

THE MESSENGER

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE FREE REFORMED CHURCHES OF NORTH AMERICA



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LET NOT YOUR HEART BE TROUBLED

“Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me.” - John 14:1

In this chapter, we find the Lord dining with His disciples in the upper room. Two great shocks had come to them in chapter 13. The first shock was when Jesus said “one of you shall betray me” (v.21). This would have greatly interrupted the peace of that blessed meal. “Who is the betrayer?”, “Who would dare?”, “Could it be me?!” These and other thoughts flooded their minds. The second shock was Jesus’s dreadful words: “Little children, yet a little while I am with you. Ye shall seek me: and as I said unto the Jews, Whither I go, ye cannot come; so now I say to you” (v.33). A dismal prospect indeed.

In chapter 14, the disciples were forlorn, trying to process these two things. And our Lord, who is about to face Gethsemane and the cross, sets all aside to bring comfort to His disciples. They were troubled. He could see it on their faces, and no doubt, feel it in their hearts. He looks at the eleven, and speaks these precious words: “Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me.”

A Marvelous Invitation

These words of Christ mark a powerful shift. Until now, Christ’s ministry has focused on the Father and rightly so. In the eternal Covenant of Redemption, the Father and Son entered into a compact to save a lost people. The Father was to elect unworthy sinners and give them to the Son. The Son was to die for them and present His spotless bride back to His Father. The plan of the ages was that Jesus came to do the will of His Father. In Psalm 40:8, we read these Messianic words: “*I delight to do thy will, O my God; yea thy law is within my heart.*” In John 4, Jesus says, “My meat is to do the will of him that sent me, and to finish his work.” Again in John 5:30, He says, “I can of mine own self do nothing: as I hear, I judge: and my judgment is just; because I seek not mine own will, *but the will of the Father which hath sent me.*” Now, on the precipice of Christ’s great Passion, the emphasis shifts. Here, for the first time, Jesus points to Himself as the object of the same religious trust given to God alone.

Try to hear these words for the first time, in the context of that room on that night. Here a man is sitting among a handful of His closest friends. Twenty-four hours from now, He will be dead. They did not know it, but Jesus did. If they had known it, perhaps it would have shattered all their hopes and belief in Christ’s claims about Himself. Yet He still says, “*Ye believe in God, believe also in me.*”

What is Christ asking here? He is not asking anything at all, but rather proffering. We should not look at these words as a demand, but as a merciful invitation to full remission, life evermore, blessings eternal, and salvation itself.

These words do not simply mean, “Believe in God, *that He is*; and believe in me, *that I am.*” Jesus is not asking here simply for intellectual agreement with a doctrine. He is inviting them to go much, much deeper than that. To believe that there is a God is an act of reason. Jesus here is inviting the disciples to move deeper, to the will, and the heart. A person may believe in God and may even believe with a historical faith in what the Bible says about Jesus, and still not enter this wonderful invitation. True faith in God, and in His Son, is not a mere intellectual process. It is an intensely and deeply personal act of yielding up both the will and the heart to a living Person. Faith is an entire yielding up of self to Him for all my needs, whatever they may be, the chief of which is my own soul. We must abandon cold intellectualism and enter into the warm atmosphere of “trust” with the will and heart.

The order of words in the Greek is more vivid than “ye believe in God, believe also in me.” Our beloved Authorized Version does not quite capture the sweet emphasis here, probably because it would make for a very difficult English sentence. In the Greek, the words are inverted. It literally says, “*Believe in God, in Me believe also.*” By inverting this sentence, God and Christ are put extremely close together in faith, with two identical actions at the beginning and the end. “Believe in God, in Me believe also.” Could Jesus be more deliberate? As the glory of the Father is, so now the glory of the Son is *appearing*. The fulfillment of Christ’s High Priestly prayer is now gloriously dawning, “*And now, O Father, glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was*” (John 17:5). Here Christ sets Himself, not next to, but rather *with* God.

A Singular Faith

“Believe in God, believe also in me.” When we read these words, we think we are presented with a contrast. But upon closer reflection, they present something better: a *singularity* of faith. Jesus is not setting Himself beside God. Neither are we worshiping two gods, as if we are to bow before the Father and before the Son. Faith in Christ *is* faith in God. Faith in the Father *is* faith in the Son. They cannot be separated. A faith in God that is not faith in Christ is an incomplete faith.

What is the underlying truth here? Faith that truly flows from the Father rightly rests upon the Son. That is the underlying truth that Jesus Christ Himself is the only and singular revealer of the Father. Dear ones, there is no real knowledge of the true God, in the depths of His love, the tenderness of His heart, the beauty of His holiness, and the loving-kindness and tender mercy of His being, aside from Christ. “No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he *hath declared him*” (John 1). I know from experience that any knowledge of God outside of Jesus Christ is full of fear, doubts, and darkness. He is fearful abstract power rather than a Person. He is a force of judgment, not of kindness, a God of vengeance, a consuming fire, and not a Father full of pity and love.

When Jesus says, “Believe in God, in Me believe also”, He is in effect saying, “*And if you believe in Me, you will have the love of the Father revealed.*” Oh, so many stand afar off, fearful of God, because they have never seen Him as He is in Christ Jesus His Son. “He that hath *seen me*, hath seen *the Father*” (v.9). In other words, all that the disciples loved so much about their Master was also true of the Father. All that they believed about the Father, was true of Christ. The bond to both is faith. Faith in God through His Son is the blessed gift received by every poor sinner brought to the firm ground of salvation.

It is an intensely and deeply personal act of yielding up both the will and the heart to a living Person. An entire yielding up of self to Him for all my needs, whatever they may be, the chief of which is my own soul. We must abandon the cold intellectualism of belief and enter into the warm atmosphere of “trust.” With the will and the heart.

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Jesus is the revealer of God, because He is God. If we look out a window, light shines through the glass. But the glass is not the light: the light and the glass have nothing in common. The God-head shines through Christ, but He is not the transparent glass. No, “For in Him *dwell*eth all the *fullness* of the Godhead bodily” (Col. 2). Jesus is saying here, “He that *hath* seen me, *hath* seen the Father.” There is no saving faith that grasps God that does not first grasp Christ. It is a singular faith: One faith, one grasp of the Father and the Son, by the powerful working of the Holy Spirit. You cannot forget Christ in order to see God more clearly because to behold Christ is to behold God.

So, it follows, dear ones, all true faith and knowledge of God, whether strong or weak, is bound up in Christ. There is no true revelation of God without a revelation of Christ. There is no salvation of God outside of Christ. There is no knowing and believing in God, without Christ. Even unconsciously some have never known Christ and yet have a faint hope for heaven based on a belief in God. This is a sad, sad delusion. All faith, without faith in Christ, is full of works, fear, dread, and doubt. It is impotent. Mere faith in God has no remission and no power to heal or satisfy the heart in the least. Thus, it has no power to comfort. That is what the disciples needed to hear: “Let not your heart be troubled.” So it is for you and me.

Perhaps this word is fitting for you? Dear friend, this is the God and the Saviour you need for true rest for your soul.

A Quiet Heart

“Let not your heart be troubled” or “Let it become calmed.” Where does this *calm heart* come from? It can only come from Christ.

The shadow of Gethsemane was falling across Christ’s precious soul when His lips uttered these words. His own unrest and exceeding sorrow were about to become so intense.

What a beautiful vignette we have here of our Savior’s character. How attractively His unselfish love beams! See here how His own approaching sorrow fails to distract Him from the sorrow of others. With most of us, our grief gives rise to selfishness. It absorbs our every thought. With Him, it was the very opposite. The

nearer He came to His own heartbreaking moment, the more concerned He became to comfort the hearts of others. His Gethsemane only intensified His desire to comfort His own people!

Earthly physicians are often unable to cure a troubled heart. But the Great Physician has a remedy that has never failed. It is a cure-all in the truest sense. There is no sickness of the human heart that it cannot reach and remedy.

Tell me, do you have spiritual heart-trouble? Why not take God’s remedy? No matter what your heart’s trouble is, no matter how much distress it has brought you, God in Christ has a

And so, it follows, dear ones, that all strong faith, all imperfect and fragmented faith, all means of knowing God, has its faith bound up in Christ. In fact, there is no true revelation of God without a revelation of Christ. There is no salvation of God, outside of Christ.

remedy that will be effectual. God in Christ will give you not only immediate relief, but peace amid the storm. It may not remove the storm completely, but it will bring a harbor of rest that passes understanding.

The greatest trouble physicians often have is to get their patients to take their medicine as directed. The Great Physician faces the same problem. People want to be cured, but they do not want to take His remedy as He prescribes it: “Believe in God, in Me believe also.”

Do you wish to be cured of your heart trouble, dear soul? God’s prescription was brought down from Heaven two thousand years ago. His prescription works a perfect cure. Take Christ for your troubled heart and be at rest.

