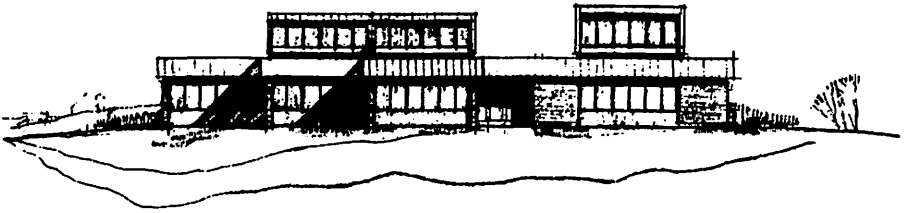


# **PROTESTANT REFORMED THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL**



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**THEOLOGICAL SCHOOL  
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# **PROTESTANT REFORMED THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL**

Edited for the faculty of  
The Theological School of the Protestant Reformed Churches

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David J. Engelsma  
Herman C. Hanko**

by  
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## Editorial Notes

A Convocation is held prior to the opening of the Protestant Reformed Seminary each year in the latter part of August or the first part of September. It is held in one of the local churches, and to it are invited members of the Protestant Reformed Churches and friends of the Seminary. Usually the church auditorium is nearly filled, a blessing which always encourages the faculty; it demonstrates that our people are interested in and give whole-hearted support to the work of the Seminary.

At the beginning of the 1992/1993 school year Professor Engelsma gave a significant address which appears in printed form in this issue of the *Journal*. The speech has been somewhat expanded, although the form of the address is retained. The speech has the added value of demonstrating where our Seminary stands in the theological confusion of our times.

Prof. Engelsma has not forgotten his promise to add one article to his series on I Corinthians 7 — an article which is a historical study of the question of divorce and remarriage. It will appear, the Lord willing, in the Fall issue.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the Autumn of 1992 the Byron Center Protestant Reformed Church sponsored a conference on “Depression.” Prof. Robert Decker and Rev. James Slopsema were asked to address that conference, the first speaker on the causes of depression, and the second speaker on the cures of depression. These two speeches were not only very well received by an unexpectedly large audience, but they stimulated many questions and much discussion. Both are reprinted in the *Journal* in the hope and with the prayer that they will be a blessing to others who struggle with the difficulties and problems of depression.

\* \* \* \* \*

Prof. Hanko continues his series on common grace. In this issue he examines closely the concept of “grace” as it appears in Scripture. Perhaps especially in the Presbyterian tradition common grace has been considered as God’s good gifts to men. The question must be faced whether these good gifts can indeed be called grace. We hope that this article will be of assistance to a clearer understanding of what grace is. ▲

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# Heard Anything New Lately?

*David J. Engelsma*

## **Introduction**

The question, "Heard anything new lately?," is addressed directly, not to the faculty and students of the Seminary, but to the members of the congregations served by this Seminary.

Have you been hearing anything new from your pulpits, in your catechism rooms, and in your private conversations with your ministers? Have you heard teachings either about your beliefs or your behavior that are different from the teachings that were heard in the churches thirty or forty or fifty years ago? Have you heard teachings that are different from the teachings set forth in the Reformed confessions? Have you heard teachings that are different from the teachings of the Bible? Have you had reason to say to your pastor what the Athenian philosophers said to Paul in Acts 17:20: "For you bring certain strange things to our ears"?

This question reflects on your Seminary. If you have heard new things lately, it is probable, indeed well-nigh certain, that this is because the Seminary is teaching new things to the aspiring pastors and teachers. If you have not heard anything new lately, but only the same old thing, this is because your Seminary is teaching the same old thing.

There are exceptions, of course, as our own history as churches illustrates. In the early 1950s ministers taught a conditional covenant and a conditional covenant promise in spite of their training in the Seminary. But the rule is that what the people hear in the churches originates in the Seminary. This is the law of church life. This law necessitated our own Seminary from the very beginning of the history of the Protestant Reformed Churches. Our fathers did not want the coming pastors to teach the doctrines espoused in the other, already existing seminaries, particularly the doctrines of a general love and universal grace of God.

A denomination's seminary is the source of the teaching that prevails in the congregations.

This is also clearly implied by the text that bears directly on the seminary in the New Testament church, II Timothy 2:2: "And the things that

thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also.”

My question probes for more, however, than an answer of simple fact, “No, we have not heard new things,” or, “Yes, we have heard new things.” What should be the attitude of the members of the congregations toward hearing new things? Accordingly, what should be their attitude toward the Seminary’s teaching new things? If you have not heard anything new lately, are you disappointed, perhaps even disgusted? Do you want the Seminary to teach your future pastors some new things?

Indirectly, the question bears on the task of our faculty and on the expectation of our students. Must the professors prepare themselves to teach new things? new things in theology? new things regarding the interpretation of Scripture? new things regarding the theory and manner of preaching and catechizing? indeed, new things regarding the fundamental calling itself of a minister?

Should the seminarians expect to learn new things? Is this the purpose and value of a seminary education?

This is a searching question: “Heard Anything New Lately?”

### **A Modern Areopagus: The Reformed Seminary Today**

“Heard anything new lately?” is not an idle question. It is characteristic of seminaries today that they teach new things. Teaching new things is their avowed intention and proud claim. I restrict myself to Reformed seminaries although the same holds for other Protestant seminaries, evangelical as well as liberal.

With some exceptions, the Reformed seminary today is a modern Areopagus where professors and students spend their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some thing, as Paul writes of the Athenian philosophers in Acts 17:21. Inevitably, this pursuit of new things and the new things themselves have appeared in the congregations as the seminarians have become the churches’ pastors. The result is that the believers have become deeply concerned. They are concerned for nothing less than the Christian faith itself in their fellowship and in their generations.

In his book, *A Half Century of Theology*, reflecting on the past fifty years of his life and work as a theologian, G. C. Berkouwer candidly acknowledges this “concern for the faith” on the part of the people:

People have a feeling that theologians are taking a critical attitude toward the church’s past, that they are breaking continuity with the church of all ages and its universal and undoubted Christian faith.

The reason for this concern, Berkouwer admits, is that “theology has

embarked on many new directions. There is tension in theology as new ways of interpreting the old dogmas conflict with traditional ways" (*A Half Century of Theology*, Eerdmans, 1977, pp. 215, 216).

As Berkouwer recognizes, the theologians of the Reformed churches (and this means the seminaries) are teaching new things about "issues (that) touch the heart of the church." The result is that the congregations are hearing new things about basic doctrines.

They are hearing that the Bible is a human book with the weaknesses of all things human. As a human book, it is subject to historical criticism.

They are hearing that the origin of the world with all that it contains, including man, was evolutionary development over billions of years.

They are hearing concerning the Savior that Jesus is a human person and that He must be a human person in order to be truly human.

They are hearing concerning salvation that God loves and desires to save all men; that Christ died for all men; and that God has reprobated no man by an eternal, unconditional decree. In this connection, they are hearing that the Reformed creed, the Canons of Dordt, is a scholastic document and that its theology is out-dated and erroneous. The people are hearing the message of universalism. They are hearing universalism, not faintly but loudly, not by implication but explicitly, not with any hesitancy but boldly.

Reformed and Presbyterian congregations are hearing new things in theology proper — in theology as the doctrine of God. God suffers. God is helpless with regard to the evils in human life. God is Himself in the process of developing along with the world. God is feminine: a "she," a "mother," a "goddess."

The people in Reformed congregations are hearing new things in ethics. They are hearing new things regarding family ethics. The wife is an equal in marriage, not subject to her husband's authority as head. She has no calling to bear children. If she chooses to have children, she has no calling to devote herself to the work of raising them and caring for her family as a worker at home.

They are hearing new things in sexual ethics: virtually unrestricted divorce and remarriage and the sanctioning of homosexuality both as a condition and as a practice.

They are hearing new things concerning the Sabbath. The Sabbath of the fourth commandment was exclusively a law for the people of the old covenant; it was Jewish. Sunday is merely a church ordinance and, therefore, may be used as church members please. The church is satisfied with attendance at one brief worship in the morning, if this is convenient.

Nor are the new things limited to theology and ethics. New things are introduced in worship, all kinds of new things, new things every Sunday.

New things are heard in the area of church government and church

order: the insignificance of office and ordination; the *significance* of charisma and gift; the right of women to teach and rule; the evil of church order as such, since church order infringes on the liberty of the Holy Spirit.

Ask Reformed people like yourselves, “Heard anything new lately?,” and their answer will be, “We hear nothing else!”

In large part, the cause is the seminary and the theologians. Recently, Rev. A. M. Lindeboom, minister of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (GKN), published a book that he describes as a “simple account of the dismantling of the Reformed Churches.” He writes:

We know indeed that this (the dismantling of the GKN — DJE) is now completed. The Reformed Churches are transformed into another kind of Churches, which, in the strict sense of the word, can no longer rightly claim the name “Reformed.”... It has become dark (*De theologen gingen voorop*, Kok, 1987, p. 13; my translation of the Dutch).

Lindeboom asks, “How has all of this happened?” The answer is found in the book’s title: “*De theologen gingen voorop*” (“The theologians led the way”).

This raises the further question, what motivates the theologians? What accounts for the seminaries’ giving themselves to the propagation of new things?

Among the causes are these three. First, the theologians have abandoned, or lost, the faith that Scripture is the inspired Word of God. They are no longer confident that the Bible is a divine, holy book by the wonder of the “out-breathing” of God, as Paul teaches in II Timothy 3:16. This is true of their attitude toward the first eleven chapters of Genesis with their account of origins. As a rule, this is where the theologians first indicate their unbelief regarding Scripture. But it is true also of their attitude toward the entire Bible.

When a seminary first loses its faith concerning Scripture, or is first discovered losing its faith by concerned members of the denomination, it will claim that its doubts are limited only to the first eleven chapters. But this is neither true nor possible. As Scripture is one, so is faith concerning Scripture one. If Genesis 1-11 is a human description of origins, so are the gospels a human account of Jesus of Nazareth; I Timothy 2 and 3, a human description of office; and Romans 1:18ff., a human description of the wickedness of homosexuality.

This loss of faith in Scripture as the Word of God explains the new interpretation of the Bible through which the new things are introduced into the churches. Seldom do Reformed seminaries simply break with the old. Almost always, they do away with the old and bring in the new by means of



the “new interpretation.” The new interpretation contradicts what Scripture clearly says. But this is acceptable because the Bible is a human book. As a human word on religious subjects, the Bible is imperfect, subject to criticism, developing, and open to revised interpretation. The theologians think, and teach in the seminaries, that the meaning of the Bible in any particular passage is given to it by the modern interpreter. The interpreter gets this “meaning” from the age and culture in which he lives. Thus the age and the culture, that is, the world, determine the meaning of the Bible.

This loss of faith on the part of the theologians is dreadful. The teachers of the teachers of the people of God are themselves uncertain. They are uncertain about the Word of God and everything it contains. In his almost classic, and certainly authoritative, analysis of Protestantism today, *The Question of God: Protestant Theology in the Twentieth Century* (Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1969), Heinz Zahrnt writes, “The most persistent problem in contemporary theology is the end of all certainty” (p. 27).

Berkouwer agrees. In his *A Half Century of Theology*, the Dutch Reformed theologian observes:

I have the sense that many, including theologians, feel themselves caught in a web of uncertainties, what with questions posed from the corners of modern biblical studies, consciousness of the relativity of human thought, the problems of modern science, and the broad question of the limits of our horizon (p. 226).

This uncertainty, however, is regarded by many as a virtue, as the ideal in theology. This is the view of another influential Reformed theologian in the Netherlands, Hendrikus Berkhof, in his book, *Two Hundred Years of Theology* (Eerdmans, 1989):

The truth of the gospel is a very different one from the truths of the natural sciences because in them people start at the point where their predecessors left off. In contrast, the truth of the gospel is a road everyone must travel by himself. *This road is itself the truth. One does not “stand” in the truth but “walks” in it on the way toward the goal that is not attainable this side of eternity* (p. 306; emphasis added).

For Hendrikus Berkhof, that which the apostle charged against false teachers and silly women is the ideal for theology: “ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth” (II Tim. 3:7). We are reminded of the notorious assertion by Lessing that, if he had a choice between knowing the truth and pursuing truth without ever finding it, he would choose the latter.

A second cause of the openness to, and advocacy of, new things is that

the seminaries are determined to conform to the world in which we live, to adapt to the culture, and to cave in to the pressure of the opinion of the learned. It is one of the main marks of modern Protestant theology that it is concerned to accommodate the world, to find common ground with the world, to be open to the world. This is clearly evident in the seminaries' conforming their view of origins to evolution and in their accommodating the world's present positions on women and homosexuality. But this also explains the rejection of predestination and of particular grace. The thinking of our world is universalistic. There may be no discrimination on the part of God.

Third, the seminaries have little appreciation of their responsibility before God to train ministers of the Word to edify the saints and shepherd the church bought with God's own blood. Seminaries are not spiritual. The ministry is merely a profession. Theology is only an academic discipline. Since theology is not a life-and-death matter, a matter of eternal life and eternal death, seminaries, like the Areopagites, can dabble in new things. Why not?

### **Source of the Same Old Thing: The PR Seminary**

In contrast to what goes on widely in Reformed, Presbyterian, and evangelical churches today, nothing new is heard in the Protestant Reformed congregations. The saints are hearing nothing strange, nothing different. The reason in large part is that the Seminary is the source of the "same old thing."

I am certain that all our people answer the question, "Heard anything new lately?," in the negative. Some may be happy about this state of affairs, while others may regret it, but all agree that they are not hearing new things.

They hear the same thing about Scripture; about creation; about salvation; about Christ; about God; about marriage, divorce, and remarriage; about women; about church order; and about worship, that Protestant Reformed people have always heard.

This "same thing" is old. It was taught seventy years ago at the beginning of the separate existence of the Protestant Reformed Churches. In the main, what we hear today dates back at least to the 16th century. It is, therefore, at the very least almost five hundred years old.

Whether people admire this or ridicule it, all must admit that, in its aversion to change and newness, the Protestant Reformed Seminary distinguishes itself as standing firmly in the Reformed and Presbyterian tradition.

The Reformation insisted that it was not introducing novelties, but only restoring the old truth of the apostles and the early church.

John Calvin vehemently resisted, and warned against, changing the

doctrine and order of the Reformed faith and church. In a sermon on I Corinthians 11:11-16, Calvin said:

Now this is tantamount to the Holy Spirit declaring from the skies that this constancy is approved by God, when men keep in line, and when, after having been taught sacred doctrine . . . they keep it without changing, and continue in it, and give no occasion to become upset, and do not provoke quarrels or disputes among themselves to destroy what has been well-received and appointed. And let us note that this is said not only regarding the principal thing: that is, doctrine; but also regarding what belongs to policy. It is true that it would be an abominable thing to even think of changing anything which belongs to religion and the substance of our salvation; what belongs to the law of divine service and all the articles of our faith. For that would be tantamount to our desiring a new god. Yet our Lord further desires not only that religion remain always intact, and that we remain firm in what we have learned from the Holy Scripture, and that our faith never be shaken, but He also wills that we be peaceable as to outward order, and that we not be as shifting sand, as many have had foolish dreams of changing this and that at every turn (*Men, Women and Order in the Church*, Presbyterian Heritage Publications, 1992, pp. 10, 11).

