhortations, threatenings, and promises thereof, as well as by the use of the sacraments.¹⁷

Commenting on this article of the Canons, Hoeksema says,

Through the means of the preached word, the life of faith is *strengthened* and *built up*. The Word in all its fullness with its exhortations, threatenings, and promises, must be proclaimed.¹⁸

15 “Canons of Dordrecht” 3-4.17, in *The Confessions and the Church Order*, 170.

16 Homer C. Hoeksema, *The Voice of our Fathers: An Exposition of the Canons of Dordrecht* (Jenison: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2013), 355.

17 “Canons of Dordrecht” 5.14, in *The Confessions and the Church Order*, 176.

18 H. C. Hoeksema, *Voice of our Fathers*, 504. Emphasis added.

A bit later, he adds,

In a sense it may be said that God threatens his people, but this must be understood pedagogically. Paradoxically speaking, God threatens them in his grace to warn them of the dire consequences of sin and iniquity and to call them away from darkness. In the sense of bad intentions toward his people to frighten them into heaven by posing the whiplash of hellfire over them, the Lord does not threaten his saints. Always his word is grace to his own, and always he is graciously inclined toward his people, even in the threatenings of the gospel.¹⁹

And once more,

The word, whether it exhorts, threatens, or promises, is always the word of God’s grace to his people.²⁰

In the Second Helvetic Confession, Heinrich Bullinger faces the issue of preaching the admonitions and reproofs of God’s law. His main concern is the necessity of preaching the admonitions that arise out of God’s law in light of predestination. The specific question to which he responds is, Does predestination rule out the need for admonitions and reproofs? Nevertheless, what Bullinger says about the need for preaching the admonitions of Scripture applies more generally. In two paragraphs he argues that admonitions are always a necessary part of the preaching of God’s Word.

WHAT IN THIS MATTER IS TO BE CONDEMNED. Therefore we do not approve of the impious speeches of some who say, “Few are chosen, and since I do not know whether I am among the number of the few, I will enjoy myself.” Others say, “If I am predestinated and elected by God, nothing can hinder me from salvation, which is already certainly appointed for me, no matter what I do. But if I am in the number of the reprobate, no faith or repentance will help me, since the decree of God cannot be changed. Therefore all doctrine and *admonitions are useless.*” Now the saying of the apostle contradicts these men: “The Lord’s servant must be ready to teach, instructing those who oppose him, so that if God should grant that they repent

19 H. C. Hoeksema, *Voice of our Fathers*, 506.

20 H. C. Hoeksema, *Voice of our Fathers*, 506.

to know the truth, they may recover from the snare of the devil, after being held captive by him to do his will” (II Tim. 2:23 ff.)

ADMONITIONS ARE NOT IN VAIN BECAUSE SALVATION PROCEEDS FROM ELECTION. Augustine also shows that both the grace of free election and predestination, and also salutary admonitions and doctrines, are to be preached (*Lib. De Dono Perserverantiae*, cap. 14 ff.).²¹

According to Bullinger, the preaching of the admonitions of God’s Word has an important and necessary place in the church of Jesus Christ. Admonitions are not “useless.” He expresses agreement with Augustine that there is a “salutary” effect upon believers as the result of the preaching of the commands of Scripture, as well as its admonitions.

Theodore Beza’s Confession of 1560 purports to be “A Brief and Pithy Sum of Christian Faith.” While not living up to its billing,²² the confession is a thorough exposition of the Reformed faith by the successor of John Calvin in Geneva. In his confession, Beza deals extensively with the two main parts of the Word of God, the law and the gospel. After treating the difference between the law and the gospel, he considers the fruit of the preaching of the law after the preaching of the gospel begins to work. In the section entitled “Another Fruit of Preaching the Law, after Preaching the Gospel Begins to Work,” Beza says,

Now among the benefits of Jesus Christ dwelling in us, as has been declared, this is not the least—to create in us a pure heart (Ps. 51:10), to know and to will (Jer. 24:7), to do what is of God (Phil. 2:13), i.e., to take pleasure and to study to serve God where we were before slaves of sin (Rom. 6:22), enemies of God (Eph. 2:12), and could not think any good (2 Cor. 3:5). By this means, the preaching of the Law begins to change the effect in us (after our disposition is changed) in such

21 “Second Helvetic Confession” 10.6-7, in *The Proposed Book of Confessions of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (Philadelphia: Office of the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, 1966), 75.

22 It is nearly 135 pages in volume 2 of James T. Dennison’s *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation*.

a way that instead of making us afraid, it comforts us (1 John 2:17; 2 Peter 1:11-12); instead of where it showed us our condemnation already prepared, it serves us now as a guide to show us good works (Jer. 31:33; Rom. 7:22) in which we are prepared to walk (Eph. 2:10). Instead of being an unpleasant and unbearable yoke, now it is agreeable to us, easy and light (Matt. 11:30).²³

Beza contends that “after our disposition is changed,” that is, after we are regenerated and indwelt by the Holy Spirit, the preaching of the law assumes a second benefit in the lives of Christians in addition to the first benefit of pointing out and convicting us of our sin. After the preaching of the gospel has been used by God to work repentance and faith, the preaching of the law is used “as a guide to show us good works.” The “preaching of the Law begins to change the effect in us (after our disposition is changed) in such a way that instead of making us afraid, it comforts us... instead of where it showed us our condemnation already prepared, it serves us now as a guide to show us good works... Instead of being an unpleasant and unbearable yoke, now it is agreeable to us, easy and light (Matt. 11:30).” Beza is not contending, of course, that the preaching of the law contains an inherent power. Neither is it a power accomplished by the one preaching the law. But this is the power of God, who is pleased to use the preaching of the law as the means in His hand in order to accomplish His purpose. The point is that it pleases God to accomplish this purpose not apart from but by means of the preaching of the law.

A strong Reformed church grew up early in the years immediately following the Reformation. One of the confessional statements of these churches was The Confession of Tarcal (1562) and Torda (1563). This little-known creed ought to be more widely known in the Reformed community than it is. It extends to a hundred pages in Dennison’s *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation*. In Article 24, the confession considers “To What End Does the Holy Spirit Use the Preaching of the Law?” The article begins,

23 Theodore Beza, “Theodore Beza’s Confession (1560),” in *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation: Volume 2, 1552-1566*, compiled with introductions by James T. Dennison, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), 281.

From what we have said about the differences between the Law and the gospel, it can easily be understood why and to what end the Holy Spirit makes use of the preaching of both in the church, for we must be in no doubt that He directs both to that which He has determined.²⁴

The confession goes on to identify the first purpose of the preaching of the law:

[T]he first benefit of the preaching of the Law is that our numberless sins become apparent, and recognizing them we begin to take no pleasure in them and thus come to the first step of conversion, the breaking of the heart, followed by the full and open confession of our sins before God.²⁵

But the confession goes on to identify the second benefit of the preaching of the law. “The Second Benefit of the Preaching of the Law, Which Follows the Effectual Preaching of the Gospel” is the title of Article 29. The article begins by noting

that our condition has changed and the preaching of the law works differently in us, so that whereas previously it terrified us, now it begins to console us; and whereas it showed us that damnation was at hand, so now it goes before us and directs our entry upon the way of good works, that we may walk in them (1 John 2:27; 2 Peter 1:19; Jer. 31:33-34; Rom. 7:6; Eph. 2:10).²⁶

It goes on to say,

Thus it will be that as true conversion or repentance, or rather moral improvement [that is, sanctification], moves by degrees towards perfection in us, so that which begins...in a serious sense of sin (which we call contrition), will end in the real amendment of the inner and outer man (Phil. 3:10-11).²⁷

24 Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, 2:697.

25 Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, 2:698.

26 Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, 2:703-4.

27 Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, 2:704.

In the beginning, God was pleased to use His word of command to bring the universe and all creatures into existence. God is pleased to use His word of command sounded in the preaching of the gospel, “Repent and believe,” to work repentance and faith in the elect who hear the command of the gospel. God is also pleased to use the preaching of the commands of His law to accomplish that which is commanded in the hearts and lives of the people of God. He is ever the God who uses His word of command to bring about that which He commands.

Conclusion

The great indicative of the gospel is, “Jesus Christ has died for me and for my salvation.” And the great imperative of the gospel is, “Live in love and gratitude to God by keeping His commandments.” The great indicative of the gospel and the great imperative of the gospel are joined by the conjunction, “therefore.” Jesus Christ has died for you and your salvation, child of God, *therefore* live in love and gratitude to God by keeping His commandments. To put it another way, “*Because* Jesus Christ has died for you and your salvation, you will live in love and gratitude to God by keeping His commandments.” And the fruit of that preaching of the law is certain. It is certain because God is pleased to accomplish what He commands by means of the command.

I conclude with a pertinent quotation from the Scottish divine, Hugh Binning (1627-1653):

There is a generation of men that can endure to hear nothing but gospel-promises; that cry out against all reproving of sins, and preaching of God’s wrath against unbelieving sinners, as legal, and meddling with other men’s matters, especially if they reprove the sins of rulers, their public state enormities; as if the whole word of God were not profitable; as if reproofs were not as wholesome as consolations; as if threatenings did not contribute to make men flee from the wrath to come into a city of refuge. Let such persons read their own character out of wise Solomon, “Correction is grievous to them that forsake the way.” “Reprove a wise man, and he will love thee, and he will be yet wiser,” Prov. ix. 8,9. If we were pleasers of men, then were we not the servants of Jesus Christ; let us strive to profit men, but not to please them.²⁸

28 Hugh Binning, “The Authority and Utility of the Scriptures,” in *The Works of Hugh Binning* (Grand Rapids: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1992 reprint), 16.
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Applications: Preaching to the Heart¹

Barrett L. Gritters

A conference on preaching is not complete without a speech on applications, because a sermon is not preaching unless the sermon is applied. That is a bold statement, but of that I want to convince you: a sermon that is not applied is not preaching.

The relationship between application and preaching is *not* to be compared to the relationship between frosting and a cake; for without frosting a cake may not be as good, but it is still a cake. The relationship between application and preaching is not like accessories in a car; for without accessories the car may be less comfortable or attractive, but it is still a car. The relationship of application to preaching is more like that between yeast and bread, between love and a godly marriage or, better, between life and a human body. Remove yeast and the lump can hardly be called bread. Remove love from a marriage and it is not a godly marriage. Remove life from the body and what is left is only a carcass, and not a human. When a preacher thinks to remove application from his sermon, he is not making a little mistake.

The burden of this article, then, is to help you move application (in your conception of the preaching enterprise) from the periphery of the sermon to the heart of the sermon, from a very small and maybe unessential part of the sermon to a large and fundamental part of the

1 The following is a transcript (much revised) of a speech at our seminary conference on preaching. The speech was given to a lay audience—men, women, young people, and children who sit in the pew each Sunday listening to sermons and who want to know what goes into the making of a sermon. Thus, the speech was not designed to be scholarly. Some years ago (April, 2015), the *PRTJ* printed a more scholarly article on applications in preaching which I delivered to an audience of ministers and elders. Although there are similarities between this article and that article, the development of thought from that to this should not be missed, especially in two areas: 1) the manner in which good, applicatory preaching relates to God's image in His people and 2) the relationship between preaching and God's covenant.

sermon. I want to help you s-t-r-e-t-c-h your conception of application, so that you are convinced that a sermon is not truly a sermon without application. It is only a wrong understanding of application that allows someone to imagine a sermon without application. And, conversely, a proper understanding of application will enable the people of God to say, “When you *preach* the Word to me, please exert yourself to *apply* the Word to me.” This article, “Preaching to the Heart,” helps us make a beginning.

In Isaiah 40, God instructs the prophet to speak *comfortably* to Jerusalem: “Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem” (Is. 40:1-2). Probably all of you have heard Heidelberg Catechism sermons in which the minister explained that the proper translation of “speak ye comfortably” is “speak to the heart.” The Hebrew is “*upon* the heart.” The Greek translation of the Hebrew is “*into* the heart.” That is what the prophet is to do: When he speaks to Jerusalem, he must speak *into* Jerusalem’s heart. He must *press* that word *upon* Jerusalem’s heart. That is what applicatory preaching is.

A Reformed and Biblical Requirement

A teacher of culinary arts will say to her students, “Do not forget the yeast!” A pastor will say to an engaged couple, “You must love one another in Jesus Christ!” Likewise, the church of Jesus Christ must say to her preachers, “You must apply the Word!”

I say that, well aware of the objections of some: “Ministers cannot apply the Word. Only the Holy Spirit can apply the Word. It is the business of the minister to explain the Word. We will let the Spirit apply it.” Of course, if you understand by application the effectual insertion of that Word into the heart, making that Word powerful in the lives of God’s people, no minister can apply the Word. That is the domain of the Holy Spirit. But that is not what we mean, or what the church has meant, when we say that the minister must apply the Word.

I am also aware of the claim that Herman Hoeksema was not an applicatory preacher. He was not a “practical preacher.” Such a claim carries weight among us. Some of the older ministers wrote articles in the *Beacon Lights* and *Standard Bearer* in which they pitted practical preaching over against doctrinal preaching. We must not have practical

preaching, they said, but doctrinal preaching. Some who heard those older ministers think that applying the Word is a mistake.

There can be good reason to react against certain kinds of “practical preaching.” J. Gresham Machen, founder of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in 1936, said that Christianity begins with one great *indicative*, that is, the teaching of what *is*.² By that, Machen was exhorting preachers to preach doctrine, to preach first what God has done in Jesus Christ (indicative), before preaching what the people ought to do (imperative). In liberal Presbyterianism, preaching had become mostly application and little explanation, primarily imperative and not enough indicative. Only slightly exaggerating the case, Machen claimed that in the church of his day there was so much Christianity applied that there was no Christianity left to apply.³ We understand the dangers. Nevertheless, the church of Christ must hear applications, and your ministers must know that preaching must apply the Word of God.