We may have many difficulties in life. We may meet sadness, losses, pain. Friends may prove untrue. A thousand other griefs may arise to disturb us. We may have trouble of mind or body. Believing God in Christ proves a remedy for all our troubles. It means trusting Him, relying on Him, taking His promises to be our very own. Taking them as realities—realities to serve us just as practically as our hands or our feet serve us. That is what His promises are meant to be to us.

“Believe in God, in Me believe also.” That is the remedy for my heart in deep trial. Is it for yours? Believe, and His promises will be fulfilled. He will take you through it all, though waves of trouble roll around you. He will keep your heart in peace amid the wildest storm, the greatest difficulty, and the worst circumstances. To be cured of your heart trouble, you must take His remedy: “*Believe in God, in Me believe also.*”

“Let not your heart be troubled”. Why? “For I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine. When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee. For I am the LORD thy God, the Holy One of Israel, thy Saviour” (Isaiah 43:1-3). ¹

Rev. J. Lewis is pastor of the Free Reformed Church of Pompton Plains, New Jersey.

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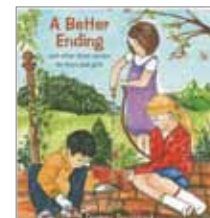
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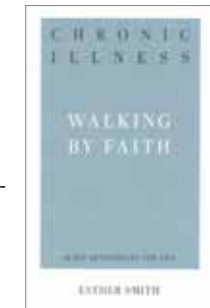
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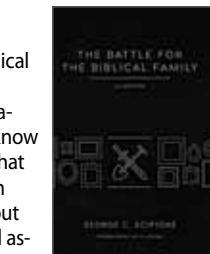
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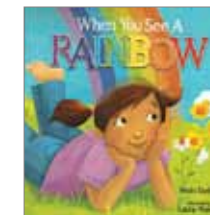
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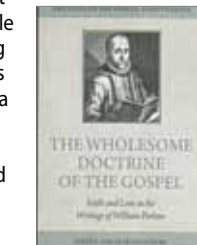
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PERSECUTION IS HERE

“I John, who also am your brother, and companion in tribulation, and in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ...” (Rev. 1:9)

Sometimes we say or hear people say, “Persecution is coming.” In light of Scripture, we should say: “persecution is here.” It may not impact our daily lives as tangibly as it does Christians in other countries, yet the Lord has made clear that all Christians will “through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22).

The Bible makes clear that the true profession of Christ will always cost believers. “If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you” (John 15:19).

Censorship

Some of us are facing pressure to conform to worldly norms and ideology, at work or school, or even privately. Social media is increasingly censoring the content of its users, labelling certain content “hate speech,” “false,” or “without context.”

People, companies, and institutions are also increasingly being “cancelled.” This term describes the act of protesting against, boycotting, and simply cutting entities out of conversations as if they have no right to exist or be heard. Admittedly, certain individuals who have been subject to this “cancel culture” have said or written things that are offensive to Christians. We cannot endorse their cause or pity their lot. However, we who stand against unbiblical ideologies that are being pushed in the media, politics, the arts, and education need to be prepared to be “cancelled” and “censored.”

At the same time, things that used to be censored as immoral, perverted, and dangerous are now being pushed. To censor these things is considered hate speech. Isaiah says: “Woe to them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter! (5:20). A common ethic of decency that may have prevailed in our societies in the past has eroded away.

All these developments should neither silence nor alarm us. We can be sent into a frenzy that is neither right nor God-honoring. We need to see that what is developing at the ideological level has been standard practice for most of the world since its earliest days.

Antithesis

A concept that used to be common in our churches is that we need to live antithetically to worldly ideology and practices. Since the time of the fall into sin, there has been the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman; the line of Cain and the line of Seth (Gen. 5). When the world mixes with the church and the church with the world, great catastrophe is bound to ensue (Gen. 6:1-11).

God’s word continues to call: “Be not conformed to the world: but be ye

transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom. 12:2). The world is constantly trying to press us into its mold. We must resist that. We must be and stay non-conformists in that regard. We need to be transformed from the inside out by the power of truth and the Spirit of God, who takes the things of Christ and shows them to believers. Such a transformed life involves living according to all the precepts of God, proving “what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God” (Rom. 12:2).

This will be true where and in whatsoever state we find ourselves: in marriage and singlehood, in school and at the workplace, alone and among friends. The world is not something outside of us only; it is allied with sin inside of us. We need the means of grace, the worship of God, prayer, and study of God’s word. We need much resolve and mutual encouragement.

Fines and Imprisonment

One of the things that is testing the moral fiber and resolve of the Christian church today is whether we will “count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord” (Phil. 3:8). No one desires to pay fines, face courts or imprisonment, or have the doors of our church shuttered, but we should face the question whether we *will* endure this before it faces us. The three friends of Daniel said boldly to the king: “O Nebuchadnezzar, we are not careful to answer thee in this matter. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up” (Dan. 3:16-18).

The Lord Jesus even invites his disciples to participate in the joy that persecution for the cause of Christ can bring: “Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you” (Matt. 5:11-12). Christians need to learn to live more and more by faith, not sight. We need to live now from out of the future that Christ has promised His people. If we do that, we will know something of the joy of heaven even amid much strife and tribulation. Paul gives an instance of this in his letter to the Hebrews: “For ye had compassion of me in my bonds, and took joyfully the spoiling of your goods, knowing in yourselves that ye have in heaven a better and an enduring substance” (Heb. 10:34). This can be our portion as well by grace. Let us then be sure that we are being persecuted not for our own wrong-doing, but for well-doing, for the gospel’s sake, for Christ’s sake, for the truth of the Bible’s sake.

Joining the Church at Large

The church in the West may be beginning to realize that for too long we have taken certain liberties and common decencies for granted. We have thought of these as norm from which we are being forced to retreat. In reality, the opposite is the case. We are now increasingly being asked to take our place with the church of all times and places and endure not just subtle but more obvious persecution. The church of Jesus Christ is to be a militant church, always fighting a three-fold enemy: Satan, the world, and our own evil flesh.

Persecution sifts the church. Some are offended at the thought of persecution and show themselves to be “stony ground,” who “when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, by and by he is offended” (Matt. 13:20-21). “Demases” will depart, “having loved this present world” (2 Tim. 4:10). We may be concerned about what our children and grandchildren will do in the world in which they will grow, but let us remember that Satan is busy no matter the time. His tactics vary between the more obvious and the more subtle. Sometimes the more obvious

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EDITOR: Dr. Gerald M. Bilkes
2692 Bridge Place NE
Grand Rapids, MI 49525
USA · T: 616.977.0599 ext.121
E: jerry.bilkes@prts.edu

ASSISTANT EDITOR:
Rev. David H. Kranendonk
T: 226.980.9607 · E: kranendonk@frna.org
The Editors report to the Synodical Publications Committee.

COMMITTEE MEMBERS:
Rev. J. Procee, Secretary
4234 Perth Line 20, St. Pauls, ON NOK 1V0
T: 519.801.6485 · E: jgprocee@gmail.com
· Mr. David Tamminga
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Rev. Jerrold Lewis, General Editor
160 West Parkway
Pompton Plains, NJ 07444
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are easier to combat than the more subtle.

We certainly must train them in the fear of the Lord, looking to the Lord for help and grace. We may pray that the coming generations will follow in the footsteps of Zwingli, Calvin, Tyndale, Latimer, and many even in Secession days, who were persecuted for righteousness' sake.

Companions in Tribulation

All the while, we ought to remember those who even now “are in bonds, as bound with them; and them which suffer adversity, as being yourselves also in the body” (Heb. 13:3; emphasis mine). I wonder if one of the sins we need to confess before the Lord is that we have too long and too much neglected brothers and sisters in persecution, not really knowing ourselves as “bound with them,” praying for them for steadfastness and faithfulness, which we also need. They may be praying for us, while we neglect to pray for them. May God forgive us, if that is true.

All the while, may we know ourselves “companions in tribulation,” as the Apostle John was in relation to the whole church of God. The book of Revelation is part of the inheritance of the church, to comfort, challenge, and hold forth the patience and endurance of believers. As John makes clear, he and all believers are not just companions in tribulation, but “in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ...” (Rev. 1:9). In other words, Jesus still reigns supreme. “His name shall endure for ever: his name shall be continued as long as the sun: and men shall be blessed in him: all nations shall call him blessed” (Ps. 72:17). No adversary, no world, no Satan will take Christ off the throne. More than that, Christ has all the resources that His church needs in order to endure patiently.

We must be found in Him, and then, no matter who might cancel us, Christ has “cancelled” sin and Satan in the sense of Colossians 2:14-15: Christ was “blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross; and having spoiled principalities and power, he made a shew of them openly, triumphing over them in it.” ①

“His name shall endure for ever: his name shall be continued as long as the sun: and men shall be blessed in him: all nations shall call him blessed” (Ps. 72:17)

WALKING BY FAITH DURING CHRONIC ILLNESS

Walking by Faith – Chronic Illness (31-Day Devotionals for Life) by Esther Smith. Published by the Biblical Counseling Coalition of P & R Publishing Company, Philipsburg, New Jersey, 2020. Softcover, 92 pages.