Calvin's deathbed admonition to the ministers of Geneva is well-known:

I pray you make no change, no innovation. People often ask for novelties. Not that I desire for my own sake out of ambition that what I have established should remain, and that people should retain it without wishing for something better, but because all changes are dangerous and sometimes hurtful (Jules Bonnet, *Letters of John Calvin*, Burt Franklin, 1972, Vol. IV, p. 376).

Old Princeton, the Presbyterian seminary, prided itself on faithfully teaching the same old thing. At the centennial of Princeton in 1912, President Francis Lindy Patton could say, as though it were the highest praise of the school, that for 100 years Princeton had "simply taught the old Calvinistic theology without modification." Twice in public addresses, Charles Hodge stated, as though it were a crowning virtue, that Princeton Seminary "had never brought forward a single original thought"; "a new idea never originated at Princeton" (cf. *Reformed Theology in America*, ed. David F. Wells, Eerdmans, 1985, pp. 17, 61).

It borders on the amusing that the Wheaton evangelical, Mark A. Noll, criticizes the great Princetonians because they "regarded theology as a static entity not affected to any appreciable degree by historical development" (*Reformed Theology in America*, p. 19). This was the power of old Princeton as its theologians both knew and advertised. I wonder whether the

Wheaton evangelical has ever considered the fortunes of Princeton since it adopted the position that theology is affected to an appreciable degree by historical development.

In its adherence to the same old thing, the Protestant Reformed Seminary is in good company, whereas those seminaries that love to tell new things are not.

We have reasons for conserving the same old thing and for our antipathy toward the progressiveness that desires the new and different. The first reason is our view of Scripture. We reverence Scripture as an inspired book, God's Word written. It is not human and fallible; it is not weakened by historical conditioning. Its interpretation is not subject to the authority of general revelation; of the thinking of the church; of modern culture; of science; or of any other authority. Scripture is truth, the truth, God's unchanging and unchangeable truth. It is truth that has been given, once and for all, as the revelation of Jesus Christ in Whom God has spoken finally and decisively. The truth does not change. In the truth of Scripture, Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and today, and forever (Heb. 13:8).

With this reverence for Scripture goes a respect for the work of the Holy Spirit in the history of the church: He has guided the church into all the truth. This is a second reason why the Protestant Reformed Seminary adheres to the same old thing. Particularly, the Seminary respects the work of the Spirit in the church's formulations of biblical truth in the ecumenical and Reformed confessions. The creeds are the systematic expression of God's permanent, unchanging truth. Significantly, our Reformed "Form for the Installation of Professors of Theology" states that the church has a "divine mission ... to collect from the Word of God her standards of faith (and) to study theology according to these words." Where theology is studied according to the words of the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of Dordt and where this is done as a "divine mission," there you will find the same old thing.

The third reason why our Seminary does not specialize in teaching new things is that we are, in principle and quite consciously, freed from the madness that supposes that the church must listen, and accommodate herself, to the current, always changing wisdom of the unbelieving world. We are antithetical in our thinking. The mind of the world is hostile to the gospel and commandments of God. God has made foolish the wisdom of this world (I Cor. 1:20). Our mind is hostile to the wisdom of the world. The wisdom of the world crucified the Lord of glory (I Cor. 2:8). The wisdom that Reformed pastors must teach the people of God is not at all "the words which man's wisdom teaches, but which the Holy Ghost teaches" in Scripture (I Cor. 2:13). This, therefore, is the wisdom that a Reformed seminary may and must teach.

The Seminary's antithetical stance is a benefit of the Protestant Reformed repudiation of the theory of common grace. The theory of common grace has accomplished in Reformed, Presbyterian, and evangelical churches that which liberal Protestantism has set as its main goal ever since Schleiermacher, namely, to build a bridge from the church to the world. Hendrikus Berkhof candidly acknowledges this purpose of modern Protestantism in his *Two Hundred Years of Theology*:

What these thinkers have in common, positively, is their attempt to bring about a reconciliation between the gospel and the spirit of modernity; negatively, their deviation, to a greater or lesser degree, from the classic or traditional teachings of the church (p. 131).

Most of these thinkers tried more or less deliberately to build a bridge between the gospel and their secularized cultural environment (p. xiii).

(Regarding) not only . . . the liberal theologians but also . . . the more conservative, one gets the impression that the majority of theologians, speaking to Christianity's leading "cultured despisers," never really accepted their radical no to the gospel. It would appear that the theologians refused to accept the antithesis (p. xii).

The bridge between the Reformed churches and the world is the theory of common grace. The great bridge-builders were the Dutch Reformed theologians at the turn of the century, Abraham Kuypers and Herman Bavinck. Their purpose with common grace was to enable the Reformed church to cooperate with and influence the unregenerate world in its development of creation and in its formation of history (cf. Kuypers, *Lectures on Calvinism*, Eerdmans, 1953; Bavinck, *De Algemeene Genade*, Eerdmans-Sevensma, n.d.). What has actually happened, however, is that the bridge has enabled the world to get into, influence, and shape Reformed theology. Over the bridge have come specific views and doctrines that are peculiarly worldly, e.g., universalism, evolution, historicism, naturalism, feminism, and approval of homosexuality.

Worse still, the bridge itself is founded on an assumption that subjects all of theology to the world's thinking and that results in never-ending revision of the church's doctrinal and ethical teachings. This is the assumption that Scripture ought to be interpreted in accordance with the insights and wisdom of the unregenerate world. For the theory of common grace — great bridge between world and church — holds that the Spirit of truth and goodness is working in the world. The current wisdom of the world, therefore, whether regarding origins, the place of the woman in home and society, homosexuality, or Scripture itself, must be reckoned with as the authoritative testimony of the Holy Spirit. The advocates of common grace call this wisdom of the world "general revelation."

Where common grace holds sway in Reformed churches, not only is this “general revelation” of equal authority with Scripture, but also it is decisive in the interpretation of Scripture.

Thus the world outside of Christ calls the shots as regards the theology of Christ’s church.

In a book published in 1989, *Vrijheid van dwang (Freedom from Constraint)*, Dutch Reformed theologian Harry Kuitert boldly denies the authority of Scripture; all certain knowledge of God; any difference in principle between God and man; the Deity of Jesus Christ; and every ethical absolute. In this connection, Kuitert expresses his high regard for Abraham Kuyper’s doctrine of common grace. What Kuitert particularly appreciates in Kuyper’s doctrine of common grace is that it gives all men positive knowledge of God from creation, history, and the cultural development of mankind.

Two distinct conceptions of a seminary are found in the Reformed churches: a modern Areopagus, and the source of the same old thing. Now we must let Scripture judge. What does Scripture say about the nature and purpose of the seminary in the churches?

### **Scripture in Judgment on the Seminaries**

Scripture everywhere and insistently calls the church, and thus the seminary, to hold fast to and hand on the truth that has been given her by revelation. The church must hold the traditions (II Thess. 2:15). In Revelation 2 and 3 Christ repeatedly praises the churches that have kept and held fast His Word. Similarly, Paul praises the Corinthians for keeping the ordinances, just as the apostle delivered these ordinances to them (I Cor. 11:2). Bishops are called to hold fast the faithful Word, as they have been taught (Tit. 1:9).

The apostle goes so far as to command the preacher to hold fast *the form* of sound words, which he heard from the apostle (II Tim. 1:13). The “form” is the expression itself by which the truth is taught. Calvin’s explanation is correct: “Paul commands Timothy to hold fast the doctrine which he had learned, not only as to substance, but as to the very form of expression.” The reason, Calvin adds, is that “Paul knew how ready men are to depart or fall off from pure doctrine” (commentary on II Tim. 1:13).

The professor of theology is not supposed to create new theologies, but rather to hand over apostolic doctrine to faithful men, who then teach it to the people of God (II Tim. 2:2).

With this charge to the church to preserve and pass on the truth go related duties: not letting anything of the truth slip (Heb. 2:1ff.); not allowing the Word to be corrupted (Tit. 1:14); not allowing heresies to be introduced (II Pet. 1:1ff.); and contending for the faith once delivered (Jude 3).

Nowhere does the Bible call the church to create new doctrines; to decree new ways of Christian behavior; to invent new forms of worship; or to legislate a new church polity. Only heretics in the seminary and on the pulpit and itching ears in the pews love novelties in religion. It is a damning indictment of the Athenians that they wasted their time and energy in telling and hearing new things.

If you have not heard anything new lately in the teaching of the church, if you only hear the “same old thing,” count your blessings!

In *The Screwtape Letters*, C.S. Lewis has senior devil Screwtape advise junior devil Wormwood that, in order to seduce Christians, Wormwood must

Work on their horror of the Same Old Thing. The horror of the Same Old Thing is one of the most valuable passions we have produced in the human heart — an endless source of heresies in religion, folly in counsel, infidelity in marriage, and inconstancy in friendship (Macmillan, rev. ed., 1982, p. 116).

### True Newness

That our people hear the same old truth because our Seminary teaches the same old thing in no way implies that the message heard is stale, boring, and lifeless, or that the work of the Seminary is, or ever may be, stagnant. A little later in *The Screwtape Letters*, Screwtape says, “For the descriptive adjective ‘unchanged’ we have substituted the emotional adjective ‘stagnant’” (p. 119). To disparage God’s unchanging truth as “stagnant” is demonic.

I repeat: The Word that comes out of our Seminary is old. It is not merely seventy years old or even five hundred years old. As the same message that Paul preached in Athens — creation, providence, repentance, judgment, resurrection, Jesus the only Savior, the one true and living God — it is almost two thousand years old. Indeed, this Word is six thousand years old, for it is the Word of covenant promise in Christ first announced by God in Paradise after the fall in Genesis 3:15.

It is not simply old; it is ancient. It is the gospel that God conceived and willed in His eternal counsel. Commenting on “the old commandment” in I John 2:7, Calvin wrote, “The gospel ought not to be received as a doctrine lately born, but what has proceeded from God, and is His eternal truth.” Psalm 119:89 states, “For ever, O LORD, thy Word is settled in heaven,” where “for ever” is “to eternity.”

Just for this reason, the Reformed faith is new, genuinely new. It is new, not with a faddish newness of novelty, but with the freshness, the

timeliness, the liveliness of the living, renewing, up-to-date Word of God in the power of the Spirit.

Continuing his commentary on I John 2, specifically the description of the “old commandment” as also a “new commandment” in verse 8, Calvin wrote:

new, because God, as it were, renews it by daily suggesting it.... (The truth does not) grow old with time, but ... is perpetually in force, so that it is no less the highest perfection than (at) the very beginning.

The doctrine of the Christian faith as confessed by the Reformed creeds, although old, is at the same time new. It is the one new thing under the sun. Hid from the ages, the truth of the Christian faith is now, at the end of the ages, revealed to the church through the apostles and prophets by the Spirit (Eph. 3:5ff.). It is new.

Whenever it is heard by the congregation in faith, it is new in the sense that Jesus Christ Himself is speaking it from heaven at that very moment (Rom. 10:14; Heb. 12:25).

It is new also in that it is refreshing, invigorating, exciting, and quickening. By it old things pass away, and all things become new.

In contrast to the Reformed faith of Scripture and the confessions, all the novelties being introduced by the seminaries into the Reformed churches are old. They are old heresies and errors that the church rejected long ago: a suffering God; a God Who is sovereign neither as regards evil nor as regards salvation; a revolutionary Jesus of human person; universalism; feminism; and all the rest. There is nothing new in any of this.

The old faith is experienced as new by the congregation. The Word of gracious pardon is new to the sinner who is crushed by his guilt and shame. The Word about almighty providence is new to the mother weeping at the coffin of her dead child. The Word of the resurrection of the dead is new to every believer going through the deep darkness of the shadow of death.

To the preacher who bears these ageless good tidings, the people of God at the end of the 20th century say what the Athenian philosophers said to the apostle (although with an entirely different meaning): “May we know . . . this new doctrine, whereof thou speakest?”

Besides, there is discovery of new facets of the infinitely rich Word of God. There are still new treasures in Scripture to be discovered by theologians who reverence Scripture as the very Word of God. This makes the ministry even more exciting.

Also, there is development of the church’s understanding and systematic formulations of the truth. Development, I say. Not repudiation of all that has gone before, in order to begin all over again, but development.



Development builds on the theological work of the church through the ages, especially the theological work that has come out of the Reformation. I make bold to say that there has been as much development — solid, significant development — of Reformed truth in the Protestant Reformed Churches over the past seventy years as anywhere, by the grace of God. The work of Herman Hoeksema, George Ophoff, and Homer Hoeksema in the Seminary has not only faithfully carried on the Reformed tradition but has also developed Reformed truth significantly.

Esteemed colleagues and dear students, this makes plain our task in the Seminary. The calling of the professors is faithfully to teach the same old thing in a fresh, living way.

The task of the seminarians is to take hold of the old thing; to make it your own; to discover it anew; to enter into it with heart, mind, and affections. Your purpose must be to teach the same old thing to the congregations. You must not, however, teach it in a boring, lifeless, rote, cliché-ridden fashion. This, in fact, is the curse of God upon a ministry that does not work with the Word in the power of the Spirit, in prayer, in faith, and in obedience to Christ. But you must teach the same old thing in demonstration of the Spirit and of power (I Cor. 2:4).

To do this, we must have the support of the congregations. I do not refer now to money and encouragement, with which our churches are generous. But I refer to the view itself that the people take of the Seminary and what goes on in it.

If ever our people come to desire that the Seminary be a theological Areopagus — on the cutting edge of contemporary theological thinking — where professors and students spend their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new theological thing, we are lost.

Our congregations must continue to view the Seminary as the Reformed pastors and professors viewed the Academy in Geneva in 1637:

It is not good that our students should be vain disputants, or that they should be learned in a theory without savour or strength. The true aim which we should set before ourselves ... is to provide a holy nursery-garden of devout pastors, pure in their faith, strong in their zeal to teach, well conducted and sober, keeping guard with a clear conscience over the grand mystery of piety, and administering with justice the Word of Truth (quoted in *International Calvinism, 1541-1715*, ed. Menna Prestwich, Oxford University Press, 1985, p. 69).

If this is the churches' view of their Seminary and if the teachers and students devote themselves to this calling, under God's blessing our people will never hear new things. ▲

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# Depression: Its Cause

*Robert D. Decker*

Your speakers are not experts in the fields of psychology or psychiatry. We are pastors in Christ's church, ministers of the Word of God. Both of us, however, have had a great deal of experience in providing pastoral care for depressed people. I, in addition, teach pastoral care to prospective ministers in the Protestant Reformed Seminary.

Both speakers are firmly convinced that there is a significant spiritual aspect to depression. We are convinced as well that the Bible has the answer to all of our problems, including depression.

Both speakers have experienced depression. I struggled with depression/anxiety for nearly twenty years. These experiences, we believe, give us unique insights into the subject and have made us better pastors.

The theme text for the conference is Philippians 4:4-9 with emphasis on verses 6 and 7: "Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice.... Be careful for nothing; but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.... Those things, which ye have both learned, and received, and heard, and seen in me, do: and the God of peace shall be with you." This passage exhorts us to rejoice in the Lord always. But that is impossible when we are depressed. So the Scripture says we are to be careful for nothing. We must not be anxious for anything. Anxiety and depression are twins. Either we are anxious and therefore become depressed or we are depressed and therefore become anxious. However it happens, those two almost always go together. When that happens we are called to let our requests be made known to God by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving (v. 6) and to think, to ponder, to concentrate on good thoughts (v. 8). God's promise is: the peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep (guard) your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus (v. 7) and the God of peace shall be with you (v. 9).