The Reformed “Form of Ordination of the Ministers of God’s Word,” an authoritative document for the Protestant Reformed Churches, gives preachers their mandate:

Consequently it is evident that the office (that is, the *work*, BLG) of pastors and ministers of God’s Word is: First. That they faithfully *explain* to their flock the Word of the Lord,...and *apply* the same as well in general as in particular to the edification of the hearers; instructing, admonishing, comforting, and reproof, according to everyone’s need; preaching repentance toward God, and reconciliation with Him through faith in Christ⁴

Notice that a minister must not only explain the Word, but he must also apply it. For a Protestant Reformed preacher there may be no question about the requirement to apply. Importantly, the Form

2 J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1981), 47.

3 Machen said that “the Christian man believes that there can be no applied Christianity unless there be ‘a Christianity to apply’.” See *Christianity and Liberalism*, 155.

4 “Form for Ordination of Ministers of God’s Word,” in *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville: Protestant Reformed Churches of America, 2005), 284-85.

goes on to explain what that means. Applications must be made in *general*. Applications must also be made *particular*. Then, applications must aim at edifying the hearers, building them up. And that is done by instructing, admonishing, comforting, and reproving. In sum, we preach repentance toward God and reconciliation with God through faith in Christ. There is a great deal packed into that little quotation from the Form that is instructive for us. A minister must explain the Word. He must also apply it.

Apropos are the decisions that the churches in the Netherlands made in 1568 in Wesel, a little city just over the border in Germany where Reformed churches assembled for the first time as a Synod. The Dutch churches could not meet in the Netherlands because of the threat of persecution. These young churches declared: “For it is beyond doubt that the office of ministers...consists predominantly of proclaiming and *applying* God’s Word correctly, in public as well as in private, unto teaching, admonition, and comfort.”⁵ Reading this, it becomes apparent from where our Form of Ordination received much of its instruction. The Dutchmen were on to something; they knew what ministers ought to do, as well as what ministers must be

5 “The Articles of Wesel 1568” 2.13, in Richard R. DeRidder, *Translation of Ecclesiastical Manual Including the Decisions of the Netherlands Synods and other Significant Matters Relating to the Government of the Churches* (Grand Rapids: Calvin Theological Seminary, 1982), 25. After a sharp warning against “idle display[s] of grandiloquence” rather than seeking “edification” (2:22, p. 27), the assembly at Wesel continued: “But the preacher must always relate everything to these two most important parts of the Gospel, namely faith and conversion. With the one he keeps the knowledge of God in view, and with the other the true mortification and quickening of life. And he shall try, as much as possible, to expose all the recesses and hidden wrappings of the human heart by reprimanding wrong opinions and heresies as well as bad morals. He shall not only take action against the gross examples of mischief and public scandal, but also endeavor to bring to light the hidden hypocrisy of the soul, and to expose the hotbed of godlessness, pride and ingratitude, which appear even among the best of men, and to root these things out in the best possible manner” (2.23, p. 27). Finally, these Reformed fathers felt the need to add the following: “He must be careful not to burden the listener’s memory with too elaborate sermons and thus stifle one’s zeal, and (as it were) generate disgust in one’s stomach.... Therefore, he shall do his best to limit his speech to one hour” (2.24, p. 27).

instructed not to avoid: applications. John Calvin said about preaching that a minister must not only teach, but he “must improve, threaten, and exhort.”⁶ “Improve” is a strange word to us, but it simply means to increase the value of something, to make it profitable, or beneficial. After a minister is finished explaining the Word, he must “improve” it. That is, he must apply it to the people of God.

It is not surprising, then, that in his class notes, Herman Hoeksema emphasized seven times in a short section that sermons must be practical in importance.⁷ And it is less surprising, then, that our seminary’s

6 “And again Saint Paul shows, that it is not enough to preach the Law of God, and the promises, and what else so ever is contained in the holy Scripture, as though a man should teach in a school: but we must *improve, threaten, and exhort*. As if he said, if we leave it to men’s choice to follow that which is taught them, they will never move one foot. Therefore the doctrine of itself can profit nothing at all, unless it be confirmed by exhortations, and by threats; unless there be spurs to prick men withal: for beasts that are so wild and fierce, if they should be let alone to lie groveling in their slothfulness, it will be hard to make them profit in the end, and to go on in the way of salvation.” Calvin goes on to emphasize, however, that these exhortations must be built on doctrine, lest they be built on “aire.” See John Calvin, *Sermons on the Epistles to Timothy and Titus* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1983), 947.

7 See the following quotes from Homer C. Hoeksema, “Homiletics” (Grandville: Theological School of the Protestant Reformed Churches, 1975). Page numbers in parenthesis.

“There is nothing more crippling than the feeling that he must deliver a message of some 4,000 to 5,000 words, but that he really has nothing to preach which is of significance, or real, practical importance...for the faith and life of the congregation.... He enters the pulpit with the feeling that... there is no element of stimulation, comfort, encouragement, or exhortation in the message.... That is paralyzing.” (25)

“It is necessary that after he has once chosen a text, the minister diligently and prayerfully work with that text until he finds what is of genuine importance to the congregation in the text.” (25)

“the sermon must make the proper spiritual-psychological application of the text, whether it be to the specific needs of the congregation or to the spiritual condition and needs of God’s people in general...” (28)

“Finally, a sermon-text must be practically fruitful for the congregation, that is, it must be fruitful for the practical, spiritual life of the church....

“Form for the Evaluation of Practice Preaching Sermons” requires application: “Is the sermon properly applied, and is the application exegetically based?” and “Is there sufficient application?”

Reformed churches have emphasized application because the Scripture is full of application. One cannot read the Bible without seeing that. Scripture is profitable for “doctrine” (2 Tim. 3:16). It also teaches us about life. It aims at our intellect; but it also aims at our heart. It tells us what to believe; but it also instructs us how we ought to live. It tells us both what God has done and how we ought to think, in what we may hope, where our affections must be lodged, and what we ought to do. Jesus preached truth. But inseparable from that and the goal of that, Jesus called the people to godly living and addressed their hearts.

We must not make such a sharp distinction between doctrine and life that we imagine doctrine to be one thing and life an altogether different thing. Scripture does not do that. Note some examples.

In 1 Corinthians 10, the apostle calls attention to the history of the Old Testament, to what God had done and what Israel did (indicatives), and then teaches that these things were examples for us. Why? To issue imperatives: that we should not lust as they lusted (v. 6); that we should not be idolators as they were (v. 7); that we should not commit fornication as they did (v. 8); that we should not tempt

[T]he minister...must not too easily come to the conclusion that a certain portion of Scripture does not meet this requirement of practical fruitfulness.” (56)

“He must therefore not only consider that central thought of the text from a logical point of view, but also from a practical, spiritual point of view, with an eye to the needs of the congregation.” (61)

“Only after the minister has thus...viewed the text in the light of the practical, spiritual needs of the church—only then is he ready to arrange and formulate his sermon.” (61)

“such a disposition of the material that it can be applied to the consciousness and life of the congregation.... The preacher is not simply delivering a discourse in a dogmatical subject, nor is he delivering a class lecture in a school. But he is called to deliver the gospel to the congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ. His message, therefore, must be arranged with a view to the practical, spiritual needs of the congregation and with a view to the faith and life of the people of God.” (74)

Christ (v. 9); that we should not murmur (v. 10). Then Paul comes back in verse 11 to repeat what he said regarding why all these things happened in the Scripture: for examples to us, so that we would learn how we ought to live.

In Romans 15:4, Paul says “whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.” Here he indicates that the indicatives are written so that they may be followed, not by imperatives, but by encouragement. The Old Testament was written with the aim of enabling us to live in patience, comfort, and hope.

Most of the epistles are written with this pattern. They first lay a theological/doctrinal foundation of what God has done. Then they provide application regarding how Christians ought to think, speak, live, as well as how to have joy and hope. That is the pattern of the Scriptures in the New Testament.

There is one passage that most clearly gives us the mandate to apply. Second Timothy 3:16 is the text usually used to prove Scripture’s inspiration. But Paul’s main purpose in this verse is to teach the profitability of Scripture. Not first Scripture’s inspiration and infallibility, but Scripture’s usefulness. For what is Scripture useful? “That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.” The aim and goal of preaching the infallible Scripture is that the man of God may be perfect, that is, complete. That is, he is furnished to live a life before the face of God in “good works.” But do not narrow your definition of good works to a few things. “Good works” refers to the entire life of the child of God. The Scripture’s purpose is to perfect the Christian so that he can live aright before the face of God.

How does that happen? First by doctrine. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for *doctrine*. The minister starts with doctrine, that is, teaching. He must tell the people of God what they ought to believe, and show them the body of truth that is the content of the Christian faith. He must start with doctrine, but he may not stop with doctrine. He must continue with *reproof*, with rebukes, censures, warnings, threats. Reproof is convicting people of sin. Reproof’s aim is that we may be *corrected*. *Corrected* is a very interesting word that means to straighten up again. People have become

crooked, and the purpose of the Scripture is to make them straight. (We will return to that idea of being straight later in this article.) Then the text ends by saying “for instruction in righteousness,” that is, training to live aright. The text is not talking about imputed righteousness, but imparted righteousness, actual godly living.

Thus far, we have seen that the calling to apply the Word in preaching is clear. Because Scripture teaches it, Reformed tradition binds it upon ministers. We have seen some key words and concepts in the texts and in those documents. Keep these words in mind to understand how to s-t-r-e-t-c-h your conception of application so that it fits over the entirety of a sermon. Without application, a sermon is not preaching. *Edification*: building up the people of God. *Admonitions*, which may be warnings, but may also be positive reminders. *Correction, comfort, faith, conversion, repentance, reconciliation*. Keep all those words in view when imagining what is proper preaching.

Our first conclusion at this point is that proper preaching is far more than teaching, explaining, aiming merely at the intellect. Proper preaching does aim at the intellect, but always to address the *hearts* of the people of God, so that the entirety of their being is addressed. That is proper preaching.

Defining Application

Also in suggesting a definition of application, I want to s-t-r-e-t-c-h your understanding of application.

Applying the truth is not telling the people of God a few things that they ought to do, or a few more things that they ought *not* do. Application is not ending the sermon (or even in the middle of the sermon) by telling the people of God how they ought to change. Yet, when you read books on homiletics (the art of making sermons from good exegesis) you will find that notion about application.

Reputable men in the field of homiletics appear to limit application to those few things. That notion of application hurts both the weak and the strong in the church. The weak will say, “Don’t preach to me!” by which they mean, “Don’t tell me what to do!” because that is the kind of applicatory preaching they have heard. And the strong may say, “Just give us doctrine.” The weak and the strong are both wrong because they do not understand what application is.

I will propose a definition that you may test. Study the Scripture to see whether it is appropriate. *Applicatory preaching is preaching that brings the people into the presence of God so that they see God. It takes that Word of God about God and presses it upon their hearts.*

Preaching must always bring God's people into His presence so that they see *Him* and hear *Him*. And they truly see Him and hear Him only when the minister takes God's Word and presses it upon their hearts. This definition is very general, and perhaps too broad. But it helps us understand that application is not a few, or even many, words tacked on to the sermon, but something that is of the very essence of the sermon. Application is not this, that after the minister has explained the Word, he looks around to find how he can tell the people of God what to do or how to feel. Application is done properly when the minister finds in the text what is important for the child of God in his relation to his God and Savior, makes it personal and clear. The Word of God in Christ in the text is "brought home."

The text in all its beauty must go into the *minds* of God's people so that we understand it. At the same time, it must be pressed upon our hearts. That is preaching, applicatory preaching. That is what the word "application" means. The women know what an applique is. So the minister presses the Word on to the heart of the people of God.

'Imperfect' Christians and the Image of God

To understand this properly, note what Paul says about the man of God in 2 Timothy 3:16. The purpose of the Word of God is to equip this man of God to be *perfect*, thoroughly furnished unto all good works. That is, before the Word of God comes to him, he is imperfect, not equipped. The Word will perfect him, that is, complete him, enabling him able to live a life of godliness.

Now, observe that imperfect man. Asking what caused his imperfection will help answer how he can be made perfect. Asking what made man crooked will help answer how he can be made straight. Man's imperfection is rooted in Adam's fall, when man was driven from God's presence and lost God's image. Gospel preaching addresses both these realities, fellowship with God and looking like God.

Preaching brings God's people into His presence where, beholding God, they are renewed in the image of God, in true knowledge, righteousness, and holiness.

This is the broadest perspective we may have of the gospel, the covenant, and the Word of God. The Bible begins with the reality that Adam and Eve lived with God, spoke with God, and intimately fellowshiped with Him. God made them His “image.” Spiritually, they looked like Him. Then came the awful reality of sin. God drove them out of His presence; they died spiritually; they lost the image of God. Gospel preaching addresses these realities, because preaching is God’s instrument to draw His people into His presence and restore them in His own image.

But that does not happen when preaching merely fills the people’s heads with information. That happens when the preaching brings the people of God to see God. And, like Moses, when they stand in the presence of God, they begin (by the mysterious, miraculous, marvelous work of the Spirit) to reflect the image and glory of God!