This is a uniquely helpful book. It is not just a daily devotional that has some thoughts to ponder, but the devotions are woven around the theme of living with chronic illness. Chronic illness is familiar to us. Few of us are spared from chronic health issues. All of us know someone who does have chronic health problems. This book, which centers on dealing with chronic suffering, will be helpful for any reader. Each of these daily devotions are introduced with an applicable Scripture passage that sheds spiritual insight on the emotions and conditions of those who suffer.

The author is a biblical counselor trained through the Christian Counseling & Education Foundation (CCEF). She suffers from a form of lupus and debilitating chronic pain due to a chiropractic injury, which make her completely helpless for periods of time. Throughout the book, she does not hesitate to bare her soul to show how she responds and empathizes with those who suffer. When she first received the shattering news that her condition was chronic, she states: “My life became very small, which took a heavy toll on my emotions and sense of self. I struggled to go to work and keep up with daily tasks of living... I felt anxious and sad, angry, and defeated. I cried a lot. Life felt meaningless, and I didn’t think things would ever get better” (p. 10). But she also states that, “Perhaps the most important lesson I have learned is that chronic illness can take away many things, but it can never take away God’s presence... When you are overwhelmed with sorrow, God invites you to tell him how much it hurts. When life doesn’t offer any answers, God offers you himself” (p. 11).

The 31 daily devotions are divided into four sections which describe areas of a person’s life that are affected – which together form our total life. In the first section, the author addresses the spiritual impact under the title, “Draw Near to God.” The second section shows how to “Take Care of Yourself,” which is followed by section three, “Live With a Purpose” and fourthly, “Don’t Give Up.”

In the first chapter of part one, she points out that chronic sufferers are “Seen and Known by God,” quoting Psalm 31:7,

where the psalmist says that God has “seen my affliction” and has “known the distress of my soul.” God knows everything; nothing is hidden from His sight (Heb. 4:13). “Maybe you can’t feel God’s presence or see what he is doing, but that doesn’t mean he isn’t there. He sees you—even when you can’t see him. He knows when no one else knows” (p.16). In this section there is a chapter, “Say How Much It Hurts” where people with chronic illness may relate to David’s thoughts and feelings. He says them out loud: “Have mercy upon me, O Lord, for I am in trouble: mine eye is consumed with grief, yea, my soul and my belly. For my life is spent with grief ... my strength faileth because of mine iniquity (Psalm 31:9-10). In the chapter, “When You Don’t Know How to Pray,” she points to

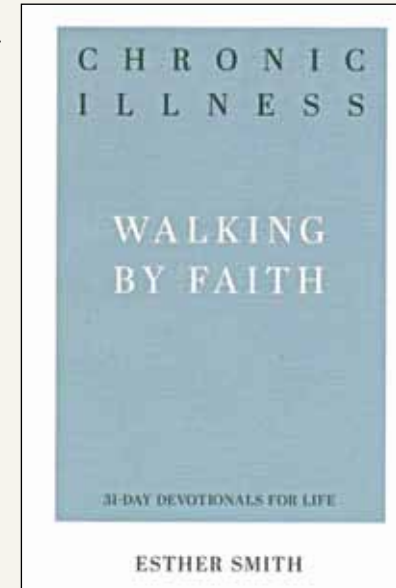
Romans 8:26-27, where we are told: “Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered...” Smith points out that “Many times, [chronic illness] can serve as a reminder for us to repent and an opportunity for us to turn back to God” (p. 32). Many more insightful spiritual nuggets could be quoted.

Next, in several chapters, the author deals with the care of our bodies. Chronically ill people often have to spend an inordinate amount of time to care for the well-being of their bodies. This is proper in light of 1 Corinthians 6:13-14, 19-20. We belong to God body and soul. Our body is destined for resurrection and glorification and is the temple of the Holy Spirit.

God took care of Elijah’s needs when he was spiritually and physically spent while fleeing from Jezebel and wanted to die. The Lord responds to Elijah’s physical and spiritual needs by first focusing on his physical needs, leading him to a tree for sleep and sending food and water by an angel. There are other helpful chapters in this section.

The third section is entitled, “Live With a Purpose.” “At times, we are more concerned about how we will continue to eat, sleep, breathe, walk, shower, and stay alive.” We wonder about our purpose to live and how we possibly benefit others. “Even as you suffer, God has given you a gift. It may be the gift of speaking or praying for others or seeing God’s grace in your suffering... The ultimate reason for us to use these gifts [of suffering] is so that God will be glorified through Christ Jesus” (p.60).

The last section, “Don’t Give Up,” contains chapters filled with encouragement that point out that by waiting on the Lord, God sometimes gives reprieve. Using modern technology and medication may help for a time. Even so, chronic conditions may also worsen. When physical symptoms are so intense you feel that you want to give up and die, God’s love never fails and He will bring you through, as the apostle Paul encourages us: “For which



cause we faint not; but though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory” (2 Cor. 4:16-17).

At one point the author asks herself, “What is the number one message that people with chronic illness need to hear? It is this: “Your relationship with God is vital for your survival. People will let you down. Symptoms will come and go. Life will be painful and filled with grief. [But] God is your only certainty” (p.20). ①

Mrs. F. Pronk is wife of Rev. C. Pronk and frequent contributor to *The Messenger*.

P.S. Other issues in this series of 31-day devotionals deal with spiritual and emotional issues such as anxiety, anger, doubt, and contentment, but also practical issues such as engagement, marriage conflict, money matters and pornography. Books from this series may be purchased in Canada at Reformed Book Services in Brantford, Ontario, and at Reformation Heritage Books, Grand Rapids, Michigan, U.S.A.

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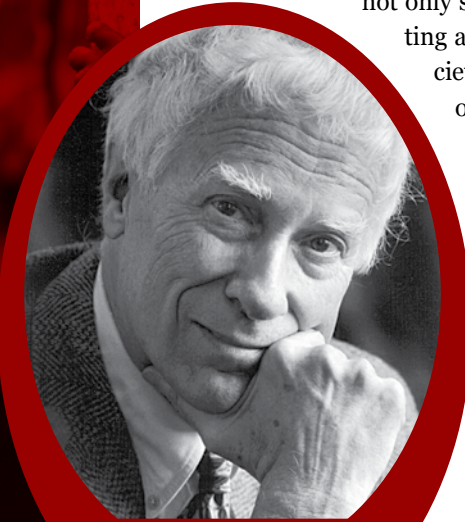
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NICHOLAS WOLTERSTORFF:

NORTH AMERICA'S MOST RESPECTED NEO-CALVINIST (2)

AN EVALUATION

Last time we looked at the neo-Calvinist, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and focused on his view of the real task of the church in the world. That task requires not only studying Scripture and growing in grace, but also getting actively involved in relieving the material needs of society at large. Using as an example the extreme poverty of the masses in Latin America, he lauds the efforts of Roman Catholic theologians there to bring about political liberation from rampant injustices. We saw that Wolterstorff recognized a similarity between the liberation movement and neo-Calvinism in that both are appalled by the injustices inflicted on many in the world. Both heard the cries of the victims of injustice for deliverance, and both understood that God's will for them was to bring about justice and peace in the world.



**NICHOLAS
WOLTERSTORFF**

Shalom Through Justice

In his book, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace*, Wolterstorff puts his finger on a real problem. Poverty and injustice abound in the world. But what can we do about it? Should we be more generous toward the poor? Wolterstorff does not think that will solve the problem unless the affluent West gives until it hurts, and how likely is that? Giving out of pity will not be the solution either. Poor people should not be seen as objects of charity, he says, but as human beings created in God's image and therefore entitled to receive our help.¹ God loves all His image-bearers. He demands from the rich that they share their wealth with the poor and He is angry with those who deprive the latter of their God-given rights. Only those who take this divine command seriously are blessed because, by the recognition that the poor are entitled to their share in the world's goods, they not only bring happiness to the beneficiaries, but also to their benefactors. Happiness, Wolterstorff says, means enjoying true peace (shalom) through justice.²

His View of Sin

Much about Wolterstorff's thought here deserves our praise and commendation. What concerns me, however, is his rather shallow and philosophical view of sin and justice. What is sin according to him and how is it related to justice? Is it sin against a holy and righteous God or is he thinking of violating Dooyeweerd's fourteen or fifteen creation laws or modalities? Let me repeat here what I wrote in the previous article.

