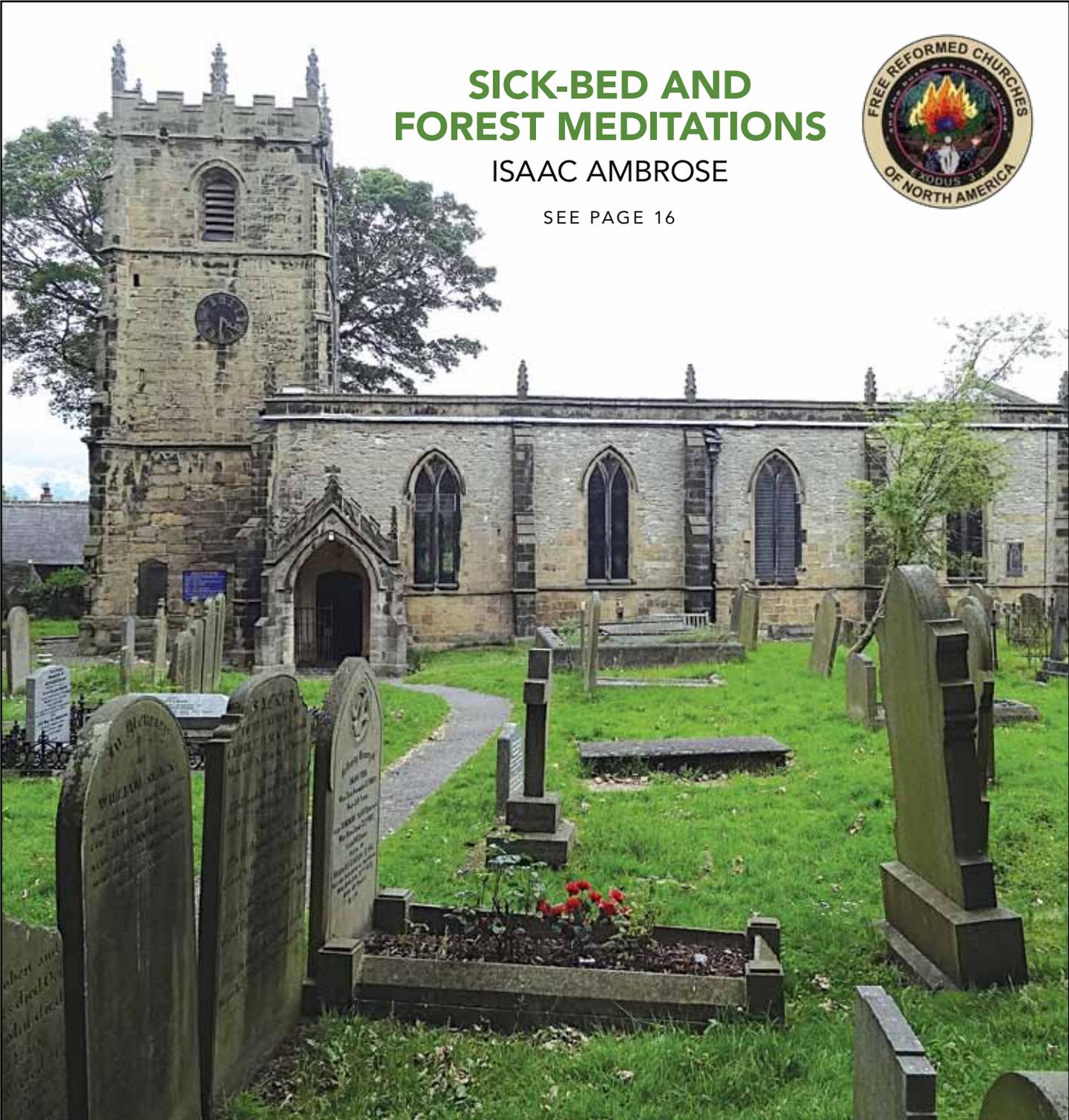


# THE MESSENGER

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE FREE REFORMED CHURCHES OF NORTH AMERICA



## SICK-BED AND FOREST MEDITATIONS

ISAAC AMBROSE

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# CHRIST OUR ROCK

“And did all drink the same spiritual drink:  
for they drank of that spiritual Rock that  
followed them: and that Rock was Christ.”  
(1 Corinthians 10:4)

The Scriptures use metaphors to describe the Lord Jesus Christ. A metaphor is a figure of speech in which something is compared to something else. For example, Christ is compared to a shepherd, a door, a vine, and a light. A most striking metaphor can be found in our text, where the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to compare Christ to a rock.

## A place of testing

Paul drew this image from Exodus 17. Several months had passed since the people of Israel had left the land of Egypt. They had travelled for many miles through the wilderness of Sinai. At last they arrived at Rephidim. Rephidim is located about ten miles west of Mt Sinai, on the southwestern side of the Sinai Peninsula. Most of the time water was in plentiful supply here, but when the people of Israel arrived, there was no water to be found – not even a drop.

What is striking is that the Lord Himself led them here. Verse 1 records: “And all the congregation of the children of Israel journeyed from the wilderness of Sin, after their journeys, according to the commandment of the LORD, and pitched in Rephidim.” The people came to Rephidim by *the commandment of the Lord* – even though He knew there was no water there.

Why did the Lord do this? Likely to test them. The Lord had previously made the bitter water of Marah sweet. He had also fed the people with manna. Would they trust in Him to provide them with water? The Lord sought to find this out by bringing them to Rephidim.

The Lord still leads His people to Rephidim today. Rephidim is any place we would rather not be. It is a place of trial and testing. In such a place, we often ask: Why did the Lord bring me here? Why is He making me undergo this trial? Why must I experience this pain or that disappointment?

We cannot always answer these questions. All we can say is that God knows what He is doing. He may be testing us just like He was testing the people of Israel. He wants to see how we will respond.

## Two Responses

How did the people of Israel respond? They were not happy. They

began to “chide” or contend with Moses, demanding, “Give us water that we may drink” (Exo. 17:2). “Chide” is the English translation of the Hebrew word “riv.” “Riv” is a legal word, meaning “to bring suit” (or lawsuit). The people of Israel as it were wanted to sue Moses (and ultimately God) for bringing them to a place where there was no water.

This explains why Moses called the place “Meribah.” The word “riv” is embedded in the word “Meribah,” which means “strife” or “contention.”

Needless to say, Moses was deeply offended by this. “Why chide ye with me?” he asks in verse 2. “Wherefore do ye tempt the LORD?” Moses rightly understood that in chiding with him, they were ultimately chiding with the Lord for He, not Moses, brought them to this place.

But the people of Israel disregarded his words and continued their attack on Moses. We read in verse 3: “And the people murmured against Moses, and said, Wherefore *is* this *that* thou hast brought us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our cattle with thirst?”

How terrible! The Lord had done so much for His people. He had delivered them from slavery in Egypt. He made the waters at Marah sweet. He gave them manna to eat. He gave them everything they wanted and asked for – and yet they complained.

So what did Moses do? He did what we all should do when faced with difficulties: he brought the matter to the Lord. Verse 4 records: “And Moses cried unto the LORD, saying, What shall I do unto this people? They be almost ready to stone me.” What a beautiful example Moses sets for us here! He does not respond to the people in kind with anger, bitterness, or resentment. He simply brings it to the Lord.

## The Lord’s Smitten Rock

What did the Lord say to Moses? He told him to do something very strange. He told him to go to Mount Horeb with the elders of Israel and with the rod with which he smote the Nile River. God would stand before Him upon the rock in Horeb and Moses had to smite the rock. Then water would come out of the rock. That is what happened. Moses struck the rock and out of it came a plentiful supply of water.

Here we have a picture of the sufferings of Christ on behalf of His people. We know this because the apostle Paul identifies this rock as Christ.

In what way was Christ like this rock? Several ways:

First, just as the rock was smitten, so was Christ. When? When He went to the cross. There the sinless Christ was smitten for sin – not for His own sins, but for the sins of His people. He was smitten to pay the penalty for their sins.

Unlike the rock at Horeb, Christ was not smitten by a mere man, but by God Himself. In Isaiah 53:4, Isaiah prophesies: “yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.” Christ was smitten by God! He experienced the infinite wrath of an infinite God against the sins of all His people. What must that have been for Christ to be smitten by His own Father! What must that have been for the Father to smite His own Son! We cannot imagine it! But that is what happened. Christ was smitten by God.