Who get depressed? It is estimated that some 15 million Americans suffer depression. These are people of all ages and in every economic level: rich and poor, Christians and non-Christians, female and male, young and old, farmers, factory workers, housewives, teachers, students, lawyers, doctors, ministers, and business people. Interestingly enough, twice as many women as men suffer depression. It occurs most often when people reach

their forties and fifties, but can occur at any age. There is a higher incidence among certain professions: doctors, ministers, and people in law enforcement.

What is depression? It is not merely feeling blue or down or sad. There is a *normal range* of feeling. This normal range includes high and low points. We are happy or sad, up or down. All of us experience this. This is not what we are going to be discussing. What we are going to be talking about is *clinical depression*, of which there are two types: depressive *psychosis* and depressive *neurosis*.

Depressive psychosis is characterized by delusional thinking or hallucinations. The most severe of this type develop lifelong schizophrenic disorders which are characterized by rambling thoughts, lack of or inappropriate facial expression, withdrawal, immobility, and "frozen emotions." These people are *out of touch* with reality.

People with depressive neurosis on the other hand remain *in touch* with reality, but they are unable to function in a normal way. They cannot fulfill the daily responsibilities of life in the work place, within the family, in church, or in society in general. This condition used to be called "nervous breakdown." It is about this latter condition, depressive neurosis, that we are speaking.

What are the symptoms of depressive neurosis? Among the most common emotional symptoms is what may be called "sad effect." Depressed people cry often, or at least feel like crying. They feel very, very sad all of the time. They never laugh. They feel empty, lonely, and especially helpless, hopeless, and worthless. And, they look very sad. Their eyes are downcast, the mouth droops, the forehead is wrinkled. They look tired, discouraged, dejected. As the depression worsens they often lose interest in their personal appearance and appear untidy.

Another symptom is painful thinking. David experienced this when he asked: "Why art thou *cast down*, O my soul, and why art thou *disquieted* within me?" (Ps. 42:5). Depressed people are prone to pessimism. They are prone to introspection — *constant* introspection, and in a self-derogatory way. They dwell on past mistakes, real or imagined. They have a very negative self-concept. They blame themselves for all their problems. They develop strong inferior feelings. They anticipate rejection by others and hence feel rejected and unloved, all out of proportion to reality. Depressed people crave reassurance from others, but are prevented from accepting it.

All of this (sad effect, painful thinking) often gets transferred to God. Depressed people are convinced that God does not love them. They are quite sure that God does not hear their prayers. They are convinced they have committed the unpardonable sin or that they are so bad that God could not possibly love them or forgive them. This leads to feelings of guilt. The

depressed are often plagued by guilt. We are not, of course, speaking of *true* guilt. One *ought* to feel guilty because of unconfessed sin (Ps. 32:3). The problem with depressed people, however, is *false* guilt, i.e., that they assume responsibility for things over which they have no control.

Still another symptom of depression is anxiety. By this we mean not just worry, but excessive, constant worry. The depressed person is virtually paralyzed by anxiety and fear. So affected is he by worry that he is unable to function normally. Anxiety makes the depressed person function at a very low energy level and with a sense of futility about the future. He loses interest in activities he once enjoyed. He loses interest in and avoids people, even close friends. He wants to be left alone. He loses his sense of humor and becomes indecisive.

Suicidal thoughts are another symptom. Suicide is the tenth leading cause of death in the United States, and depression is the leading cause of suicide. Ten percent of those who threaten suicide actually carry out the threat. Often the threat of suicide is a manipulative gesture, an attempt to gain attention and sympathy. But such threats obviously must be taken seriously.

There are physical symptoms of depression. Bodily movements are decreased. The quality of sleep is affected. A depressed person is either troubled by insomnia or sleeps too much. Appetite is also affected. One either eats too much or too little, to the point of causing significant weight gain or loss. The depressed are often bothered by constipation or diarrhea, the former being the more frequent complaint. In women the menstrual cycle may become irregular, sometimes stopping entirely for months. Sexual interest may decline or disappear. Other common symptoms are headaches, dry mouth, rapid heartbeat, and heart palpitations.

What causes depression? There may be physical causes. Some of these are in fact quite common and usually of rather brief duration. There is post-partum depression. Some women experience depression after giving birth. There is post-operative depression. Some experience depression after undergoing surgery. There is pre-menstrual syndrome (PMS), and some women become deeply depressed during menopause. Alcohol and drug abuse often cause depression.

There are also emotional/spiritual causes. A highly respected trio of Christian psychiatrists write, "Pent-up anger is the root of nearly all clinical depression."\* Children often learn to repress anger from their parents who repress anger. Many parents discourage their children from expressing

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\* Paul D. Meier, M.C., Frank B. Minirth, M.D., Frank B. Wichern, M.D., *Introduction to Psychology and Counseling: Christian Perspectives and Applications* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1982), p. 261.

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angry feelings, even appropriately. Having learned to fear anger, such children grow to feel that expressing their anger will result in rejection and punishment. Repressing anger often leads to displacing it on someone else. Pent-up anger then may be directed towards others and take on the form of holding grudges. Or it may be directed towards oneself, resulting in true or false guilt. The Bible says, "Be ye angry and sin not, let not the sun go down upon your wrath" (Eph. 4:26). Be angry. That is a command. There is a righteous anger. But do not be sinfully angry. Get rid of your anger in a proper way — that is Scripture's teaching. Get rid of your anger before you go to bed! Do not bottle it up inside and bear grudges.

Certain personality types are very susceptible to depression. There is the obsessive-compulsive personality. He is the person who wants everything done right and wants it done yesterday! And *he* has to do it. He is the perfectionist, the workaholic, the "take charge" type who cannot delegate anything to others. Never wanting to say "no" he allows others to make impossible demands of him. In a sense this is a good and commendable trait. These are the people who get things done. But trouble comes when this becomes an *obsession!* A person will then work too hard and too long and often become physically run down. What is more, the obsessive-compulsive person is never satisfied with his work. This is where anxiety enters. If this person does not, by God's grace, learn to take control of his life, he will likely become depressed.

Poor self-concept or low self-esteem is another cause of depression. This may have been caused by parents who were never satisfied with the child's school work, who were hyper-critical, who seldom if ever praised him, or who were overly protective and never allowed him to "grow up." Or the person may have been excessively teased by his peers, and as a result he just does not feel accepted. Or the person is constantly comparing himself to others, and in his mind he just does not measure up. The result is often excessive, unrealistic inferior feelings.

There are also *precipitating* causes. This refers to those events in our lives which may become the *immediate* cause of depression. Included are such things as: the death of a spouse or close friend or family member, divorce or marital separation, a large mortgage or other debt, changing jobs, retirement, marriage, last child leaving home, etc.

Having said all of this we conclude by noting that sin lies at the root of all these problems. We do not mean merely sin in general. It is true, of course, that depression is one of the consequences of the fall of Adam. Were it not for the fall of mankind into sin, and were it not for our sinful natures, there would be no depressed Christians. But specific sins, unconfessed sins, produce depression. The adulterer and habitual drunkard are likely to become depressed as long as the sin remains unconfessed. **More than this,**

to be obsessive-compulsive as described above is sinful. The Bible tells us often and in many different ways that we may not live that way. To feel inferior is sinful. I must accept my God-given talents and calling and with these gifts serve my Lord. And, I must accept changes in my life in faith.

I must rejoice in the Lord always! And when, because of the burdens and trials of life I find this difficult if not impossible, I must not be anxious. Rather I must by prayer and supplication let my requests be made known to God. His promise is that His peace will keep my heart and mind through Christ Jesus! ▲

# Depression: Its Cure

*James Slopsema*

What is written here about depression does not reflect the expertise of a trained psychologist or psychiatrist. Rather it is the viewpoint of a pastor who not only has had to deal with the scourge of depression in his own life, but also has had the privilege of helping his parishioners in their battle with depression.

In searching for a cure to depression it is imperative that we take as our starting point the Scriptures. It is true that the Bible is not a textbook on psychology. Nevertheless, Scripture does contain a great deal of psychology (a word concerning the soul), and therefore has much to say to the problem of depression. Besides, the Bible is God's infallibly inspired Word, the sole rule for faith and practice. In the Scripture therefore we will find the key to overcoming what to many is the horrible enemy of depression.

## **What Hope is There for the Depressed Christian?**

The biggest concern of a depressed person is whether there is any hope for him, any way out. A person who slips into the pit of depression experiences that his life has fallen apart. He is overcome with anxiety and insecurity. He can no longer concentrate. He can barely function. All joy is gone from his life. In spite of his best efforts he has slowly been backed into a corner. He does not know where to turn, what to do. He is caught and knows no way out. His greatest fear is that he will never escape the horrible pit into which he has fallen, that he will be emotionally incapacitated for the rest of his life.

God's Word gives hope and wonderful assurance to the believing Christian in his depression.

This is not the case, however, for the unbeliever. The Bible holds forth no hope for those outside of Jesus Christ. To the ungodly the Bible speaks only of wrath and condemnation. This is very depressing! This is not to say that the unbeliever cannot manage to overcome depression to one degree or another. The point is that one is given no encouragement or hope in Scripture, so long as he remains in his unbelieving state.

The Bible, however, does give tremendous hope to the believer in Christ. The Bible assures the believer that the Lord will never leave him or forsake him, not even in the darkness of his depression (cf. Gen. 28:15, Heb. 13:5). The Lord is his refuge so that he has nothing to fear (cf. Ps. 46). The Lord is his keeper (cf. Ps. 121). In addition, nothing is impossible for the Lord. When one is in the state of depression, the resumption of a normal, productive, happy life seems totally impossible. However, what is impossible for man is possible with God (Gen. 18:14; Matt. 19:26). Finally, there is the promise to the believer that God will provide a way to escape the trials and temptations of life, even his depression (cf. I Cor. 10:13).

These and other assurances the Christian must accept by faith. As indicated, the depressed Christian cannot see a way out. If he did, he would certainly have followed it; for a depressed person wants more than anything else to be delivered from the horrible scourge of depression. However, the situation looks hopeless, impossible. The depressed believer must therefore not live by sight but by faith. He must simply believe and be ready to follow God's way out. Sad to say, it is not uncommon for the depressed Christian to lose even the assurance of his salvation. In that case, he must be pointed to the sure promises of God to save the believer, and he must be called to walk in the way of faith.

It is important that the depressed Christian have this hope of recovery. Overcoming depression is a slow and difficult process. It requires that a person learn things about himself that are humbling and painful. It requires that he also learn a new approach to life that is sometimes even frightening. If he is to do this, he must have the hope that in Jesus Christ there is a way out of his depression.

### **What are Some Key Elements in Dealing with Depression?**

In dealing with depression it is helpful to recognize that there are certain character traits that make one prone to depression.

One such trait is low self-esteem. By low self-esteem we mean a low estimation of self, feelings of inferiority and worthlessness. One who has low self-esteem sees many good qualities in others but can find very little that is worthwhile in himself. He is convinced that there is very little that he can do and has done that is really worthwhile. He concentrates his

attention on all the failures of his life, real or imagined. This convinces him that he is a failure. For this reason he also tends to hate himself.

There are very few who can live with this kind of self-estimation. Who can accept the conclusion that he is inferior, worthless, of no account? For that reason, those with low self-esteem generally strive to convince themselves that they are of true worth and value. They are constantly trying to prove themselves, in order that they may find a measure of self-acceptance.

This inner drive for self-acceptance generally leads a person to live for the approval of others. If others approve of him, he can approve of himself. If others accept him as worthwhile, he can accept himself. This is generally not a conscious thing, but it is very real. Those who have low self-esteem crave the praise of others, are elated at the approval of their peers, but are devastated at disapproval.

This inner drive for self-acceptance also leads to perfectionism. By perfectionism we mean the tendency to set high and lofty goals, to have unrealistic standards. The perfectionist is always in pursuit of the unattainable. Such people tend to be workaholics, overachievers. They can accomplish a great deal. On the other hand, however, these same perfectionistic tendencies can make someone a pathetic underachiever. A person can have such high standards and such lofty goals that he can never accomplish anything. He is afraid to get started on anything for fear his efforts will not be good enough. Or he may get started but, for fear of failure, never finish anything. The point, however, is that the perfectionist is driven by the desire to prove himself, that he may salvage for himself some form of self-esteem and self-acceptance.

These tendencies (low self-esteem, seeking the approval of others, perfectionism) place a person on a collision course with depression.

The chief cause of depression is stress. Certainly there may be and often are other contributing factors. But the chief factor in most depression is stress. Place a person under enough emotional stress for a long enough period of time and he will inevitably slip into the black pit of depression.

Now, consider that those with the tendencies we have just described do in fact live at a very high stress level. How stressful, after all, to live constantly with the conviction of being inferior and worthless! How stressful to live for the approval of others! It is impossible to please all the people all the time. How stressful to strive for unrealistic and unattainable goals, to "fail" again and again, to live with the feelings of guilt that come with such "failures."

The stress that is generated by this approach to life often leads to depression. The normal problems and crises of life quickly overload such a person with more stress than he can handle. The result is the blackness of depression.



To overcome depression requires that these tendencies be overcome and reversed.

The Bible has a great deal of instruction at this point.

First, the Bible teaches that a born-again Christian, who is living his faith in Jesus Christ, is not worthless, not inferior, but very important and valuable.

This is not the case, of course, with the unbeliever. We must not accept the popular notion that everyone, regardless of his relationship to Jesus Christ and regardless of his behavior, is of great value and worth and thus can esteem himself highly. This is humanism at its worst. God's Word is very clear on this point. The unbeliever, who lives apart from Jesus Christ, is totally depraved. He is vile and wicked in all his ways. He may be wonderfully gifted, have tremendous potential and ability; but, being an unbeliever, he uses all his good gifts sinfully. For that reason he is worthless. In his unbelieving state he is of no value whatsoever to the kingdom of Jesus Christ. His life and accomplishments do not promote the cause of God but are a hindrance. Consequently, he is nothing; he accomplishes nothing worthwhile. He has every reason to feel inferior, to esteem himself as nothing, to hate himself.

In Jesus Christ, however, this is all changed. The testimony of Scripture is that the born-again Christian is a new creature in Jesus Christ (cf. II Cor. 5:17). He is the workmanship of God, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God has before ordained that he should walk in them (Eph. 2:10).

The implication of these and similar passages are enormous. This implies, for example, that the true Christian is wonderfully gifted of God. He not only has certain natural gifts but also the gift of grace to use his natural abilities in the service of God.

This implies also that the Christian has important work to do in the kingdom. Each believer has a place of labor in the kingdom that is uniquely his. For that place of labor he has been wonderfully gifted by God. And no one else can fill his place, do his work. Others in the church and kingdom are also wonderfully gifted by God. But they have been fitted to occupy a different place, to do other work. Each has his own unique place of labor for which he has been wonderfully gifted. Furthermore, the place of work that God has for each in the kingdom is important. For God will use it to advance the cause of His kingdom.