According to Dooyeweerd and his disciples, God the Creator has placed all of creation under His laws, not just the law of the Ten Commandments and its derivatives recorded in Scripture, but also a number of so-called creation laws which He has embedded in the cosmos. To obey these so-called creation ordinances or modalities, they need to be discovered by studying Scripture (special revelation) or nature (general revelation), especially the latter. Dooyeweerd believes he has identified all or most of the creation laws that govern the various aspects or realities of our life such as our religious beliefs, moral conduct, social, economic and political interests and responsibilities, etc. With reference to the quality of life resulting from poverty and other evils, and the ideal life of shalom made possible through liberation from those deprivations, Wolterstorff makes use of the norms derived from the creation ordinances or modal spheres, and paints a picture of the ideal life as it ought to be lived—a life of peace, contentment, and joy and above all justice (See my Article 25).

His Concept of Justice

Wolterstorff's definition of justice is not very clear in his book, *Until Justice & Peace Embrace*. He is clearer in another book entitled, *Justice in Love*,³ in which he sets forth a theory of justice that departs from the historic Augustinian and Reformed understanding of this divine attribute. His new concept is called *reprobative justification*, which is a form of justification that includes the notion of disapproval, blame, or censure, but that does not insist on punishing the offender. The sinner is reminded of his wrongdoing and of God's strong disapproval, but he is nevertheless freely forgiven by God's unconditional love (agape). God's justice need not be satisfied by the sinner or by Someone else in his place (Heidelberg Catechism, LD 5, A 12). Justification does not mean imputation of righteousness, as Paul teaches in Romans 4. When the apostle there speaks of Abraham being declared righteous in God's sight, he simply means that God dismissed the charges against him and that Abraham simply believed God's act of love, according to Wolterstorff. So, God justifies Abraham upon the ground of his *faith*.⁴

This does not mean, however, that Wolterstorff totally rejects the doctrine of the penal and substitutionary atonement. He grants that Christ's suffering for us "in some way is undeniably a component of New Testament teaching."⁵ But the words "in some way" betray an alarming vagueness and lack of understanding of the gospel way of salvation. Whereas Wolterstorff sees the cross as only a "component" of New Testament teaching, Paul sees it as of "first importance" (1 Cor. 15:3). This means that for Wolterstorff, Christ's role in salvation is incidental, not central. This

makes one wonder whether Christ's death was necessary at all. If the ground of justification is faith, even if faith is seen as a gift of God, one must still ask: what is the object of such faith? If it is only or primarily God's love, where does justice come in?

His View on Same-Sex Marriage

In my last article, I stated that Wolterstorff and other neo-Calvinists have moved in the direction of neo-orthodox and even liberal theology. A clear indication of this is his change of views regarding sexual morality. In a recent lecture, held on October 13, 2016, in the Neland Avenue Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, he spoke on the subject of *Biblical Justice and Same Sex Marriage. The Banner*,⁶ the official publication of the CRC, reported that Wolterstorff stated that with respect to the issue of same sex marriage, he had come to see things differently. He now concluded that biblical justice requires that people of homosexual orientation be

Wolterstorff noted that Scripture stresses God loves justice and that we are to do justice in a loving way. Being the most vulnerable people in our society, he said, homosexuals are being wronged the worst.

granted "the great good of civil and ecclesial marriage." Part of his change was the result of listening to people who were gay, and of studying Scripture passages related to the topic at hand.

Being on the homosexual end of the sexual orientation continuum, he said, doesn't seem to be a disorder or a mark of the fallenness of creation, but rather a creational variance. "When those with homosexual orientation act on their desires in a loving, committed relationship, [they] are not, as far as I can see, violating the love command... If homosexual orientation is not morally blameable or a disorder, and if members of the church are to accept people as they are, then why is it wrong for people with [homosexual] orientation [to act] on their desires in a loving and covenantal relationship?" Admitting that Romans 1 "depicts a truly appallingly wicked people," he asked whether we can "generalize from this passage and say that Paul is saying that God says homosexual activity is always wrong; ... there is a night-and-day difference between what Paul describes and the same-sex couples I know."

Wolterstorff noted that Scripture stresses God loves justice and that we are to do justice in a loving way. Being the most vulnerable people in our society, he said, homosexuals are being wronged the worst.

Reactions to Wolterstorff Speech

Wolterstorff's speech met with mixed reactions, many indicating agreement while others were opposed.

Matthew Tuininga: Among the latter was Dr. Matthew Tuininga, Assistant Professor of Moral Theology at Calvin Seminary, who disagreed especially with Wolterstorff's exegesis of Romans 1. After a detailed exposition of a number of key passages, Tuininga

concluded with these words: The body is meant “for the Lord, and the Lord for the body,” Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 6:13. The relationship between male and female was intended from before creation to tell us something about the relationship between Christ and His church, between God and us. It is inextricably tied up with what it means to be human. That is why Genesis 1 declares that God made us in His image as male and female. That is why male and female become one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28). And that is why Paul can say in Romans 1 that homosexual practice tells a lie. It takes the meaning of creation, the meaning of human sexuality, and turns it on its head.

Cory J. Griess: Rev. Cory J. Griess,⁷ a minister of the Protestant Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, also countered Wolterstorff’s speech. He disagreed with especially to the latter’s statement that homosexuality is not a disorder and mark of man’s fallenness, but rather a creational variance. The most fundamental and enduring moral law is to love God and our neighbor, he writes. This law may be drawn from nature or the creation order apart from Scripture, but it is also clearly revealed in Scripture. Moreover, Scripture tells us *how* we are to love God and our neighbor. Some neo-Calvinists view these commands of Scripture as time-bound to a former age. They think that specific Scripture commands are only *illustrations of how* we should love others.

“Brethren, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved”
Romans 10:1

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The church today must do for our age what the apostles did for theirs, but we must do it without taking what they wrote as the actual Word of God for our age. This makes it difficult to apply biblical commandments to our modern cultural situation. The result is that for many people even the Ten Commandments are no longer normative as the absolute changeless law of God. They see the decalogue as an expression of God’s law for a particular time and place. On this basis many progressives in Reformed and Evangelical churches defend homosexual relations and the ordination of women to offices in the church. That the Bible does not allow these practices is acknowledged but dismissed as not applicable to our day.

William Dennison

How do progressive intellectuals like Wolterstorff and many other neo-Calvinists come to such radical and unbiblical views? According to Griess, to answer that question we must study the origins of neo-Calvinism. He says he was greatly helped by reading an article on that subject by William Dennison, associate professor of interdisciplinary studies at Covenant College, Lookout Mountain, GA.⁸

According to this Presbyterian scholar, a shift took place in the 19th and 20th centuries away from the Church’s hope in Christ establishing the new heavens and new earth to a hope that is centered in this life and realized through our transformation of culture. Largely to blame for this shift are Dutch Reformed scholars who teach that God will bring restoration and redemption to the present creation through the social activity of Christians. Through them, God will turn it into a new creation without the effects of sin. Along with this, Griess writes, has come the notion of God’s dual purpose in history.

One is to save a church in Christ. The other is to establish a worldwide God-glorifying culture, established by the union between the church and the world on the basis of a supposed common grace. As soon as the world is convinced of the modal spheres, and falls in line with their norms, the heavenly city will be complete. For many, this other goal is just as important as the saving of Christ’s church. For many the saving of His church is only a means to this end... Sanctification is recast from progressive obedience to the law of God from the heart, to progressive transformation of culture... [This change] has drawn God’s people away from the high callings given them in Scripture (e.g. being a wife and mother). It has drawn the church away from putting her energy into reforming the lives of the families within her midst according to the Word of God (which is the foundation of the church and society, and which is a major focus of the Word of God), to allowing the church to mirror the culture in the family’s destruction, all the while calling people to transform the culture. Indeed, the traditional Reformed

and biblical emphasis on the antithesis has fallen away. The church becomes more and more like the world, transformed by the world, all the while proclaiming that her goal is to influence the world.⁹

According to Dennison, neo-Calvinists, through their contacts with scholars from other religious backgrounds, have compromised their Reformed convictions, resulting in a blurring of doctrinal distinctions. He writes,

For many neo-Calvinists, tolerance concerning the definition of the person of God and towards other religions is becoming increasingly apparent. Wolterstorff has distanced himself from the person of God as defined in the Reformed Confessions... The immanent identity of God in history is a theme that is typical of modern critical liberal scholars from Schleiermacher to the present process theologians... It is revealing when Wolterstorff remarks that he wishes to stand between Barth and Schleiermacher and is comfortable to tolerate any monotheistic religion whose God is identified with his activity in history... Furthermore, we must seriously consider the possibility that, at least in the case of Jews and Muslims, the non-Christian is not worshipping a different god, not worshipping an idol, but worshipping differently the same god, the one and only God.¹⁰

Wolterstorff must know how far he has moved away from the Reformed tradition in which he grew up in Minnesota. The teaching in the Christian Reformed Church at that time may have been somewhat one-sided, even pietistic, but surely when it comes to the essentials of saving truth, it was very close to the old and time-tested apostolic faith which was once and for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3).¹¹


(Endnotes)

- 1 Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace*, 82.
- 2 Ibid., 69-70.
- 3 Wolterstorff, *Justice in Love*, 84.
- 4 Ibid., 263.
- 5 Wolterstorff, *Justice in Love*, 192-193.
- 6 Wolterstorff, “Biblical Justice and Same-Sex Marriage,” *The Banner* (October 13, 2016).
- 7 Cory J. Griess, “A Report from the Desert,” *Protestant Reformed Journal* 53.1 (2019): 27-48.
- 8 William Dennison, “Dutch Neo-Calvinism and the Roots for Transformation: An Introductory Essay,” *JETS* 42.2 (June 1999): 271-291.
- 9 Griess, “A Report from the Desert,” 43.
- 10 Dennison, “Dutch Neo-Calvinism,” 284. See also Wolterstorff “On Christian Learning,” in *Stained Glass: Worldviews and Social Sciences*, 70-71.