## We can learn several lessons here:

1. If Christ was smitten, how great is God’s wrath against sin! God showed His wrath in various ways: the flood, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the Babylonian captivity, and the destruction of the temple of Solomon. But nothing displays His wrath more clearly than the smiting of the Rock. God hates sin so much that He required it to be punished with the death of His only begotten Son.
2. If Christ was smitten, how great is the love of Christ for sinners! He loves them so much that He was willing to be smitten on their behalf by His own Father! He was willing to do so for murmuring, ungrateful, unbelieving, selfish wretches like you and me! Such love knows no bounds. Such is the love of Christ for His own.
3. If Christ was smitten, how willing we should be to be smitten for Him! Are you suffering for Christ’s sake? Are you being mocked, ridiculed, dismissed, disowned by people at work, friends,

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or neighbours – even by family members? Do not resent it. Bear it patiently. Remember that what Christ suffered for you was far greater than all our sufferings combined.

- The Puritan Ralph Robinson writes, “You cannot be smitten for Christ as He was smitten for you. You are smitten with rods, he with scorpions. You drink up the wrath of men; he drunk up for your sakes the wrath and fury of the Almighty.”
- Since Christ was smitten, we may rest assured that the justice of God has been fully satisfied and the penalty for our sins has been fully paid. One writer comments, “Considering the dignity of His person, justice is better satisfied with one blow on Him than if we should have been smitten to all eternity.” Therefore we need not fear the wrath of God. He has made whatever payment had to be made.
  - Since Christ was smitten, there is nothing He will not do for us. Speaking of God the Father, the apostle Paul confessed: “He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?” (Rom. 8:32). What is true of God the Father is also true of God the Son. He will give us all we need for body and soul.

**The Lord’s Abundant Fountain**

Second, just as the rock produced an abundance of water, so there is an abundance of saving grace in Christ. This is clear when we understand that the water that gushed forth from the rock is a picture of salvation in Christ. Scripture often pictures salvation as water. For example, in John 4:10 Jesus said to the woman at the well, “If thou knewest the gift of God, and who it is that saith to thee, Give me to drink; thou wouldest have asked of him, and he would have given thee living water.” The idea is that just as water cleanses and quenches, so does salvation in Christ. It cleanses from sin and quenches the spiritual thirst of those who embrace it.

**Here we learn several things about this salvation:**

- It came at a great cost. Before the rock gushed forth water, it had to be smitten. The same is true for Christ. To secure the salvation of His people, He had to suffer and die. Only through His suffering and death can we be saved.
- It is abundant. Just as the rock gushed forth water, so there is an abundant supply of grace in Christ. Enough grace is in Christ to save the vilest of sinners. No one is too sinful or too unworthy. Whosoever will may come and drink of the water of life freely!
- It is readily available. Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:4 observes that the rock followed the people wherever they went. Paul here could be saying that Christ followed the people wherever they went. But he could also be saying that the water that gushed forth from the rock followed them wherever they went. If the water followed them, that was an amazing miracle.

Wherever the people went in the wilderness, the water followed them, giving them a constant, readily accessible supply of water. Whenever they were thirsty, dirty, or simply needed to be refreshed, they had plenty of water available.

This is still true today. God’s salvation in Christ is readily available to all. Are you spiritually thirsty? Go to Christ. He can quench your thirst. Are you spiritually filthy? Go to Christ. He can cleanse you! Are you spiritually weary? Go to Christ. He can refresh you. Whatever we need is to be found in Christ!

- It is to be found ONLY in Christ. There were many rocks in the wilderness, but only one rock gushed forth water. Salvation is the same. No other source can quench our thirst. No other source can make us clean. No other source can refresh us. Only Christ can do that. Therefore, we must look to Him and Him alone.

**Drinking from the Rock**

Do you hesitate? Do you think you are too sinful? That cannot be, for Christ Himself invites you. Listen to His call in Isaiah 55:1: “Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters.” Listen as He stands in the temple courts, saying, “If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink” (John 7:37). Listen as he says through John, “I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely” (Rev. 21:6). Listen as He says to the church, “And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely” (Rev 22: 17).

The great purpose of our Lord’s ministry was for thirsty souls to come to Him and have their thirst quenched. Therefore all who thirst may come to Him and drink.

Have you come to Him to drink? If not, you will perish. Then you will drink of another cup - the cup of God’s wrath and fury for evermore.

Be careful how you drink. Paul says all of the Israelites drank of that spiritual rock that was Christ, but with many of them God was not well pleased. As a result, they were overthrown in the wilderness. They were overthrown because, although they drank of Christ, they did not so do in faith. They did so merely in an external way. They drank only to relieve their physical thirst, not their spiritual thirst.

Take heed, therefore! For Christ to do us any good, we must partake of Him in faith. That means we must look to Him and trust in Him as the only hope and ground of our salvation. Anything less will not profit us. It will only testify against us on the Day of Judgment.

Behold the rock that is Christ! Drink deeply from Him! Wash yourselves in Him! Be refreshed in Him! And you will live forever more. ①

*Rev. J. Schoeman is pastor of the Free Reformed Church of Abbotsford.*

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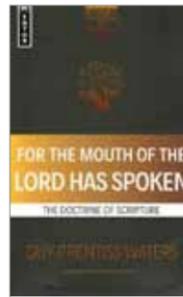
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## LESSONS FROM JOB (4):

COMFORT THE  
AFFLICTED

“Now when Job’s three friends heard of all this evil that was come upon him, they came every one from his own place ... for they had made an appointment together to come to mourn with him and to comfort him” (Job 2:11).  
“Have pity upon me, have pity upon me, O ye my friends: for the hand of God hath touched me” (Job 19:21).

In a sermon on Psalm 147:3 entitled “Christ’s Hospital,” Charles Spurgeon writes: “The church of God is never so well built up as when it is built up with men of broken hearts.” His text says: “He healeth the broken in heart, and bindeth up their wounds.” He makes clear that this refers not only to those broken by sin, but also those broken by the consequences of sin. These consequences include all the sorrows associated with this life after the fall into sin, including sadness that may not have its source in any particular sin. As Paul said, we should “weep with them that weep” (Rom. 12:15). This weeping is not restricted to those who weep for sin.

**Job’s Friends**

Sadly, the church is sometimes more like a company of Job’s friends. Perhaps, like them, we begin with some intention to comfort those who are afflicted, but often, we give up listening and start lecturing, or blame sufferers instead of helping to bear burdens, thus fulfilling the law of Christ (Gal. 6:2). Thankfully, this is not always the case. Some can testify to how believers ministered in a Christ-like way to their needs, relieving burdens, providing tangible help and hope, and ministering with genuine sympathy or empathy, and certainly Christ-like sensitivity. Yet, far too often, we treat wounded souls roughly and harshly, pouring salt into their wounds. We stigmatize and shame, and unwittingly incur the displeasure of God, as Job’s friends found out Job 42:7: “My wrath is kindled against thee, and against thy two friends: for ye have not spoken of me the thing that is right, as my servant Job hath.”

Sometimes I think that the Lord has allowed the microphone of the Spirit to record the many things Job’s friends said in order that the church would look at its own speech and find the ways in which it echoes the kind of speaking Job’s friends did. The Scriptures are clear that the speeches of the friends were as much a tool in the hand of Satan to get Job to curse God and die as some of the other things that happened to him. We should not be surprised that Satan would use church members, including true believers, as instruments in his arsenal. Let’s not forget how the Lord Jesus said to Peter: “Get thee behind me, Satan” (Matt. 16:23).

**Danger of Truisms**

The friends of Job aimed their pious words to get Job to see that he was guilty of something heinous after all. This does not mean that the friends did not speak certain truths here and there. Who can deny that, at some level, “man is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward” (Job 5:7)? Who can deny that man by nature is “more abominable and filthy” than angels, drinking “iniquity like water” (Job 15:16)? Much of what they spoke was true in general, but mismatched to Job’s case and situation. The truth became truisms in their mouths, clichés that reduced complexities in such a way that these truths were applied falsely. They twisted truths to say something they didn’t and shouldn’t say in this particular instance. Satan also did this to Christ in the wilderness of temptation (e.g., Matt. 4:6). They used their “truisms” to get Job to say that he had no faith, that he wasn’t truly a child of God, that he had done some God-provoking sin, bringing retribution upon him from the Almighty.