Galatians 4 teaches this. In verse 19 the apostle addresses the church at Galatia with some disappointment: “My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you...” Christ must be formed in them *again*. When the apostates came to Galatia, as Calvin said, they defaced that image of God in the Christians. But the apostle was not so discouraged that he would cease working with them. Rather, he would travail again with them, that is, he will feel like a mother giving birth. He will continue with them, *preaching truth* so that again they would reflect the image of God.

Paul makes that same point even clearer in 2 Corinthians 3:18: “But we all, with open face (that is, an unveiled face) beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory.” When the people of God behold the face of God in the face of Christ, they are changed into the same image from glory to glory. Three things are clear here: First, we are changed into His image by beholding Him. Second, change is a process: “from glory to glory.” It does not happen overnight. Third, most importantly, the Corinthians see God through the ministry of the Word. Thus, Paul says, “We preach not ourselves” (2 Cor. 4:5). That is, we do not want you

to see us; we want you to see Christ. We preach Christ! And when we do, you see Christ! And when you see Christ, you are formed into the image of Jesus Christ!

That is, preachers must take God's Word, study it, meditate upon it, hear and see God in it, and then teach it in such a way that they press it upon the minds and hearts of the people of God. The people see that the sermon is important for them because they realize it has been important for their preacher. That is what preaching is. That is true preaching. Without that, preaching is not preaching. The preacher must apply the Word of God.

The Image: Knowledge, Righteousness, Holiness

Let me develop this point with regard to the image of God by using the three elements of the image of God to illustrate what preaching is and does. We all have learned in catechism that when we are restored in God's image we are restored in true knowledge, righteousness, and holiness. That is what Adam and Eve lost. That is what God restores in us: knowledge, true knowledge; righteousness, God's righteousness; and holiness, God's own holiness. We preach God.

First, the preacher must preach the knowledge of God. He must teach the people about God. He must bring them into His presence and say, "Behold your God! That is who He is! This is what He is like! You need to know about Him! You must have true knowledge of Him! We preachers are going to fill you with the knowledge of God." That is what sermons are about. That is what Protestant Reformed preaching must be. The Canons say that God's Holy Spirit uses preaching to "illumine the mind" (3-4.11). Of course, the point of that article is that preaching does not do *only* that, but it does start with that. We must rightly understand the things of the Spirit of God.

What Moses said to God (Ex. 33:18) you must say to your preacher: "Show us God's glory! We want to see Him. We want to know what kind of God He is." When bringing this down to the level of high school students in catechism, one begins with the first question in the "Essentials of Reformed Doctrine" book: "What is above all things most precious?"⁸ I love that question and I love the answer. No one

8 Herman Hoeksema, "Essentials of Reformed Doctrine: A Guide in Catechetical Instruction" (Grandville: Protestant Reformed Churches in

may ever forget what is above all things most precious: “The *knowledge* of the true God.” And do not forget the proof in John 17! Lesson one is about the knowledge of God. Lesson two teaches the doctrine of Scripture, God’s instrument to reveal Himself to us. And lesson three returns to what it is that we know about God, asking: “Wherein ought we to know God?” Answer: “In His essence, names, attributes, persons, and works.” These five realities—His essence, His names, His attributes, His persons, and His works—bring the students all the way to the end of that catechism book. No catechism teacher may ever teach catechism in any other way than to teach the young people the essence of God, and press it on their hearts so that they see its importance. The teacher does the same with the names of God, pressing that Word on their hearts so that they see that God’s names are important to them. Those students go to catechism with delight because they learn about their God. Preaching to the youth in catechism works this fruit: They say, “My God is spiritual and glorious. My God’s name is Jehovah. He is my Friend. He is the I Am. He does not change. He is my God.”

When Moses asked God to show him His glory, God did so, but then immediately *spoke*. That is, what Moses *saw* was not as important as what Moses *heard*. What did Moses hear? God declared to Moses His attributes, and began by saying, “merciful” (Ex. 34:6). That is what God is like. He is more: “Gracious, long-suffering, good, true, forgiving.” God was teaching Moses theology. Because this was the Old Testament, the spiritual reality was expressed in a physical manner, so that when Moses came down from the mountain, the people saw God’s glory radiating from his face. Moses had been in the presence of God. That is what preaching must do: Bring the people into the presence of God, teach theology, explain God, read Scripture clearly, cause the people to understand the reading (Neh. 8:8), and teach in such a way that even the children understand the Word. Faith is worked by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God. Faith is the knowledge of God. Preaching must address the minds of God’s people: “And this is life eternal, that they may *know* thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent” (John 17:3).

At this point, refutation of error and polemics and confutation of false doctrine come in. Why? So that the people of God recognize

when someone preaches falsehood about their God. They must be able to say of false teaching, “That is not my God. That is not the one who bought me. He is not the one who loves me. You are describing some idol. You dishonor my God.” Preaching, in connection with teaching the knowledge of God, must refute false doctrines.

Second, we preach the righteousness of God. The image of God is also righteousness. Ephesians 4:24 teaches that the new man “*after God, is created in righteousness.*” Righteousness is perfect conformity to the will and law and being of God. And what is that will of God? To love Him with all our being, and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Preacher, preach God’s righteousness! Bring the people into the presence of God by describing that perfection of God’s righteousness! And after they see the righteousness of God, press that Word upon their hearts so that they know they must be righteous as God is righteous! The God-worked response to that kind of preaching will be, “I cannot. I am not. I am crooked. I am wrong.” Then we preach reconciliation to God through faith in Jesus Christ: “Repent of your crooked nature and your crooked actions. Find the remedy in the righteousness of God in Jesus Christ, granted and imputed to you by faith. Then, when God looks at you, He does not see you as crooked, but as perfectly straight with the righteousness of His own dear Son.”

In connection with righteousness, we preach the Ten Commandments, and we preach them “strictly” (Heid. Cat., Lord’s Day 44) because we must have both imputed righteousness and actual righteousness, the righteousness of a godly life. God demands perfection, and nothing less than perfection, within and without. Preacher, preach the righteousness of God and the righteous demands of God so that God’s people cry for forgiveness, find imputed righteousness in Christ, and then plead with God for the grace of the Holy Spirit so that more and more they hate sin and *live* righteously!

When Moses went to the top of the mount to commune with God, the mountain quaked. So did Moses. He was standing in the presence of a righteous God. Moses, a type of our Lord Jesus Christ, quaked before the righteousness of God. Beholding Moses, we see more clearly why Jesus sweat great drops of blood in Gethsemane. He was standing before the righteous requirements of His own God and Father. As He bore our sins, God’s righteous judgments crushed

Him. Preacher, preach the righteousness of God so that the people of God can be led to see God and God's Christ!

Here, the warnings and threats of the preaching come in. The Canons of Dordt teach that God "preserves, continues, and perfects" His work of grace in His people "by the...exhortations, *threatenings*, and promises" of the gospel (5.14). "Jehovah holds a cup of wrath and holds it not in vain," we sing in Psalter 206, and "all the wicked of the earth (all who do not repent) its bitter dregs shall drain." Can you sing that psalm? Of course you can, but only because you have learned of God's righteousness.

Third, the preacher must also preach the holiness of God, that is, His own perfect consecration to Himself and His own hatred of sin. Then, because God is holy, we must be holy, perfectly consecrated to God, fully separated from sin. Holiness is that single-minded, pure-hearted devotion to God, having eyes for God alone. "Holy, holy, holy is LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory" (Is. 6:3). And when preaching brings the people of God into the august presence of the Holy God, they are altogether undone and again fly to Christ and find in Him also their holiness, both imputed and imparted. They are more and more conformed to God's image, in holiness, too.

Preacher, press also that Word of God's holiness upon sinners. Because of our sins we must be driven out of God's presence, having no right to dwell in His garden. Then show the people the way back to God by showing them Christ. Having found Christ, in grateful love they will hate sin and have single-minded devotion to our God of all grace.

That is preaching. That is preaching applied. Bring the people to see God, in the face of His Son. When they come into God's presence as Moses did on the top of Mount Sinai, more and more, by the power of God's Spirit, they are going to look like God, be restored in His image, and have fellowship with Him.

Covenantal Preaching

If someone were to ask you what the relationship between preaching and the covenant is, you might be tempted to say to say that the preaching must teach the *doctrine* of the covenant, defend the truth of the covenant, oppose all errors regarding God's covenant. You would not be wrong if you said that, but you would be wrong if you said *only*

that. The relationship between the preaching and the covenant is much more than that. If the covenant is God's blessed marriage-friendship with His people in Jesus Christ, preaching is the means by which this ever-blessed God irresistibly draws unto Himself those who deserve to be driven away from Him, takes them into His bosom, and speaks the secret things of His love. By that same preaching God makes us, His restored sons and daughters, more and more like Him, more and more able to recognize His voice. We sit at the table of God in His family fellowship. We hear the voice of God, see how beautiful He is, feel His embrace, taste and see that He is good. We live with Him as a wife with her husband, as children with beloved parents. And we say, "I long for the day when I will live with Him forever, never leave Him, and behold His beauty. The only thing I can see and the only thing I want to see is my God who loves me in Christ. Whom have I Lord, in heaven, but Thee?"

I say again, *stretch* your idea of what it means to apply the Word of God. You will see that you never want to say again that application is nice but not central, helpful but not essential. You will always ask for the Word of God pressed upon your heart.

Applications for Listeners

I conclude by applying this article on application. Now I use the word *application* in the narrow sense, telling you what you ought to do and how you and I ought to change. I speak first to listeners, and second, to preachers.

To listeners: Pray for your preacher. There is an adage that runs something like this: "If you want a better preacher, pray for the one you have." Pray that your preacher would spend all week in God's presence so that he sees God and knows God and loves God, so that at the end of the week he is able to stand before God's people and from his heart speak to our hearts. Pray this: "Lord, bring our preacher into Thy presence all week long. Motivate him by what he sees in Thee, Thy great love for him and us. Give him love for us as Paul loved the Galatians, though they badly betrayed him. Give him such love that our preacher is willing to travail again as it were in birth for us, because we deface the image of God. May he know us and be able to

speak to us in a way that he would not be able to speak to any other congregation.”

Second, to the listener: *Prepare* to meet your God when you sit in the pew and hear a preacher who speaks God’s Word on God’s behalf. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew day began at 6PM. Their Sabbath was on Saturday, so on Friday evening at 6PM the people were observing the Sabbath already. When the new day dawned, they were prepared to meet their God and bring their sacrifices. They did not stay up late on Friday night, awaking tired on Saturday morning, then to spend the Sabbath in weariness. They prepared to meet their God. People of God, whose Sabbath is Sunday, prepare your ears, your eyes, your mind, your heart on Saturday evening. Then, bring your gifts to God’s house and listen with the heart of faith. Do not listen for information only, as though you come to hear a lecture, but listen for a testimony of God’s love to you in your heart.

Preachers, first, be the kind of man for which the people pray. Spend all week in the presence of God. Be men of prayer. Study the Scripture. Feed on the Word of God. Love God and His Word. Search Him out. Learn more and more about Him every day. That is, be “first partaker of the fruits” (2 Tim. 2:6). Then, when you come to the pulpit on Sunday you will be filled to the brim and overflowing, as a prophet ought to be. You will be able to speak, not just from your mouth to their mind, but from your heart to their hearts. Be a man of God and of prayer.

Second, in order to apply the Word according to everyone’s needs, and not only generally but particularly, come down from the pulpit after you are finished preaching and live among the flock. A good shepherd knows the state of the flocks; he attends to his herds (Prov. 27:3). You must be able to make the kinds of applications to your flock that may not be appropriate for any other flock. When you live among the people, you are able to make application in the catechism room to the young people. You can address the saints in their living room when they have just lost their spouse, when their wayward son has departed, when their heart is broken. A good shepherd knows his sheep.

Conclusion

What a rich gift God gives to us in the preaching of the Word of God: "...so great things are effected by it; yea, how highly necessary it is for man's salvation..."⁹ What a glorious work is preaching!

Let us pray that more young men may hear what a glorious work preaching is, what a blessing God makes it to be, and then come to seminary to study to be preachers who will "preach to the heart" the message of God in Jesus Christ. It is the power of God unto our salvation.

9 "Form for Ordination of Ministers of God's Word," in *The Confessions and the Church Order*, 286.

Book Reviews

Grounded in Heaven: Recentering Christian Hope and Life on God, by Michael Allen. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2018. Pp. 186. \$18.00 (softcover). ISBN: 978-0802874535. [Reviewed by Marco Barone]

This book attempts to refocus Christian eschatology and ethics “upon communion with God, or the beatific vision (the classical image of the eschatological presence of the Almighty)” (8). This goal is unintelligible without mentioning first a tendency that Allen calls “eschatological naturalism.” Allen’s introduction indicates that this theological tendency is primarily represented by the Neo-Calvinist and Kuyperian heritage, with Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck as their most famous exponents. The author sees positive elements in that heritage (7-8, 22-23). However, neo-Calvinism’s emphases “upon the new creation and the earthiness of our hope can and have morphed at times from being productive Reformed correction to the catholic faith to being parasitic to the basic lineaments of the Christian gospel”; that is, “a desire to value the ordinary and the everyday, the mundane and the material, has not led to what ought to become common sense to any Bible reader: that heaven and the spiritual realm matter most highly” (9). Rather, neo-Calvinism emphasizes “the resurrected body, the shalom of the city, and the renewal of the earth” (8).

Chapters one and two expound the eschatological part of Allen’s proposal, and chapters three and four constitute the ethical part.