These spiritual realities must guide the born-again Christian as he seeks to come to a proper estimation of himself. For the Christian to have feelings of inferiority and worthlessness is to deny the work of Jesus Christ in his life and the glorious place God has for him in the kingdom. To esteem himself as important, valuable, and of great worth in Jesus Christ is to lay

hold of the reality of his own salvation.

With this proper estimation of himself the born-again Christian can also accept himself. God does. In Romans 14:17, 18 the apostle Paul indicates that those who serve Christ in righteousness, peace, and joy of the Holy Spirit are acceptable (*euartetos*, well-pleasing) to God. If God accepts His people as they labor in their respective places in His kingdom, they too must accept themselves. If God is pleased with them as His workmanship, they must be pleased with themselves as well.

With a proper self-esteem the born-again Christian can also love himself. In a certain sense the Christian must hate himself. He must loathe his sin (cf. Ez. 6:9). He must also loathe himself for his sin (cf. Ez. 20:42). He must hate what the New Testament Scriptures call the old man, or the old man with its deeds (cf. Rom. 6:6; Col. 3:9). This is our old sinful self not yet renewed by grace. This self-loathing must bring the Christian to his knees daily to find forgiveness in the cross and the power of grace to overcome sin in his life. On the other hand, however, the born-again Christian certainly is to love himself. This is implied in the great commandment of the law, which is to love our neighbor as ourselves (Matt. 22:39). The Christian is to love what God has made him to become in Jesus Christ — a new creature wonderfully fitted to good works in the kingdom of Jesus Christ.

When the depressed believer learns to take this perspective of himself, the tremendous load of stress generated by a wrong estimation of himself is wonderfully lifted. He has found an essential key to overcoming his depression.

But the depressed believer must not be content to stop here. He must continue to free himself from self-induced stress by learning to live for the approval of God rather than of men.

How stressful it is to live for the approval of men. Our fellow men tend to place unreasonable and impossible demands upon us. They expect of us what we cannot attain. Their approval of us is at best fickle. Besides, no one can please everybody. One who will be all things to all men to gain their approval places himself in an impossible situation.

It is much easier, and thus less stressful, to seek the approval of God. God approves of us when in faith we use our gifts in the loving service of Him and the neighbor. God does not call us to do the impossible. His expectations of us are consistent with the gifts and abilities He has given to us. God's calling to us is to labor in our respective places in His kingdom according to the measure of grace He has bestowed on us. When we busy ourselves in this, God is well pleased. It is true, that God calls us to serve Him perfectly, without sin. And this is impossible so long as we are in the flesh. However, God has graciously provided a covering for our sins in the blood of Jesus Christ. Laboring therefore in the loving service of God, and taking our stand

in the shadow of the cross to cover our sins, we enjoy God's blessed approval.

It is imperative that we seek God's approval rather than that of men. For this is the command of Scripture. To Timothy the apostle Paul writes, "Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed" (II Tim. 2:15). In II Corinthians 5:9 Paul indicates that he and his co-laborers "labor that we may be accepted (*eurtetos*, well-pleasing) of Christ." In turn, servants are warned not to be men pleasers (cf. Eph. 6:6, Col. 3:22).

Faithfulness to these injunctions of holy Writ is another essential key for the depressed believer to conquer his depression.

Finally, the depressed believer must learn to set realistic goals and standards for himself. This means that he must learn to live according to God's expectations of him. In the first place, God expects the believer to labor diligently in the place God has given him in the kingdom and for which he has been especially fitted. God does not call the Christian, nor has He fitted the Christian, to do every good work. There are many important tasks in the kingdom that belong to others. Each believer must come to understand what is his place in the kingdom, the work for which he is fitted, and then be content to fill that place. It may not be glamorous. It may not put him in the limelight. But it is important work and God's good gift to him. Hence, he must be content to labor there according to his several abilities. This is what God expects of him. This is what the believer must expect of himself and no more.

Furthermore, God expects the believer to work but also to rest. "To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven" (Eccl. 3:1). There is a time to work but also a time to rest and to play. There is a time to enjoy one's family. There is a time for prayer and meditation. There is also time for a vacation. Jesus Himself often needed time away from the press of the multitudes. Knowing our limitations God in His wisdom and grace even commands us to observe a day of rest, the first day of every week.

The depressed believer, however, with his perfectionistic tendencies seeks to be and do more than this. He expects more of himself than God expects. He expects of himself more than God has equipped him to do. He expects the impossible of himself. The stress, worry, anxiety, and endless problems generated by this mad approach to life easily overwhelm a person with stress and depression.

If the believer will overcome depression, he must forsake the stressfulness of perfectionism and conform his expectations of himself to God's expectations of him.

### **How is Depression Actually Overcome?**

To overcome depression the believer needs help.

First of all, and most importantly, he needs the help of God. As we have noted earlier, if a Christian is to overcome depression he must change deeply entrenched attitudes and patterns. This requires nothing less than the power of divine grace. The believer obtains this divine power through the Word and prayer.

The sorry plight of the child of God who has fallen into deep depression is that he can scarcely pray, or concentrate sufficiently to read the precious Word of God. Such is the scourge of depression. Nevertheless, the depressed Christian must do the best he is able in this regard. If he can concentrate on God's Word for only a few seconds, then that is where he must start. If all he can pray is, "God help me," then he must pray this with the assurance that God will hear even this brief plea. It is also helpful for the believer in the throes of depression's anxiety to reflect on familiar and comforting passages of Scripture, especially those that relate the mighty works of God to deliver His people in the past.

But the depressed child of God also needs the help of his fellow saints. The power of God's grace also reaches us through the communion of the saints.

The depressed Christian usually does not understand the principles we have been dealing with in this article. If he did, he probably would have been able to avoid the depths of depression. Besides, the judgment of a depressed person is greatly diminished. He sees everything through the dark glasses of depression, which distorts reality.

Hence, the depressed Christian must have the help of his fellow saints. He needs the help of others who understand the intricate maze of depression and can show him the way out. Ideally this would include his pastor, family members, and church members. It may require a professional counselor. The depressed believer also needs the support of others who perhaps do not understand what depression is all about but are sympathetic. He needs their support, encouragement, and prayers.

There are several important things to remember about the healing process in depression.

First, progress is slow. It takes months to slip into a deep depression; it takes equally as long to climb out of it. Those who expect to overcome depression in a few weeks will be sadly disappointed. In fact, false expectations of a quick recovery can have devastating effects when these expectations are not realized.

Secondly, it is necessary temporarily to relieve the depressed person from the crushing responsibilities of life. In depression the normal routine and responsibilities of life become too much to handle. To overcome depression it is important that a person be relieved of the responsibilities he can no longer handle. To make clear the importance of this, consider a person

who has strained his back by overworking himself. For his back to heal he must rest it for a while. Should he continue to carry the same load as before, his condition will only worsen. No different are our mind and emotions. A depressed person has overloaded them with stress and strain. To allow the mind and emotions to "heal" he must give them a rest. He must get from underneath the heavy load of stress. This requires the help of family members. It may even require hospitalization.

Thirdly, a depressed person must be helped through different layers of problems. A depressed person has what we may call surface problems. These are problems of which he is aware. They usually are problems with his job, various family members, guilt feelings, etc. These problems are occasioned by the depression which has taken away his ability to function and which probably has made him irritable. These problems must be dealt with first of all. For they are very real and are pressing down upon the depressed person. However, after these problems are brought under control, there are deeper problems that must be handled. These are problems that have brought on the depression. In many instances the depressed person is not even aware of these problem areas. Quite often, if not always, underlying depression are the tendencies we have treated earlier: an unbiblical self-estimation, a tendency to seek the approval of men, perfectionism.

Fourthly, the depressed person may need medical attention. There is an inseparable connection between body and soul. When therefore the soul is ravaged by the scourge of depression, the body is invariably affected. Sometimes depression so adversely affects the body that medical attention is necessary. In this connection, anti-depressant drugs are also worthy of consideration. In depression there is a chemical imbalance in the brain. Many have debated whether this imbalance triggers the depression or the depression the imbalance. Perhaps there is a reciprocal relationship. The fact is that there is such an imbalance and that anti-depressant drugs often are able to help. Many suffering depression have been able to overcome depression much more quickly with the help of anti-depressant drugs.

Finally, the depressed believer is greatly helped by the love, concern, and prayers of his fellow saints. As emphasized before, the depressed Christian must learn not to live for the approval of others. Nevertheless, we all need the support, love, and prayers of our fellow saints. This is especially true when there is depression. Pray for one who is in depression. If he is able to receive you, visit him. Do this even if you do not understand depression. Show him your concern and support. Encourage him. He may not, however, be able to receive you, because of inner fears and turmoil. Then write him to encourage him and to express your love. This support from fellow saints is an essential element in overcoming depression. ▲

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# Another Look at Common Grace (3) What Is Grace?

*Professor Herman Hanko*

(In our previous article we quoted extensively from defenders of common grace to learn from them specifically what they mean by the concept. We turn now to a discussion of the idea itself.)

If one should study the writings of those who defend common grace, one soon discovers a rather striking fact about such defenses: In their appeals to Scripture to support their views, no text is ever quoted in which the word “grace” itself is used. Sometimes various passages are quoted which are supposed to refer to different aspects of common grace, such as the origin and source of common grace, the effects of common grace among men, the purpose of common grace, and such like things. But in every case, no text is quoted where grace itself is mentioned.

The same is true when common grace is discussed in terms of its synonyms. Common grace is identified with a general love of God for all men, or a general longsuffering of God toward all (the latter being God’s supposed willingness to postpone men’s judgment until they have sufficient opportunity to repent). Sometimes common grace is defined in terms of God’s goodness toward all men, or a certain kindness or benevolence that He shows toward all. And various Scriptural passages are quoted which are alleged to teach such general love, or kindness, or longsuffering.

Although the words themselves (love, kindness, longsuffering, goodness) are sometimes used in the texts cited, more often than not the words do *not* appear in the texts, and the conclusions drawn from them (*viz.*, that these attributes of God are shown toward all men) are mere deductions.<sup>1</sup> This

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<sup>1</sup> An instance of this is the text from Matthew 5:44, 45. This passage is perhaps quoted more than any other in support of common grace. And yet none of the words are found in it which are used to refer to God’s general attitude of favor towards all.

is not to say that the deduction, because it is a deduction, is necessarily wrong.<sup>2</sup> But the fact remains that the terms associated with common grace are terms in Scripture that, when used, usually are clear and unmistakable references to God's attitude toward His elect people.

This is emphatically true of the term grace. One would think that a concept so important as that of common grace would surely be mentioned by name in Scripture. But anyone who knows the Bible at all must admit that nowhere, either in Scripture or in the Confessions, is the term found.<sup>3</sup>

It can be argued, of course, that this is not really an objection because other theological terms, such as "trinity," "providence," etc., are also not found in Scripture, but are nevertheless accepted by all Reformed people as words that connote truths of Scripture. And so, it is said, the same is true of common grace. The term is not there, but the idea is.

This argument would hold some value if it were not for the fact that, while "common grace" is a term not found in Scripture, "grace" is found repeatedly in both the Old and the New Testaments. One would think that if "common grace" is indeed taught in Scripture, then *somewhere* the word "grace" itself would refer to common grace. Why then is it that *no* such texts are ever quoted? Why does not anyone point us to one passage where the word "grace" refers to common grace?

There is another somewhat strange aspect of this question. Theologians can be found who, while they deny the *doctrine* of common grace, nevertheless use the *term*. In general, they use the term to denote God's providence. More particularly, they use it to denote that aspect of God's providence according to which God sends good gifts to men. Among these good gifts are rain and sunshine, health and wealth, friendship and marriage.

While it is our intention to discuss these good gifts at some later point, it is important now to notice two things. In the first place, one could very well ask the question of those who hold to the term while denying the doctrine: Why do you want to use the term "grace" to indicate God's

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<sup>2</sup> The Westminster Confession speaks of "good and necessary consequences," when it deals with the legitimate interpretation of Scripture.

<sup>3</sup> It is, of course, found once in the Canons of Dordrecht. But in this one instance, it is found in the mouths of the Arminians whose views were condemned by the Synod of Dordrecht. The pertinent article reads: "...The Synod *rejects* the errors of those Who teach: That the corrupt and natural man can so well use the common grace (by which we understand the light of nature), or the gifts still left him after the fall, that he can gradually gain by their good use a greater, viz., the evangelical or saving grace and salvation itself" (III/IV, B, 5).

providence? More particularly, why do you want to use the term “grace” to indicate especially the good gifts of God’s providence? Would you have objections to using the term “grace” to indicate cancer, or an automobile accident, or famine? These things too come by God’s providence. The answer to these questions would be interesting.

In the second place, we are again back to the point. The term “grace” is often used in Scripture. A good question to ask any Reformed man would be: Is the term “grace” in Scripture ever used to denote providence in general, or the good gifts of providence in particular? If it is not, to say the very least, the use of the term is highly dangerous in today’s theological climate when the term is used in many more ways than merely the workings of divine providence.

All of which leads us to the conclusion that a good beginning in our discussion of common grace is a careful analysis of the use of the term in Scripture. What does Scripture mean by grace? To that we intend to devote this article.

Even a cursory study of the concept “grace” in Scripture will immediately make clear that the word has a variety of meanings, which meanings are, nevertheless, related.

Kittel<sup>4</sup> points out that although Scripture gives to the term its own distinct meaning, nevertheless, the basic idea of the term was found in profane Greek. It meant 1) that which pleases or delights; 2) the state of being pleased; 3) that which causes pleasure to others, kindness.<sup>5</sup> In general, therefore, it means good pleasure, favor, goodwill.<sup>6</sup>

In Hellenism, Kittel says, the term means either the demonstration of a king’s favor, a gracious disposition, or thanks. He then goes on to add that the term also had the connotations of power, a connotation found also in its New Testament usage.<sup>7</sup>

He goes on to discuss the meaning and connotation of the terms in Scripture, which are חַסֵּד from the verb חָסַד in Hebrew and χάρις in Greek. Kittel says that the noun in Hebrew refers first of all to beauty or charm, and points to several passages as illustrations. In Exodus 3:21 the Lord says:

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<sup>4</sup> Kittel, G., ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. VIII (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 373.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 374.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 375, 376.



“And I will give this people favour in the sight of the Egyptians.” Here “favour” is really “grace.” This thought is repeated in Exodus 11:3 and 12:36. The same meaning is attached to the word, according to Kittel, in Psalm 84:11: “For the Lord God is a sun and shield: the Lord will give grace and glory: no good thing will he withhold from them that walk uprightly.”<sup>8</sup>

In other places in the Old Testament the word refers often just to an attitude. This is especially true of such passages as speak of one finding grace in the eyes of another. An example of this is in Genesis 6:8: “But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord.”<sup>9</sup>

After pointing out that this Old Testament idea is carried over into the new, Kittel goes on to say that it is especially the New Testament which emphasizes that grace is always free. While a number of texts are quoted as support for this idea, Kittel appeals especially to Romans 3:24: “Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”<sup>10</sup>

Kittel’s summary statement is: “What is in view is the process whereby one who has something turns in grace to another who has nothing, nor is this just an impersonal transfer of things, but a heart-felt movement of the one who acts to the one acted upon.”<sup>11</sup>

In connection with the fact that grace is always free, Kittel makes some very sharp statements that have direct bearing on our discussion of whether Scripture uses the word “grace” as being common, i.e., towards all men.