Someone who offers truisms to suffering souls is like a physician who throws bottles or a whole cabinet of medicine at a patient. All those bottles might contain useful medicines when properly administered, but many of them administered at the wrong time and in the wrong dose could be seizure-inducing, if not deadly.

**Offended by the Rawness of Pain and Grief**

I don’t believe the friends of Job intended to hurt Job. They didn’t consciously desire to speak in a way that would make God angry with them. They weren’t chomping at the bit to be placed as a negative example in the Scriptures of how not to comfort the afflicted people of God. At first they were silent, mourning and lamenting with Job for seven days and seven nights: “none spake a word unto him: for they saw that his grief was very great” (Job 2:13). Few of us would do that.

However, what changed things was that they heard Job wishing he had never been born (Job 3). They heard Job saying things that he wouldn’t have said if the pain in his soul had not been so great. Job was not happy to say these things. Job was not proud of these feelings, but they were there, deep in his soul. Later he would repent of them, confessing: “I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes” (42:6). But these things were in his soul and had to come out. To suppress them was neither necessary or noble.

Stoicism may have its adherents, but Christians are not called to be stoics. We are not stocks and blocks in this sense either. Even Paul, who was ready to be both abased and to abound (Phil. 4:10), had to learn that contentment in every state. That process of learning (Phil. 4:11) came through sighing, groaning, and crying. “The Spirit also helpeth our infirmities .... with groanings which cannot be uttered” (Rom. 8:26). As the Psalms make clear, learning to pray means learning to cry, and learning to cry means pouring out our hearts to the Lord (Ps. 62:8). What is in our hearts is often not pretty, holy, just, and good. But it must come out. It must come out before anything else can come in. There is sin in praying; sin in preaching; sin in helping, but may it be the sin of Job rather than the sin of the friends, with whom God was sorely displeased (Job 42:7).

When Gehazi saw the Shunammite overwrought, having lost her young son, he rudely “thrust her away” (2 Kings 4:27). God save us from the Gehazi spirit, and give us instead the mind of Elisha who said: “Let her alone; for her soul is vexed within her: and the LORD hath hid it from me, and hath not told me” (2 Kings 4:27). He let her words come out: “Did I desire a son of my lord? Did I not say, Do not deceive me?” (2 Kings 4:28).

God give us the mind and heart of the Lord Jesus, who, when Martha and Mary complained at His feet, “groaned in the spirit, and was troubled” with them and “wept” (John 11:33, 35). He Himself is acquainted with all the “feeling of our infirmities” and “was in all points tempted like we are (Heb. 4:15). The Savior himself cried in great agony of spirit in the garden, “exceeding sorrowful, even unto death” (Matt. 26:38). “He was oppressed” (Isa. 53:7).

**Compassion**

The words “compassion,” “empathy,” and “sympathy” all have the same root word. It refers to the feeling we have to people in their suffering. Some differentiate between empathy and sympathy.

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When we empathize, we try to enter into the suffering of others. Sympathy tries to understand from a distance, without really letting itself get close. Of course, sympathy is better than indifference, but gets neither spiritually and emotionally close. The Bible certainly calls us to have a deep compassion and empathy with believers in suffering. This is part of the “fervent love” we should have for each other (1 Pet. 1:22; 3:8; 4:8; 1 John 3:17). The Samaritan of the parable didn’t just try to understand the wounds and the needs of the half-dead man. He showed mercy by stopping, stooping, caring, carrying, sacrificing, and more.

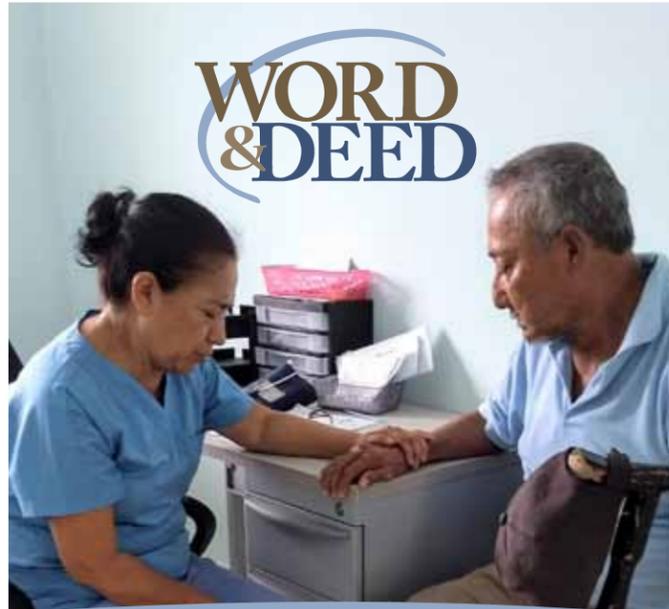
The Lord certainly has deep empathy for His people (Ps. 56:8; 1 Pet 5:7). The Lord Jesus, when He saw the multitudes without a shepherd, was moved with compassion (Matt. 9:36). The Savior, however, did more than empathize. He suffered in the stead of sinners. He bore for me what I deserve, as something I cannot and now need not bear.

Job calls for his friends to “pity” him (Job 9:21). The word does not suggest how we often use the word “pity” today, in the sense of “looking down on someone as a pitiful creature.” On the contrary, Job urged his friends to enter into his situation with an open heart that is disposed towards him. This is precisely what the friends were not doing. It is significant then that when James writes of Job, he notes that “the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy” (James 5:11). The Lord had wounded Job, but out of a heart of deep compassion He would also heal him.

**The Healer**

Pastors, elders, deacons, and all Christians should show true empathy with the suffering of others. We must do so from out of the mercy of God in Christ. Paul says it beautifully in Philipians 2:1-2: “If there be therefore any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any bowels and mercies, fulfill ye my joy, that ye be like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind.” Yet, in the end, we must recognize that God alone can heal the broken in heart. In the above-mentioned sermon, Spurgeon tells how he has often tried to comfort and cheer the sorrowful, but by himself, he always failed. Not so the Lord. “He healeth the broken in heart.” He not only tries to do it, He does it. He touches the secret sources of the sorrow and takes the spring of grief away. We try our best, but we cannot do it. That is precisely what the Lord says about the Savior. He will give “the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness” (Isa. 61:3).

An elder said it well in one of his prayers before a service, asking the Lord to “comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable.” Let us look to the Lord so to do, while showing the compassionate heart of the Savior. May none of us afflict the afflicted any more than we comfort the comfortable. May the church be a place in which broken souls experience from the Lord the healing that God alone can give. ❶



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**THE CALL TO THE MINISTRY:  
RIGHT MOTIVES**



The Lord promises in Jeremiah 3:15: “And I will give you pastors according to mine heart, which shall feed you with knowledge and understanding.” We would do well to plead this promise for ourselves and for the generations yet to come. This accords with what the Lord Jesus said in Matthew 9:38: “Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth laborers into his harvest.”

The call to the ministry has both an internal element and an external element. Internally, we need to feel a desire and burden to give ourselves to pastoral ministry and all that comes with it. But this inward sense of call needs to be confirmed by others, particularly those who hold office in the churches. The qualifications of 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 need to be considered. We do well to scrutinize our hearts and lives in the light of these Scriptural requirements, looking to the Lord and His grace.

As a federation, we encourage those who believe they are being called by the Lord to speak to their pastors and elders, and to seek a recommendation to appear before the Theological Education committee to be trained, guided, and mentored through seminary with an eye to being examined by a synod of the churches and declared a candidate for ministry. Only when a church has properly called such a candidate is the external element of the call confirmed.

One thing that needs to be discerned by both the individual and the churches is whether the person desiring training for the ministry possesses the right motives. The matter of proper

and improper motives is discussed at length by Pastor Albert N. Martin in the first volume of his recently released *Pastoral Theology*. Among motives that are wrong, Pastor Martin mentions the following: A falsely instructed conscience; the unwise and unsanctified ambitions of others; imbalanced and unbiblical concepts of spirituality; inaccurate self-assessment; craving personal identity; underestimating pastoral responsibilities; and unmortified lust for personal gain. Pastor Martin elaborates on each of these at length.