In chapter one, “Retrieving a Theological Eschatology,” Allen further discusses neo-Calvinism’s eschatological naturalism that “speaks of God instrumentally (as a means to, or instigator of, an end), but fails to confess communion with God as our one true end (in whom alone any other things are to be enjoyed)” (23). The name “eschatological naturalism” ought not be confused with philosophical naturalism and its denial of the supernatural. Rather, it is “a theology...that is naturalistic only in a targeted manner regarding eschatological confessions (or the lack thereof)” (39), and in which “the secondary is elevated to the primary position in terms of Christian hope, and that which is in fact primary is relegated (at best) to the fringes, if not outright dismissed”

(39-40). In other words, “eschatological naturalism treats God as the sovereign instigator and cause of Christian hope, the almighty and gracious Lord who brings his kingdom to pass” (46); however, “when it comes to describing or articulating that glory, it searches for other items, realities, and persons to mark its very nature: the shalom of the city, the redemption of creation, the resurrection of the body,” with the result that its “ends can and have at times become naturalistic, limited to horizontal and limited frames” (46).

Allen sees several dangers with neo-Calvinism’s eschatological and ethical emphases. I will mention two. The first is the desire for spiritual reformation. This desire, although good in itself, can become “parasitic” as a side effect of Kuypertian polemics against the errors and hyper-spiritualizations of dispensationalism and rapture theology (48).

Reform can be productive or parasitic. Theologically speaking, attempts to revitalize a doctrine, practice, or church sometimes lead to flourishing by way of deepening. But reforms can also be so intently or myopically focused as to lead to the unintended loss of a wider theological context and of confessional integrity. The danger of polemics in theological debate, then, is not only a matter of tone (whether loving or vindictive) and of content (whether true or false) but also of breadth (whether well balanced or narrow). Too many times, potentially prophetic words misfire because they are separated from a wider doctrinal commitment to the whole counsel of God. In such cases, a reform (perhaps a needful and good reform) takes a parasitic turn and eats away the substance of the doctrine, confession, practice, or church. (21-22)

Another danger has to do with idolatry, which is connected with upside-down priorities (40) and treating God as a means to an end rather than the end (46).

The danger of idolatry lurks especially in the realm of eschatology. When we speak of eschatology we are speaking of fundamental hopes and ultimate desires. Matters of priority and significance come right to the surface because we are addressing what has lasting meaning, value, and integrity in God’s economy. Numerous errors can be identified in the eschatological realm...each of these errors glows from some

cultural and personal ideal being given independent significance in a way not acknowledged or upheld by (and sometimes quite contradictory to) the teaching of Holy Scripture. (36-37)

Allen suggests that some sections of neo-Calvinism have fallen into these errors, even into a form of idolatry that “may take the form of instrumentalizing God—treating him as the liberator from captivity and the sovereign who brought one to prosperity, and then turning to worship in an illicit form” (38). Differently, the proper emphases of Christian eschatology and ethics have to do not so much with earthly realities and institutions to be renewed, but rather with God Himself and fellowship with Him. God is the beginning, middle, and end of the history of redemption (34-35). God Himself is the cause, the center, and the end of our hope. The Christian hope *is* God Himself.

Theology that seeks to follow the emphases of the Scriptures will be alert to the reality that at the end of God’s grace is, ultimately, God. His creation, sustenance, instruction, patience, deliverance, reconciliation, forgiveness, resurrection, and so many other intermediate and unnamed kindnesses—they are all unto God. The gospel logic runs: “From him, through him, and to him are all things” (Rom. 11:36). While our vision or enjoyment of heaven is creaturely enjoyment—thus experienced in time and space and as embodied social being—its object is that one who is no creature but the Lord God Almighty. (38)

True, all things will be renewed in the age to come, and there will be not only spiritual changes but also physical, political, cultural, and social ones. However, that should not be the focus of our eschatology (and, therefore, of our ethics, since eschatology inevitably influences ethics). Rather, God Himself ought to be the *end* since all things are *means* to the final manifestation of His glory in Christ. Appropriately, Allen notes that Scripture’s descriptions of both the first creation of Genesis (Gen. 1:1-2:4) and the new creation of Revelation (Rev. 21:3, 21:22-27, 22:12, 20) are not focused on creation, production, restoration, and renewal by themselves. Rather, the culmination and end of all those things is God’s presence and His covenantal fellowship in Jesus Christ (34-35).

In chapter 2, “The Visibility of the Invisible God: Reforming the Beatific Vision,” Allen bemoans the absence in recent Protestant theology of developed discussions on the doctrine of the beatific vision (61), with a few exceptions. This absence is “glaring in the face of the substantial place that the doctrine of the beatific vision held in classical faith and practice, where the beatific vision played a role in prolegomena (as the ultimate form of human knowledge of God), in eschatology (as the central hope of the Christian), and in ethics (as the driving force or motivation for ascetic discipline)” (61). Allen judges this shyness as biblically and theologically unwarranted:

The New Testament witness points to the Christological nature of the beatific vision... (2 Cor. 4:6). Indeed, the apostles witness not only to the positive promise of sight of God in Christ but also to the exclusion of any other sight of God the Father... (John 6:46). There is one way who brings truth and life (John 14:6); he is the only vision we have of the Father. This is at the heart of not only Johannine but all apostolic theology... (John 1:14). (77)

Allen then expounds on the Biblical teaching of the invisibility *and* visibility of the triune God (66-87), that is, the triune God who, although invisible in His own nature, has made Himself visible in the incarnation of the Son:

The whole Godhead moves to express its glory outward and even the most visible of the persons—the incarnate Son—continues to possess the attribute of invisibility. We do well, then, to speak of the visibility of the invisible God... The shared glory of the three divine persons befits only God, but this Trinity of love and light does share this inner-Trinitarian visibility. Without bringing creatures to share in this natural knowledge and sight, the loving Lord of eternity does elect that creatures participate in this light and wisdom by grace and according to their creaturely capacity. Our vision of God is not the same as God’s own vision, but it is remarkably real nonetheless. (83-84)

Chapter 3, “Heavenly-Mindedness: Retrieving the Ascetical Way of Life with God,” opens the ethical part of Allen’s proposal. Inspired by several past theologians, Allen highlights the importance of being

both spiritually-minded (95-101) and heavenly-minded (101-132), which is what the author means by asceticism. This emphasis, marked by a “delight in the triune God,” does not “displace concern for neighbor care and even enemy love,” but “actually sustains and motivates earthly action” (131). On the contrary, what seems lacking today is a proper emphasis on the spiritual and the heavenly, also because of the counter-intuitive nature of this ethical posture caused by our fallen state (90-91, 94-96, 101, 113-114).

Such a theological focus is counter-intuitive and counter-cultural this side of Eden... Hardening of this sort comes naturally to the self-infatuated sinner and is propelled by the materialistic frame of modern culture... But God calls us to lift up our hearts to look upon the “heavenly places in Christ Jesus” where we are filled with “the fullness of him who fills all in all,” that is, “with all the fullness of God” (Eph. 1:23; 3:19). Heavenly-mindedness molds our desires for something eternal and infinite, for God’s own fullness and nothing less. (113-114)

Therefore, Allen calls the reader to order his priorities, or, in Augustinian terms, his loves (112, 127-132), since our heart is by nature restless and can find *true* rest *only* in fellowship with God. This is a helpful and needed chapter on a potential problem for all Reformed institutions in general, not only neo-Calvinist ones. The Protestant ethic of work can be exaggerated, or even abused (sometimes unconsciously and subtly), with the result that earthly work is made an end in itself. The good gift of fellowship can be abused to gratify a disproportionate desire for entertainment and activities, neglecting prayer and mutual edification. The covenantal requirement of Reformed education can be abused to hide a proud lust for academic or professional achievements. The stewardship of our God-given bodies through sport or physical activity can be abused to hide an inordinate love for sports and appearance.

In chapter 4, “Self-Denial: Reforming the Practices of Renunciation,” Allen proposes a Reformed practice of asceticism. “Asceticism” here means the practice of renunciation, self-denial, mortification, and contempt for the world, to which all Christians are called (139). Allen focuses on self-denial, and he claims that a sound asceticism does not make us neglect our earthly and creaturely duties (134-140). His

accounts of Calvin's correction of the works-righteousness excesses of past asceticism is very interesting. Here is a sample:

Calvin defines repentance neither as a preparation for the gospel nor as a distinct response to the gospel but as a divine provision of the gospel that takes the form of sanctified human action. His reading of Jesus's scriptural message relayed in Luke 24:47 locates repentance as a believer's action flowing from and gifted by God's kindness. While repentance is our action, its existence flows from God's good promise, indeed, it is a part of that promise, not as a condition but as a creation flowing from the unconditional gift of Christ. (141-142)

Allen laments "the heavy influence of neo-Calvinism or Kuyperianism and of the Weberian and Neibuhrian approaches to reflecting upon the sociological, economic, and cultural significance of Calvinism," which for him "has led to an image of the reformers' theology that rarely, if ever, finds itself identifies with heavenly-mindedness, self-denial, contentment, Sabbath, and renunciation of the world" (152). Allen calls again for a reorganization of priorities:

My emphasis here ought not to be mistaken for a rejection of this Kuyperian or neo-Calvinist vision of Christ as Lord of all things, the sovereign over every sphere of life... That said, there are serious dangers to this emphasis, chief among them a loss of proportion. Culture in its various forms can be good, but even at its very best it can only be a secondary participating good that pales in comparison to our primary good: the triune God who participates in no one, but who may be participated in by those united to him in Jesus Christ. (153)

Critical Remarks

I have two criticisms of this book. First, previous key criticisms of the Kuyperian project are absent from Allen's book. For example, Herman Hoeksema's,¹ David J. Engelsma's,² and Klaas Schilder's³ respective criti-

1 *The Christian and the Culture* (First PRC Evangelism, Grand Rapids, MI); "Not Anabaptist but Reformed," in Henry Danhof and Herman Hoeksema, *The Rock Whence We are Hewn* (Jenison: Reformed Free Publishing Association), 88-155.

2 *Christianizing the World: Reformed Calling or Ecclesiastical Suicide?* (Jenison: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2016).

3 *Christ and Culture* (Hamilton, ON: Lucerna CRTS Publications, 2016).

cisms of Kuyper's project are nowhere to be seen in the critical apparatus. The works of these men have been around for decades, and are often discarded simply because of proud and unwarranted academic snobbery. Of course, I do not ascribe to Allen any malicious intent in this. However, the absence of even the simple recognition of said pre-existent bibliography is, at this stage of the debate, academically unacceptable.

Second, Allen still uses (although only once in this book) the confusing (to say the least) terminology of "common grace" (100). Scripture presents only one meaning of God's grace as applied to creatures, that is, effectively saving grace.⁴ This indicates that Allen's eschatological and ethical proposal needs a soteriological appendix that disposes of the ambiguous language of common-grace theology. This lack is particularly surprising, especially considering what Allen says regarding the fact that anything done or enjoyed outside fellowship with God is idolatry (128-132). God's universal distribution of degrees of good gifts has nothing to do with a universally gracious and saving disposition on His part, but simply with the perfectly wise plan of His providence.

These criticisms aside, Allen's book is both needed and refreshing. The author's criticism of Kuyperianism is spot-on. In a sense, one could say that Allen is not sharp enough in his criticism, at least if one looks at the undeniable and steady spiritual decline of some Kuyperian institutions that have applied Kuyper's project with a certain consistency. Allen is entirely right about the "eschatological naturalism" and earthly-mindedness of much of neo-Calvinism, and he is also right about the danger of idolatry that seems inherent in the very nature of Kuyper's project. The warnings of Hoeksema and his students have been around for almost a century now, and they have often been dismissed with preposterous accusations of hyper-Calvinism (for their denial of the doctrine of common grace) and Anabaptism (for their rejection of the Kuyperian project). That their warnings are warranted is evident to any honest investigation of the results of Kuyper's project.

Allen's discerning use of ancient and medieval theologians is informative and edifying, and his respect for Reformed boundaries is encouraging. I recommend this short (although deep) volume as

4 Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grandville: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2004), 1:154-160.

it contains good insights and correctives for all Reformed people in general, and not just Kuyperians. It will help the reader from any station and calling in life to set his or her affections on things above, on heaven, where Christ is seated.

Seeing God: The Beatific Vision in Christian Tradition, by Hans Boersma. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2018. Pp. 487. \$55.55 (hardcover). ISBN: 978-0802880192. [Reviewed by Marco Barone]

Introduction

This book by Hans Boersma (Anglo-Catholic professor of theology at Nashotah House, an Anglo-Catholic Seminary in Nashotah, Wisconsin), is both a dogmatic elaboration and an historical account of the doctrine of the beatific vision, that is, the meaning of the biblical statements that the saints will see God (e.g., Matt. 5:8). The Introduction ably summarizes the conclusion of the author's investigation:

The beatific vision is a vision of God's very own character as revealed in Christ... If it is within the eternal tabernacle, or with our eyes fixed on the heavenly groom... that we see God himself, then this must entail that we see the true or faithful character of God in Christ. Seeing God in Christ, therefore, is at the same time a vision of God's nature or God's essence... It is precisely *inasmuch as we see Christ that we see the very character of God and so participate also in who he is, that is to say, in his being or essence*. No matter how deeply we enter into the being of God—or, as the cover of this book depicts it, no matter how many icons we impose on top of each other—in the end we are still faced with the face of Christ, for in him alone do we see the essence of God. (12-13)

The book has several strengths that make its reading beneficial. However, there are also some weaknesses, and some of them raise reasonable concerns and necessary warnings.

