

# ORDAINED SERVANT



The Committee on Christian Education at Work in March, 2000

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# ORDAINED SERVANT

## Statement Of Purpose

*Ordained Servant* exists to provide solid materials for the equipping of office-bearers to serve more faithfully. The goal of this journal is to assist the ordained servants of the church to become more fruitful in their particular ministry so that they in turn will be more capable to prepare God's people for works of service. To attain this goal *Ordained Servant* will include articles (both old and new) of a theoretical and practical nature with the emphasis tending toward practical articles wrestling with perennial and thorny problems encountered by office-bearers.

## Editorial Policy

1. *Ordained Servant* publishes articles inculcating biblical presbyterianism in accord with the constitution of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and helpful articles from collateral Reformed traditions; however, views expressed by the writers do not necessarily represent the position of *Ordained Servant* or of the Church.
2. *Ordained Servant* occasionally publishes articles on issues on which differing positions are taken by officers in good standing in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. *Ordained Servant* does not intend to take a partisan stand, but welcomes articles from various viewpoints in harmony with the constitution of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

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Dr. James Gidley, Mr. David Winslow, Rev. William Shishko and Rev. Peter Wallace

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During the past decade the Committee on Christian Education has enjoyed the able leadership of the Rev. Thomas E. Tyson as its General Secretary. With his recent resignation to accept a call to serve as a regional home missionary for the Presbytery of Philadelphia, the Committee was faced with the need to choose his successor. It is remarkable that there was complete unanimity in the Committee in determining to call Rev. Larry Wilson to this task. Larry has been a member of the CCE for many years, and has already contributed much to its efforts. He comes to this task from a long and fruitful pastoral ministry at Grace OPC in Columbus, Ohio. As you will see from Larry's contribution to this issue of *Ordained Servant*, it was no easy thing for either the pastor or the people to face up to this call. The fact that it was accepted by him, however, as well as by the congregation and Presbytery is indicative of the wise pastoral leadership exemplified in the whole process. It is for this reason that the editor asked, and received, permission to reproduce in this issue Larry's pastoral letter that did so much to help the people of his congregation deal with this unwanted change. We think it articulates clearly the great principles of Presbyterianism that we so highly value.



Dr. R. Dean Anderson is a native of New Zealand, growing up in the nurture of our sister church there. He is now pastor of two congregations of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (Liberated). His article in this issue was originally prepared for the young people in his congregations. We think he says things that people in our own churches today need to hear. It is our hope that this material will be useful for study and discussion groups in our congregations.



In future issues of *Ordained Servant* we hope to deal with such subjects as the following: *The Free Offer of the Gospel*, *The Regulative Principle of Worship*, *Divorce and the Offices of the Church*, *The Two- and Three-Office Views*, and *Our Ecumenical Calling* (with

possible reflections on 'The Godfrey proposal' for a Synod made up of denominations, and the future prospects for NAPARC). If you—or your Session—has already done work in any of these areas and has something to say to the whole church, please send a contribution for possible use in *Ordained Servant*. We also welcome your suggestions for other possible subjects.



We are surprised that requests still come to the editor for copies of past issues, and the like, even though the official notice page clearly states that all such requests should be directed to our distributor Mr. Stephen Sturlaugson. Please—before you call or write anyone about *Ordained Servant*—take the time to read the small print carefully.



"In order...that the purity of the Church may be preserved, a confession of faith in Christ must be required of all those who would become Church members. But what kind of confession must it be? I for my part think that it ought to be not merely a verbal confession, but a credible confession. One of the very greatest evils of present-day religious life, it seems to me, is the reception into the Church of persons who merely repeat a form of words such as "I accept Christ as my personal Saviour," without giving the slightest evidence to show that they know what such words mean. As a consequence of this practice, hosts of persons are being received into the Church on the basis, as has been well said, of nothing more than a vague admiration for the moral character of Jesus, or else on the basis of a vague purpose of engaging in humanitarian work. One such person within the Church does more harm to the cause of Christ, I for my part believe, than ten such persons outside; and the whole practice ought to be radically changed."