When it comes to proper and necessary desire, Pastor Martin highlights the “enlightened and sanctified desire for the pastoral office.” He stresses that it should be more than just “a desire to preach or teach,” but as 1 Timothy 3:1 mentions, it should be a desire for the whole office. Martin makes clear that the focus of this desire should be the edification of the flock of God, the calling of sinners to Christ, and the “longing to discharge a growing sense of God-given stewardship” (58-62). Those who are busy with the matter of whether God is calling them to pastoral ministry should prayerfully consider reading Pastor Martin’s helpful guide in this perceptive and worthwhile *Pastoral Theology*. ❷

For further reading, see Albert N. Martin, *Pastoral Theology: Vol. 1: The Man of God: His Calling and Godly Life* (Montville, NJ: Trinity Pulpit Press, 2018). This and the other two volumes are worth thorough consideration and study of all who aspire to the office of pastor.

## PILGRIMS AND PURITANS IN AMERICA (3)

# THE ARRIVAL OF NON-SEPARATIST PURITANS

## The Puritan Settlement in Massachusetts

Not long after the Pilgrims settled in Plymouth, another group of English Puritans decided to make the move to the New World. These were not separatists like the Pilgrim fathers, but non-separatists. They too sought to purify the Church of England, but not by leaving that Church, but by staying in it.

Like the Pilgrims before them, these loyal sons of the Established Church became increasingly convinced that their reform efforts would not result in significant and lasting changes. During the reign of King Charles I, who ruled from 1625-1649, the opposition to Puritan attempts to change the Established Church became stronger than had been the case under his father, James I.

Charles I asserted his authority over Parliament, church, and people with much more rigidity and ruthlessness than James I, who had been more willing to negotiate and compromise. Especially when the new king appointed Archbishop William Laud to enforce new strict rules of worship to which everyone had to conform, life became very difficult for the Puritans.

They now faced the alternative of conforming, at great cost to their consciences, or defying, at great cost not only to their livelihoods but even their lives.

When Charles dissolved Parliament in 1629 - the last institution to restrain royal autocratic power - the Puritans knew that their cause was lost, at least for the present. Many came to the conclusion that the only way out for them was to migrate to the New World.

A few weeks before Parliament's dissolution, some Puritans had applied for a charter under the name of the Massachusetts Bay Company. The terms of the charter were negotiated by several businessmen and lawyers, led by John Winthrop, an able and godly man with strong Puritan convictions. Whether by accident or by design, the Charter failed to specify how or by whom its stockholders were to be governed or that the company's meetings had to be conducted in England. Taking advantage of this neglect on the part of the government, the Puritans decided to take the charter with them with a view to setting up a self-governing company in the New World and ap-

pointing a governor without input from English state or church authorities. They elected John Winthrop even before the group left England. Realizing that those voting for him were "eminent gentlemen of high quality," known for their "wisdom and godliness," Winthrop was deeply humbled by the confidence they had placed in him, but more importantly, he wrote in his diary, "I have assurance that my charge is of the Lord, and that he hath called me to this work"<sup>1</sup>

The first group of non-separating Puritans to leave England numbered about 700 men, women, and children. In March of 1630 Winthrop and his company boarded the ship *Arbella*, leaving behind him his pregnant wife and one son. The plan was that she was to join him and the other children soon after her delivery.<sup>2</sup>

Three months after Winthrop and his company left England, another three hundred followed and still another thousand made the journey before the end of the year 1630. Many more followed later during that same decade. The result of what came to be called *The Great Migration* was that the population of Massachusetts Bay soared to nearly nine thousand people. In contrast with the still small Plymouth Plantation, the new colony grew by leaps and bounds. Because of the plentiful supply of new immigrants, there was no shortage of skilled workers, productive farmers, and regular infusions of new blood.

### John Winthrop's Model of Christian Charity

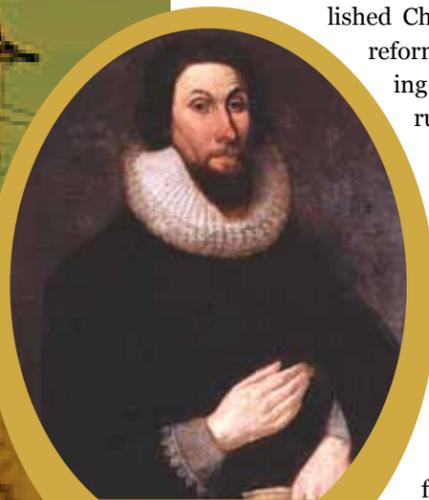
In 1630, while still aboard the *Arbella*, Winthrop challenged his fellow passengers with a powerful and stirring address, later called "*A Model of Christian Charity*." Just as one would avoid shipwreck at sea, he explained, so they must avoid a similar disaster on land. The only way to do this was to heed "the counsel of the prophet Micah, to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God" (Micah 6:8). This means, he said, that we "must be knit together in this work as one man." He reassured them that if they would so conduct themselves, "the Lord will be our God and delight to dwell among us and make us a praise and glory, so that men will say of succeeding



plantations: the Lord make it like that of New England." Let us all acknowledge, Winthrop urged, "that we are entered into covenant with him for this work."<sup>3</sup> Then Winthrop added this solemn warning:

We must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us, so that if we deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken and so cause him to withdraw his present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word throughout the world, we shall open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the ways of God and...we shall shame the faces of many of God's worthy servants and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us till we be consumed out of the good land wither we are going.<sup>4</sup>

Winthrop, like Robinson the Separatist, and Puritans in general, believed that nations could only thrive if they kept their covenant with God. With this strong sense of history, providence, and destiny, Winthrop saw the Puritan venture as an opportunity to show how they, as a new planting of the Lord, could prosper and be blessed. He felt a great burden resting on him and the people who came with him to America. He was convinced that the main task of their future government was to make sure that the covenant with God would not be broken and that both in their behaviour and belief, the settlers would not offend their God in any way, lest His judgment would come



JOHN  
WINTHROP

NEW-ENGLAND PRIMER. 25



Time cuts down all,  
Both great and small.

Uriah's beauteous wife  
Made David seek his life.

Whales in the sea,  
God's voice obey.

Xerxes the great did die,  
And so must you and I.

Youth forward slips—  
Death soonest nips.

Zac-che-us, he  
Did climb the tree,  
Our Lord to see.

in the branches of an Oak tree in Boscobel wood, where he saw his enemies in full pursuit of him. This Oak tree was regarded, by the friends of the King, with much veneration, after having afforded shelter to the Royal Fugitive.

22 NEW-ENGLAND PRIMER.



In Adam's fall,  
We sinned all.

Heaven to find,  
The Bible mind.

The Cat doth play,  
And after slay.

The Dog will bite  
A thief at night.

An Eagle's flight-  
Is out of sight.

The idle Fool  
Is whipt at school.

on them. Thus, Winthrop set for himself and his people a very noble and difficult task. The amazing thing is that they succeeded to a degree that has seldom, if ever, been equalled in history, be it only for a relatively short time of about a hundred years.

**Puritan Priorities**

As soon as they got on land, the new settlers began to apply the principles drawn up in the *Model of Christian Charity*. Their first task, of course, was to clear the woods to build shelters and prepare the soil for planting. But the very next thing they did was to form local government structures. Even before they built churches and instituted congregations with office-bearers, they saw to it that they had in place proper magistrates for the benefit of the new society. They did this whenever a new plantation was organized in New England.

This priority on government may surprise us in that we might expect Puritans to be more concerned to start churches than to set up government structures. But the rationale for their seemingly inverted sense of priorities is that the Puritans believed that biblically sound churches could only be instituted after biblically sound magistrates were appointed. They believed the purpose of civil governments was not only the prevention of

evil or the advancement of the social wellbeing of society, but also and especially the establishment and maintenance of the church of Jesus Christ in society. Having lived for years under what they believed was a corrupt government in England, they wanted to make a new start in New England by appointing only church members - born-again believers - to occupy positions of civil authority.