Strengths

The book will certainly interest lovers of church history and historical theology, but it will also intrigue lovers of philosophy and

systematic theology. For the latter group, in the Introduction and in Chapters 1-2, as well as in the final chapter, Boersma sets the stage of his book by offering the historical context and justification for a book of the beatific vision. In these sections, Boersma also expounds on a theological way of looking at the world that he calls “sacramental ontology,” a reformulation of Augustinian and Thomistic metaphysics that is at the basis of all his arguments (see 19-20 for a definition).

After that, lovers of church history will be glad to know that in chapters 3-12 the author offers very informative accounts of the doctrine of the beatific vision as formulated by Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas, Gregory Palamas, Symeon the New Theologian, John of the Cross, Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, Nicholas of Cusa, Dante Alighieri, John Calvin, John Donne, Isaac Ambrose, John Owen, Richard Baxter, Thomas Watson, Abraham Kuyper, and Jonathan Edwards. These chapters are helpful because they provide windows on neglected aspects of the theology of well-known and lesser-known theologians. The Reformed reader will be pleasantly surprised to discover the significant length to which Calvin, Owen, Watson, Kuyper, and Edwards discuss the beatific vision. Moreover, these chapters show how these theologians connected eschatology and ethics. Godly living and Christian ethics need to be vitally informed by and grounded upon a proper eschatology.

The entire book is heartwarming Christological. The Bible does not tell us much about the nature and modality of our vision and fellowship with God in Christ in the age to come, but Boersma successfully keeps his proposal within the boundaries of Scripture. One of the reasons for his success is his repeated recognition that, even though we will never see God’s infinite and invisible being in itself, we will no less really see Him in His incarnate Son Jesus. This is what Boersma says in relation to Matthew 5:8:

The Beatitudes (and in particular the one that holds out the vision of God to the pure in heart) have Jesus himself as their focus. Jesus does not position himself as a third party between God (the promised object) and his audience (who are told to be pure in heart); Jesus is not an outsider imposing on others an extraneous condition (purity of heart) for seeing God. Rather, in his Beatitude on the *visio Dei*, Jesus puts himself forward as the subject of both the first and the second

part of his saying. In terms of the first part, it seems obvious that Jesus is the very definition of what it means to be “pure in heart.” We obtain purity only by participating in his purity. We participate in the life of God—in his purity—only inasmuch as we are united to Christ. The second part of Jesus’ saying makes clear that this purity of heart enables us to discern who God is *in Jesus*. If Jesus is the true revelation of God, then in him we see the character or being of God. Jesus’ words, then, hold out to the disciples the way to greater intimacy with himself. Both parts of this Beatitude dispel any notion of Jesus standing aloof from or in between the two parties (God and man) that he reconciles. It is in the hypostatic union of the Son of God that we come to know ourselves as well as God. Jesus does not simply pronounce this Beatitude; he is himself its subject. He is both the one in whom we are blessed (“blessed are the pure in heart”) and the contents of the promise (“they shall see God”). Again, therefore, in Jesus means and end converge: since the three persons of the Trinity are not three individuals, but are one in substance, there is no vision of the Father outside of Jesus Christ. (413)

The Christological nature of any vision of God is true, with the proper distinctions, for the saints of both Old and New Testaments:

The difference between Moses’s vision of God and the beatific vision is not that Moses saw one thing (say, created objects) whereas the blessed see another (the divine essence). When in the Old Testament God appeared in theophanies by means of creaturely objects, it is his own being or essence that was seen (though it was seen indirectly through the veil of the bodily appearance). Similarly, when in the hereafter the blessed will see God’s essence, they will see it in a theophany—that is to say, in God’s ultimate self-manifestation in Christ. To be sure, in one important respect the object is different: not every theophany is an actual incarnation. As Saint Augustine reminds us in *De Trinitate*: “The Word *in* flesh is one thing, the Word *being* flesh is another; which means the Word *in* a man is one thing, the Word *being* man another.” While the eternal Word (his essence) is mysteriously present in the burning bush, he does not identify with it as he does with the flesh of Christ. The difference between the former and the latter is not just epistemological, therefore, but also ontological: only in connection with the incarnation can we say in a univocal or straightforward manner that “the Word became flesh” (John 1:14). (417-418)

Another interesting point the book argues is that a focus on the ultimate and highest end of men (the *visio Dei*, eternal life with God and fellowship with Him in Christ) does not detract from a healthy engagement with the world and with our earthly callings. Relatedly, the author seems to show little sympathy towards Neo-Calvinism's emphasis on "Christianizing the world" (my terms) as embraced and developed by Herman Bavinck (33-40) and Abraham Kuyper (351-353). In fact, one of the (unintended?) results of the book is that it shows that the preoccupation with the earthly and the "culture" (espoused by Neo-Calvinists and supporters of the doctrine of common grace) was certainly not the norm in the church prior to Abraham Kuyper (a point that, although it does not *demonstrate* anything by itself, is certainly *indicative*).

Weaknesses

Many if not all the errors or flaws of this volume are symptomatic of the tradition to which Boersma belongs, that is, Anglo-Catholicism.

On one occasion, the choice of which theologians to discuss is questionable. Chapter 6 is entitled "Mystical Union and Vision: Symeon the New Theologian and John of the Cross." The chapter belongs to Part 2, "Beatific Vision in Mediaeval Thought." However, John of the Cross (1542-1591) was a Jesuit theologian well into the Early Modern period. The author, a most capable historian, knows that but does not offer any explanation for such a strange placement. More importantly, the chapter contributes little or nothing to the discussion. Still more, the speculations of John and Symeon, with their extreme subjectivism and unhinged mysticism, are often disturbing.

Boersma also shares some common misunderstandings about Calvinism (296, 302, 399), which is unforgivable considering both his learning and the fact that the book itself discusses several Calvinist theologians.

The book is also naively ecumenical, even to the point of claiming that the relatively secondary issue of the specific nature of the future vision of God in heaven can help contribute to "bridge the East-West divide of the church on a key point of spiritual theology" (192; see also 126, 163-165).

Both learned and less-learned readers need to be warned about these errors, and encouraged to develop any *locus* of systematic theology (including the eschatological doctrine of the beatific vision) within the boundaries of Scripture, which, for the Reformed reader are well summarized in the Reformed standards. *Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda est* (the church reformed, always reforming), says the motto, but it adds *secundum verbum dei* (according to the Word of God).

Conclusion

Keeping in mind the reservations expressed in the previous section, from the viewpoint of historical theology and constructive dogmatics the volume is certainly an impressive achievement. The book, besides being lengthy, is very scholarly and, therefore, not a popular-level book. The discerning theological student will benefit from reading the book by judiciously finding in it material and insights for thinking biblically about the doctrine of the beatific vision of God which, with few exceptions, is rarely addressed in Reformed circles.

Amillennialism, by William Bunting and David McAllister. Northern Ireland: Assembly Testimony, 2020. Available free at assemblytestimony.org. Pp. vi + 138. N.p. (softcover). [Reviewed by David J. Engelsma]

Out of Northern Ireland, especially of late, has flowed an abundance of witness to the truth of the gospel, including the future fulfillment of the gospel in the (one) coming of Jesus Christ. Out of Northern Ireland has also come *Amillennialism*, a short book perpetuating and defending the heresy of premillennial dispensationalism.

The value of the book for the Reformed reader is that it sets forth the full theology of dispensationalism in clear, brief, summary form. Having read the book, the Reformed student can be confident that he knows the theology of dispensationalism in its fundamentals.

In that the book is also the summary of the basic attack of premillennialism on amillennialism (the book is written as a polemic against amillennialism; hence, the book's title), the Reformed reader can also be sure that he is now familiar with the strongest attacks on

amillennialism by premillennialism. These attacks do not, in fact, refute amillennialism. Rather, they expose premillennial dispensationalism as heresy with regard to a number of fundamental truths of the gospel. These heretical elements of dispensationalism include the following tenets, as freely acknowledged by *Amillennialism*. First, there are two different saving works of God in history: the exalting of national Israel, the Jews, as an earthly power enjoying earthly benefits, and the spiritual work of the saving of the church, which gives believing members of the church spiritual blessings. Second, the Old Testament and New Testament are virtually unrelated, in keeping with dispensationalism's separating of the kingdom of Jews and the church of Gentiles. Third, salvation for the Jews (Israel) was, and is, carnal (in the words of John Calvin, amounting to the "feeding of a herd of swine"); salvation for the church, which is merely a "parenthesis" in God's chief work with Israel, is spiritual. Fourth, Old Testament Israel did not, and the restored, future Israel still will not, share in the spiritual blessings of salvation that are in Jesus Christ:

Israel and the Church are not identical. Believers in this dispensation...are "blessed...with all spiritual blessings in the heavenly places in Christ" Eph. 1:3. No Old Testament believer is ever said to have enjoyed such blessing. (20)

It is supposed to be the great blessedness of Israel that its members miss out on the spiritual blessings that are in Jesus Christ, but instead fill their bellies with rich food and alcoholic beverages (wine).

In bondage to its axiom that Old Testament prophecy must be explained literally, the dispensational theologians dare to predict a future restoration of the Old Testament temple and all its ritual, including the restoration of animal sacrifices for sin. Refusing to explain the church as the fulfillment of Old Testament Israel, premillennialism denies that the church is the reality of the Old Testament temple (1 Pet. 2:5) and that the sacrifice of Jesus Christ was the fulfillment and, therefore, the abrogation of all the sacrifices of the Old Testament (Hebrews). So serious is dispensationalism's demand for literal interpretation of all Old Testament prophecy that it necessarily forces dispensationalism to deny the one sacrifice of Christ on the cross.

Dispensationalism's doctrine of a restoration in the future of animal sacrifices, on the basis of its literal interpretation of Ezekiel 40-48, all by itself alone condemns dispensationalism, not as a minor error in eschatology, but as heresy—as gross a heresy concerning the cross of Christ as is imaginable.

Present Jewish aspirations to rebuild God's house [which in reality is the church and has already been rebuilt by Jesus Christ—DJE] will in His time be fulfilled...and animal sacrifices will again be offered upon His altar, Dan. 9:27; 11:31; 12:11 (compare also Hos. 3.4, 5) (43)... In a future day, when Israel is restored, in the land, with priests, and a Temple, then sacrifices will be in order....(124)

In defense of this indefensible doctrine, the authors argue that the future bloody, animal sacrifices will merely be memorials of the death of Christ. The defense fails for two main reasons. First, Ezekiel 40-48 describes these sacrifices, not as mere memorials of the sacrifice of Christ, but as “sin offerings,” that is, bloody sacrifices that typified to the church of the Old Testament the atonement of the cross of Christ (Ezek. 43:18-27). Typically, they did nothing less than to “make reconciliation for the house of Israel” (Ezek. 45:17). Second, after the death of Christ, there may be no introduction into the worship of the church of any bloody ceremony whatever, for any reason or purpose whatever, least of all a bloody memorial of the cross (Hebrews). The sign and symbol of the cross of Christ in the New Testament is the unbloody sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

This is premillennial dispensationalism, according to *Amillennialism*: Jewish priests in all the garb of the Old Testament priesthood will be sacrificing bullocks on an altar in the rebuilt temple in Jerusalem in order to “make reconciliation” for an earthly kingdom of the Messiah of God. The purpose is that the Jews, who once rejected the Messiah exactly because He did not bestow upon them these kinds of benefits and this kind of kingdom, may be a carnal kingdom of God who revel in earthly prosperity and who exercise earthly power over all the world.

In what would be laughable, were not the issue so serious, the authors of *Amillennialism* transgress their own law of literal exegesis of Old Testament prophecy in a passage that is essential to premillennialism, Daniel 9, the prophecy of the seventy weeks. A literal expla-

nation would be compelled to explain the seventy weeks as *weeks*, that is, some four hundred ninety days. Since this number would not serve dispensational theology, the authors make of the seventy weeks seventy weeks *of years*. And then, compounding the outrage of their explanation of the passage, to say nothing of their violation of their own demand for a literal interpretation of prophecy, they impose on the seventy weeks of Daniel's prophecy a separation of some two thousand years between the sixty ninth year and the seventieth year. Nothing in the text itself even suggests these impositions upon the text of Daniel, which impositions are essential to dispensationalism. This is not solid typical exegesis. It is not even the wildest allegorical exegesis. It is the sheer forcing of Holy Scripture into the service of a preconceived, arbitrary, fanciful theology.

Prominent on every page is the transference of the hope of the church, as also of the citizens of dispensationalism's kingdom of Christ, from the (next, second, and only future) coming of Christ to the thousand-year, earthly kingdom of the Jews. It is *the* premillennial hope "that Israel will be regathered and become the centre of Divine administration and blessing upon the earth" (29). This is to strike a fatal blow at the heart of the gospel, for "we are saved by hope" (Rom. 8:24).

In involuntary admission of the weakness of their biblical arguments, the authors cannot resist the cheap shot of accusing those who reject premillennialism of anti-Semitism (136). One stands amazed: A theology that has Israel sharing in the spiritual blessings of salvation in Jesus Christ (Rom. 11) is anti-Semitic.

Zwingli: God's Armed Prophet, by Bruce Gordon. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021. Pp xvii + 349. \$32.50 (hardcover). ISBN: 978-0300235975. [Reviewed by Douglas J. Kuiper]

Biographies of Martin Luther and John Calvin abound. Of the reformer Huldrych (Ulrich) Zwingli (1484-1531) they do not. Another English biography of Zwingli is always welcome. Besides, Zwingli's significance cannot be overstated. Although he began to understand the true gospel about the same time as Luther, Zwingli did so completely independent of Luther. And in some respects he went further

than Luther: “Nothing in Luther’s reforms matched the zeal with which the worship of God was spiritually and physically reconceived in Zurich” (5). Besides, Zwingli was both the first *Swiss* reformer, and the first reformer to lay the foundation for the Reformed branch of Protestantism.