— J. Gresham Machen (*What is Faith*, p. 155)



## Biblical Theology and the Session -Part 3

Redemptive History and the Character of the People

by James S. Gidley

### *Redemptive History and Character of the Session*

I am convinced that a redemptive-historical ministry will place a characteristic stamp on the life of the people of God. I will attempt to sketch the main features of this life in two stages: first, by looking at the character of the Session and its shepherding of the flock; second, by looking at the life of the flock itself.

In both sketches, we must give attention to the redemptive-historical perspective on the *ordo salutis*. Yes, we must not forget that there is an *ordo salutis*. Yet the Pauline perspective on the *ordo salutis* is precisely to see it in intimate connection with the *historia salutis*. In Paul's words (2 Cor. 5:14,15, NKJV): "*For the love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died, and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again.*"

Paul sees us in union with Christ, not simply in union with His Person, but in union with His death and resurrection. I think I need not multiply quotations to demonstrate this point to you. What this means is that we find the pattern of the Christian life in the pattern of the death and resurrection of Christ.

First and foremost, this requires elders who are willing to give themselves sacrificially for the flock. The exhortation that Peter gives to elders in 1 Pet. 5:1-4 is striking in its conformity to the Pauline representation. Peter refers to the sufferings of Christ, and Christ as the chief Shepherd, evidently turning our thoughts to the pattern of Christ's self-sacrifice in shepherding. The text resonates with the prophecy of Ezekiel 34, in which God denounces the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves rather than the flock, and foretells His own coming to be the One true Shepherd.

### *What will that sacrificial shepherding look like?*

For one thing, it will require a costly investment of time. Feeding sheep may be streamlined to some extent, but caring for ailing sheep is a time-consuming, one-at-a-time affair. The very requirements of a loving discipline will necessitate the expenditure of large blocks of time on frustrating and discouraging labor.

As a simple example, you well know how ailing sheep are inclined to bolt from the flock rather than be cared for. The easy path is simply to erase the names of such sheep from the membership rolls. But the good shepherd will leave the ninety and nine in the pasture and go out to seek that one sheep who has wandered astray. This will often mean fruitless attempts to contact a member who doesn't want to talk to you. And then it may require a lengthy process of formal church discipline, formally citing the accused, citing witnesses, citing the accused again after he does not appear the first time, and so on. Meanwhile some of the other sheep may begin to murmur: "Why are you so long away from the flock? Can't you handle these obvious problems quickly?" Yes, we can, but not with the love of the good shepherd. Love requires patience.

For discipline that does not partake of the seeking love of Christ is not worthy to be called church discipline. Discipline that takes the form merely of a censorship of morals may be appropriate for the civil magistrate, but not for the church of Jesus Christ. The whole process of formal discipline must be suffused with a spirit of love for the offender and earnest desire to seek his repentance.

Such a ministry is evidently incompatible with much of what is advocated by the Church Growth Movement. If you want your church to grow

rapidly, you would be better advised to look out for an additional ninety and nine docile sheep rather than to waste time chasing after the one that has gone astray. I do not see how a church devoted to such shepherding can ever become a mega-church. Our Session seems to have all we can handle with about one hundred members.

Again, it is easier for a ministry to expand rapidly if it seeks people from a homogeneous ethnic, social, and economic background than if it seeks to shepherd *all* the sheep that the Lord sends to it. It will be more time-consuming and frustrating to deal with a heterogeneous flock.

All this means that true shepherds may well have to labor in obscurity, never regarded as successful by the public or even the contemporary ecclesiastical world. I have often thought that in our day the price of integrity is obscurity.

One particular cross of obscurity must be borne by the ruling elder who is committed to a redemptive-historical approach and yet finds himself serving in a church that is not sympathetic to a redemptive-historical ministry. What should such an elder do? Bear the cross and serve meekly. Exhibit Christ-like, self-sacrificing love.<sup>1</sup>

To return to the question posed initially: “What should a Session look like that is shepherded by a redemptive-historical ministry?” It should be characterized by self-sacrificing devotion to the congregation. It should be very reluctant to let sheep wander away.

#### *Redemptive History and the Character of the Congregation*

As you know, the detractors of the redemptive-historical ministry criticize us for being impractical. We are reluctant to preach “how-to” sermons and to organize the congregation into a well-oiled self-help and social betterment machine. Of course, as the critics would have it, if you do not organize and orchestrate an ambitious program, then the congregation will be stagnant, lacking in discipleship and service, lacking in power to

influence the community. In short, you will foster a passive sort of Christianity in which church members are simply spectators of the drama of redemptive history.