David Weir further explains that the Puritans did not want to rush into the establishment of a church which often involved a painstaking process. Candidates for church membership were subjected to an examination as to the spiritual state of their souls, which was often a slow process. Thus, the institution of new congregations could take months and even years. What they did first then was to elect to magisterial office those who were already known to be saints in England. Then they involved others who were judged to be converted or at least were earnestly pursuing church membership.<sup>5</sup>

**The Importance of Education**

A key role in the religious life of the colony was played by the ministers. Well-educated - all were graduates of English universities - they represented the intelligentsia, along with doctors and lawyers. This does not mean, however, that ordinary

church members were ignorant. Literacy in New England was high. Especially reading was considered an essential of Christian education. On top of the reading list was the Bible. Mothers were initially the chief teachers of their children at home, but soon every New England town had its grammar school for boys, while less formal "dame" schools supervised the education of girls.

To demonstrate their great interest in and concern for education, especially for ministers, the Puritans founded Harvard College only ten years after settling in America. Among the rules and precepts established in 1646 were the following: "every student shall consider the main end of his life and studies to know God and Jesus Christ which is eternal life, John 17:3, and therefore to lay Christ in the bottom, as the only foundation of all sound knowledge and learning."<sup>6</sup>

The Puritans had left England to escape kings and bishops and cleanse themselves from every impure element in worship. Having come to New England, they were resolved to recreate the New Testament Church according to the clear teachings of Christ and His apostles. In doing so, they were prepared to turn away any settlers who were of a different mind. New immigrants were welcome, but only if they were willing to keep "the New England Way," pure and undefiled.

This fundamental and rather uncompromising stand for what they believed to be the truth was soon challenged by newcomers who, in varying degrees, held to different ideas and persuasions. This resulted in a great deal of discussion, conflict, and, in some cases, even use of force, as we will see next time, D.V. ①

Rev. C. Pronk is an emeritus Free Reformed pastor residing with his wife in Brantford, Ontario.

**Endnotes**

- 1 Francis J. Bremer, *John Winthrop: America's Forgotten Founding Father*, 160-161.
- 2 Edmund S. Morgan, *The Puritan Dilemma, The Story of John Winthrop*, 53.
- 3 David Edwin Harrell, *Unto a Good Land: A History of the American People*, 55-56.
- 4 "A Model of Christian Charity"; quoted in *Early American Writing*, ed. Giles Gunn (1994), 108-12.
- 5 David Weir, *Early New England*, 92-93.
- 6 Allen Carden, *Puritan Christianity in America: Religion and Life in Seventeenth-Century Massachusetts*, 188.

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# ORDINATION AND INAUGURATION SERVICE OF Benjamin Hicks

AS MINISTER OF THE WORD AND PASTOR OF THE LONDON FREE REFORMED CHURCH

Although conducted under the unusual circumstances of the government-imposed lockdown of the province of Ontario, the evening of January 2021 was a very happy time for the London Free Reformed Church. A small physical gathering met in the church building of the St. Thomas Free Reformed Church for the ordination and installation service of our new pastor, Benjamin Hicks. While the majority of the congregation were grieved to be prevented by the government from participating in this special worship service, they and members of other congregations were able to view a live internet broadcast of the ordination from their homes. After over a decade of vacancy, the Lord has graciously answered many prayers in supplying a pastor and teacher for our small congregation.

The installation service opened with the singing of Psalter 375. Pastor Eric Moerdyk of the St. Thomas congregation and counsellor of the London congregation officiated the service. He



Pastor Benjamin Hicks delivers a sermon.

preached from Zechariah 4:10: “For who has despised the day of small things? For these seven rejoice to see the plumb line in the hand of Zerubbabel. They are the eyes of the Lord, which scan to and fro throughout the whole earth.” The message was honest about the challenges we have experienced as a congregation. Our membership has seen numerical decline over our period of vacancy

and our largely elderly saints have become concerned about our congregation’s survival. From a human point of view, our situation is not favorable and the ordination of an inexperienced minister to such a church is but “small things.” But like when the ancient Israelites returned from exile and began to rebuild the temple, the eyes of our covenant Lord are yet upon His people. Our lives and souls are in His care, and so we must look to Him in dependent faith. He is the One who does great things through weak means. This sermon was deeply appreciated.

The form of ordination was read by Pastor Tim Bergsma and



brother Hicks answered each question posed to him with “Yes, truly, with all my heart.” Pastors Tim Bergsma, Scott Dibbet and Eric Moerdyk came forward to perform the “laying on of hands,” while several office-bearers held an open Bible over the new pastor’s head.

The evening continued with an inaugural sermon delivered by Pastor Benjamin Hicks. He preached from John 1:29: “The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.” The glorious gospel of the Lamb was declared. Pastor Hicks spoke about the identity of the Lamb as the Savior promised and provided by God; the work of this Lamb in taking away sin through His sacrificial death and in saving a world of lost and perishing sinners; and a right response to this Lamb as a look for trusting faith. He called on all to behold the Lamb and find Him to be the glorious and sufficient Savior.

Pastor John Koopman of our Chilliwack congregation and chairman of Synod 2020 addressed the gathering through a prerecorded video that was very inspirational and encouraging. The service concluded after Pastor Hicks expressed his gratitude to numerous persons including the Free Reformed churches, his internship mentors Pastors Koopman and Schoeman, his parents in New Brunswick, his dear wife and best friend Rebekah, and the Triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Pastor Hicks, his wife Rebekah, and their four children Phoebe, Wallace, Enoch and Cornelius now reside in the city of London, only a few minutes away from the church building.

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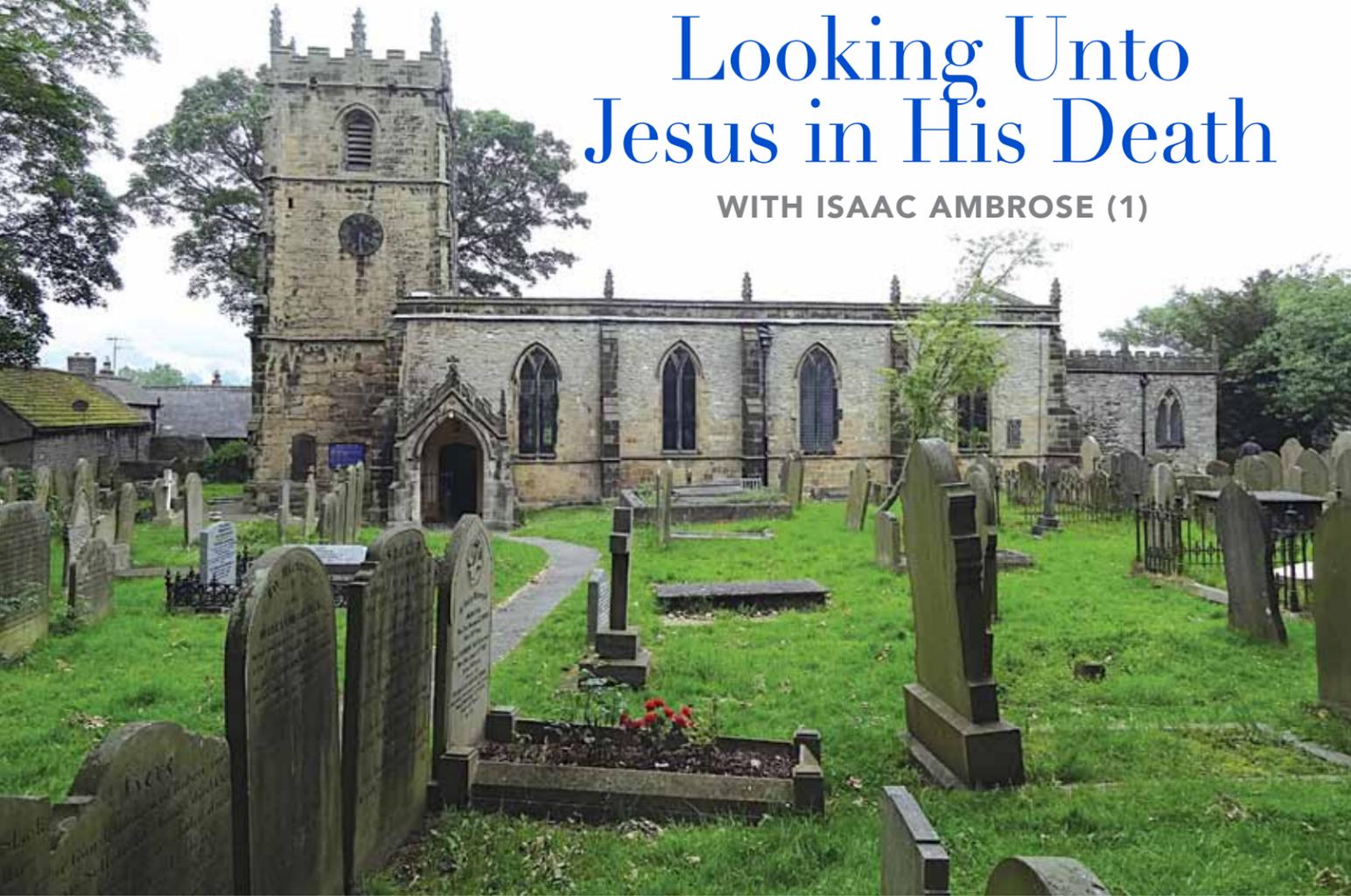
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# Looking Unto Jesus in His Death