Bruce Gordon is well suited to write this new biography. He is professor of ecclesiastical history at Yale University, and has previously written a biography of John Calvin and a book on the Swiss Reformation. Zwingli is not an unfamiliar subject to him.

The book’s subtitle, “God’s Armed Prophet,” is a play on words. Many know Zwingli as the reformer who died in battle. But Gordon refers to him as *God’s* armed prophet, wielding the sword of the Spirit to oppose Romish doctrine and practice and to bring reform to Zurich. (Gordon also takes his starting point from a literary reference to the fiery Italian Girolamo Savonarola [1452-1498] as an *unarmed* prophet because he did not work in conjunction with the civil authorities.) Zwingli’s reformation, by contrast, involved an alliance of church and civil government. This last point becomes the book’s theme.

Summary

The book’s focus is on Zwingli’s twelve years as a Reformed pastor in Zurich (1519-1531). The first two chapters set the stage. Chapter one, the book’s shortest, covers the years from his birth (January 1, 1484, seven weeks after Martin Luther’s) until his ordination into the priesthood in 1506. Notable is the mention of the rise of the Swiss mercenary trade, the practice of hiring out Swiss youth and men to fight the wars of other countries. Zwingli would later strenuously oppose this practice. When he encouraged war, he would not do so for monetary gain, but with a view to the spread of the Reformed faith.

Chapter two covers his priesthood in Glarus (1506-1516) and in Einsiedeln (1516-1518). Even though a Romish priest, Zwingli was well educated and a scholar, and he worked to educate his people. In Einsiedeln he began to understand the sufficiency of Scripture and the true nature of forgiveness. This gospel *he* needed: his sexual sins were frequent and well known. Many, Gordon included, consider this new understanding to be Zwingli’s conversion (39). Without question, these years were a turning point in his life, and were preparing for

his later break from Rome; but that break would not come until 1522, three years into his priesthood at Zurich.

Zwingli moved to Zurich as a priest, but as a *preaching* priest. From day one he preached the true gospel there. His real break from Rome came when he defended some who ate sausages during Lent. He was also influential in ending Zurich's practice of hiring out mercenaries. More than Zwingli's gospel preaching and his ignoring the Lenten traditions, the ending of the mercenary service was the straw that broke the pope's back: the pope needed these mercenaries to help him in his earthly battles. This one finds in chapter three.

But to learn of Zwingli's life and work, you will have to read the book, not this review of the book. Suffice it to say that chapters four through ten tell the story of Zwingli's work and writings; of the rise of the Anabaptists; of the Marburg Colloquy, at which Luther and Zwingli met; and of other attempts to unite the German Lutherans and the German-Swiss Reformed. Especially, they tell the story of how the Reformation progressed in Zurich; of how it spread to other Swiss cantons; and, of course, of how some cantons remained staunchly Catholic, so that war between the cantons was threatened and then broke out; and of how, in one of those battles, Zwingli himself went out to fight and was killed.

Chapter eleven examines the varied responses of Reformed, Lutherans, and Catholics to the news of Zwingli's death, while chapter twelve treats Zwingli's legacy and scholarship about him in the last two centuries.

Themes

As the title suggests, the book's main theme is that Zwingli's reform work could not have been carried out without the help of the civil magistrates. This fact is an essential part of Zwingli's history; Gordon certainly does not impose it.

Did Zwingli *create* this dependence of the Reformed faith on the magistrates? No; it was inherent in the way the Swiss cantons were governed, for each canton's government determined the official religion of that canton. When a canton's government sided with the Reformation, that entire canton became Reformed. This meant that the progress of the Reformation in Switzerland involved a bigger challenge than in

Germany. Luther needed only to know that his prince was behind him, but the Swiss reformers needed to convince an entire body of leaders. So Zwingli's method was political, while his goal was religious.

What Zwingli did create is a method by which to help the magistrates make their decision. This was the "disputation," a public debate by Reformed and Catholic leaders, after which the canton's leaders would make their decision. "A disputation was his most audacious move, a calculated plan to push religious change into the public square. The disputations that emerged in the early Reformation were not intended as open debates, but as a means by which one side might demonstrate its superiority" (89). In some cantons, the disputations sealed a victory for Catholics; but Zwingli knew that in Zurich it would result in the Catholic leadership being "effectively cornered" (90).

"Ever the tactician" (69), Zwingli encouraged political alliances when he thought they served the spread of the Reformed faith. He was even "ready to sacrifice the Confederation for the sake of true religion," (187); the political union of the Swiss cantons meant nothing to him, if all of Switzerland would adopt the Reformed faith.

This desire motivated Zwingli to participate in the Marburg Colloquy, at which he and Luther discussed the Lord's Supper. Yes, he desired doctrinal agreement and union. But this colloquy might also serve an alliance of Swiss Reformed with German Lutherans, thus giving the gospel more political clout.

This desire also led to his death. The issue in the Second War of Kappel was whether the Reformed could preach the gospel in certain territories that were not Reformed. The Catholic cantons were ready to oppose the Reformed cantons, to prevent them from earning that freedom. Zwingli was ready to fight in that battle, to earn that freedom. He fought. And he died.

A second theme, though less prominent, is the development in Zwingli's view of the Lord's Supper. Gordon refers to this at significant points throughout the book, and devotes the entire seventh chapter to it. What *was* Zwingli's view of the Lord's Supper? True, Zwingli spoke of the Supper as being a memorial of Christ's death (138). But that is not *all* he said about it, and *why* he said it that way is necessary to know. Zwingli denied that the Lord's Supper was a sacrament in order to distance himself from Rome, which taught that a sacrament

worked grace *ex opera operato* (the sacrament itself worked grace). But already in 1524 Zwingli taught that Christ was spiritually present in the Supper (132), and that the sacraments were signs of God's covenant (145). His last treatise, in 1531, suggested that the bread and wine "are the means by which an almost mystical union with Christ is achieved" (237; quotation of Gordon, not Zwingli). Zwingli was closer to the Reformed doctrine of the Lord's Supper than many have acknowledged, but to see that one must read *all* that he says about the sacrament.

A third theme is God's providence. In Marburg, before the Colloquy with Luther, Zwingli preached a sermon on God's providence. In it he attributed all that had happened and would happen to God's providence. That he and Luther ultimately did not agree was due to God's providence. But his conviction that God was in control did not lead him to wait for God to work; providence led him to trust God, and to act! That Zwingli died on the battlefield, fighting for the cause of the Reformation, was God's providence.

Analysis

The book is well written and gripping. Gordon presents the real Zwingli, warts and all. At times the reformer reaped what he sowed (120). Of his wife, Anna, we know very little; in this regard one can appreciate Luther far more than Zwingli. When leaving for the Marburg Colloquy, Zwingli did not even tell Anna that he was going! But he meant to spare her, for his life was in danger during the entire journey.

Gordon does not hide that unique aspect of Zwingli's view of salvation, that many virtuous pagans would be in heaven (239). Zwingli held this view, not because he was a universalist (he was not), nor because he thought that man possessed inherent goodness by which he might be saved (he rejected Rome's ideas of man and salvation), but because he did not relate unconditional election to the means that God uses to bring His elect to conscious faith. Zwingli's argument, in essence, was this: Who is to say that Socrates was not elect? God's ways are higher than ours! Sound Reformed theologians and lay-people will readily see Zwingli's error, and realize the truth of the matter: God realizes His decree of election by working in us faith and sanctification (2 Thess. 2:14). But, while clearly differing from Zwingli on the issue itself, we

must remember that Zwingli was facing the question without benefit of a Reformed foundation on which to build. He was working to lay the foundation. Any man who has never before laid the foundation for a house, and is asked to do so almost single-handedly, without training, can be expected to make a mistake somewhere.

That Zwingli was a controversial man friends and foes alike recognized (chapters eleven and twelve). His life, his theology, and even the manner of his death, was controversial. But God is a God of providence. In His providence, God raised up Heinrich Bullinger, Zwingli's successor, to strengthen the foundation that Zwingli began to lay, and to repair some of the cracks that Zwingli created. Zwingli was the very first Reformed reformer, but others must soon build on his foundation.

Also in His providence, God directed the political leaders of the villages around Zurich to resolve that, from the day of Zwingli's death on, ministers would stay out of politics:

Let the preachers in the countryside say only that which is God's Word, expressed in both testaments. Let the clergy, as stated, not undertake or meddle in any secular matters either in the city or the countryside, in the Council or elsewhere, which they should rather allow you, our lords, to manage. (251)

Early on, the Reformed learned that the armor that its ministers wear must be spiritual, not carnal.

A Beginner's Guide to New Testament Studies: Understanding Key Debates, by Nijay K. Gupta. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020. Pp. 196. \$24.99 (softcover). ISBN: 978-0810097575. [Reviewed by Douglas J. Kuiper]

Nijay Gupta, professor of New Testament at Portland Seminary, presents a beginner's guide to New Testament studies. Emphatically, this is a *beginner's* guide: "This textbook aims to aid the uninitiated in understanding, in a simple way, some of the most important and hotly debated issues in academic study of the New Testament" (xi). And:

“It is written for relative newcomers to the world of New Testament studies, not experts” (xi). The layperson who reads this book will get an overview of various issues in New Testament scholarship today.

Gupta’s Valuable Overview

The first four chapters treat issues related to the gospel accounts. Chapter one deals with the synoptic problem: how do we explain the close similarity and, at the same time, the significant differences in Matthew, Mark, and Luke? Chapter two treats the historical Jesus. Do the gospel accounts make Him larger than life, or do they give an accurate historical picture of who He was and what He did? Chapter three addresses the question whether John’s gospel account is true history, or whether it is only a story that serves to explain the view that Jesus is divine. Chapter four asks regarding the relation of Jesus’ teachings to Paul’s: Did Paul stick closely to Jesus’ teachings? Did Paul develop Jesus’ teachings in a positive direction? Or is Paul’s theology radically different from Jesus’?

Chapters five through eight deal with issues related to the epistles and Revelation. Chapter five is entitled “Paul’s Theological Perspective” (What was Paul’s theological starting point?), and chapter six “Paul and the Jewish Law” (Why was Israel given the law, and why was Paul opposed to the Mosaic law?). Chapter seven regards “Interpreting the Book of Revelation” (Is it a prophecy of the whole New Testament era? Or is it prophecy only of what will happen immediately before Christ comes? Or does it speak of events that are completely past?) And chapter eight treats “Pseudonymity and the New Testament Letters” (Who really wrote 1 and 2 Timothy, 1 and 2 Peter, James, and Jude? The letters claim to be written by Paul, Peter, James, and Jude—but did other lesser-known men write them, and claim to be Paul, Peter, James, and Jude in order to sound more authoritative and gain an audience?)

The last five chapters address themes and issues that are found throughout the entire New Testament. They include treatment of “The New Testament and the Roman Empire,” “Women in Leadership in the New Testament,” “Justification by Faith and Judgment according to Works,” “The Old Testament in the New Testament,” and “The Application and Use of Scripture.”

In each chapter Gupta gives a brief overview of the issue, presents arguments pro and con, includes his own reflections, and provides a bibliography for additional reading. Gupta's reflections do not state his personal position on the issue, and his goal in presenting them is not to convince the reader. His goal is to show that underlying each issue are matters of interpretation, presupposition, or methodology, and that scholars of every perspective have good reason to hold their views.

Without question, each of these issues is debated in New Testament scholarship today. And Gupta certainly fulfills his goal of introducing beginners to these issues. He also writes clearly, simply, and concisely. In this respect the book has value.

The Sad State of New Testament Scholarship

Renewed, believing, Spirit-filled Christians ought to have a high view of Scripture. Particularly, the confessions of Reformed and Presbyterian Christians permit nothing less. After all, Scripture is God's testimony to His people, written by the inspiration of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit inspired the writing of every word, so that no book or passage can really contradict the Holy Spirit's meaning in another book or passage, and so that we have in Scripture the inerrant Word of God. In revealing the gospel of grace in Christ Jesus, and doing so in every book, Scripture has an organic unity. What the Holy Spirit meant to teach the original recipients of these words, and what He means to teach us today, is the same thing. Scripture is normative for all of faith and life.

The reader with this high view of Scripture will realize that many New Testament scholars today do not share that high view. First, some of the issues that are faced today underscore this. Is the fourth gospel account historical? John claims they were (John 20:30-31), and the Holy Spirit inspired that account using the genre of history. Do Jesus and Paul contradict each other? How can they, if they both reveal the same God, and if the written record of their words are, in every instance, inspired by the Holy Spirit?

Second, in other instances the questions raised are fair questions, but some of the answers given are bad answers. Chapters one, five through seven, and eleven through thirteen address issues that, in themselves, do not indicate a low view of Scripture. That one must

understand Paul's view of the Old Testament law in order rightly to understand his epistles is a given. But the explanation of the New Perspectives on Paul scholars (73-77) is not, and cannot be, the right explanation. Likewise, that one must know how rightly to interpret the book of Revelation is clear. But many of the approaches given are not the correct approach.

Third, the book underscores a problematic methodology of many scholars today. Many scholars take a position on an issue, defend it, and then say that an opposing view is as valid as their own. But with regard to some issues this book raises, such really cannot be: Is it as valid to say that John does not give us a historical view of Jesus as it is to say he does? Is it as valid to say that women may be leaders in the New Testament church as it is to say that they may not? The believer may not take this approach. Many New Testament scholars do.

This book's value is that it concisely explains the various issues that New Testament scholars are discussing today, and some answers that they give. But because it betrays the low view of God's Word that prevails today, let him who reads do so with understanding and discernment.