Once again, the truth of the matter is far different from what at first glance it would appear. Again, I can appeal to my experience. I remember a friend who had been in the church at Morgantown, WV, for a time, and then a career move took him away. He later came back for a visit, complaining that the new church he was attending had programs to promote fellowship among the members, but, he said, “In Morgantown, we just did it.” When people love each other, you don’t have to resort to gimmicks to get them to spend time with each other and to help each other when in need. When they do not love each other, the gimmicks are hollow substitutes for the real thing.

The churches in whose redemptive-historical ministries I have known over the past eighteen years have been notable for their care for each member. In the past several weeks, my family has been the recipient of extraordinary care as my wife has been recovering from a serious head trauma. We have had meals brought in, people come in to clean, people to stay with my wife while I have been away, encouragement given, and all with a spirit of cheerfulness as Paul requires in Romans 12:8: “he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.” To be sure, some of the helpers have been Christian friends from Geneva College and/or the local Christian school which my children attend, but the center of the support and the majority of the help have been from the Church. This is the more remarkable in that Grace Church is not a “community church.” Our membership is scattered over an area of more than a twenty-mile radius from the church building. This is a long distance in Western Pennsylvania!

It has been further remarkable that this kind of aid has been offered to my family at a time when the congregation is reeling from the death of our beloved pastor, Mr. Charles Dennison. And the family most helpful to us was struggling with a

daughter's chronic illness and the death of the husband's mother during the time when they helped us. The love of Christ knows no bounds!

Is this coincidental? I do not think so. A redemptive-historical ministry stresses the union of the people of God with Christ. We do not encourage our people to be spectators of redemptive history, but to realize that they are participants in it. If we show a reluctance to *apply* the text to the people, it is because we believe that they are already *in* the text. I believe that such a ministry as ours, carried out truly, will have two prominent effects on the people of God.

First, it will draw out from the people a conformity to the cross and resurrection of Christ. As with the elders, so with the people. The measure of the love required of us is the measure of Christ's love. The escape from legalism should also mean an escape from the invariable concomitant of legalism: the tendency to reduce the law of God to manageable, keepable proportions. The love of Christ "demands my soul, my life, my all." I can never say, "I have done enough, I have kept myself pure, now leave me alone."

Second, conformity to Christ will lead our people to a more profound sense of the unity of the body of Christ. Individualism has no place in a community in which "One has died for all and therefore all have died." I have recently been going through Romans with our adult class, and have just completed chapter 12. I have been struck with Paul's persistent and powerful teaching in this chapter on the oneness of the body and all that it entails: and that message is certainly not confined to the discussion of the gifts in verses 3-8. We should see that one of the most powerful motives keeping our erring sheep from running away should be this bond of love. How could one conceive of abandoning the body in which I have found my life, which has been made my family? How could one conceive of leaving that body in which I have myself been the recipient of such tender care, such godly instruction, such gentle understanding?

Yet though I have been privileged to observe such manifold expressions of love in the church, I have also been grieved to see that love spurned in too many instances. And it has been spurned not only by those who have been intent on pursuing a course of known sin in their lives, but by those who have regarded our ministry as too indulgent of sin. I will illustrate my point with a single instance that is representative of other cases.

A few years ago, a family came to Grace Church in desperate need. I do not recall precisely how we came in contact with them, but they were on welfare and somehow had lost their place of residence. For a time, we allowed them to stay in the church building, and gave them significant diaconal aid. In due course, we helped them find a place to live and get settled in it. The family was initially very appreciative, the more so because they were professing Christians who were already convinced of the truth of the Reformed faith.

Sadly, the good times did not last long. This family complained that our preaching did not contain enough denunciation of sin and sinners. People have to be reminded how sinful they are! In particular, we were too lax about the observance of the Sabbath. We actually tolerated conversations after church that did not directly bear on the Bible or theology. (You must understand that our people like to linger after worship for up to an hour or more in conversation: such is their love for each other's company.) On top of that, they observed an elder's child with a Power Rangers doll. Didn't we know that the Power Rangers were the tools of the devil?