WITH ISAAC AMBROSE (1)



Almost 375 years ago, in May 1646, if someone went into the forests in the north of England, he would find a wooden hut. Inside would be a 46-year-old man with a short, greying beard and wearing the dark clothes of a minister. In his hut or outside it among the trees, he would sometimes speak aloud, other times he would appear deep in thoughtful meditations, and yet other times he would be writing.

Sadly, his own “register of God’s dealings toward him and of his dealings toward God” has not survived, other than some extracts which he published in one of his books. This is what he wrote in 1646: “I came to Weddicre, which I did upon mature resolution, every year about that pleasant Spring time (if the Lord pleased) to retire myself and in some solitary and silent place to practice especially the secret duties of a Christian. In this place are sweet silent woods and therein this month, and part of the next, the Lord by his Spirit wrought in me evangelical repentance for sin, gave me sweet comforts and spiritual refreshings in my...intercourse with him by prayer and meditation and self examination, and discovered to me the causes of my many troubles and discouragements in my ministry, whereupon I prayed more fervently, pressed the Lord with his

promises, set his power and wisdom and mercy on work; and so waited and believed, till the Lord answered every petition and I could not but observe his hand in it. This was a comfortable time to my soul.” This man was the puritan preacher, Isaac Ambrose.

I would not recommend that married men withdraw from their families for such extended periods of time. But I do highly recommend the fruits of his close walk with the Lord, as they are contained in his classic work, *Looking unto Jesus, or the Soul’s Eyeing of Jesus as Carrying on the Great Work of Man’s Salvation*. He wrote this book after the Lord restored him from a serious illness. On his sickbed, the Lord so filled him with such a delightful view of Christ and His work, that he resolved and begged God for grace to preach this gospel duty of looking unto Jesus more than he ever had before. He confessed, “I may feelingly say, it is the sweetest subject that ever was preached on.”

Since being written in the early 1650s, this book has been reprinted multiple times. Even the *Encyclopedia Britannica* notes that this book “long held its own in popular appreciation with the writings of John Bunyan.” It was also translated into

Dutch and some of the early immigrants to Canada took their copies with them. When my father-in-law was in his teens in the Netherlands, he asked an uncle what he should read. The response was: *Looking to Jesus* by “Ambrosius” (as his name is in Dutch). I know several men and women who have slowly worked through the book as a devotional.

This book progresses historically through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. It begins in eternity; explores the riches of the Old Testament promises concerning His coming; reveals the glories of His birth, life, sufferings, death, resurrection, ascension, and session at the right hand of His Father; and climaxes in Jesus’s return on the day of Judgment. Then, for each aspect of Christ’s work, he has devotional sections on knowing, considering, desiring, hoping in, believing in, loving, joying in, calling on, and conforming to Jesus in that respect. Given the time of year, we will focus on what he conveys about looking unto Jesus in his death.

## First, Knowing Jesus

“Let us know Jesus carrying on the great work of our salvation during his sufferings and death.” He emphasized knowing is not just head-knowledge, but heart-knowledge. “Come then,” he exhorts, “and spend thy time for the future more fruitfully in reading, learning, knowing, this one necessary thing. Study it therefore, but be sure thy study and knowledge be rather practical than speculative. Do not merely learn the history of Christ’s death, but the efficacy, virtue, and merit of it. Know what thou knowest in reference to thyself, as if Jesus had been all the while carrying on the business of thy soul’s salvation; as if thou hadst stood by, and Christ had spoke to thee, as to the woman, Weep not for me, but for thyself; thy sins caused my sufferings, and my sufferings were for the abolition of thy sins.”

## Second, Considering Jesus

Consider Jesus in His death. When Hebrews 12 speaks of looking unto Jesus, it focuses on Him who for the joy set before Him endured the cross. The focus is especially on Christ’s death. As Zechariah 12 says, “they shall look upon me whom they have pierced.” Consider Him in His final descent into death.

- See Him in the Garden of Gethsemane. “Never was man so afraid of the torments of hell, as Christ (standing in our room) is of his Father’s wrath.” He apprehended perfectly the cause for fear.
- See Him wrestle in prayer. Hear Him cry: “O my Father, since thou hast bent thy bow, lo, here an open breast, fix herein all

thy shafts of fury, better I suffer for a while, than that all believers should be damned for ever; thy will is mine.”

- Hear the drops of blood drip. “Now is he crucified without a cross, fear and sorrow are the nails, our sins the thorns, His Father’s wrath the spear, and all these together, cause a bleeding shower to rain throughout all his pores.” Consider this and know that “Thy sins were the cause of this bloody sweat.”
  - Consider His arrest. “How is it then, that this virtue or power is tied with bands, that innocency is apprehended, that wisdom is flouted and laughed to scorn, that honor is contemned, that glory is tormented, that he who is fairer than all the children of men, is besmeared with weeping, and troubled with sorrow of heart? Surely there is something, O my soul, in thee, that caused all this.”
  - Consider His trial in the night. “O my soul thou sinnest in the dark, in covert, in secret, when no eye is upon thee, when the sun, that eye of the world, is set or hid; and therefore all the night long is Christ thus tormented by thy sins”
  - See Him falsely condemned. “Wisdom is taken for folly, virtue for vice, truth for blasphemy, temperance for gluttony, the peace-maker of all the world, for a seditious disturber of the world, the reformer of the law for a breaker of the law, and the justifier of sinners for a sinner, and the follower of sinners. See how he emptied himself, and made himself of no reputation, that he might fill thee with goodness, and make thee spiritually wise unto salvation.”
  - See Him set before us in those words: “Behold the man!” “O brightness of thy Father’s glory, who hath thus cruelly dealt with thee? O unspotted glass (mirror) of the majesty of God, who hath thus wholly disfigured thee? ...It is my sins, O Lord, that hath so troubled thee, my sins were the thorns that pricked thee, the lashes that whipped thee, the purple that clothed thee: it is I, Lord, that am thy tormentor, and the very cause of these thy pains.”
  - Consider Him on the cross. “O my soul, see him now, if thou canst for weeping, his eyes are dim, his cheeks are wan, his face is pale, his head is bowing, his heart is panting, himself is dying; come, come, and die with him, by a most exact mortification; look pale like him with grief, and sorrow, and trouble for thy sins.”
- Many of us may have learned the accounts of Christ’s sufferings from our childhood, but Ambrose exhorts us to stop and meditate and consider what He was doing in His sufferings and death. Who can fathom that?