He defines grace as the “totality of salvation,” and quotes II Corinthians 6:1 and I Corinthians 1:4 as proof. II Corinthians 6:1 reads: “We then, as workers together with him, beseech you also that ye receive not the grace of God in vain.”<sup>12</sup> And I Corinthians 1:4 reads: “I thank my God always on your behalf for the grace of God which is given you by Jesus Christ.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 379.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 380.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 394.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 377.

<sup>12</sup> This is an interesting passage. The translation of the AV might lead one to misinterpret it. The Greek reads: *Συνεργοῦντες δὲ καὶ παρακαλοῦμεν μὴ εἰς κενὸν τὴν χάριν τοῦ θεοῦ δέξασθαι*. The translation is: “But working together, we also beseech you not to receive the grace of God in vain.” The point is not that we are co-workers *with* God; but that we work together as ministers *of* God.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 394.

As he emphasizes this point, Kittel speaks of grace as “the power of grace [which] is displayed in its work, the overcoming of sin.” He refers to Romans 5:20 as proof: “Moreover the law entered, that the offence might abound. But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.”<sup>14</sup> He uses such expressions as follows — all of which show the particularity of grace: “It is free election.” “It actualizes itself in the church.” “Its goal is every good work.” “It holds the believer fast in the fellowship of grace.” “It is the destruction of sin.” “*χάρις*” is the divine ‘favour’ shown in Christ.” In fact, in Colossians 3:13, grace means “to pardon.” “Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye” — where, in both instances that the verb “forgive” is used, the Greek uses the verb form for grace.<sup>15</sup> So grace always belongs to salvation.

If it is argued that these Scripture passages all speak of saving grace in distinction from common grace, the obvious answer is: Saving grace is the only use of the term in God’s Word.

Hermann Cremer<sup>16</sup> is in basic agreement with Kittel’s analysis of the term. He offers the general definition: Grace is a “kind, affectionate, pleasing nature, and an inclining disposition either in person or thing.”<sup>17</sup> Luke 1:30; 2:40, 52; Acts 2:47; 4:33; 7:46 are referred to as texts which use the word in this sense.

He then proceeds to speak of it as God’s grace and favor which excludes merit and is not hindered by guilt, but forgives sin. Among other texts, the following are quoted as supporting this idea. Romans 5:15: “But not as the offence, so also is the free gift. For if through the offence of one many be dead, much more the grace of God, and the gift by grace, which is by one man, Jesus Christ, hath abounded unto many.” Galatians 2:21: “I do not frustrate the grace of God: for if righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain.” Ephesians 3:2: “If ye have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given me to youward.” And he concludes his discussion with the statement that grace is spontaneous favor.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 395.

<sup>15</sup> The Greek word is *χαρίζομαι*.

<sup>16</sup> Cremer, Hermann, *Biblico-Theological Lexicon of New Testament Greek* (New York: Charles Scribner & Sons, 1895).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 573.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 574.

Also Cremer finds no use of the term in Scripture which can in any way be construed as applying to a grace which is common.

Following these analyses of the word "grace," Rev. Herman Hoeksema also treats this concept extensively in his *Reformed Dogmatics*.<sup>19</sup>

He points out, first of all, that grace is an attribute of God.<sup>20</sup> God, says Hoeksema, is gracious in Himself. As proof of this use of grace in Scripture, he refers to Exodus 34:6: "And the Lord passed by before him, and proclaimed, The Lord, The Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth"; and I Peter 5:10: "But the God of all grace, who hath called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered a while, make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you."

Hoeksema considers this to be an important point. He argues that God never becomes outside Himself what he is not, first of all, within His own triune covenant life. He is gracious in Himself. The grace that He reveals to sinners is the grace which He is within His own being. And so, such revelations of His grace as He is pleased to show in Christ Jesus are revelations of His own perfections.

Proceeding from this starting point, Hoeksema shows, first of all, that grace is always rooted in ethical goodness.<sup>21</sup> He quotes a number of passages to prove this. Among them are the following. Proverbs 22:11: "He that loveth pureness of heart, for the grace of his lips the king shall be his friend." This is an important text in the argument, for it proves that pureness of heart and grace belong together. The one who loves pureness of heart has grace of lips. Psalm 45:2: "Thou art fairer than the children of men: grace is poured into thy lips: therefore God hath blessed thee for ever." Ephesians 4:29: "Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers." That is, grace is administered to hearers when we speak nothing corrupt, but speak good to the use of edifying. Colossians 4:6: "Let your speech be alway with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man."

Grace is, therefore, a beauty or excellence, a comeliness or attractiveness which is rooted in ethical perfection.

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<sup>19</sup> Hoeksema, Herman, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1966).

<sup>20</sup> In fact, his analysis of the term is found under the section dealing with the attributes of God.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 107, 108.

Secondly, grace is an attitude of gracefulness. In Acts 7:46, David is described as one “who found favour (or grace) before God.” The same is true of Mary as the angel assures her: “Thou hast found favour (or grace) with God” (Luke 1:30).

We must be sure that we understand this meaning of the term clearly. The idea is not so much that David or Mary were in themselves graceful in the sense that they were ethically pure and thus attractive — although this was surely, in a sense, true. But the idea is rather that God took an attitude of favor towards them. He was favorably inclined towards them. He looked upon them with approval.

It is at this point that the two ideas come together. Grace is attractiveness which is rooted in ethical perfection; but it is also an attitude of God towards men. Now this latter can mean two things. It may mean that the one who is gracious is ethically perfect. God is gracious because He is ethically perfect.

But, quite obviously, this idea does not do justice to the texts cited above in which Scripture states that David and Mary found grace in the sight of God. The idea is here that these two are the objects of God’s attitude of favor, of approval, of delight. The idea here is, then, that God’s attitude towards them is an attitude which cannot possibly be rooted in themselves or in the kind of people they were. They were wicked and ethically impure.<sup>22</sup>

God is favorably inclined to them, therefore, because they were ethically perfect for another reason than the kind of people they actually were. They were ethically pure objectively in Christ Who died for them so that God sees them in Christ. But that great attitude of God’s favor towards them made them ethically pure.

Hence, in the third place, grace is undeserved favor. This is repeated again and again in Scripture. It is sharply contrasted with works of any kind. It is never payment of a debt. It is never earned. It is the very opposite of works. This truth is emphatically stated in Romans 11:6: “And if by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise work is no more work.”<sup>23</sup> The

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<sup>22</sup> Some effort is made to get around this by the defenders of common grace by asserting that God loves the sinner, but hates his sin. The trouble with this distinction is that it is the sinner who sins. Sin is not an abstraction which hangs out in the air somewhere. Sin is the activity of a person. Not only that, but even more importantly, the sinner sins because he is a sinner. He is, in his own nature, totally depraved. He is ugly and repulsive, shot through with guilt, full of running sores. That kind of person God cannot love as a sinner.

<sup>23</sup> The last sentence of this verse is omitted in some translations. This is a mistake. The support for the verse as we have quoted it is very strong.

same truth is stated in Ephesians 2:8, 9: "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast."<sup>24</sup>

Finally, grace is the power of salvation.<sup>25</sup> It is itself the power whereby these blessings are actually given and become the possession of the people of God. It is that which makes the objects of God's grace ethically perfect as He is by transforming them into saints and bestowing on them all the blessings of salvation.

It is clear how crucial the idea of ethical perfection is to the concept of grace. If it is true that ethical perfection always stands connected with grace, then it is also true that the term in Scripture cannot apply to any common attitude towards all men.

And so it is clear that the term grace in Scripture has reference only to the saving grace of God which is given through Jesus Christ to those who belong to Christ's church. Never is there the slightest hint that this grace is common, that it is shared with all alike, that all men are, in some sense, the objects of this grace. Scripture simply does not use the term in that sense at all.

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It is obvious from a study of the term grace in Scripture that grace is closely related to other attributes of God such as mercy, love, longsuffering, goodness, and the like. Kittel, e.g., treats the concept mercy along with grace on the grounds that the two are so closely related that they cannot be treated separately.<sup>26</sup> And Hoeksema also makes the point that these ethical virtues of God stand related to each other.

The defenders of common grace are quick to admit this. They insist that, because all men are the objects of God's grace, all men are also the objects of God's love, mercy, goodness, etc.

H.J. Kuiper, e.g., speaks of a grace *and* love shown to all men.<sup>27</sup> He goes on to explain how God can both hate and love the same person: "God

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>26</sup> Kittel, *loc. cit.*

<sup>27</sup> Kuiper, H.J., *Sermons Delivered in Broadway Christian Reformed Church*, 1925. These sermons were delivered in Kuiper's congregation shortly after the controversy in the Christian Reformed Church which led to the expulsion of Rev. Herman Hoeksema. In the Foreword he states: "Our real purpose was to explain and defend the three points." See pp. 10, 11 where Kuiper explicitly states that God's love is towards all men.

hates the wicked *as wicked*, but He loves them *as His creatures*.”<sup>28</sup> So bold is Kuiper on this point that he states: “There is no one here in this audience who can say, ‘God hates me.’ Suppose you knew that you will ultimately be lost; even then you could not say, ‘God does not care for me.’”<sup>29</sup>

Macleod speaks of God’s longsuffering towards the world and insists that man receives blessings of divine benevolence.<sup>30</sup> Surprisingly, Macleod even goes so far as to say that God does not always love the elect, just as He does not always hate the wicked: “His attitude to them (the elect) is not simply one of love.”<sup>31</sup>

Henry Meeter insists that grace towards all men must be identified with God’s favor which includes goodness, kindness, longsuffering, love.<sup>32</sup>

John Murray is not at all reluctant (as some are) to root common grace in the atoning work of Christ: “Many benefits accrue to the non-elect from the redemptive work of Christ.”<sup>33</sup> Specific benefits upon the ungodly are expressions of God’s kindness and mercy.<sup>34</sup> He finds in Matthew 5:44 and Luke 6:27, 35 proof also for God’s love to the unregenerate: “There is a love in God that goes forth to lost men and is manifested in the manifold blessings which all men without distinction enjoy, a love in which non-elect persons

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 15, 16.

<sup>30</sup> Macleod, Donald, *Behold Your God* (Christian Focus Publications, 1990), p. 118.

<sup>31</sup> Macleod says this in spite of Scripture’s testimony: “The Lord hath appeared of old unto me, saying, Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee” (Jer. 31:3).

<sup>32</sup> Meeter, Henry, *Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing), p. 73.

<sup>33</sup> Murray, John, *Collected Writings of John Murray*, Vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), p. 63. Not all defenders of common grace are prepared to admit that the blessings of common grace are rooted in the cross. Sietsma, e.g., claims that these blessings are not something given through the cross, but some original goodness is preserved in man from the beginning in the office which man continues to hold. See Sietsma, K., *The Idea of Office*, tr. by Henry VanderGoot (Toronto: Paideia Press, 1985), p. 33.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 65, 66.

are embraced, and a love that comes to its highest expression” in the “entreaties, overtures and demands of the gospel proclamation.”<sup>35</sup>

The argument is, of course, correct formally. Because God’s attributes are one in Him, they are to be treated together. God’s grace is surely inseparably connected to and a part of His love, kindness, goodness, mercy, longsuffering, etc. If any one of them is common to all men, they are all common. If one is particular, however, they all are particular.

It would go beyond our present purposes to discuss in detail all these various attributes of God which are mentioned and defined in Scripture to show that in every case they are attributes which are shown only to the elect. There is a *prima facie* case to be made for the truth that always God is particular in His grace and mercy, His love and favor. The argument consists of two lines of thought.

The first is this. If all these attributes are indeed inseparably related to grace, and if grace in Scripture is something shown only to the elect, then it follows that these other attributes as well are shown only to those chosen in Christ from eternity.

The second line of thought goes like this. God’s attributes are never mere characteristics of God. They are living, powerful, working attributes. They are the virtues of the living God Who does all things. If, e.g., grace is itself the power whereby we are saved, so also is this true of love and goodness. We love God because He first loved us. We are good because God is good to us. We are called to be kind towards one another because God is kind to us. God’s attitude is never merely attitude, powerless to accomplish what it is in Him. When God is gracious to a man, that grace permeates man’s being and makes him gracious. God’s mercy is more than an attitude of pity and longing to deliver. It is a mighty power that rescues us from our own hell and makes us blessed. It is a serious injustice to God to make His attributes mere attitudes such as our attributes are.

Nevertheless, it is not amiss to call attention to one other such attribute, the attribute of longsuffering. We choose this particular one because it especially is mentioned as referring to God’s attitude of favor to all men. Three texts especially are quoted in support of the idea that longsuffering is an attribute of God which He shows to all men. The first is found in II Peter 3:9: “The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.”<sup>36</sup> The other two passages are found

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>36</sup> See, e.g., the extensive treatment of this passage in “The Free Offer of the Gospel,” written by John Murray and Ned Stonehouse as part of the Report to the 15th General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1948.

in Paul's epistle to the Romans. The first is 2:4: "Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?"<sup>37</sup> The second is 9:22: "What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction?"

The Greek words for longsuffering are μακροθυμέω in the verb form, and μακροθυμία in the noun form. The words are used often in the New Testament both as an attribute of God and as an attribute of God's people.

To take the latter first, God's people are called to be longsuffering towards one another in James 5:8: "Be ye also longsuffering;<sup>38</sup> stablish your hearts: for the coming of the Lord draweth nigh." The interesting part of this verse is that it is found in the context of a description of the sufferings of God's people at the hands of the wicked rich. They are told to be patient unto the coming of the Lord because the Lord Himself is longsuffering towards them (v. 7).<sup>39</sup>

In Hebrews 6:15, this attribute is applied to Abraham: "And so, after he had patiently endured ('had been longsuffering,' in the Greek), he obtained the promise."

In I Corinthians 13:4, love is said to be longsuffering; and in I Thessalonians 5:14, God's people are admonished to be "patient (i.e., longsuffering) towards all." In Colossians 1:11 longsuffering is said to be an attribute of God's people for which the apostle prays. In II Timothy 3:10 the apostle speaks of longsuffering as characteristic of his own life. This mention of longsuffering as an attribute of the believer is common in Scripture.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> The text was quoted in support of the first point of the three points of common grace adopted by the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church in 1924.

<sup>38</sup> The AV has "patient" here, but the Greek has the usual word longsuffering: μακροθυμήσατε .

<sup>39</sup> Again, in the description of longsuffering as an attribute of God, the AV uses the expression, "and hath long patience for it." We shall refer to this text a bit later in our discussion of longsuffering as God's attribute.

<sup>40</sup> See Hebrews 6:12, James 5:10, II Corinthians 6:6, Galatians 5:22, Ephesians 4:2, Colossians 3:12, I Timothy 1:16 (this passage speaks of Jesus Christ showing forth all longsuffering in Paul), II Timothy 4:2.



It is worthy of note that in every case in which the word is used in the New Testament it is used as an attribute of the believer. Never does the word refer to a characteristic of the ungodly. This is already significant because the believer is recreated in the image of God; and the clear implication is that the believer is called to reflect in his life and does actually reflect God's attribute of longsuffering to him. This would already suggest that God's attribute of longsuffering is one shown only to His people.

But a study of the word "longsuffering" as an attribute of God very clearly supports this idea.

This is true of James 5:7: "Be patient therefore, brethren, unto the coming of the Lord. Behold, the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience (longsuffering) for it, until it receive the early and latter rain."