Of course, our attempts to remonstrate with this family about their procrastination and unseemly selectiveness in seeking gainful employment met with vigorous cries of "Foull!" It seems that sinners need to be reminded of sin, but not too particularly! Soon they left us with these complaints, as if our kindnesses to them had never been.

Doesn't every church suffer from these sad defections? Is there anything in this that is

distinctive of a redemptive-historical ministry? Perhaps not, but I have selected this example because it illustrates a phenomenon that I have seen too often: the accusation that the Session and ministry of the church is “soft on sin.” The general accusation is that a redemptive-historical ministry is insufficiently concerned with holiness.

At the same time, I have seen in such accusers a distressing disregard of the demands of love and compassion, a seeming obliviousness to manifest kindnesses of an extraordinary nature shown to the malcontents themselves. Perhaps this is just the nature of self-righteousness, but I see something more specific at work.

I see in this attitude a failure to perceive the nature of holiness as being characterized precisely by self-sacrificing love, Christ-like love. There is also a failure to perceive the covenant bonds that bind together the visible people of God. Piety is individualistic for such critics. How else could the manifest outpourings of love upon these people have failed to elicit sufficient reciprocal affection to keep them from leaving?

For that matter, why do churches split over trifles? Why does a chart of Presbyterian history look like “spaghetti at right angles?”<sup>2</sup> Might it be that we have lost sight of the primacy of love in Christian ethics and sanctification?

I know what will be said. It is the liberals who speak of “love” in order to provide a screen for their unbelief. But is it the liberals only who speak of love? Don’t Jesus and His apostles have much to say on the matter? You see it is not only in dogmatics that liberals have evacuated Biblical words of their true content and poured new content into them. So it is also in ethics. Machen quite rightly protested the liberal co-optation of words like redemption, resurrection, salvation, etc. But we ought to be just as indignant about the liberal capture of the word “love.” We do not cease to use the word resurrection because liberals mean something else by it. Neither should we shy away from love.

I appeal to you to give more attention to a redemptive-historical account of Christian ethics. I believe that this will restore love to its rightful prominence in our thinking. A cursory reading of our catechism may give the impression that “love” is simply a convenient double heading to summarize the two tables of the law. If you *really* want insight into the nature of holiness, you must attend to the ten commandments. Such a viewpoint discounts the revolutionary advance that Jesus makes in ethics by subsuming the ten commandments under the two great commandments to love.

For one thing, Jesus demonstrates once and for all that the ten commandments — eight of which are stated as prohibitions — are not merely negative, but positive. The commandments are not merely a boundary which one must not cross, but a compass showing us which way to go. Our catechisms catch the significance of this in their treatment of both the duties required and the sins forbidden in each commandment. It is no coincidence that the case which I have described to you involved people who seemed to view holiness primarily in terms of what one does *not* do.

In particular, I find the New Testament treatment of “Love your neighbor as yourself” fascinating. First of all, this commandment can hardly be said to be given prominence in the Old Testament. It occurs in Leviticus 19 — you find the verse! — buried in a conglomeration of moral commandments (nine of the ten commandments are repeated in some form, but not in order), civil ordinances of Israel, ceremonial laws, and regulations of ritual purity. Even in the midst of this miscellany of commandments, “Love your neighbor as yourself” does not appear as a major heading under which other duties are grouped. Rather it is introduced in a subordinate position.

When we come to the New Testament, it is as though Jesus rescues this commandment from oblivion. The combination of it with the first great commandment “Love the Lord your

God with all your heart, soul, and mind,” has become so traditional to us that we miss the astounding nature of this combination. For it is difficult to conceive of a text in the Old Testament with *more* solemnity and emphasis than Deuteronomy 6, in which the first great commandment appears. What Jesus does is roughly the equivalent of combining the Declaration of Independence with some obscure rider to an appropriations bill.

When we advance to the next stage of redemptive history, something even more startling appears. In the epistles, the first great commandment from Deuteronomy 6:5 is *never* directly quoted. But both Paul (in Romans 13:9 and Galatians 5:14) and James (James 2:8) explicitly quote “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Interesting that Paul and James should agree in this!