Pastor C. Pronk is emeritus minister of the Free Reformed Churches, and former editor of The Messenger. His recent book is entitled, A Goodly Heritage: The Secession of 1834 and was published by Reformation Heritage Books.

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WAVES OF EXODUS (10): EXODUS TO GLORY

If they think of death at all, non-Christians either look at it with fearful forebodings or with mythical fancies of a heaven with no basis except wishful dreaming. To Christians, however, the Bible gives a firm foundation for the “hope set before us.”

The Apostle Peter wrote this second epistle knowing that death was not far off. He stirs his readers up to live a holy life (1:1-9). He warns of false prophets (chapter 2) and holds up the authority of the Word of God as a sure reliance in all times, including dark times (1:19-21). He also directs to the second coming of Christ, which will mark the end of all things (chapter 3). Scoffers will come who will call into question whether there will be an end of all things. They will mock God, whose longsuffering bears with them and their wickedness, though they do not know that at all.

How important it is to bow under and hold to the Word of God. In a certain sense, as Peter writes some of his last words and draws some of his last breaths, he points us to everlasting Word of God, breathed out by God the Holy Spirit (2 Pet. 1:21).

What This Is For Peter

Peter had witnessed a lot in his life. He had been called by the Lord Jesus Christ to follow Him. In that effectual call, He received new life from his deadness in trespasses and sins. Though he remained a sinner, and would often lament it, yet he knew the only true God and Jesus Christ, whom He had sent (see John 17:3). That was the beginning of eternal life for Peter. Christ had redeemed his life from destruction and crowned him with lovingkindness and tender mercy.

Additionally, Peter had seen the Lord Jesus undertake the exodus of His people in His suffering and death on the cross. He had even been there when Moses and Elijah had spoken to the Lord Jesus of His “exodus” (decease) that He would accomplish at Jerusalem (Luke 9:31). He had been there when Christ celebrated the last Passover and instituted the Lord’s Supper. He had been there when Christ had gone out and sung the great Passover liturgy (Psalms 113-118; see Matt. 26:30). He had seen the great drops of blood in the garden of Gethsemane and witnessed part of the trial in Caiaphas’ hall. He had heard about Christ’s atoning death on the cross, and even preached to the people that Christ, “being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain” (Acts 2:23). All this was Christ’s great Exodus of redemption by the blood of the cross. This had been the great act of God in Christ that had also personally redeemed Peter, who without this would have been a slave of sin forever.

This Exodus of Christ colored everything in Peter’s life. Every day looked different because of it. His life, his ministry, his trials, his joys – all of it was radically affected by Christ’s Exodus. He had been redeemed. He had been bought with a price in order to serve God in his

body and live to the glory of God. Life was now unimaginable without the death of Christ. But death, Peter’s death, was also unimaginable without Christ’s death.

So, when it comes time for Peter to stare death in its face, he uses the word for himself that had applied to Christ’s death

– exodus. Literally, the text reads: “Knowing that shortly I must put off this my tabernacle ... I will endeavor that ye may be able after my exodus (decease) to have these things always in remembrance” (2 Pet. 1:14-15). There are a number of important lessons that we can draw from how Peter terms his death.

1. He sees his own death *in the light of Christ’s death*. Christ’s death changes everything for Peter. Because Christ has redeemed him from the curse of the law and from the penalty of sin, death is not a payment for sin. Christ has paid that and redeemed him unto God. In a sense, Peter has even died already with Christ and been crucified with Him. Peter’s own death will forever be colored by Christ’s death on his behalf.
2. He sees death *as the final passage into glory*. Peter’s death will be the culmination of redemption applied to him. It will transport his soul to glory, and his body will soon follow (at the return of Christ). Then will be gone even the remnants of sin and the bondage he still feels, making him cry with Paul: “Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?” (Rom. 7:24). Then the redemption of the children of God will be forever complete. Peter’s death is the final stage in the application of redemption to him. Though the process of death takes longer for some than others, the moment of death is simply an exit. There are no long voyages through purgatory or stages of being. Death is simply like going through a doorway. To be “absent from the body” means to be “present with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:8).
3. He sees death *as something that the Lord personally appointed for him*. He calls it “my decease” or “my exodus.” In verse 14 he confesses death is something “our Lord Jesus Christ hath shewed me.” Indeed, Christ told him in John 21:18: “When thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldest not.” All this was meant to signify “by what death he should glorify God” (John 21:19). The Lord Jesus has so ordered the death of each of His children so that it would glorify God. For the most part, He doesn’t reveal the

manner of our death to us. In a certain sense, perhaps when we receive a diagnosis of a terminal illness, we hear what the particulars of “our decease” will be, though even then we do not know for certain. But if we are believers, we can know that God has ordered every particular for us, so that we might glorify God, and He in turn might glorify us.

Without this comfort that comes through faith, our death will not be an exodus to glory, but an exit unto the misery of hell forever. Those who believe deserve the same judgment, but as with Peter, Christ’s redemption impacts our life, and also our death. May the Lord seal this perspective to our hearts by His Spirit.

What This Is For the Lord

Not only do believers desire to be with Christ, which is far better, but Christ also desires to have His people with Him in glory. On the eve of His betrayal, He prayed: “Father, I will that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am; that they may behold my glory” (John 17:24). The death of believers is not just an exodus from this life, but an entrance into glory where Christ is. In the Greek, Peter makes a play on words. He uses the words *exodus* (exit) and *eisodos* (entrance) just a few verses apart. He writes about the death of the Christian as follows: “For so an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 1:11). You can sense that Peter is longing for that. Going through the door of death, he will not be in some long tunnel, or in oblivion, but he will be immediately with Christ. The door out of this world is for the believer an entrance into glory. Peter says a number of things about the death of the believer as an entrance into glory:

1. Death for the Christian is a royal entrance into glory. Peter speaks of the “everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour.” The death of the Christian on the outside might seem dark, difficult, and even dismal, but in an instant, he or she is in the royal Paradise of God, before the throne of God. If entering an earthly palace would be impressive, entering the throne room of God is beyond comparison. On earth we may have been slaves, beggars, the offscouring out of the earthly – but believers will reign with Christ forever, all because of grace.

2. Death for the Christian is a ministered entrance into glory. Believers sometimes fear they cannot enter glory. They are

QUESTIONS

01 Wasn’t it too bold of Peter to compare his death to Christ’s and call it an exodus? In what ways can a believer see his or her death as an exodus?

02 Peter’s death was for the glory of God (see John 21:19). Can the same thing be said of every believer? Why does God choose such a difficult deathbed for many of His children?

03 Why don’t we think more of what the eternal state will be for Christ and the Triune God? How does that help the focus of believers to be less preoccupied with themselves? What perspective does the High priestly prayer of Christ give here?