As we noticed, the Lord is speaking here of the suffering which His people endure in the world. The question might arise why the Lord does not deliver them, but waits until the coming of Christ. James uses a parable to explain this. He compares God with a husbandman who waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being longsuffering, for the early and latter rain must first come before the harvest can be brought in. The fruit of the earth here refers to the full harvest of the elect, when all the elect will have been born and saved. Only then can Christ return.<sup>41</sup> The husbandman, as much as he would like to harvest his field as quickly as possible, knows that he must wait until the grain is ripe.<sup>42</sup> He endures the great threats to his harvest because he knows that if he harvests his crop too early, the harvest will be spoiled. So also God is longsuffering towards His people in their distress while He waits for the full harvest to come.

In Luke 18:7, the same idea of longsuffering on God's part is vividly described. The widow who sought redress for wrongs done to her found an uncaring judge. It was only, finally, when she refused to cease pestering him that he was moved to help her and avenge her against her enemies. By way of application of the parable Jesus says, "And shall not God avenge his own

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<sup>41</sup> The figure of a harvest to depict the salvation of the elect is common in Scripture. See Revelation 14:14-17 and Matthew 13:39-43.

<sup>42</sup> I well remember, when working on the farm in Montana, how true this was. The grain was not ready till early September. But in that high altitude, snow could come at any time and destroy the harvest before it was reaped. Every morning the farmer for whom I worked would anxiously go to his field to see whether the grain was sufficiently ripe for harvesting. But he would return to tell us that we had to wait yet a bit. When finally it was ready, everyone, in great excitement, would hurry to the fields to begin the combining.

elect, which cry day and night unto him, though he bear long (is longsuffering) with them? I tell you that he will avenge them speedily." It is, therefore, because of the longsuffering of God that Jesus tells us that we "ought always to pray, and not to faint."

The same use of longsuffering is used in I Peter 3:20. We quote the entire passage. "For Christ hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit: by which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison; which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water" (vv. 18-20). Apart from the difficulties of verse 19 in particular, it is clear from the passage that in the days of Noah also the true people of God were hard pressed by their enemies. In fact, so great was the pressure of the wicked world that by the time the flood came only eight souls were left among the believers. During that terrible time of suffering Noah was building the ark in which he was saved. God did not deliver them immediately from their sufferings, because He had His own appointed time for their deliverance in the ark by the flood. But during that time of persecution God was longsuffering towards His people. When the time came for deliverance, God came in judgment upon the world and saved His church.

It is this idea which also stands on the foreground in II Peter 3:9. As we noticed earlier, this text is often quoted in support of God's favorable attitude of longsuffering towards all men.<sup>43</sup> The idea is then that God postpones deserved judgment because He earnestly seeks the salvation of all men. Only when men have clearly shown that they want no part of salvation does this longsuffering change to wrath.

Yet the text teaches nothing of the sort. In fact, it is quite difficult to see how this text can be quoted in support of God's attitude of graciousness or longsuffering to all men.

The theme of this passage is much like that in James 5, to which we referred earlier. The saints to whom Peter is writing were enduring severe persecution. It is clear from this chapter that the saints were expecting an early return of the Lord and were, in fact, puzzled by what seemed to them an unnecessary delay of this great event. Peter explains that God never delays, for He is not slack concerning His promise. The explanation is to be found in God's longsuffering. That longsuffering, Peter emphatically states,

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<sup>43</sup> It is argued that God is longsuffering towards all men in this respect that God wants all men to be saved.

is to "us-ward"; that is, it is a longsuffering towards Peter and the saints to whom he is writing. That longsuffering reveals itself in this, that God is "not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance." The reference is very obviously to the church which is yet to be born. We must remember that the number of the elect, destined to inherit the new heavens and the new earth, is a fixed number, determined eternally by God. That number of elect is not merely a conglomeration of individuals, an arbitrary group of people; it is the body of Christ, which with Christ constitutes the organism of the church. So completely is that organism one that if one individual in it should not be saved, it would be impossible that any be saved. All the elect go to heaven, or none goes to heaven. And so Christ cannot return for salvation until every one comes to repentance. This is why the Lord cannot come as yet. And this is why God bears the sufferings of His people with much longsuffering. He endures their agony in the interests of their salvation.

That this is the meaning is indicated further by the fact that just a few verses later Peter writes: "And account that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation" (v. 15). This is a strong statement. It means that God's longsuffering is identical with salvation. It is the same thing as salvation. When longsuffering is showed to a man, that constitutes his salvation. In the light of that strong statement, it is difficult to see how longsuffering can still be said to indicate God's attitude towards all men.

We come now to the two difficult passages which seem to indicate that longsuffering is not particular, but general. I refer to Romans 2:4 and Romans 9:22. To these we now turn.

Romans 9:22, to take this passage first, reads: "What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted for destruction?"

It would seem, on the surface of it, that the objects of God's longsuffering are the vessels of wrath fitted for destruction. And yet, a closer look at the passage surely indicates that this cannot be. We call attention to the following objections:

- 1) We have, first of all, the broader context of Scripture itself in the light of which this verse must be considered. We have noticed that, with the exception of these two passages in Romans, every use of this term in the New Testament, as it is applied to God, indicates that God's longsuffering is particular, i.e., only for the elect. And we ought not to forget Peter's strong statement that God's longsuffering *is* salvation. We must be careful to interpret Scripture in the light of Scripture. It would be strange to find that most of Scripture teaches that God's longsuffering is only towards His people, then suddenly to find a passage where this is not true. This is all the more the case when we remember that longsuffering is salvation. No one

would want to maintain the position that the vessels of wrath, objects of God's longsuffering, are in fact saved.

2) The immediate context in verse 23 makes sharp distinction between the vessels of wrath fitted for destruction and the vessels of mercy through whom God is pleased to make known the riches of His glory, and who are, in fact, afore prepared unto glory. Verse 23 is the continuation of the thought in verse 22, and verse 22 must take verse 23 into account.

3) The relation between verses 22 and 23 is all the more important when we consider that the word "longsuffering" in verse 22 is in the Greek in the form of a prepositional phrase: ἐν πολλῇ μακροθυμίᾳ. The text can, therefore, be translated: "What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured, in abundant longsuffering (or, perhaps even better, while being abundant in longsuffering), the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction. The text, translated in this way, would not necessarily teach that God's longsuffering is towards the vessels of wrath.

In keeping, therefore, with the rest of Scripture, it is better to refer the phrase concerning God's longsuffering to His attitude towards the elect while He was enduring the vessels of wrath fitted for destruction. This interpretation is certainly plausible if we consider that the apostle uses the word ἤνεγκεν to indicate God's attitude towards the vessels of wrath. Although this idea is not very common in Scripture, it apparently refers to the very opposite of God's longsuffering. God *endures* the vessels of wrath, in contrast to His longsuffering towards His people. This endurance is for the sake of His people. As the wickedness of the world increases and evil is increasingly rampant, one often wonders why God does not come in judgment upon the workers of iniquity who transgress God's law, openly mock His precepts, and trample His commandments under foot. The only answer is that God endures their sin for a time. He does this, not to give them a chance to repent, which is an old Arminian interpretation; but He endures their sin because the elect must still be gathered. And until these are gathered, God cannot destroy the world.

4) Finally, the entire context is opposed to the interpretation that would make longsuffering apply to all men. When Israel was rejected, this was not because the Word of God had taken none effect (v. 6). God was accomplishing His purpose, for they are not all Israel which are of Israel. That purpose of God is to be found in election and reprobation. The elder (Esau) in the family of Isaac is to serve the younger (Jacob). And this is because God loves Jacob and hates Esau. Can Esau, whom God hates, be the object of God's longsuffering?

And so it is throughout time. God has mercy on whom He will have mercy. Pharaoh was raised up and hardened that God might show His power in him (vv. 11-18). How can longsuffering be shown to those whom God

hardens? Is hardening an indication of longsuffering? How can that be? God, willing to show His wrath, endures the vessels of wrath who are fitted to destruction. But He is longsuffering to the vessels of mercy. After all, they live in the world surrounded by the hatred of the vessels of wrath. They suffer greatly. They are led as sheep to the slaughter. God longs to deliver them, and, indeed, suffers with them. God also is impatient to pour out His wrath upon the wicked. But all must wait until the last elect is born and saved so that the riches of God's glory might be revealed in them whom He had afore prepared to glory.

Romans 2:4 is also said to teach that longsuffering is an attribute of God towards the ungodly. The passage itself reads: "Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?"

But there are obvious problems with this interpretation. We call attention to the following.

1) Nowhere does the text say that the reprobate wicked are the objects of God's longsuffering. The text merely asserts that men despise God's longsuffering. It can perhaps be argued that if men despise such longsuffering, this must mean that they are the objects of it. But such is not necessarily the case. It is surely possible that the wicked despise this attribute of God even though they are not the objects of it. I may, e.g., despise the wealth of a man without possessing that wealth myself. Or I may despise marital love in general, and the specific instance of it I see in my neighbor without myself being married. This is the more plausible in connection with the longsuffering of God when we consider that the wicked always despise God with all their hearts. And, in despising God, they despise also all His attributes.

2) The argument that this text supports common grace is based on the statement that God's goodness leads to repentance. But surely this does not prove an attitude of goodness on the part of God to all. The text, so interpreted, proves too much. The text does not say that God's goodness *wants to* lead all men to repentance. Nor does it say that God's goodness *attempts to* lead all men to repentance. It emphatically states that God's goodness *does lead* to repentance. The interpretation of those who hold that this goodness is shown to all men proves too much. It says more than even the most passionate defenders of common grace want to say.

2) The passage is addressed to "man" in general: "Therefore thou art inexcusable, O man..." (v. 1). "And thinkest thou this, O man..." (v. 3). Paul is here including all men, whether Jew or Gentile, under the severe judgment of God.

3) When all are included under the just judgment of God, then does God's grace towards His people become manifest. The following verses

make that clear. “But after thy hardness and impenitent heart treasurest up unto thyself wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God; Who will render to every man according to his deeds: to them who by patient continuance in well doing seek for glory and honour and immortality, eternal life: but unto them that are contentious, and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, upon every soul of man that doeth evil, of the Jew first, and also of the Gentile; but glory, honour, and peace, to every man that worketh good, to the Jew first, and also to the Gentile: for there is no respect of persons with God” (vv. 5-11). Thus the point is that Jew and Gentile are treated alike, for all come under God’s just judgment. But to the contentious and those who do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, comes wrath — whether they are Jew or Gentile. And to those who work good, whether Jew or Gentile, comes blessing. These are those among the general “oh, man” who are led to repentance by the goodness of God.

And so we conclude our study of these terms. The Scriptures themselves are clear on the matter. God’s virtues of grace, love, mercy, longsuffering, and goodness are always particular.<sup>44</sup> ▲

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<sup>44</sup> We shall have occasion to consider the attributes of love and goodness in another connection.

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# Book Reviews

*The Life & Work of Charles Haddon Spurgeon*, by G. Holden Pike. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1991. 2 vols., pp. 1342. \$69.92 for the 2 vol. set (cloth). [Reviewed by Robert D. Decker.]

This very attractive set of two volumes is a reprinting of the original six volume biography of the great 19th century English preacher, Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-1892), by Pike. Included in the two volumes are photographs, excerpts of many of Spurgeon's sermons and lectures, some of his correspondence, and a detailed index.

The reader will learn many interesting facts about Mr. Spurgeon. This reviewer was delighted to learn that the Spurgeon family was of Dutch descent. Spurgeon's ancestors fled the Netherlands to escape the persecution of the Protestants under Philip II. Mr. Spurgeon had no formal training for the ministry. He preached without notes. He preached his first sermon at the age of 17. This means that, though he died at the relatively young age of 58, his preaching career was nearly forty years. The membership at the Metropolitan Chapel in London at the time of Spurgeon's death was a little over 5,000.

Spurgeon had a delightful and powerful preaching style, as is obvious from the following excerpt from

a sermon on John 17:20. The title of the sermon is, "Christ's Prayer for His People." In the section we are about to quote, Spurgeon is insisting that God would never do without ministers of the gospel:

Christ says in the text, "Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word." Someone may object and say, "Yes, but their word signifies the word of the apostles." Then another person might say, "Are you the successors of the apostles?" There has been a vast deal of fudge in these days about "the successors of the apostles." We have people who pretend to be the successors of the apostles. There are the Roman Catholics; they are the successors of the apostles. But, I think, if Peter and Paul were to come and see their successors, they would think there was a mighty difference between themselves and them. By way of parable, suppose the Virgin Mary, Peter, and Paul should come one Sunday and go to a cathedral; well, when they entered, the Virgin heard them singing something to her honour, and praise, and glory; she jogged Peter, and said, "What are those people after? They are worshipping me. My Son said to me, 'Woman, what have I to do with thee?' He never worshipped me," she said; "let us turn out of this." They stopped a

little longer, and they heard one of them say that the apostle Peter was the head of the Church, and his successor, the Pope, was therefore the head. Peter jogged the Virgin Mary and said, "What a lie that is; I was never head of the Church at all. Did I not fall into sin? I head of the Church! A pretty head I was." Soon afterwards Paul heard them preaching justification by works. "Come out," said he, "There is no gospel here; I preached justification by faith without works, and they are preaching justification by works"; and so upon that, they all three of them went out. By and by they came to a place where they heard them singing, "Glory, honour, praise, and power be unto the Lamb that sitteth on the throne"; and they heard them speak of those who were "kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation." "Ah," said Peter, "this is the place, and here will I stay." Those are the successors of the apostles who are like the apostles.

It is good for preachers to read a biography of one of the great preachers from time to time. They will learn that, while great preachers like Spurgeon, Lloyd-Jones, Abraham Kuyper, Samuel Volbeda, Herman Hoeksema, R. B. Kuiper, *et. al.* were all blessed with extraordinary gifts from God, they all worked very hard and preaching consumed their lives. They lived to preach the blessed gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Reading of the work and lives of the great preachers ought to inspire faith-

ful preachers today to put forth their best efforts in the work of preaching, of which work David Martyn Lloyd Jones said, "To me the work of preaching is the highest and greatest and the most glorious calling to which anyone can ever be called" (*Preaching & Preachers*).

We commend The Banner of Truth Trust for making this fine biography available. ♦

*Seeking Our Brothers in the Light: A Plea for Reformed Ecumenicity*, ed. Theodore Plantinga. Neerlandia, Alberta, Canada: Inheritance Publications, 1992. 142 pages. \$4.50 US/\$4.95 Can. (paper). [Reviewed by David J. Engelsma.]

The main body of this book, barely more than 70 pages, consists of four short essays, two each by Christian Reformed college professor Theodore Plantinga and by then Christian Reformed pastor Richard A. Wynia. Wynia has since seceded from the Christian Reformed Church (CRC). The rest of the book is made up of two appeals concerning church relationships made by the Canadian Reformed Churches ("Liberated") in 1963 and in 1977 to the CRC; an article advocating "Liberated" church polity by Cornelis Veenhof; and the names, addresses, and telephone numbers of all the Canadian and American Reformed churches in North America.

It is immediately apparent that the title of the book is misleading.



The book is not a "plea for Reformed ecumenicity." But it is a plea for Reformed ecumenicity between Christian Reformed churches in North America and the Canadian Reformed Churches (CaRC). Indeed, the real agenda is the one that is only very poorly hidden: directing those CR churches which have seceded from the CRC into the bosom of the CaRC. The authors are seeking only a very limited, and quite specific, group of brothers in the light.