Paul is particularly perplexing here. In Romans 13:9, and even more emphatically in Gal. 5:14, he declares that the whole law is summed up in “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Wait a minute! What happened to loving God? Not that either Paul or James wishes us to ignore the command to love God! Not in the least! Yet aren’t both their statements and their silences arresting?

While I am not satisfied that I can yet give a full accounting for these startling phenomena in New Testament ethics, I do think that I can justly say that love of neighbor is thrown into great prominence by Paul. Is Paul telling us that the self-sacrificing love of Christ put into practice by the people of God in service to each other is the very heart and soul of holiness?

If so, Paul forever gives the lie to a predominantly negative piety, a piety that measures itself primarily by what it avoids rather than by what it does. In all this I am struck by the need for a companion volume to Vos’s *The Pauline Eschatology*. In theological jargon, I have in mind the title: *The Pauline Parenesis*.

To return again one last time to our initial question: “What should a congregation look like that is shepherded by a redemptive-historical ministry?” It should be characterized by self-sacrificing love and service, by people that love one another with a love that transcends that exhibited in loving families. Brother elders and ministers, see that you lead your flocks into these green pastures.

I have returned again in my thinking to questions 27 and 28 in the Shorter Catechism, about the humiliation and exaltation of Christ. Years ago, I could not imagine what place these questions had in a systematic treatment of the faith, nor what they could be saying to me about the Christian life. Now I know that they speak to me of the grand, victorious march of Christ from heaven to earth to heaven. But I also know that I have been raised with Christ to sit with Him in the heavenly places; and I have been summoned to join His triumphal procession. Therefore there is a life of humiliation for me as well. But in Christ, there is also a glorious resurrection to come.

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<sup>1</sup> I am assuming that the church’s ministry is otherwise sound according to reformed faith and practice.

<sup>2</sup> A remark of the Rev. Gordon Keddie of the RPCNA which I heard about ten years ago.

**Dr. James Gidley is Chairman of the Engineering Department at Geneva College and a ruling elder of Grace OPC in Sewickley. This article was originally an address delivered at the Kerux Conference, June 1999, at Westminster OPC, Westminster, CA and printed in *Kerux: A Journal of Biblical-Theological Preaching*. *Kerux* ([Kerux.com](http://Kerux.com) on the web) is published three times per year and is available from the Editor, James T. Dennison, Jr., 1131 Whispering Highlands Dr., Escondido, CA 92027.**



## ROADBLOCKS LIMITING CHURCH EFFECTIVENESS - Part 2

by

Johannes G. Vos

### II. THE ROADBLOCK OF SECULARISM, OR REGARDING GOD AS INCIDENTAL

#### *Secularism is Characteristic of Present-Day American Culture*

The word “secular” comes from the Latin for “age.” It is defined as “of or pertaining to things not religious, sacred or spiritual; temporal; worldly.” Secularism, then, is that view of life which regards life as non-religious. According to the secular philosophy of life, human life as a whole is non-religious, but within this totality of human life there may be one sector or compartment which is called “religion” and which concerns man’s relation to God. Secularism confines religion to this one section of human life, while the rest—by far the major portion—of human life is regarded as unrelated to religion, and unaffected by it. According to secularism, God is relevant only for a small fraction of human life. With regard to all the rest, God does not matter. It is held that God has no meaning for the ordinary, everyday life of man.

#### *Religion Regarded as Incidental*

Secularism is the internal dry rot of the churches. It is the tacit assumption that religion is only a minor incident in human life, that religion concerns but a small fraction of human life and activity. Secularism is characteristic of present-day American and European culture. Our modern western culture has come to regard itself as self-sufficient and able to get along on its own; it no longer feels any great need of God. This attitude toward religion is exemplified by Time Magazine, where “Religion” is treated as one department of life, and is sandwiched in between other departments such as “Cinema” and “Sport.”

#### *God Regarded as a Luxury*

Needless to say, this secular philosophy of life is very different from the belief of our forefathers. It is not only

different from the belief of Christian people of a few generations ago; it is even different from the belief of a large part of the population a few generations ago. The cultural pattern has been changed from one that regarded God as relevant to one that regards God as irrelevant. The cultural pattern of western civilization has been changed from a theistic pattern to a secular pattern. God is now regarded as a luxury, rather than as a necessity. For the most part, people think they can get along without God pretty well. They do not give Him a thought most of the time.