## CONFESSIONAL STUDIES

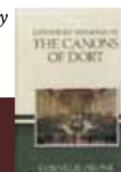
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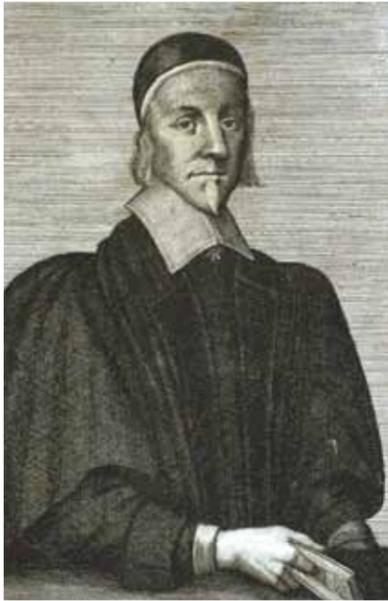
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### Third, Desiring Jesus

Desire Jesus in His death. Ambrose teaches that “Jesus Christ, to a fallen sinner, is the chief object of desire, but Jesus Christ, as crucified, is the chief piece of that object. Humbled souls look for the remedy, and they find it chiefly in Christ crucified.”

What makes Christ crucified so desirable to a sinner?

- His person is so desirable. The one who died is the God-man. In Acts 20, Paul says God purchased His church with His own blood.
- The “merit and satisfaction” of the blood is desirable. “Christ’s death and blood is superabundant to our sins.” Ambrose counsels, “Many a humble soul is apt to complain, ‘O if I had not been so great a sinner, there might have been hope.’ This is to undervalue Christ’s redemption, this is to think there is more in sin to damn, than in Christ’s sufferings to save: whereas all thy sins to Christ, are but as a little cloud to the glorious sun; yea, all the sins of all the men in the world, are but, to Christ’s merits, as a drop to the ocean.”
- The remission of sins secured by His death is great. How desirable then is His death. “O, my sins afflict me! cries many a one. ‘O I am loathsome in my own eyes, much more in God’s’ ... See here what an argument is put into thy mouth, from these sufferings of Christ; well mayest thou say, O Lord, I am unworthy, but it is just and right that Christ obtain what he died for; O pardon my sins for his death’s sake, and for his precious blood’s sake.”
- In His death is reconciliation and peace with God. “This certainly should support the drooping soul; it may be thou criest, ...I have warred against heaven, and now God wars against me...But come and look on Christ’s death ... and thou canst not but say, ‘O, this death is desirable!’ When God the Father looks at a sinner in the bloody glass of Christ, then saith God, ‘Fury is not in me, I have no more controversy with this soul: seeing Christ hath suffered, it is enough, I have as much as my justice can demand, my frowns are now turned into smiles.’”
- In His death is power to open heaven. “This blood is the key that unlocks heaven, and lets in the souls of his redeemed ones.”



Isaac Ambrose

Is Jesus not desirable in these ways? What reason to desire Him above all else! His death “is only this fountain, that can quench my thirst; and now I have seen the fountain opened, how should I but thirst, and cry out with the woman of Samaria, O give me this water, that I may thirst no more! But alas, I say it, I only say it. O that I could feel it! O my Jesus, that thou wouldst breed in me ardent desires, vehement longings, unutterable groans,

mighty gaspings. When my spirit is in right frame, I feel some desires after Christ’s blood; but how short are these desires, how unworthy of the things desired! Come, Lord, kindle in me hot, burning desires, and then give me the desirable object.”

### Fourth, Hoping in Jesus

Hope in the Jesus who died. Ambrose knows that “The main question is, Whether have I any part in Christ’s sufferings.” I

must share in them for them to benefit me. Here he provides signs of a well-grounded hope in distinction from false hopes and presumptuous comforts.

Here is some guidance he gives concerning marks of grace that show we belong to this Saviour:

- **Forgiveness.** “If Christ’s death be mine, then is that great end of his death accomplished in me, namely, ‘By the sacrifice of himself he hath put away sin,’ even my sin, Heb. 9:26.” Has He forgiven your sin?
- **Repentance.** “Remission of sin, and repentance for sin, are twins of a birth.” Repentance evidences we are forgiven.
- **Mortification.** “If Christ’s death be mine, then am I ingrafted into the likeness of Christ’s death.” True mortification flows from the root of faith: “If we can make out this truth that we believe in Christ, that we

roll ourselves on the Lord Jesus Christ for life and for salvation; and that now we begin to feel in us the decay of sin, we may conclude from the cause or rise, that this decay of sin is true mortification.” True mortification is also general: “death seizeth upon every member, it leaves not life in any one member of the body, so neither doth mortification leave life in any one member of sin; my meaning is, it takes away the commanding power of sin in every member.” At the same time, this mortification “is not without its present combats, though at last it conquer, many a time corruption may break out.” Thus, it is “painful work” involving the death-pangs of sorrow for sin.

### Fifth, Believing in Jesus

Believing in Christ crucified is so important. Ambrose exhorts: “Let us believe in Jesus, carrying on the great work of our salvation during his sufferings and death.” At the same time, he deals tenderly with the troubled soul: “Every one looks upon this as an easy duty; only the humble soul, the scrupulous conscience cries out, ‘What, is it possible that Christ should die, suffer, and shed his blood for me? ...that the Son of God should become man, live amongst men, and die such a death, even the death of the cross, for such a one as I am, I cannot believe it; it is an abyss past fathoming; the more I consider it, the more I am amazed at

it.’ ‘Oh! What a hard thing it is, considering my enmity against Christ, to believe that Christ died for me, that he gave himself to the death, even to the death of the cross for my soul!’ In response he counsels, “Trembling soul! throw not away thyself in a way of unbelief. It may be thou wouldst not die for an enemy, an irreconcilable enemy; but are not the mercies of God above all the mercies of men? O believe!”

He also gives specific guidance. He exhorts to go directly to Christ Himself as born under the law to fulfil the law and pay the price demanded by a broken law. Focus especially on God’s purposes in Christ’s death. He died “to redeem us from the slavery of death and hell” (Gal 3:13). “The case stood thus betwixt Christ and us in this point of redemption, we all like a crew or company of malefactors, were ready to suffer, and to be executed: now, what said Christ to this? ‘Why, I will come under the law, said Christ, I will suffer that which they should suffer, I will take upon me their execution, upon condition I may redeem them.’ Now this he did at his death; and this was the end why he died, that by his death we might be redeemed from the slavery of death and hell.” His purpose was also to “free us from sin” (John 1:29; 1 John 1:7). “God that willeth not the death of a sinner, would not for any inferior end, will the death of his Son, whom he loved more than all the world besides.” His purpose “could be no less than to remove that which he most hated, and that was sin.” Seeing in the gospel God’s purpose in Christ’s death encourages us to believe in Christ. “Consider the worth, the excellency of this glorious object, Christ crucified,” he counsels. He further motivates to the exercise of faith by directing to the object of faith.

- Look to His righteousness: “Stand amazed, O believer, thou hast gained by thy loss, thou hast lost the righteousness of a creature, but the righteousness of an infinite person is now made thine: hence it is many times called the ‘righteousness of God.’”
- Look to His blood: “O it was the blood of Christ one drop whereof is of more worth than thousands of gold and silver!”
- Look to how He offered it up: “O the worth, O the excellency of this death of Christ! – Many are apt to complain, O the filth of my sins! ‘O the injuries and unkindness that have been in mine iniquities! It is not my misery, my destruction that so much troubles me, as that God is displeased.’ Sweet soul! Turn thine eyes hither; surely this death of Christ is more satisfactory to God, than all thy sins possibly can be displeasing to God, there was more sweet savor in Christ’s sacrifice, than there could be offence in all thy sins...come on then, and close with Christ upon this encouragement: there is a dignity, an excellency in this object of faith, Christ crucified.”
- Look to His suitability for you: “Thou art a sinner, and he is made sin to satisfy the wrath of God even for thy sin; thou art such, and such a sinner, and he is accounted such, and such a sinner for thy sake, that thou mightest find in him something suitable to thy condition, and so the rather be encour-

aged to believe, that in him, and through him, all thy sins shall be done away. Away, away unbelief, distrust, despair! You see now the brazen serpent lifted up, you see what a blessed object is before you; O believe! O look up unto Jesus! O believe in him thus carrying on the work of thy salvation in his death.”