04 How is the death of unbelievers an exit but no exodus?

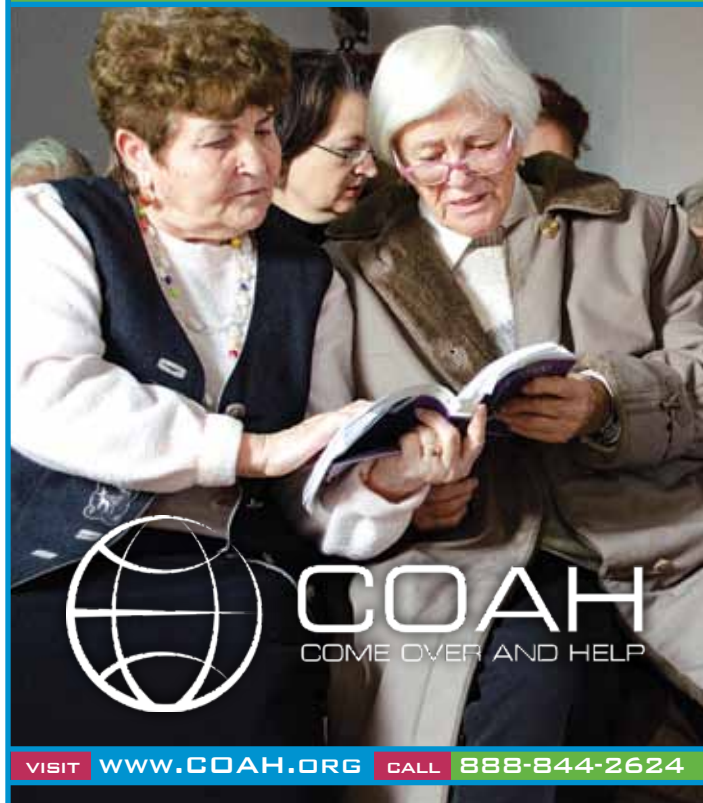
05 Psalm 121 is the prayer of a pilgrim that mentions “thy going out and thy coming in” (v. 8). One day there will be one last going out and coming in for all the people of God. Reflect on the comfort of this reality for believers.

too sinful, too unclean, too unbelieving, they think. But Peter knows that their entrance into heaven is not their own doing and certainly not on the basis of anything in themselves. He says that their entrance will be “ministered unto them.” The word means, entirely furnished and supplied. In other words, Christ will see to all of it. We read of the angels carrying Lazarus into Abraham’s bosom in the parable (Luke 16:22). Nothing is left to chance. Christ has not just purchased their rescue from hell, but furnished their entrance into the glories of heaven.

3. Death for the Christian is an abundant entrance into glory. That’s what Peter says. The word literally is “richly.” They will not be grudgingly permitted to enter heaven. There will be a lavish provision for them in every possible way. Just to mention one thing: they will receive crowns, all of which of course they will cast before the One on the throne (Rev. 4:10).

It should be clear by now: Christ is even more desirous to see His people than they are to see Him. Then His Exodus will not only be accomplished, which it is already now, but it will be entirely applied, in their exodus and entrance into His heavenly Kingdom. Then He will have His full reward. Then He will have all His blood-bought people with Him, and He will reign forever. ①

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IMPLEMENTING REFORMED WORSHIP IN A CHURCH PLANT

JUNE 17, 2020

In the summers of 2011 and 2012, while I was a Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary student, I was invited along with my family to serve for a few weeks in a church plant of the Free Reformed Churches in Powassan, Ontario, Canada. We noticed immediately that this church plant had a different feel than other places I was accustomed to exhorting. The group was smaller and yet more diverse, the available rental spaces changed from time to time, visitors came and went, and discussions were different. One thing this group did not expect to be significantly different, however, was the approach to worship. The order of worship was simple. It followed the pattern of historic Reformed liturgy, though the service overall was a little bit shorter than some Reformed believers may be used to. Most of the members and visitors seemed to appreciate this simple, Biblical approach to worship. They had begun with a good, time-tested, and Biblical foundation, even for a small church plant in a rural area. The validity of implementing these Reformed patterns of worship from the beginning was often reinforced after I was called to serve this congregation as a church planter in 2012.

When starting a church plant, there are often suggestions to modify Lord’s Day worship. One is the temptation to remove, or obscure, elements that may seem strange or off-putting to our culture. This often includes suggestions to remove the reading of the Ten Commandments, or the collection, or other elements that are thought to be potentially distasteful. Another temptation is to simplify preaching or teaching in the direction of story-telling or humour, so much so, that little is being learned by the majority of a core group, and there is little taught from Scripture “for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.” (2 Timothy 3:16). To summarize, these are temptations to “take away” elements of Reformed worship so that visitors will feel more comfortable.

The great danger in an approach that seeks to eliminate elements of worship is that it is precisely the most unfamiliar and counter-cultural elements that the Lord may use in the conversion, or spiritual growth, of visitors. We must understand that the Holy Spirit may use the simple reading of the law to convict of sin. More than a few times, I have had conversations with people who were pricked in their conscience by a commandment, sometimes after they had heard the Ten Commandments in their entirety for the first time in their life. A collection bag passing by may convict others of their selfishness and their failure to dedicate all that they have to the Lord. It may often be counter-cultural, but Biblical, elements of worship that most affect the thoughts and hearts of visitors! Though these elements may not attract superficial seekers or fill pews quickly, they may be used by the Holy Spirit to convict “...of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment.” (John 16:8)

On the other extreme, there may be temptations to maintain an approach to worship that is unnecessarily rigid, or even cryptic, to an out-

sider. Very long prayers or deep sermons, which would benefit a mature congregation, could become a stumbling block to a newer church or its visitors. More than once I have been reminded of the principle which a shoemaker cautioned Dr. Martyn-Llyod Jones about:

Martyn, he declared, was expecting too much of his hearers. With one of his characteristic similes drawn from the way in which horses and cattle have to be fed in farmyard stables, he went on, ‘You are putting the rack too high - it is wonderful hay but they cannot all reach it.’ (*The First Forty Years*, p. 183)

Those preaching and leading worship in all churches, as well as church plants, ought to pray for much wisdom in standing as a representative of the Lord Jesus Christ, to be wise enough to know how to feed the flock that is before them. That does not mean abandoning the provision of good food, but it may mean taking thoughtful steps to remove unnecessary stumbling blocks. The following are some principles that may be helpful in addressing these concerns:

First, leaders and congregants ought to put some thought into the experience of a visitor. What would it be like to walk into your church or plant for the first time and sit down? Will they be confused when a congregation, without instruction, automatically stands or sits at certain times? Is there material or literature available that aids in understanding the liturgy or certain theological terms that may be used? Will someone welcome them as they walk in, ideally in a friendly and natural way, and ask if they have any questions or needs?

Second, those who are leading worship should consider explaining the various steps of the liturgy when visitors are present. It is good for us to think like a child and ask “why?” over and over. Why do we have a silent prayer? Why do we read the law? Why do we have a congregational prayer? Why do we have preaching? Why do we sing this particular Psalm at this point? Why do we stand now? Assume that many visitors will be asking these questions in their mind, and that they will not know the answers. Be prepared to explain that the elements of Reformed worship were already being used in the synagogues that the Lord Jesus Christ worshipped in, and in the apostolic church. Be gentle, but firm and unapologetic, in explaining that this is how faithful churches have worshipped for thousands of years. Consider being prepared to introduce most of the elements of the liturgy with a short one or two sentence explanation, so that visitors understand why we are doing what we do. You may be surprised how much benefit these little explanations would be in an established church as well; it is helpful to lead people through the liturgy from time to time!

Third, personal contact should follow attendance at worship services. Timid visitors may need to be approached with gentleness and with kindness, but they still need to be welcomed personally when at all possible. A primary calling of a church planter, and even the entire congregation, is to follow up with visitors and to seek to begin a relationship of discipleship. If people are reluctant to talk, we can gently try to draw out their questions. We should try to get a sense of where they have come from and what their past experiences with churches have been. It is through a growing relationship of discipleship that we can begin to teach how Reformed worship is actually historic Chris-

tian worship, and that it is solidly rooted in the Word of God and centres on His glory. A personal relationship of discipleship is also an ideal avenue for the asking and answering of questions.

Fourth, we should not assume that the Holy Spirit will always directly and quickly guide true Christians to appreciate Reformed worship. Many people, especially in North America, have been deeply affected by false teaching about the prosperity gospel, “felt needs,” mystical experiences, and seeker sensitive worship. Some visitors or new believers may need to be patiently guided to help them see that Reformed worship is deeply relational, personal, and experiential in the genuine sense. Time needs to be taken to show them that Biblical worship directly relates to the true Christian’s experience of misery, deliverance, and gratitude.

Fifth, more mature believers that are attending a church plant need to be somewhat flexible in their expectations. It is not always possible for a service in a church plant to have an atmosphere that is as “reverent” as some established churches may have. The preaching may have to touch on areas that are less relevant to them, or that seem basic. They must also remember that many church plants cannot realistically run a full nursery, or Sunday school program, or provide a pipe organ for accompaniment, or even rent satisfactory facilities. Various factors may mean that services ought to be simpler or shorter than may appear to be ideal.

Sixth, depending on the local setting or the gifts of those in leadership, it may be best to introduce some unbelievers first to the Word through a simple evening Bible study. Consider that such a study would work through one of the gospels, or perhaps address basic theology systematically with the help of a catechism. The advantage of this type of study is that it may be more suitable to a level of interaction, discussion, and discipleship than worship on the Lord’s Day.

Finally, it is critical that a church plant does not lose its focus on its reason for existence. Though a church plant certainly needs to focus on its mission to reach unbelievers with the gospel, we must remember that even the smallest meetings of believers on the Lord’s Day exist primarily for the purpose of coming to the throne of grace and worshipping Him. We are still those that are “called out” of the world in order to honour Him. Hebrews 12:28-29 calls us: “...Let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear: For our God is a consuming fire.” The percentage of members in a room or the stage that a church plant is in may change the emphasis in ministry, but it does not change this priority. If church plants, prayerfully and in dependence on the Holy Spirit, begin and continue in the God-honouring patterns of Reformed worship, they may trust that our Sovereign Lord may use that “other-worldly” worship as a beacon of Light in a world of darkness. ①

Pastor R. VanDoodewaard is pastor of
the Free Reformed Church of Powassan,
ON.