Of course, if people get in bad enough trouble and everything else fails, they will still perhaps turn to God as a sort of last resort. People on board an ocean liner may spend their time eating and drinking, dancing and playing cards; but if the ship hits a mine and is about to sink, many of them will presently attempt to pray. A culture which has omitted God finds God useful in emergencies as a last resort.

#### *God Limited to a Fraction of Man’s Life*

And secularism is willing to concede to God His relevance in one small department of Life, namely, religious feelings and worship. That, according to secularism, is God’s domain. He belongs there, and He had better stay where He belongs. Even secularism cannot deny that there is such a thing as religion and that man is a religious animal. There must be some recognition of a Higher Power or God. So the sphere of religion is marked off as a special area and there God is recognized.

Those who have no use for God in their daily lives, who never in their life dreamed of living for the glory of God, or making the Kingdom of God the goal and aim of their life, still feel that they need God occasionally to forgive their sins. So they retain God as a dispenser of forgiveness. According to their philosophy, that is what God is for—to forgive people’s sins. God is not to make any demands on people’s lives, but He is to be ready to forgive their sins when asked to do so. For the rest, God is politely

bowed to the sidelines and regarded as no longer necessary. Man feels that he can stand on his own feet and does not need God.

If we inquire as to the roots of this modern secular culture we will, I think, find that it goes deeper than we might at first suppose. It cannot be explained simply on the basis of people's laziness, selfishness and desire to have their own way. It has philosophical roots. We might say that modern secular culture has grown from the twin roots of modern science and modern philosophy.

### *Science Gives Man a Sense of Power*

To speak of science first, modern science and technology has made man feel very powerful and important. Regarding everything as controlled solely by natural law—with no thought of any divine providence back of natural law—modern man no longer sees the hand of God in the world of nature.

Man who can build great hydro-electric plants, who can fly faster than the speed of sound, who can split the atom with devastating results—why should such a being need God? Modern science has undertaken to explain everything without God, and this has tremendously bolstered modern man's confidence in himself. His ego is tremendously inflated. He feels that man can do anything. Even flights to the moon are regarded as within the realm of possibility.

Only occasionally does something happen to remind modern man of his real helplessness and dependence on God—such as a tornado or an earthquake. Accordingly, such events are legally designated as "acts of God," while the ordinary conduct and course of life is regarded as independent of God. In short, modern science and technology, with its great success in dealing with material things and physical forces, has given modern man "the big head." He is inflated with vainglorious human pride, a state of mind utterly contrary to humble faith in God.

### *Modern Philosophy Omits God*

The other root of modern secular culture is modern philosophy. We may regard modern philosophy as beginning with Immanuel Kant. Since the time of Kant

philosophy has veered farther and farther away from faith in God and from regarding God as relevant for human life as a whole. The result is that over against the theistic philosophy of the Bible we have today a secular philosophy which recognizes no need, place or use for God (except in the narrow area of religious feelings and worship.) Or if modern philosophy does indeed use the word "God" at all, it is not speaking of the God of the Bible and of historic Christianity, but of a pantheistic "God" who is really only an aspect of the universe, a projection of the human mind.

Modern American Pragmatism is the outcome of the modern development of philosophy. Pragmatism holds that anything is true if it "works." Pragmatism, of course, has really no place for God. He is left outside of this system.

We live in an age when the "grass roots" culture is affected and determined by the "experts" as never before. Many people today who have never taken a course in philosophy or opened a book on philosophy are nevertheless deeply influenced by the trends of the philosophy of the day. This is evidenced with special clearness in our educational system, which has been deeply influenced by the pragmatist teachings of John Dewey and others. So the views of the philosophers and "experts" percolate right down to the kindergarten and first grade of our public schools.