The Covenant Theology of Jonathan Edwards: Law, Gospel, and Evangelical Obedience, by Paul J. Hoehner. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2021. Pp. xxxii + 330. \$42.00 (softcover). ISBN: 978-1725281578. [Reviewed by David J. Engelsma]

The reader of this journal will readily understand that this volume leaped off the book table into this reviewer's hands and clamored to be reviewed in the journal to which he is permitted access. The publisher did not send a copy for review. But the reviewer became aware of the book at a Puritan conference. He bought it.

It is not the theology of Jonathan Edwards as such, but it is the covenant theology of Edwards. It is a volume, therefore, that promises to set forth the doctrinal thought of Edwards on the covenant in a more or less comprehensive form by a learned Edwards scholar. The book offers escape from wading through the voluminous Edwards in order to ascertain the great Puritan's theology on the fundamental doctrine of

the covenant. Even if one would have to disagree, learning Edwards' theology of the covenant would be rewarding.

Hence, this review.

The book fulfills its promise. Not only does it summarize (as much as is possible), vigorously defend, and carefully explain Edwards' doctrine of the covenant, but it also convincingly contends that all of Edwards' theology is covenantal. Edwards viewed all the revelation of Holy Scripture as embraced in the framework of the covenant of God in Jesus Christ. In short, biblical truth is covenantal. The covenant theology of Jonathan Edwards is all of theology in light of the covenant.

The question then is, what for Jonathan Edwards is the covenant? Here, at the crucial point, the book disappoints. The fault is not that of the author, but that of Edwards himself. For Edwards is not clear and consistent. At one time, he speaks of the covenant as a relationship of fellowship of Christ and the believer, rooted in the communion of the Father and the Son in the triune being of the Godhead; at other times, he speaks of a contract. At one time, he refers to three distinct covenants, that of the Father and the Son as a covenant of redemption in eternity, that of a covenant of works with Adam in Paradise before his fall, and that of a covenant of grace between Christ and the church; at other times, he stresses the unity of the covenant, with three phases. And at one time, he insists that the covenant is conditional; at other times, he denies that the covenant is conditional, strictly speaking, and affirms the unconditionality of the covenant as a covenant of grace.

It is especially this last description of the covenant that interests this reviewer, and that ought to be of great importance to contemporary Reformed and Presbyterian theologians. Evidently, Edwards taught that faith and obedience are conditions of a [covenantal] salvation, thus jeopardizing the fundamental gospel-truth of justification by faith alone. Edwards wrote:

Universal and persevering obedience is as directly proposed to be sought and endeavored by us, in Scripture, as necessary to salvation [and] as the condition of our salvation, as faith in Jesus Christ. (261)

He becomes emphatic: "To suppose that there are any promises of the covenant of grace, or any covenant promises, that are not conditional

promises seems an absurdity and contradiction” (160). As vigorously as the author exerts himself to deliver Edwards from the charge that such statements of the conditionality of the covenant and of its blessing of justification teach the dependency of justification and salvation upon the sinner, he—the author—is compelled to acknowledge Edwards’ doctrine of a dependency of the covenant upon the sinner:

The Covenant of Grace [in Edwards—DJE] does, once consented to, place demands on the believer, including a persevering in faith as exhibited by a progressive growth in holiness (sanctification). But those conditions of the Covenant of Grace between Christ and the believer are also the promises of the Covenant of Redemption...The elect believer’s “working” faith, as the ground for union with Christ’s justification.... (272)

Such was Edwards’ teaching of the necessity of good works in the matter of justification that the author himself, defensive of the orthodoxy of Edwards to a fault, admits that on this subject namely, justification, Edwards is “confusing” and “prone to misinterpretations” (260). Although the author does not mean it so, this judgment is damning. No orthodox Protestant theologian may be “confusing” on the doctrine of justification by faith alone, without works. Besides, Edwards’ teaching that “works are ‘necessary conditions’ for justification” does not seem “confusing”—heretical, but not confusing (289).

In addition to the disturbing, un-reformed, and anti-creedal statements regarding fundamental truths of Scripture noted above, Edwards was not averse to explaining justification as the “infusion” of righteousness. “Edwards uses the term ‘infusion’ in his discussions on justification.” “Edwards uses the term ‘infusion’ or ‘physical infusion’ [in explaining justification—DJE] throughout his writings” (241). The author denies that Edwards meant by “infusion” the Roman Catholic doctrine of justification, but words have established, creedal, and traditional meaning in theology, and Edwards knew the linguistic issue and the traditional controversy over “infusion” and “imputation” between Rome and Protestantism. In addition, was not Jonathan Edwards bound by the Reformed and Presbyterian creeds, which explicitly confess justification as “imputed” righteousness and explicitly condemn the teaching of “infused” righteousness? (see the Westminster Confession

of Faith, 11.1: “not by infusing righteousness into them”). Ignoring the language of the Protestant tradition and of the creeds, to create a theology *de novo* smacks of arrogance, which also is a sin.

This ignoring and then contradicting the Reformed and Presbyterian creeds, not only regarding describing justification as the “infusion” of righteousness, but also regarding other fundamental aspects of Protestant theology, was a grievous fault of Edwards. Seldom did he begin his investigation and development of a doctrine by examining what the creeds confess concerning that doctrine. Nor did he allow the creeds to govern his theology. One gets the distinct impression that Edwards considered himself a theologian who was above the creeds, or, at least, an authority alongside the creeds.

The same questionable independency of theological thought characterized Edwards’ doctrine of the Mosaic covenant, including the Ten Commandments. Granting the difficulty of locating the Mosaic covenant within the overall revelation of the biblical doctrine of the covenant of grace and the differences of explanation of the Mosaic covenant by Reformed theologians, whether a repetition of the Adamic covenant or a form of the covenant of grace, Edwards’ conception of the Mosaic covenant is unique, and dubious. As is characteristic of Edwards, he embraces neither of the two main options but proposes a unique view of his own.

The Mosaic covenant, which includes all the laws delivered to Moses, was

another covenant that Edwards calls the covenant of God with Israel in the flesh... This is a “national” covenant made with an “external” temporal society that is characterized by its “this worldly” orientation. As external and carnal, it is solely concerned with Israel’s outward safety (from foreign invasion and captivity) and prosperity, having nothing to do with the internal salvation of individual believers. The blessings were external and carnal, involving the inheritance and life of Israel in Canaan and only pertained to Israel as a nation during this particular historic period. The stipulations of this covenant, in keeping with its external and carnal orientation, involved an outward and external conformity to the law of God, to the moral law as well as to the external and carnal laws embodied in the ceremonial and judicial law, along with an external and carnal worship. (203)

“This covenant was a ‘mixed covenant,’ partaking of the nature of both the Covenant of Works and of Grace” (203), but distinct from both as referring only to external behavior and merely to earthly blessings and curses. This invention of Edwards may be named, in distinction from the Adamic covenant and the covenant of grace, the temporary, carnal covenant of fleshly Israel.

Contributing to what clarity of conception of Edwards’ theological thought there is, in addition to the author’s own explanations, are the author’s apt references to acknowledged experts in the field of Edwards studies, very much including John H. Gerstner.

Edwards was constitutionally incapable of simplifying and thus clarifying a biblical doctrine. Perhaps his brilliance unfitted him for this instructional virtue. On the contrary, the truth being considered is more complicated at the conclusion of Edwards’ study than it was when first he applied his mind to it. Edwards’ gift was the discovery of the fullest depths and most intricate inter-relations of all aspects of the truth under consideration. Reading Edwards is demanding, and dizzying.

With regard to the nature of the covenant, Edwards had profound insights that subsequent theologians could explore profitably in their own development of the doctrine. Developing a consistently sound, unified, and clear doctrine of the covenant, originating in the Trinity and culminating in the unconditional (that is, gracious) covenant of God in Christ with the elect church, awaited later (Dutch Reformed) theologians. Their names would be Herman Bavinck and Herman Hoeksema.

Reformation Anglican Worship: Experiencing Grace, Expressing Gratitude, by Michael P. Jensen. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021. Pp. 190. \$35.00 (hardcover). ISBN: 978-1433572975. [Reviewed by David J. Engelsma]

To the Reformed believer, the Anglican Church is an anomaly. In relation to the Roman Catholic Church, on the one hand, and to the Reformed Church, on the other hand, it is neither fish nor fowl. I

refer not to the contemporary worship of the largely apostate modern Church of England, which has embraced praise bands, which occasionally features a female preacher, and whose sermons comment, utterly mistakenly, on world events (as once I myself painfully witnessed). Rather, I refer to the worship of that Church in the days of its glory, under Thomas Cranmer. On the one hand, it showed the influence of the Reformation. On the other hand, not only had it not shaken off the elements of the worship of the Roman Catholic Church, but it was also quite determined to retain “priests,” choirs, choral music, special garb for the clergy, and more Roman liturgical actions and features of worship. More importantly, it resolved to reject the “regulative principle” of worship, thus giving the liturgy over from the will of God into the hands of the church herself.

The “regulative principle” of worship is the teaching that the church may worship God only in the manner which He Himself has prescribed in His Word. It stands in contradiction to the notion that the church may worship God in any way that God has not forbidden. This notion invariably results in the church’s worshipping God in any way it pleases. What “regulates” worship, where the “regulative principle” does not govern the worship, is the whims of the fickle audience, or the arbitrary will of a worship committee, or the latest fad on the church scene. That is, nothing at all regulates the worship.

Jensen’s crisp, well-researched book describes Anglican worship as shaped by the Reformation, especially under the influence of Cranmer, but also under the influence of two powerful civil rulers, Henry VIII and Elizabeth. To this influence of the heads of state, and to the related reality of the Anglican Church’s being the religion of the state, can be attributed that Church’s weakness with regard to worship down the centuries to the present time. Where the church is a creature of the state and its members, the citizens of the nation, corruption of the church’s worship is a foregone conclusion, as this book proves.

The book begins with a sound accounting of the nature and fundamental elements of Christian worship. With sound Reformation thinking, it declares that worship is not the church’s effort to obtain blessing from God, but her sacrifice of thanksgiving to a gracious God, who has saved the church and her members by the atoning work of Jesus Christ. “Worship is a response to the gracious divine initiative

and...is enabled by God” (42). Hence, the sub-title of the book. And God Himself works this worship within the church’s members.

The book continues with the description of the shaping and molding of Anglican worship by the sixteenth-century Reformation.

The bulk of the book is a description and defense of the elements of Reformation worship in the Anglican Church. The main element, rightly, according to the author, was, at the time of the Reformation, if no longer in many congregations, the reading and preaching of Scripture. “The...sermon is a recognition that the center of the church’s worship is the act of listening to the speaking God” (103). Such was the influence of preaching upon the Anglican Church in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that it shaped the architecture and furniture of the church buildings.

The emphasis of Anglican worship on the reading of the Bible corrects a weakness of which some Reformed preachers are guilty, namely, giving the reading of the Bible in worship a “lick and a promise,” probably, in their thinking, in deference to the preaching. It becomes evident that the officiating minister has not read over his chapter before the service. He stumbles through the reading, without proper emphasis and with a number of mistakes in pronunciation. Reformation Anglican worship regarded the means of grace as preaching *and the reading of Scripture*. Rightly so!

On the other hand, some notables in the Anglican Church, the prominent Richard Hooker among them, held that the reading of the Bible in worship makes preaching unnecessary, a fundamental error concerning worship that is not shared by Jensen.

Yet another aspect of the book’s treatment of worship in light of the instruction of Cranmer from which the Reformed minister will profit is the analysis of the public, congregational prayer. This prayer must be carefully thought out ahead of time. It must have certain components. There must be a certain order. To demonstrate the elements of proper congregational prayer the author appeals to, and briefly explains, the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, with which the Reformed pastor does well to become acquainted. A benefit of reading the book may well be the reminder that worship importantly also consists of *the congregational prayer*.

In the end, Anglican worship suffers from a fundamental weakness. The error goes back to Cranmer himself. It is the rejection of the “regulative principle” of worship.

In matters of church order [having to do with worship—DJE], he [Cranmer] proved himself to be quite pragmatic, so long as unity, discipline, and edification were upheld. It was quite feasible, in his mind, for there to be different liturgical forms in different places and times, if properly justified. The church in each nation should have freedom to order its own ceremonies [elements of the liturgy—DJE] according to culture and circumstance. (63)

To this rejection and disregard of the “regulative principle” of worship is due, finally, the chaotic and deplorable condition of the liturgy—the worship!—of much of Anglican worship today. The author himself, determined as he is to validate and approve even the most abominable developments of contemporary Anglican worship, with reference specifically to certain music found in worship services of Anglican churches, calls the worship of some Anglican churches “simply paganism” (167).

The book is an excellent source, not only of the knowledge of the Reformation’s powerful influence on the worship, and thus the formation and struggles, of the Anglican Church, but also of the knowledge of the important subject of Christian worship itself.

Is Jesus Truly God? How the Bible Teaches the Divinity of Christ, by Greg Lanier. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020. Pp. 144. \$16.99 (softcover). ISBN: 978-1433568404. [Reviewed by Marco Barone]

When we study the incarnation of the Word, we approach the mystery of mysteries, looking into the unfathomable abyss of Jehovah’s mightiest miracle: the second person of the Godhead assumed the human nature and became a true man, like us in all things but sin, for our salvation. Such a wonderful event requires an explanation within the boundaries of Scripture’s claims and of what can be deduced from Scripture by good and necessary consequence. In *Is Jesus Truly God?*, the author succeeds in meeting that requirement.