FREE REFORMED SYNOD 2020



Synod 2020 of the Free Reformed Churches of North America took place September 8-11, 2020. This later date than our traditional June timing was due to COVID-19 restrictions. During this global pandemic we are continually reminded of James 4:13-15: “Go to now, ye that say, To day or to morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain: Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away. For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that.”

Opening and Arrangements

Abbotsford FRC was our calling church and prepared the Synodical agenda. Hamilton FRC served as our hosting church. It was truly a blessing to convene in such a suitable and beautiful building and to be so wonderfully provided for by the serving hands from the Hamilton congregation as our delegates gathered from our 19 Canadian congregations and virtually via videoconferencing (zoom) from our two American congregations, one Canadian delegate, Rev. W. Klaver, who was in travel-related quarantine in his study next door to the church, and fraternal delegates from the HRC.

Although attendance at the prayer service was significantly less than normal due to restrictions, many congregants of our federation joined virtually in prayer for our churches, ministries, and synod meeting. Rev. J. Schoeman preached an encouraging sermon on Ephesians 1:22-23 extolling Christ as the glorious head of

all things for His Church as His body.

Following the prayer service, Rev. J. Schoeman called the delegates to order with a warm welcome and roll call, which was followed by the election of the executive. Our executive was the following: Chairman, Rev. J. Koopman; Vice-chairman, Rev. J. Schoeman; First Clerk, Rev. J. Overduin; Second Clerk, Rev. E. Moerdyk. Mr. John Wilbrink is treasurer of Synod and Mr. Ray Pennings ably assisted the clerks in preparing draft minutes.

This year we were not able to accommodate visitors from the congregations to be physically present during Synod, however, a zoom webinar was approved and the open sessions of Synod were able to be viewed by members of our congregations. Brother John Wilbrink, who aptly managed the zoom and webinar platform, reported that most sessions were viewed by between 25-35 viewers, which is more than usually visit. This was a wonderful opportunity for those in our congregations who normally do not have

the opportunity to experience Synod meetings. If you tuned in to this platform, you might have realized Synod is not only about the “business” of the churches, but also contains opportunities to be greatly encouraged through biblical exposition, singing, and prayer. Each day begins with approximately a half hour of devotional worship. Rev. D. Kranendonk, Rev. P. VanderMeyden, and Rev. H. Bergsma each led in opening devotions.

Theological Education

The Theological Education Committee recommended that we interview Rev. David Kranendonk to be appointed as professor of theology for our churches and that we examine two students, Student Benjamin Hicks and Student Ben Van Liere, with a view to declaring them candidates for gospel ministry. They also recommended Students Chris Mourik, Geoff Otten, and Jeff Overduin be moved to the licensure phase of their training, which was approved. Licensure phase allows them to lead worship services. There was also an applicant recommendation to Synod; however, due in part to the timing of Synod, the academic year already started, and potentially pre-seminary work to be completed, the committee was advised to work with our brother throughout the year and make a recommendation at Synod 2021.

The interview with Rev. Kranendonk reminded us of the daunt-

ing task of a professor of theology. With gratefulness to the Lord for His gifts to His Church, Synod extended a call to a currently serving minister of the gospel to the task of instructing students for the ministry for the first time in our history. We recognize that this call came from the church, so we gave thanks that the Lord also confirmed this call in the heart of our brother to accept this position. The chairman addressed our brother with the words of 2 Timothy 2:1-2: “Thou therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. 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.”

Although we have much to be thankful for in the Lord providing another professor of theology, we also are saddened by Dr. David Murray’s resignation as an FRC professor and pastor. He has been a great blessing to us. We thank him for his faithful labour in our churches and seminary as we commend him to the Lord in his future ministry.

The examination of Students Benjamin Hicks and Ben Van Liere took a large part of our Thursday meeting. Each preached a sermon and were examined concerning their soundness in the faith, fitness for ministry, and personal knowledge of grace and sense of calling to the ministry. We were grateful for the Lord’s sustaining grace for both brothers and for the interactive way in which the examination took place. Both students were declared candidates for gospel ministry and commended to our churches.



Outreach and Missions

The Outreach Committee report included Banner of Truth Radio Ministry, FRC US Urban Missions, and the translation work of Brother Junho Hwang, who is translating faithful reformed books and tracts into the Korean language. This is a service to both Korea and our Urban Missions ministry in New York City. The Urban Ministry was approved as a ministry of our federation last year, and Rev. Young Jae Lee was called by Grand Rapids in coordination with our Pompton Plains congregation to develop a Bible-based church plant in New York City. Despite challenges due to COVID-19, this effort is well underway with strong local





Free Reformed support. It hopes to have a facility to work from very soon. Synod commends this ministry and all our outreach ministries to the congregation's generosity in free will donations.

We recognize that the Lord has brought the world to our door and see the wonderful blessing of being able to reach out with the gospel in our pluralistic society; however, we should not forget about foreign missions as well. Free Reformed Mission International continues to serve abroad. Although we do not have 'boots on the ground' in Guatemala any longer since the Kattenbergs returned to Canada a year ago, there is still much to do in Guatemala as we continue to provide encouragement to the churches in the Aldeas, financial support for the after-school programs, and the promotion of the newly translated and now printed Achi Bible. We also give thanks that Nico and Lia Kattenberg and their family are settling back into Canada and are doing well. We also support an indigenous lecturer at Mukhanyo Theological College in South Africa and seek to provide ecclesiastical encouragement and accountability for this institution. Our missions committee is currently evaluating where the Lord would have us labour among the nations, and they ask the churches to pray for wisdom in doing so.

Inter-Church Relations and Endeavours

Over the past five years, interchurch relations have been highlighted by our concurrent synod meetings with the HRC. Due to travel restrictions, this year was the first year since 2015 that we did not meet in the same facility as the HRC synod meetings. However, the ad hoc FRC-HRC Church Unity Committee continues to work diligently. This committee has developed a booklet

titled "Organic Union," and asks that each consistory distribute it to their members when it is available for distribution. The goal is to educate and foster awareness and discussion within the "grass-roots" membership. This booklet will explain the biblical basis of Christ's call for unity in His Church and point out the remaining differences between our federations. We are reminded that organic unity with another federation is never something that should happen from the top down. Future Synod meetings will undoubtedly hear the feedback that flows from these discussions with our membership.

The Interchurch Relations Committee continues to dialogue and maintain contact with various denominations with which we have official relationships of contact or correspondence. The North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC) and the International Conference of Reformed Churches (ICRC) are also important bodies where denominations including ours may encourage each other to faithfulness and to be a unified Christian witness to the world around us. We have complete correspondence, which is the highest level of correspondence, with the *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken (CGK)* and the *Heritage Reformed Congregations (HRC)*. Concerns were raised regarding the direction of some of the congregations within the CGK who have pushed to install women in office and allow for practicing homosexuals to attend the Lord's Supper. Let us be in prayer for our sister churches in this regard that they will remain faithful to the Word of God as they currently meet as Synod to decide on these matters.

The Interdenominational Psalter Revision Committee has also been engaged in the work of updating our Psalter, which is near-

ing completion. Members are encouraged to check the link for our new joint Psalter, where all 150 psalms can now be viewed at <https://thepsalter.net/>. The committee is still working on the Genevan Psalms, and may add some additional ones to the selections currently in the back of our Psalter. The revision committee encourages feedback on their work.

Many More Activities

It may seem strange, but we actually have two committees working on a new psalter. The other is the Supplementary Psalter Committee, which has evaluated three other very good psalters used in Reformed churches. It is tasked with studying the feasibility of putting together a psalter with contemporary and accurate lyrics by taking the best selections of these three psalters.

The ethical committee has done a significant amount of work over the past years to provide resources for office-bearers in dealing with bio-ethical questions. A large document containing information and resources on conception and the development of human life to end of life issues was presented and approved for distribution to office bearers in assisting them with biblical counsel.

Many other committees also reported such as publications, refugee, finance, church order, confessions and liturgical forms revision, and youth and education. We are thankful for each of these committees and all the work invested to carry out their mandates given by Synod to serve our congregations and the world in various ways. One point I would like to share regarding youth and education is the Plants and Pillars website. Young people, this is a

wonderful resource for questions you may have, devotionals, and timely articles. If you have not checked it out for yourself, please do so at <https://plantsandpillars.net/>.