In keeping with this quest, Plantinga and Wynia give an account of the controversy in the Netherlands in 1944 that resulted in the formation of the "Liberated" Reformed Churches that is distinguished by its vagueness and by its bias toward the "Liberated." Without any substantiation, indeed without any examination of the doctrinal issues involved, their account of 1944 is a running defense of the "Liberated." They criticize the CRC for uncritically accepting the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (GKN), while rejecting the "Liberated" Churches, from 1946 on. They then call on CR individuals and churches to seek ecclesiastical fellowship with the CaRC: "We ought to pursue ecclesiastical fellowship with the Canadian Reformed Churches, recognizing them as faithful Reformed churches" (p. 16).

Reformed ecumenicity is a holy calling. It is grounded in the unity and catholicity of the church. It may well be that the CR churches

that secede from the CR denomination belong in the CaR denomination. But it is by no means evident from *Seeking Our Brothers* that joining the CaRC will be an expression of genuine Reformed ecumenicity on the part of the seceded CR churches.

Reformed ecumenicity seeks and finds oneness in the truth of Scripture as expressed in the "Three Forms of Unity." This implies that there is real acceptance of and agreement in the doctrines taught in the "Three Forms" by the uniting churches. It is irresponsible of Plantinga and Wynia to content themselves with the assertion that the CR churches, including those that secede, and the CaRC "have the Three Forms of Unity in common" (p. 14), as though this made any further investigation into doctrinal differences superfluous. Formal acceptance of the "Three Forms of Unity" today does not assure a sound understanding and confession of the doctrines that these creeds teach. If recognition of mutual, formal acceptance of the "Three Forms" were all that is necessary for the union of Reformed churches today, no CR congregation might secede from the CRC, since the CRC still officially stands on the "Three Forms" and still requires all her officebearers to subscribe these confessions.

There were important doctrinal issues involved in the schism in the Netherlands in the 1940s that resulted in two opposing Reformed denominations both of whom claimed

to be faithful to the "Three Forms of Unity." One was the Reformed doctrine of God's covenant with believers and their children. The GKN defended a covenant of particular grace grounded in God's eternal decree of election. The "Liberated" wanted a conditional covenant with every child of believing parents. God makes the promise of the covenant to every child at baptism. But the fulfillment of the promise depends upon the faith of the child. This conditional covenant is not founded on or controlled by election.

The CaRC maintain this "Liberated" conception of the covenant. Do the CR churches, whether within the CRC or seceded, agree with this covenant conception of the CaRC? Are the CR churches convinced before the face of God that this is the doctrine of the covenant taught by Q. 74 of the Heidelberg Catechism; by the Reformed form for baptism; and, especially, by the Canons of Dordt? Reformed ecumenicity in 1993 cannot ignore this doctrinal issue. Plantinga and Wynia may not suggest that CR churches are able to unite with the CaRC on the basis of the "Three Forms" without any consideration of this doctrinal issue. The CR churches that do unite with the CaRC may be sure that they are committing themselves to the covenant view of the CaRC with all its implications concerning the conditional salvation of sinners.

There is also the distinctive "Liberated" doctrine of the church. This denies the reality of the church

invisible. Closely related to this denial is the well-known, controversial "Liberated" teaching on the true and the false church. This is supposed to be the alternative to Abraham Kuyper's theory of the pluriformity of the church. Many have charged that their doctrine of the church commits the "Liberated" to the position that only the "Liberated" churches and those in fellowship with them are true churches, whereas all others are false. To say the least, the "Liberated" have had great difficulty over the past 50 years in clearing themselves of this charge.

Is "Liberated" ecclesiology the doctrine of the church of the CR churches? Is this the doctrine of the church that the CR churches believe to be confessional? Perhaps it is. But this important doctrinal issue may not be disregarded in the Reformed ecumenical activity to which Plantinga and Wynia call CR Christians and churches. In addition to noting that the CaRC hold the "Three Forms of Unity," the CR churches that contemplate union with the CaRC must determine exactly what the CaRC believe about the church and must be sure that this is confessional, Reformed ecclesiology.

No genuine Reformed ecumenicity overlooks church polity, or minimizes its importance. Certainly, CR churches that have seceded from the CRC will not be of a mind to overlook the church government of the denomination to which they attach themselves. A main reason for their secession, they say, is

the hierarchical church government of the CRC.

Theodore Plantinga is not guilty of overlooking or minimizing church polity in his presentation of the controversy in the Netherlands in the early 1940s. Of various possible explanations of the deepest cause of the split in the GKN, Plantinga proposes that of the hierarchical church polity of the synod of the GKN. This took form in synod's deposing of officebearers (cf. pp. 19-31). The importance that Plantinga attaches to church polity is evident from the inclusion in *Seeking Our Brothers* of the chapter by "Liberated" theologian Cornelis Veenhof on "Church Order in 1886 and 1944."

This makes it all the less excusable that *Seeking Our Brothers* fails to call the attention of the CR churches which are being exhorted to seek fellowship with the CaRC to the congregational church polity of the CaRC. In their reaction against hierarchy, the "Liberated" Reformed Churches in the Netherlands fell into the opposite but equally unreformed error of congregationalism. As "Liberated" churches, the CaRC share fully in this error. The error consists of a denial and rejection of the authority of the broader assemblies, classis and synod. The CaRC deny that classis and synod possess any authority of Christ that is binding upon the consistory.

The "Liberated" themselves express this congregationalism in the documents that Plantinga and Wynia include in their book on Reformed

ecumenicity. In the CaRC "Appeal of 1963" to the CRC appear the following statements:

The only governing body in the church is the consistory ... (p. 85).

Neither the Scriptures nor the Creeds ... teach that Christ entrusted any authority to a classis or a synod (p. 85).

... the wrong conception that major assemblies possess authority entrusted to them by Christ (p. 90).

A classis, being a meeting of persons who were delegated by the consistories, does not have the right to exercise supervisory care over the ones who delegated them (that is, over the local churches in the area of the classis — DJE) (p. 90).

Delegates of consistories — forming together a classis for a few hours — have no authority at all over the consistories. To exercise supervisory care over their principals is not in their province (p. 91).

"Liberated" theologian Veenhof advocates the same congregationalism in the chapter, "Church Polity in 1886 and 1944" (pp. 123-129). In his explanation of an article of the Church Order of Dordt that is of decisive importance for genuine Reformed church government — Article 31 — Veenhof says:

Article 31 of the Church Order states that the decisions of a major assembly shall be considered settled and binding unless they

are shown to conflict with the Word of God or with the articles (of the church order) decided on in this General Synod, and so forth. We maintain that what is meant by "are shown to conflict with..." is "to conclude for oneself that it has been proven that God's Word forbids the observance of that which has been found good" (by the synod or a major assembly).

Someone, whether Veenhof himself or the one who made the English translation, is guilty of a poor translation of the article. Article 31 does not state, "unless they are *shown* to conflict," etc., but, "unless it be *proved* to conflict," etc. The Dutch is, "tenzij dat het *bewezen* worde to strijden," etc., where "*bewezen*" refers to established proof.

Regardless of the translation, "shown" or "proved," Veenhof's explanation of the article denies the binding authority of classis and synod, not only for the consistory but also for the individual member of the church. Each member decides for himself whether decisions of the major assemblies are considered settled and binding by him. Further, what actually causes a decision of a major assembly to be considered settled and binding in the denomination is not the act itself of the major assembly but the ratification by each consistory and by each individual member. For a criticism of this interpretation of Article 31 of the Church Order and for the explanation that requires that personal or

consistorial objection be proved to the major assembly, the interested reader is referred to my article, "The Binding Decisions of a Reformed Synod," in the June 1, 1991 issue of the *Standard Bearer* (pp. 389-392) and to my series of articles, "Church Unity, Reformed Synods, and Independency" in the February 1 and 15 and March 1, 1992 issues of the *SB* (pp. 197-199; 221-223; 245-247).

Veenhof also quotes J. C. Sikkel with approval: "A synod is only a temporary gathering as a manifestation of the church federation, and it has not the slightest authority over the churches, but is only a gathering of the churches..." (my emphasis — DJE).

Against this "Liberated" rejection of the authority of the broader assemblies over the consistory stands the clear testimony of the Church Order of Dordt. Article 29 states that the Reformed faith and churches recognize and maintain four kinds of church assemblies — consistory, classis, particular synod, and general synod — and not only the consistory. Article 36 declares that the classis has jurisdiction, or authority, over the consistory, as the synod has over the classis. Article 31, properly understood, requires that in a Reformed denomination the decisions of the major assemblies be considered settled and binding by all consistories and members, *by virtue of the vote at the majority of the assemblies*, although it demands of the assemblies that they decide according to the Word and the church

order and gives to the members the right and duty of appeal in case they are wronged.

The rejection of this fundamental element of Reformed church government by the CaRC ought to be of some importance to CR churches which want to be Reformed in every aspect of their life. But the call of Plantinga and Wynia for fellowship with the CaRC ignores this. Surely, this is not good Reformed ecumenicity. The oneness of churches in Jesus Christ the Lord includes unity under His government in Reformed church polity.

Reformed church polity is not congregational. It is not that of the Cambridge Platform. It is presbyterial. It is that of the Church Order of Dordt. This church order is synodical, without compromising the autonomy of the local congregation. The Reformed synod — synod in the real, robust sense; synod that meets at stated times; synod with authority; synod whose decisions are to be considered settled and binding by all according to the stipulations of Article 31 of the Reformed Church Order — is not a beast to be kept at bay in Reformed thinking, much less a monster that must be killed, but the expression, manifestation, and enjoyment on the part of autonomous churches of the unity of the Body of Christ. Attack on the idea and reality of synod is attack on the unity of the Church.

It is wrong of Plantinga and Wynia to leave the impression with the CR churches which they are di-

recting toward the CaRC that the church political alternatives for Reformed churches are hierarchy and congregationalism. They leave this impression because they themselves reject the Reformed synod. This is ironic. In a book pleading for Reformed Christians to seek each other, the authors show themselves hostile to the assembly that represents brothers and sisters having sought and found each other in the light. Urging separated churches to come together in the oneness of Christ, they undermine the unity that churches have within the Reformed, synodical federation.

The congregationalist leanings of the authors come out in Wynia's appeal to individual CR churches that are still in the CRC to overturn synodical decisions and to engage in ecumenical relations with CaR churches on their own.

... *you* have an ecumenical task. Individual believers and individual congregations have an ecumenical task to carry out. We are not accustomed to thinking this way. For whatever reason, our practice is to regard ecumenical relations as the work of synods.... If you are persuaded that something ought to be done once you have read this appeal, it will not be enough to say, "They should do something," or, "I hope someone does something." *You and your local council* can take up the task. You can do the homework, present it to your council, and ask it to act. You can bring this

matter to the attention of your congregation, to help them see what has been done, how they share responsibility for those decisions, and what ought to be done by way of correction. *Once your council is persuaded that action should be taken, it should make contact with the nearest Canadian or American Reformed congregation or council, to inform them of the decision that was made* (my emphasis — DJE). (Addresses of all the churches appear in the appendix to this book.) (pp. 131, 132)

This is the independency that springs from congregationalism. Each congregation in the denomination does its own thing. In this case, each congregation decides for itself whether the CR synods erred in their decisions on relations with the GKN rather than with the “Liberated,” and each congregation on its own initiates ecumenicity with the CaRC.

This is repugnant to Reformed thinking. The churches carry out their ecumenical calling in a cooperative, united manner, that is, synodically. That each congregation, as a church of Christ, has an ecumenical task is certainly true. That each congregation may undertake this task on its own, apart from the other churches, is emphatically false.

If the Rev. Wynia carries these independentistic notions into the CaRC, that denomination will soon disabuse him of them. The denominational life of the CaRC is more Reformed in polity than its theory

about Article 31 and its rhetoric about “synodocracy” would lead one to suppose. A future CaR council and congregation with Rev. Wynia as pastor would be ill-advised to make contact with, let us say, a local GKN council informing it that Wynia’s council had taken a decision declaring “Liberated” decisions against the GKN null and void. It would be equally ill-advised to exercise its ecumenical task by entering into sister-church relationships with, let us say, local Protestant Reformed churches.

When they wrote *Seeking Our Brothers*, Plantinga and Wynia desired that the CRC break fellowship with the GKN and establish fellowship with the “Liberated” Reformed Churches. They also wanted the CRC to confess that she erred in her decisions for the GKN. To achieve this, they should have made their appeal to the synod of the CRC, or urged CR churches to overture the synod. This was required by the unity of the church to which they both belonged.

If the CRC or churches that secede from the CRC do engage in ecumenical contact with the CaRC, there must be more light than that shed in *Seeking Our Brothers* — doctrinal light and church political light. Genuine Reformed ecumenicity demands it, and can stand it. ◆

*The Incarnation of the Antithesis*, by Dr. R.E.L. Rodgers; Edinburgh: Pentland Press Ltd. xvi + 87pp., £7.50 (paper). [Reviewed by Herman Hanko.]

Taking the title of this book from Frank VandenBerg's definitive biography of Dr. Abraham Kuyper, Dr. Rodgers discusses the role that Kuyper's view of the antithesis took in Kuyper's educational philosophy and work.

After a short biography of Kuyper, Rodgers informs his readers that Kuyper saw Calvinism as a world-and-life view and not only a theology. That is, Kuyper was concerned about man's relation to his fellow man and to the world as well as his relation to God.

In the development of his views, Kuyper's *principium* was the sacred Scripture, and the heart of his theology was the truth of the sovereignty of God.

From his theology, Kuyper developed the antithesis as between Calvinism and Modernism, as the latter was embodied in the French Revolution and the absolutism of the State.

This view of Calvinism became the first stone in the foundation of Kuyper's educational philosophy.

The second stone in that foundation was Kuyper's doctrine of common grace. Rodgers treats Kuyper's common grace from the viewpoint of the good which the wicked are capable of doing. He claims that Kuyper held consistently to the truth

of total depravity even though Kuyper held to a restraint of sin which is not only exercised outwardly by God's providence, but also inwardly by making man less than depraved. Rodgers claims that common grace was Kuyper's basis for antithetical and Calvinistic education—although exactly how this is true is not made clear in the book.

The third stone in the foundation is Kuyper's view of sphere sovereignty, which came to expression particularly in the establishment of the Free University.

In chapter III, Rodgers deals with Kuyper's educational philosophy itself. His intent is to show how Kuyper's foundation developed into a complete educational philosophy. It is this chapter which is the weak link in the argument, in my judgment.

Rodgers correctly points out that after Kuyper had abandoned the ministry of the gospel and entered Parliament he fought long and successfully for two goals: one was to establish free Christian schools, i.e., schools free from government control; the other was to obtain government financing for these Christian schools so that Christian parents would not have to pay taxes to support public education and tuition to support Christian schools. While it is true that Kuyper was successful in both these endeavors, the book does not make clear how these endeavors followed from Kuyper's theoretical foundation.

In Chapter IV Rodgers deals

with the establishment of the Free University. It was to be a university truly "free" from church and state. It was a university which in a particular way was the expression of Kuyper's theology of common grace and the antithesis. It is in demonstrating this that the author points out especially the relation between common grace and the Free University by reminding us that: 1) music, art, etc., are, in Kuyper's view, the products of common grace; and, 2) that the study of all branches of knowledge in a university is due to common grace.