In the “Introduction,” Lanier announces that the goal of his book is not only to demonstrate that Jesus is fully God, but also to show *how* the Scriptures reveal this fact (15). The author successfully does that through careful, deep, but clearly explained exegesis of numerous biblical passages.

Chapter 1 discusses the eternal pre-existence of the Son as the second person of the triune God. The author clearly explains how the New Testament writers appealed to the Old Testament (Is. 6, Ezek. 1, Dan. 7, Ps. 110) in order to show that the Son *is* the God of the Old Testament, and, therefore, was at work during that dispensation (39).

Chapter 2 demonstrates that Jesus’ expressions of closeness and intimacy with the Father make sense only on the basis of the truth of the Son as being begotten from the Father. The chapter ends with a helpful reminder:

It is worth reflecting on how Jesus’s use of Abba—and the full depth of his sonship to the Father—might shape how Christians should think of their own relationship to the Father. We are urged by the Spirit to, like Jesus, call out to ‘Abba’ in Romans 8:15 and Galatians 4:6. By virtue of the eternal sonship of Jesus Christ, our relationship to the living God has been transformed from one of enemy to one of adopted sons and daughters. (54-55)

Chapter 3 shows “how the New Testament authors, through interacting with Scripture in profound ways, make clear that the one true God revealed in the Old Testament is now fully disclosed to include (and to have always included) the divine Son” (58). Lanier summarizes the New Testament writers’ strategy as follows:

The Son of God manifested in the flesh of Jesus Christ can be considered really and truly God, in the way later formalized in the creeds, only if he is and always has been the ‘one god’ of Israel disclosed in the Old Testament. He could not become this; he had to always be this. And that is precisely what the New Testament authors labor to convey in reading the Old Testament afresh in this direction. By applying Lord/*kyrios*, YHWH passages, divine prerogatives, divine metaphors, and the ‘I am’ phrase to Jesus, the New Testament communicates this truth: he who is God in the Old Testament was, is, and always will be inclusive of the Son as the second person. (75)

Chapter 4 explains how the New Testament contains instances of the worship of Jesus, and how the nature of such worship is the same as that which is directed to the one true God. The author shows how the New Testament Christians focused on being partakers of Christ, and he concludes with some food for thought for the contemporary Christian:

The real spiritual union Christians have with the risen and ascended Lord Jesus should stimulate more precise reflection on the nature of the Christian life... We should see the Christian life as one in which Jesus, who abides in us by his Spirit, is producing the obedience of faith from within us, as the outflow of a renewed heart. By uniting you to himself, Jesus molds you into conformity with himself through Christ-shaped worship in all of life. (92)

Chapter 5 focuses on the inner relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is far from being beside the point of the book. On the contrary, “any discussion of a divine Christ must necessarily factor the divine Spirit, or else it is woefully incomplete” (94). This edifying chapter expounds on the most blessed fellowship between the three divine Persons who, in turn, share themselves by the Holy Spirit with the saints: “From start to finish, the individual Christian life is one of fellowship with the Triune God... the Trinity should be an enriching reality that shapes how one lives” (104-105).

Chapter 6 discusses some clear passages (Tit. 2:13; 2 Pet. 1:1; Heb. 1:8; 1 John 5:19-20; John 1:1, 10:33, 20:28) and other less clear passages where Jesus is addressed as Lord and God. The concluding warning is appropriate: “These passages reveal the need to take the task of reading Scripture closely, word for word, for all its worth. Precision matters for doctrine, and doctrine matters for life” (118).

The “Conclusion” expounds four biblical passages (Phil. 2:6-11; Col. 1:15-20; Heb. 1:1-4; John 1:1-18) which “combine elements of the preceding chapters: preexistence, divine sonship, use of the Old Testament, divine prerogatives, worship, and so on” (120). These are amazing passages that teach the supremacy, sovereignty, and creative power of the Son over all things, passages that (coupled with the preceding ones discussed in the book) reveal how the “New Testament authors did not feel the need to defend or prove the idea that Jesus is

God. They assumed it. It was the inescapable conclusion toward which they were all drawn...It shows up everywhere in the New Testament, even in places one might not expect. It was the air they breathed” (126).

The book offers an orthodox Christology in agreement with the biblical teaching as expounded in the Ecumenical Creeds. This point is not secondary, considering that many in the church world are trying to revise and even reject the teaching of those ancient creeds. One minor criticism is that the book, although intended for the general public, often contains reading suggestions in the footnotes that are too advanced for the non-academic and/or difficult to acquire. Apart from that, the book is both deep and readable, ideal for both group and personal Bible study. It is a doctrinally reliable guide that leads the reader to appreciate more the infinite glory of the Captain of our salvation, our Lord and God Jesus Christ.

Till Death Do Us Part? What the Bible Really Says about Marriage and Divorce, by Joseph A. Webb. Longwood, FL: Webb Ministries, 1999. Pp. xv + 270. \$8.05 (softcover). ISBN: 978-0963222657. [Reviewed by David J. Engelsma]

“Yes!”

This is the resolute, uncompromising answer of the book to its title, which title, it must be noted, is a question. Marriage is an ordinance of God. Its origin was the divinely conceived and realized marriage of Adam and Eve—a historical reality. According to the meaning and purpose of God regarding His institution, marriage is a lifelong covenant of one man and one woman for life.

[Marriage is] a covenant for life; which can only be broken by the physical death of one of the partners...Either partner can violate this covenant repeatedly but it is scripturally impossible to break it (8).

This means, for the author, on the basis of the abundant Scripture that he quotes and explains in support of his contention, that all remarriages while an original spouse is still living are adultery: “To marry another after divorce constitutes adultery. Any persons who have married again after divorce while their first spouse still lives

are adulterers” (85). It is demanded, therefore, that those who are remarried after divorce repent of their adultery. Repentance includes, and demands, separation from the one to whom they are remarried. In the judgment of God, their present partner is not a lawful spouse and the relationship is not a valid marriage, but legalized adultery. Impenitent continuation in such a relationship ends in damnation. Webb quotes 1 Corinthians 6:9, 10: “Neither fornicators...nor adulterers... shall inherit the kingdom of God.” Against the (familiar) criticism he receives that he is a hard man with a harsh doctrine, Webb’s repeated response is that the doctrine is not his, but God’s in Holy Scripture.

The author emphasizes that this doctrine of marriage, being the Word of God prior to Adam’s fall and the revelation of the Savior, applies to all humans, unbelievers as well as believers, regardless of their knowledge or ignorance, and is unconditional, regardless of the circumstances of their marriage and of the fact that they are already remarried when first they learn this doctrine of marriage.

A prominent feature of the book, a feature that makes it difficult, if not impossible, to dismiss the book’s admittedly unpopular teaching, is its abundant citation, explanation, and application of pertinent passages of Scripture. Scripture is both abundant and clear on the truth of the lifelong permanency of marriage and on the sinfulness of remarriage after divorce.

The book was occasioned by the “epidemic proportions” of the “ripping asunder of marriage relationships in society,” including “professing Bible-believing churches” (x).

Webb calls attention with alarm to society’s acceptance of remarriage, although the consequences of divorce and remarriage are devastating, not only to churches but also to society: “Our society has accepted adultery as a social norm” (189). In the judgment of this reviewer, divorce may well be the leading cause of the breakdown of society. God established the family, prior to Adam’s fall, as the foundation of society, and divorce destroys the family. Divorce and remarriage are certainly destructive of the churches:

As long as the *church* continues to compromise in this area, the church as we have known it will disintegrate, and our families will be destroyed. All of this tragedy is occurring, because men of God today (preachers and theologians—DJE) refuse to say, “*It is written.*” (174)

Of some interest and no little importance is the author's assertion that the early church held the view of marriage as an unbreakable bond till death. The agent of the change of this view in Protestantism was the humanist Erasmus (88).

Members of the Protestant Reformed Churches will read the book with gladness. Members of many other churches will read it with a guilty conscience and, if they read it with a mind open to compelling biblical evidence, with profit.

One area of possible disagreement is Webb's seemingly absolute prohibition of divorce, even on the ground of adultery. The absolute forbidding of divorce implies, as the author acknowledges, that the innocent mate remains in the marriage relationship—praying, but remaining—even though the spouse is living impenitently in adultery. This argument appeals to the Jewish custom of betrothal and an unconvincing explanation of Matthew 19:9: “except it be for fornication.” Mitigating the objection to Webb's prohibition of divorce even on the ground of fornication is his apparent understanding of divorce as a legal separation that would allow for remarriage. Seemingly, he does not recognize divorce as a legal separation that still does not permit a remarriage.

The book concludes with a long, helpful section of questions occasioned by the marriage doctrine of the book and the answers by the author. One question puts many contemporary churches and ministers on the spot, and, therefore, they refuse to answer the question: “If what you have shown us from the Scriptures is true, why hasn't the church taught it, and why is divorce and multiple marriages so widespread in the churches themselves?” (233).

The Spiritual Marriage between Christ and His Church and Every One of the Faithful, by Girolamo Zanchi, tr. Patrick J. O'Banion. Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2021. Pp. xxxvi + 114. \$25.00 (hardcover). ISBN: 978-1601789044. [Reviewed by David J. Engelsma]

For two main reasons the Reformed believer will want to read this book. The first is the author himself. He is the prominent, influential,

second-tier reformer, Girolamo Zanchi, or Zanchius. Important for the Reformed faith and churches as he was in his time, not much written by him has been translated into English, or is available to those whose language is English. What little has been translated into English is mostly in the sixteenth-century version of the language, the form of which “deters all but the most intrepid literary explorers” (ix).

There is reason to believe that Zanchi wrote the book when he was older than 75. Therefore, the theology of the book is that of the mature Zanchi.

The second reason is the subject of the book itself. It is a careful, sometimes novel, comparison of earthly (in Zanchi’s word, “carnal”) marriage, as the type, with the spiritual marriage of Christ and His church, as the reality of marriage.

Zanchi begins with a penetrating explanation of the marriage of Adam and Eve, as the historical origin and foundation of the reality of marriage. Why Eve was made of a rib of Adam near his heart, and what is the significance of Adam’s having been asleep during the forming of his wife-to-be from a rib, in the doctrine of Zanchi, are intriguing.

Then, Zanchi proceeds to compare earthly marriage and the spiritual marriage of Christ and the church. Working mainly with the grand passage on marriage in the New Testament, Ephesians 5, Zanchi both gives instruction how the Christian husband and wife are called to regard and behave in their carnal marriage, and applies the truth of this carnal marriage to the spiritual reality of the union of Christ and the church.

Zanchi calls attention to aspects of the earthly marriage of Adam and Eve, and therefore to the marriages of Christians, that are unusual and thought-provoking even for the Protestant Reformed Churches, which churches have nearly exhausted the truth of marriage, it might have been supposed. For example, as Eve was a “helper” to Adam, so the church is a “helper” to Jesus Christ, by begetting and raising Christ’s children. In this connection, Zanchi emphasizes the gathering of the church from the children of believers. Also, and more controversially, just as Eve consented to be Adam’s wife, and as every carnal marriage requires the woman to consent to marriage with a certain man (she may not be forced to marry anyone), so does the church “consent” to her marriage with Christ. Regarding this consent, Zanchi

takes pain to contend that neither the church nor any member consents by nature, but that the consent is worked by Christ, the Husband, by His efficacious grace. “He requires our consent. Yet this He also gives, having given us faith” (24).

Zanchi’s doctrine here is that Christ does not force the church or any member into union with Himself. He does not, in my word, “rape” the church, but makes her willing, sweetly drawing her to Himself by His own irresistible love for her.

Without treating the subject in any detail, or considering the truth of the unbreakable covenant of marriage, Zanchi asserts that adultery and desertion dissolve earthly marriage:

But if your wife either stops being one flesh with you and becomes one flesh with an adulterer, or if she refuses to have you cleave to her but instead abandons you, then you are free. (34)

For a marriage cannot be dissolved except on account of fornication or on account of adultery. (90)

This was the thinking of all the reformers, following, strangely enough, the theory of the humanist Erasmus. Here, the comparison of the marriage of the church and Christ with carnal marriage broke down for Zanchi, for the church’s marriage to Christ is, as the reformer himself confesses, indissoluble.

In the course of his consideration of the Lord’s Supper as the outstanding realization by Christ of His union with the church and with the believer individually, Zanchi carries on a long and vigorous polemic against the Lutheran doctrine of the ubiquity of the body of Christ, a lively issue in Zanchi’s day.

Although Zanchi does not expressly call attention to it by name, the book is, in fact, an exposition of Zanchi’s and the Reformation’s theology of the covenant of grace. For them, the covenant is intimate union with Christ, symbolized by earthly marriage. Marriage reveals the nature of the covenant, and the nature of the covenant determines Christian marriage. Except for the indissoluble nature of the covenant!

Contributors for this issue are:

Marco Barone, member of Southwest Protestant Reformed Church (Wyoming, MI) and book coordinator at the Reformed Free Publishing Association (Jenison, MI). He also holds a PhD in philosophy, and is an independent scholar.

Ronald L. Cammenga, professor of Dogmatics and Old Testament Studies in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary (Wyoming, MI).

David J. Engelsma, professor emeritus of Dogmatics and Old Testament Studies in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary (Wyoming, MI).

Barrett L. Gritters, professor of Practical Theology and New Testament Studies in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary (Wyoming, MI).

Brian L. Huizinga, professor of Dogmatics and Old Testament Studies in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary (Wyoming, MI).

Douglas J. Kuiper, professor of Church History and New Testament Studies in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary (Wyoming, MI).