Although there was and is so much for which to be thankful to the Lord, there are also difficulties that come up at every Synod. These challenges can simply relate to the fact that there are times when we need to make difficult decisions that affect people's lives. Other discussions can relate to the sorrows of sin in congregational life, challenges in ministry, weakness of our flesh, or all the attacks of Satan the church experiences. We certainly recognize there are many challenges facing the church today; however, we look to our great God, who holds all things in His hand and has given all power and dominion both in heaven and on earth to His Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ. We also recognize our ascended King gives gifts to His Church, so as a federation we thank our elders and pastors for faithfully looking to Christ, who is the author and finisher of our faith, as they lead the flocks entrusted to them.

I recognize I left out far more than what was written, but I remind you that the Minutes of Synod 2020 will be made available to you. It would serve you well to spend some time reading through them and familiarizing yourself with what many times we take for granted, namely, the rich heritage the Lord has given us in and through our churches. Finally, let us pray that the Lord will bless our federation of churches richly and use us as a light on a hill to His glory. 🙏

Rev. S. Dibbet is pastor of the Providence Free Reformed Church of St. George, Ontario.



WHERE ARE THE REFORMERS TODAY?

“They got not the land in possession by their own sword, neither did their own arm save them: but thy right hand, and thine arm, and the light of thy countenance, because thou hadst a favour unto them” (Psalm 44:3).

“Here I stand, may God help me.”



Some of the most life-changing events in the history of the church have come about due to a stand being taken by one man at a critical juncture. In this year, 2017, we are commemorating the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther nailing his *Ninety-Five Theses* to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg on 31 October 1517, an event which lit the fires of the Protestant Reformation. Later, the Reformer was summoned to the Diet at Worms, where, on 18th April 1521, he declared: “My conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against my conscience. I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, may God help me. Amen.” The Edict of Worms, dated 8th May 1521, declared Luther an outlaw together with his adherents. That is the kind of difference that one man can make!

It is interesting to speculate what the church would be like today if Luther had been prone to compromise. The pressure was heavy on him to tone down his teaching and soften his message. Sometimes division is fitting, even healthy, for the church. It is right for the true people of God to declare themselves. Compromise is sometimes a worse evil than division. What an encouragement it would be to see more ministers taking a stand. It is not often nowadays a man steps out of line. It was so recently with Rev Gavin Ashenden, a senior clergyman of the Church of England and Chaplain to Her Majesty the Queen, who made a public stand against the reading of the Qur’an in St Mary’s Episcopal Cathedral in Glasgow on 7th January 2017. He resigned from his duties and left the Church of England.

LEADERSHIP IN HISTORY

There are other examples in history of God using men to break the slumber of the church. We had Athanasius (c.296-373) standing against the Arian heresy and almost single-handedly preserving the integrity of the Christian faith. We recall the heroic stand

of Jan Hus (1373-1415) fighting against such great odds, and at the base of the fine statue of him in Prague today, we read “Great is the truth, and it prevails.” There is John Calvin (1509-1564) contending against the Libertines in Geneva and achieving for the church freedom from the state in ecclesiastical disciplinary matters. William Tyndale (1494-1536) was hounded to his death “simply because he wanted to reform the church, to restore the gospel, and especially to give the people of England the Bible.” John Knox (1514 – 1572) was raised up to blow His Master’s trumpet and to rid the Church in Scotland of Roman superstition and idolatry.

George Whitefield (1714-1770), the “Revived Puritan,” burst in upon a dead church and a decadent London and saved England from a disaster akin to the French Revolution. C H Spurgeon (1834-1892) stood firm against the rising tide of unbelief, in an age of decline, and suffered scorn and ridicule against his person. J Gresham Machen (1881-1937), challenging the growing infidelity of Princeton Seminary and the Presbyterian Church in America, was suspended from the ministry and forbidden to defend himself. Dr D M Lloyd-Jones (1899 -1981) called the decadent church of the mid 20th century back to a God-centred outlook. Time would fail us to tell of others. They were men of one mind – seeking to advance the glory of God and to maintain His truth. They dared to stand alone. They nailed their colours to the mast. They were men on fire and so they were instrumental in lighting others. “Your zeal hath provoked very many” (2 Cor 9:2).

LEADERSHIP IN SCRIPTURE

In Scripture we find similar examples of bold faith and courage. Gideon is raised up to deliver Israel from the Midianites. The real problem then was disobedience in Israel. Gideon had to throw down the altar of Baal. “But the Spirit of the Lord came upon Gideon” (Judges 6:34). Literally the Spirit of the Lord “put on”

Gideon. The Spirit comes to deliver through a man. We see Elijah the Tishbite, coming from relative obscurity, heralding the Word of the God, “before whom I stand,” to confront Ahab and the nation that was steeped in idolatry. Baal worship must be cast out. The prophet “repaired the altar of the Lord that was broken down,” and prayed “let it be known this day that thou art God in Israel.” The fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt sacrifice. That day the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal were killed (1 Kings 17-18). Time and again in the history of Israel, God raised up a prophet to arouse the people and call them back to obedience. Even after his people had been chastened by their years of captivity in Babylon and had returned to Jerusalem, God raised up Haggai and Zechariah to call them to “Consider your ways” (Hag. 1:5) and the people “obeyed the voice of the Lord their God.” In the Book of Revelation, chapters 2 and 3, Christ comes, through a revelation to His servant John, to trumpet His displeasure with the evils tolerated in some of the Seven Churches of Asia, and to call members of the congregations to repentance.

THE URGENT NEED TODAY

It is generally acknowledged that Western civilisation will collapse without a Christian revival. We are in the midst of a rapid spiritual and moral decline. The change that has come about in the last quarter of a century is staggering. We have seen the dismantling of the Judeo-Christian heritage that underpins our society in Britain and the West. Our liberal elite are ready to give toleration to Muslims, Hindus, and other false religions. We have gone beyond mere toleration. Islam is protected against criticism, while Christianity is exposed with impunity to insult and ridicule. The BBC editorial policy bans criticism of the Koran, but not the Bible. We find local authorities removing Christian symbols from buildings or suggesting that schools should not celebrate Christian festivals, lest this give offence to members of other religions. Gideon Bibles have been removed from students’ rooms in Universities, for it is considered wrong to favour one faith above others. Our inherited Christian culture is being pushed to the sidelines. If there is not a change we face a holocaust. What do we do in a post-Christian secularized culture?

There is no doubt that Western civilisation needs to rise up against the forces that oppose it. The question is: Where is the body with the moral fibre to undertake that fight? It should be the role of the Christian church, which is rightly designated as the “church militant.” Without the leadership of the church, the nation cannot recover from its present descent into cultural degeneration and the neo-paganism that is its inevitable accompaniment. But is the church in the West in any condition to engage in such a warfare? She is in a weakened state. It has been said, “The supreme duty of the Church is to see that she offends not her God and her Saviour.” It is obvious that, as a church and as a nation, we have offended God. He has turned His countenance away from us. What the church needs to recover above everything else is the divine favour.

SPIRIT ANOINTED LEADERSHIP

How did the people of God gain the victory in former times? In Psalm 44, we are reminded that, “They got not the land in possession by their own sword, neither did their own arm save them: but thy right hand, and thine arm, and the light of thy countenance, because thou hadst a favour unto them” (v.3). The Psalmist goes on to describe their present state: “But thou hast cast off, and put us to shame; and goest not forth with our armies” (v.9). In such circumstances, such as the visitation of chastisements and the hiding of God’s face, the way back must be by humbling ourselves, by confessing our sins, and by repentance. We can advocate these things, but the trouble is that we are presently in a kind of deadlock and need a break-through.

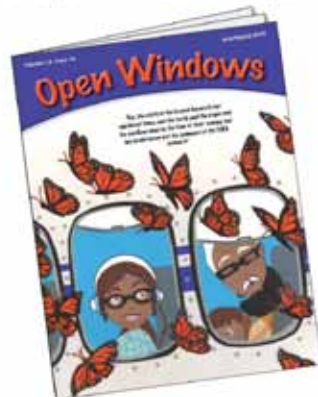
It is in this situation that the church urgently needs God appointed and “Spirit anointed” leadership. Many churches today are obsessed with programmes, strategies, and schemes. No true church reformer of past generations announced a programme. Certainly not Luther. When Luther nailed his *Ninety-Five Theses* to the door of the church at Wittenberg, he did not realise he was preparing the way for the Reformation. In his own eyes, he was being faithful to the Word of God and openly attacking error. It is sadly true that the church, in a state of backsliding and under judgment, is often fast asleep and it needs just one voice to break that slumber. We need those like the “children of Issachar, which were men that had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do” (1 Chron. 12:32). We need men to sound an alarm. We need men to stand up and be counted. The church needs to hear the voice of God and be aroused from its present slumber. We need reformers. ①

Rev. John J. Murray, late minister in the Free Church of Scotland, Continuing, passed away earlier this year. His article appears here in a slightly abbreviated form.

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ANNOUNCEMENTS

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1955 October 28 2020

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the Lord"*

Joshua 24:15



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