In a concluding chapter, Rodgers discusses briefly the influence of Kuyper's educational philosophy in the Netherlands, America, and South Africa.

While Rodgers' general thesis is undoubtedly true, it is not always quite as clear as Rodgers would have it what role common grace played in Kuyper's educational philosophy. What is true is that in the years of Kuyper's pastoral ministry he said nothing of common grace, and the doctrine played no role in his thinking. Kuyper did not really begin to pay close attention to common grace until he was elected to Parliament and saw the possibility of breaking the liberal hold on the Dutch government by means of an alliance with the Roman Catholics. At least in part, Kuyper's development of common grace was intended to be a justification of this alliance—something which Rodgers also admits (see page 50). But all this means that

common grace played no role at all in the early formulations of Kuyper's theology and philosophy of education, and that his philosophy of education was considerably altered as Kuyper began his development of common grace.

What is true is that a genuinely Reformed philosophy of education must be developed apart from common grace if it is to be truly Reformed; and that a genuinely Reformed college or university can surely be established only when common grace is repudiated. Kuyper, with his remarkable invention of common grace, sowed the seeds of the death of truly Reformed education, even when he attempted to establish Reformed educational institutions.

One more remark. Rodgers makes the point that Kuyper held to a view of the faculties of learning as including theology as the "queen of the sciences." I think Rodgers is wrong in this respect. He refers in a footnote to Kuyper's *Principles of Sacred Theology*, pages 192-210. If he would read the entire section, he would, I think, see that Kuyper expressly repudiated this idea. It was Foppe TenHoor who held to the idea that theology was the queen of the sciences. This was one point in his dispute with Kuyper.

It is an interesting historical note that the controversy was carried over into this country, particularly into Calvin Seminary where Foppe TenHoor taught. When the controversy arose in Calvin Seminary in



the 1920s between Ralph Janssen and the rest of the faculty, one of the issues was whether theology was the queen of the sciences. Ralph Janssen, an ardent disciple of Kuyper, insisted that it was not. In insisting that it was not, Janssen held to the view that theology was a science also, on a par with other sciences (such as medicine, jurisprudence, natural science, etc.). It was this view that theology was a science which led Janssen to work with theology and Scripture from a "scientific" viewpoint; i.e., from the viewpoint of an empirical science. I make some references to this aspect of the controversy in my study of the Janssen controversy, which the interested reader can consult.

Rodgers' book is an interesting, though somewhat brief, treatment of an aspect of Kuyper's thought which has been somewhat neglected.

The address from which the book can be ordered is: Pentland Distribution, 3 Regal Lane, Soham, Ely, Cambs. CB7 5BA, England. ♦

*Interpreting the Gospel of John*, by Gary M. Burge. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992.) 185pp., \$10.95 (paper). [Reviewed by Herman Hanko.]

When I picked up this book, I was eager to peruse its contents, for the Gospel According to John is of great interest to me, and any book written on this beautiful gospel is a welcome addition to my library. Sad

to say, the book was a total disappointment, to the point where it was puzzling to me how Baker was even interested in printing it. The title of the volume is itself a give-away: "The Gospel of John." While the author indeed makes this book of the Bible John's own gospel, in fact it is not that at all; it is "The Gospel According to John." The author denies that John was the instrument of the Holy Spirit in writing this infallible part of Holy Scripture.

The book is intended to lead beginning students into a study of John. Those students who follow Burge's leadership will find themselves in a bottomless morass of higher criticism. Although the author admits the book was probably written by John in its original form, he claims that it underwent extensive editing by John's disciples, who sowed together many traditions, some in an almost unnoticeable way (noticed only by the skilled literary critics), some in such a poor way that the "seams" are "awkward." The result is that the Bible may contain the Word of God, although it is not the Word of God. This position of the author comes out when he writes:

The meaning of John 6 is found in *what I discover there*. The meaning of John 6 is *what God says to me as I read it*. One minister I know is fond of saying from the pulpit before Scripture is read, "Listen *for* the Word of God," instead of "Listen *to* the Word of God." For him the words of the Bible are not intrinsically

God's words that we are called to *listen to*; as we respond they *become* God's words (the emphasis throughout is the author's) (p. 162).

Every single line in the above quote is totally false. There is not one grain of truth in any part of it. The meaning of John 6 is not what I discover there; it is in what God Himself says there. We must not listen *for* the Word of God; we must listen *to* the Word of God. The words of the Bible are indeed intrinsically God's Words. They are God's Words even if not one single soul in all the earth listens to them. They are God's Words though the whole world should deny them. They do not become God's Words when someone listens; they are God's Words throughout all the ages.

But the author did not speak thoughtlessly. He is adamant on this point. One page later, comparing Scripture to a poem, he writes: "A poem can mean one thing to one reader and quite another to a second reader. Interpretation, therefore, involves personal experience, and meaning changes, depending on who is doing the reading." This is called "reader-response criticism."

I did not have much inclination even to review the book and would not have done so except that God's people must be warned against these vicious and unprincipled attacks against God's Word. My soul wearies of all the vagaries of unbelief as systematically God's Word is

torn to shreds. But the evils are prevalent and real, and we must be warned. And the warning is all the more urgent when the author evidently claims to be an evangelical, for he is professor of New Testament at Wheaton College.

This so-called reader-response criticism is something new on the horizon of higher criticism, although it is new only in name; in fact it is very old. To take this position is to maintain: 1) That Scripture is not the infallibly inspired record of the revelation of God in Christ; that, in fact, there is no such thing as revelation recorded in Scripture. 2) That Scripture is not an organic unity in which Scripture interprets Scripture, but Scripture is only the notions that some people in an ancient time had about God. 3) That Scripture is not the eternal Word of God to the church in which God tells His people of His wonder of salvation in Christ. 4) That Scripture is not a lamp unto our feet and a light upon our path; that it is not profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness; that it has no power thoroughly to furnish the man of God unto all good works. It is merely a book which can mean anything and everything — anything any man wants it to mean; everything which arises in the sinful heart of unbelief.

Does this mean that the Bible has no contemporary value? The author would be quite indignant if this charge were made. He goes on for pages exercising himself about

the need to bring the Bible into today's world and make it relevant to the man in the pew. But what it means to a man is his own business and his own silly notions. Yesterday it meant one thing; today it means something quite different. It means such-and-such to a Nigerian; it means something quite different and even contradictory to a man in Lithuania.

The author gives us an example of how we must give the Bible contemporary meaning. In John 7 is recorded one of the Lord's discourses. Only a blind man cannot see that we have in this discourse something about the Holy Spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is, beyond doubt, one of the most profound, one of the most sublime, one of the most soaringly beautiful and deeply moving discourses recorded of our Lord. One can study it a lifetime and be awestruck by its greatness. One can preach a series of 20 sermons on it and know beyond all doubt that he has only scratched the surface a bit. But what does the author find in this? Let him speak for himself.

My denominational tradition also builds religious institutions. We cultivate them with care and find that they do indeed meet religious needs after a fashion. But in the end the immediacy of God becomes lost in ceremonies, choirs, glass windows, and committees of church life. We too need Jesus Christ to interrupt our festivals and make us pause to consider whether we relish ceremonies about God more than our desire to know him personally. Do we want ceremonial water, or living water? Do we want tradition, or do we want the Holy Spirit?

This is called "contextualization," another new fad in biblical interpretation. If it were not all so serious, it would be silly. This comes, mind you, from a "scholar" who occupies a prestigious chair in an evangelical school.

Perhaps I received a flawed book from Baker Book House, but my copy was falling apart before I had read ten pages. At this point the book is a bundle of loose pages inside a paper cover. ▲

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# Book Notices

*Before the Face of God: A Daily Guide for Living from the Book of Romans, Book One*, by R. C. Sproul. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Company, 1992. 497 pages. No price given (cloth). [Reviewed by Robert D. Decker.]

This book is not a commentary, but a collection of devotions. The author follows the outline of *The Epistle to the Romans*.

Sproul correctly defines the doctrine of total depravity as "total inability" in a devotional on Romans 8:7 (pp. 252-253). The author teaches immediate regeneration (pp. 298-299) and defends the Reformed doctrine of election and reprobation (pp. 330-331). But the Reformed reader will be disappointed with Sproul's description of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. He defines the hardening of Pharaoh's heart as God's "withdrawing of the restraints of common grace" (p. 338, cf. also pp. 334-335).

The expositions are rather shallow and very brief, consisting of no more than one and a half to two pages each.

The discerning reader may find the book useful for personal devotions. ♦

*Essays On Ethics And Politics*, by Gordon H. Clark. Jefferson, Maryland: The Trinity Foundation. xi,

198pp., \$10.95 (paper). [Reviewed by Herman Hanko.]

In this recent publication by the Trinity Foundation, John W. Robbins has brought together writings of Gordon Clark written over a period of 50 years on the subjects of ethics and politics. In it appear many brief articles which were written for *Baker's Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, articles written for various magazines, and some unpublished essays. In them all Clark is especially concerned about insisting that the Holy Scriptures must be the norm for all ethical conduct, and that all attempts to subjectivize ethics are ungodly, unethical, impossible, and irrational.

Some of the essays in the book are outstanding. I refer especially to various essays which deal with the history of ethics and with fundamental Christian principles; to an essay that treats the subject of determinism and responsibility; to an essay which deals with abortion; and to two essays which severely (but correctly) criticize the Toronto movement, known in Clark's lifetime as The Association for the Advancement of Christian Studies (AACS).

Because the articles are taken from so many sources, there is some repetition, sometimes verbatim. But this does not detract from the value of the book. ♦

*A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada*, by Mark A. Noll. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992. Pp. xvi-576, \$29.95 (paper); \$39.95 (cloth). [Reviewed by Herman Hanko.]

In this interestingly written and comprehensive overview of Christianity in the North American continent, Mark Noll has produced a remarkable exploration of major religious movements and events in our land and Canada. It can well serve as a handy and valuable reference volume in the field of the history of religion.

A historian strives for objectivity and tries hard not to let personal bias enter his work. Such objectivity is, however, impossible. The perspective from which Dr. Noll writes this book is the perspective of the relation between religion and culture, between the church and the cultural milieu in which the church lives. He writes from the viewpoint of how culture was shaped by the church and how in turn the church shaped culture.

This perspective gives the book a distinct character and has its effects on various aspects of the discussion. For example, the book does not give much information concerning teachings of various theologians and churches. It does not relate various groups as to their origins and place in the ecclesiastical spectrum. Because of the cultural perspective, there is no analysis of Christianity from the

viewpoint of the truth of Scripture (considered in scholarly circles to be unscholarly), a bias in its own right which leads the author of the book to devote nearly as much space to Aimee Semple McPherson as to the whole of the history of the Reformed churches from the middle of the 19th century to today.

There is a great deal of interesting material in it. We are informed in the book of the impact common sense philosophy had on American thought, especially through John Witherspoon. We are informed of how B.B. Warfield did not believe that a commitment to an infallible Scripture precluded various theories of evolutionism. The strength of the book is, in this reviewer's judgment, in Noll's discussion of the origins of Christianity in this country. ♦

*Romans: Justification by Faith*, Romans 1-4, by James Montgomery Boice. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991. 512pp., \$29.95 (cloth). [Reviewed by Robert D. Decker.]

James Montgomery Boice has served as Senior Pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia since 1968. He is, as well, the radio pastor of "The Bible Study Hour."

This book is the first of a four-volume set (the first two are available, the other two are forthcoming) on *The Epistle to the Romans*. These are the sermons Dr. Boice preached

at the morning services between September 1986 and June 1988.

Students of Homiletics will recognize that Boice's style of preaching is *lectio continua* or analytical. Boice simply gives a verse by verse exposition of the entire *Epistle*.

The book contains good, meaty exegesis and would be of help to preachers. It can also be read as devotional material. Boice's style is lucid and interesting.

How Boice manages to find common grace taught in Romans 1:18-20 (cf. pp. 129-160) is a mystery to this reviewer. Despite this weakness the book is worth the price. ◆

*The Suffering Savior: Meditations on the Last Days of Christ*, by F.W. Krummacher. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1992. 444 pp., \$15.99 (paper). [Reviewed by Robert D. Decker.]

Friedrich Wilhelm Krummacher (1796-1868) was a preacher in the Reformed Church in Germany. The denomination then already was shot through with Rationalism. Krummacher was a Calvinist. He believed in the sinfulness of man and in the vicarious atonement of Jesus Christ for the sins of the elect. He held firmly to the belief that the Bible is the inspired, infallible Word of God and, therefore, the absolute rule for the faith and life of the Christian.

Krummacher preached these

truths for his entire ministry. One of the more famous churches he served was Trinity Church in Berlin, long the scene of Schleiermacher's ministry. In 1853 he was appointed court preacher at Potsdam, a position he held until his death in 1868.

The book contains fifty-three printed sermons on the suffering of our Lord. Here is, for the most part, good stuff. Pastors will find insightful exegesis that will enrich their preaching. All of God's people will find these sermons to be good devotional material.

No Reformed person will agree with Krummacher's exegesis of the first Word spoken by Jesus from the cross, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do" (pp. 351-358). Nevertheless, books like this belong in our church and home libraries and ought to be read by us. ◆

*The Dawn of the Reformation: Essays in Late Medieval and Early Reformation Thought*, by Heiko A. Oberman. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992. 309 pages, \$29.95 (paper). [Reviewed by Herman Hanko.]

This book contains a number of articles which the author has written over a period of 25 years. Perhaps a quote from the Preface will best summarize the contents of this diverse collection.

... Each of these articles testifies to the need and value of placing the Reformation movement

in its medieval context and bridging the ideological gaps between late medieval, Renaissance and Reformation studies.

The first six chapters are dedicated to the emergence of the young Luther and his reformation programme.... The 'Dawn' calls attention to that period of adumbration and clarification in which the Wittenberg reformer was hindered and helped, enriched and infuriated, shaped and sharpened by the conflicting claims of mysticism, Augustinianism, nominalism and renaissance humanism....

The second half of this volume expands the focus from Luther to the broader spectrum of events which mark the Reformation era: the Peasant War and the Copernican Revolution, the beginning of the Counter-reformation and the reform initiated by the Council of Trent....

Some of the articles are very difficult reading and require a background knowledge of scholastic philosophy and medieval religious thought. In Oberman's treatment of Luther's relationship to medieval thought, the philosophical orienta-

tion in Thomism and Nominalism of the scholastics is on the foreground.

Some of the essays are extremely interesting reading and helpful to an understanding of Luther. Two chapters especially can be included in the latter group: Chapter IV, entitled, "The Beginnings of Luther's Theology," is an excellent piece of work which explains Luther's break with the Pelagianism and Semi-pelagianism of the Roman Catholic Church. Chapter VI, entitled, "Luther and Mysticism," is helpful in understanding Luther's relationship to the strain of medieval mysticism — also as it reappeared in the Anabaptist Movement.

While the book is almost must reading for serious students of Reformation thought, it is very hard going; one reason is that the book has a lot of untranslated Latin, German, Greek, Dutch, and French in it.

Oberman is an internationally recognized scholar in the field of Reformation studies, and what he produces must be taken seriously — even if one does not always agree with his analyses. ▲

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