There is enough already in these brief tastes of this book to lead us by the Spirit’s blessing to know, consider, desire, hope in, and believe in the Saviour who suffered and died. Reading the book itself you will find much more. Some have not begun and none are ever done *looking unto Jesus*. He is indeed the chief among ten thousand, the beloved of the Father, and the one precious to those who believe. He is so especially in His death. ①

*Rev. D. Kranendonk is pastor of the Free Reformed Church of Oxford County and assistant editor of The Messenger. Quotations from Isaac Ambrose, Looking unto Jesus. The most recent significant edition was published by Sprinkle Publications in 1986 (hardcover). Ebook editions are available online.*

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## Wilhelmus à Brakel Teaching Doctoral Students

Recently, a doctoral course was offered at PRTS on Wilhelmus à Brakel (1635-1711), a major representative of the *Nadere Reformatie*, and a contemporary of Gisbertus Voetius and Herman Witsius. The course illustrated at least three things as it concerns the doctoral program and its courses.



Pastor B. Elshout addressing the students of the PhD/ThM Wilhelmus à Brakel course.

First, twenty-one PhD and ThM students from five continents and eight countries participated in the course, showing the continuing and growing interest from around the world in the doctoral program of PRTS. Currently, twenty-eight doctoral students participate in the Biblical Studies program, Historical Theology, and Systematic Theology programs. Most of these students are instructors and ministers in seminaries and churches in Brazil, China, Egypt, Portugal, South Korea, The Netherlands, and the US. They are seeking an education with an emphasis on both academic *and* spiritual formation: a comprehensive doctoral program that captures academic rigor and combines this with biblical piety (*de pietate cum scientia conjungenda*), serving the ministry of both the academy and church (teaching and preaching). PRTS seeks to adhere to the

Reformed and Puritan tradition of learning together with piety, exemplified by John Calvin, William Perkins, William Ames, Gisbertus Voetius, Archibald Alexander, and many others. The support of the doctoral program comes in various ways including the following: people who pray for the students and faculty; churches, including the Free Reformed Churches of North America; donors who financially support our work; the William Perkins Library at PRTS, which is one of the best libraries in North America with resources for studies in Reformation, Puritan, and *Nadere Reformatie*, as well as the many resources for Biblical Studies and Systematic Theology. Moreover, the Lord willing, in August 2021, a Doctor of Ministry (DMin) degree program will commence in Homiletics (preaching). This DMin program will not only address the preaching of the Reforma-

tion and post-Reformation era, but also the Dutch experiential tradition of preaching, including Professor G. Wisse and Dr. A. Baars (late and emeritus homiletics professors at Apeldoorn Theological University), as well as Dr. Joel Beeke. The training for Gospel-ministry in the DMin program aims to equip current preachers and a new generation of instructors for preaching.

Furthermore, the PhD program is affordable, accredited, accessible, and accommodates learning from a distance. This brings us to the *second point*: the à Brakel-course was followed by students from the various continents and countries joining by live-stream video/audio Zoom technology. For some, that meant joining the class at 9:30 pm (Taiwan) and for others it was 5:30 am (California). In this time of a global pandemic and travel restrictions, the use of technology is a blessing—students can continue their studies while remaining in their ministry context.

Third, the course shows the global interest in biblical, Reformed, experiential theology as taught at PRTS and found in à Brakel's *The Christian's Reasonable Service*. This work was published in Dutch (1700), translated into English (1995), in Chinese (2010), and other languages. Students read major portions of the work, and many noted the practical and experiential character of the work useful for their preaching and pastoring. One student remarked, "à Brakel is a spiritual counselor and guide, which is not only helpful for my congregation, but

also for me as their pastor." Furthermore, we discovered in class that à Brakel's work is read in small groups in Taiwan, China, and other countries. The students gave a special thanks to Rev. Bartel Elshout, the translator of *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, for joining the lecture on the last day of class and for his pastoral discussion around three questions he was asked: what translation challenges he encountered (Dutch to English), what was personally most edifying in translating à Brakel's *magnum opus*, and what advice he could give to the students in reading *The Christian's Reasonable Service*. Pastor Elshout's address to the students shows and underscores the intimate link between the church and the seminary.

Teaching a course like the à Brakel course and leading the doctoral program is a privilege and a responsibility. The support of congregations, thereby, and the continuing prayers that the Lord will send students to the seminary is heart-warming. To serve in a community of faculty and students around the core principles of biblical, historical, confessional, and experiential teaching is a blessing, and it is my prayer to be a blessing to the church and academy, denominationally (FRC and HRC, among others) and globally. 

Dr. Adriaan C. Neele is Director of the Doctoral Program and Professor of Historical Theology at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary.



## Learning about the Church with the Catholic Church

What is the church? That is what ecclesiology is all about, as one of the seven loci of Systematic Theology covered at PRTS. In January 2021, I again had the privilege of teaching a one-week course on Ecclesiology.



Every time of teaching this course is different, especially because every time there are new students. This time there were 35 students from a range of places: China, South Korea, Malaysia, Nigeria, Malawi, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Mexico, Brazil, and even the city Smyrna (Turkey; see Rev. 2:8), not to speak of Canada and America. The backgrounds are also diverse: some grew up knowing nothing of the church and others grew up in the church. Some came from various Presbyterian and Reformed backgrounds, while others came from Mennonite, Pentecostal, and Baptist backgrounds. What a testimony of the catholicity of the church!

We were all together in one class, studying “the church.” On the first day, I asked them to spend four minutes defining the church. Definitions varied, with some focusing on the elect, others on the gatherings marked by preaching, sacraments, and disciplines, and others breaking the definition into “visible church” and “invisible church.”

How thankful we can be that we may go to the Word of God to study what He reveals concerning the church: its essence and manifestation; its members; its relation to the triune God;

its attributes and marks; its relationship to the world; and its means of grace, including preaching and the sacraments. At the same time, “catholicity” means the church is not only throughout the world, but also has been through the ages, such that we may learn from what God has taught the church in previous generations.

As could be imagined, with such a diversity of backgrounds, many practical questions arose. How should the official ministries of the instituted church relate to the practical service of individual members? What role should parachurch organizations play? How should we apply the marks of the church to churches today? When should someone leave his church? How should you work toward reforming a church? What about woman deacons? What do you do for the Lord’s Supper in a culture that does not eat bread? How should discipline take place? What does household baptism really involve?

Students were also to answer the question: “How does your view of the congregation affect your preaching?” In response, our Free Reformed students stated the following:

- “Recognizing that the people in front of you are in differing relationship with God means we ought to preach discriminatingly by applying God’s word to varying cases. At the same time, recognizing all are within God’s covenant means we preach the claims and promises of God indiscriminately to all.”
- “The congregation is made up of more than only believers. In the midst of the congregation are covenant children who have not come to faith, those who have made confession of faith but are hypocrites, unbelievers, and believers. Even among unbelievers and believers, there are a variety of conditions. The pastor has a duty to apply God’s word to the varied audience as he seeks to convict and draw unbelievers to Christ, and strengthen and equip believers.”
- “My view of the congregation means that my preaching must address various groups of people in light of the gracious, gospel promises of God given to them as a covenant people. This means that my preaching will focus on God’s revelation of Himself in His Word on who He is for His people, emphasizing that this revelation is by His sovereign grace alone and not because of anything in ourselves. From there, I would apply the Word to different groups of people according to their different spiritual states of unconverted or converted and the various conditions within those states. I don’t think this means that every sermon needs to address every single condition, but as the text speaks to different conditions, that should come out in the preaching. Personal knowledge of the people will also impact this, resulting in particular conditions being addressed more often than others.”

One assignment was for students to read a classic devotional work on the Lord’s Supper by Wilhelmus a Brakel, Thomas Watson, Jonathan Edwards, or Matthew Henry. The responses were very encouraging, especially from those who are used to rather frequent celebrations of the Lord’s Supper with little attention given to it. As one student wrote in his review, “As a pastor who has wrestled with a desire for the Lord’s Supper to be more than a ceremony, where the table is approached with reverence and the reality of the blessing of all Christ has done for us, this chapter of reading has equipped me with much needed direction and wisdom I will now take to our elders and our church. This has changed the way we will practice the Lord’s Supper at my church. The experience I had at church last Sunday with the “preparation service” [in a local Reformed church] and the observations I made there were a timely blessing that I will keep with me.”

Such comments remind of the purpose of theological training: to equip pastors to be a means of blessing in their congregations by God’s grace. ①

*Rev. D. Kranendonk is pastor of the Free Reformed Church of Oxford County.*

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**Rev. D. H. Kranendonk, Secretary**

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