### *Secularism Surrounds us Today*

This secular philosophy is all around us. It is everywhere; it is pervasive. Sometimes it is explicitly stated, but much more often it is assumed, it is taken for granted. It is the unvoiced major premise lurking in the back of men's minds. You see it everywhere. You do not have to search for it. You cannot walk around in the America of 1956 without bumping into it. It is in the Reader's Digest, the Ladies' Home Journal, the Woman's Home Companion, Time Magazine, Life, your daily newspaper, the radio, the television, your parent-teacher association, the United Nations, and—last but not least—in the government of the United States of America and in our state and local governments down to the local township. All along the line man feels able to get along all right without God. It is not so much that man is opposed to God as that he just omits God. God is not regarded as

bad; He is just regarded as superfluous and unnecessary.

One thing that makes it attractive to be a foreign missionary is that on the foreign field you meet the forces of evil and of Satan head-on in open conflict. A man is either a Christian or a non-Christian, and it is not hard to decide which he is. Society is out and out pagan; The Christian Church is a little nucleus of a different type of society—a society in which God is central. But in America it is different. Here it is hard to tell where a man stands. He may be a member or even an officer of a church, and yet he may regard God as irrelevant for nine-tenths of his life.

### *Secularism Taken for Granted*

This secular view of life is taken for granted; it is an assumption in the back of people's minds. They are hardly conscious of it, but it is there. If people would come out and say it plainly, it would be much easier to cope with it. But only the blatant atheist comes out and calls a spade a spade. The rest profess to believe in God while in nine-tenths of their life they ignore and disregard Him.

This is what we are up against in America today. This is what evangelism is up against. This is what Christian education is up against. This is what the Church is up against. And this is what the individual Christian is up against—a society and a culture that regards God as without meaning for most of human life.

### *Secularism has Deeply Infiltrated the Churches in Present-Day America*

It is inevitable that Christian people will be affected by their environment. When Christian people live in a secular environment such as that of present-day America, they cannot but be profoundly influenced by it. The American church has absorbed the secular view of life from the secularism of modern culture.

Christian people are still human. They read the Reader's Digest and other popular magazines, and unconsciously they absorb the point of view from which these magazines are edited. They see motion pictures, they listen to the radio, they view television programs, they hold membership in community organizations of one sort or

another. It is inevitable that Christian people will be influenced by all these contacts.

### *A Subtle, Gradual Influence*

The trouble is that the influence of secularism is slow, gentle and gradual. If it had come as a sudden revolution from the theistic (God-centered) view of life held by previous generations, perhaps Christian people might have sensed the danger and reacted to it. But the influence of secularism is so gentle, so slow, so gradual and yet so pervasive and continuous, that Christian people have absorbed it without noticing any real change of viewpoint.

When you go to a different community, away from home, you may notice that the drinking water tastes different from what you are accustomed to. You notice the difference because the change is sudden, abrupt. But the drinking water of your own home city probably does not taste exactly the same at all times. It has seasonal variations in taste and chemical content. But you do not notice these changes because they come very gradually.

So it has come to pass that modern secularism has infiltrated the churches. It is not so much that the churches preach and teach secularism, as that they take it for granted and they tolerate it. It is assumed as legitimate; it is not challenged, it is not analyzed, it is not criticized. But this shift from a theistic view of life to a secular view of life, though it has come gradually, represents a major change from the attitude of our forefathers. They did not believe in religion as one of a number of co-ordinate interests in life. They did not place God on a reservation and expect Him to stay there. They regarded God as the real aim and purpose of human life. The Bible regards man as existing for God; modern culture regards God as existing for man and at man's disposal. And modern culture does not want God to get in its way.

### *Many Churches Have Been Affected*

This notion of religion as an incidental concern—one human interest among many others—is characteristic of many churches of the present day. They tolerate it, they have made their peace with it, they have compromised with it, they are deeply affected by it, they

do not think of challenging it.

No church has completely escaped the infection of this deadly virus—not the purest church, not the strictest, not the most faithful. Show me a church whose members do not read newspapers or magazines nor listen to radio programs, and whose children do not attend the public schools, and I will grant that such a church may be comparatively uninfluenced by secularism. But there is no such church. The existing churches have all been influenced—some more, some less; some very passively, others with a decided reaction against secularism. But influenced they have been and it cannot be denied.

This infiltration of secularism is certainly one of the major causes of the churches' present frustration and helplessness. It is one of the major elements of the churches' present weakness and lack of influence. Therefore it is important that we understand this present-day phenomenon, for if we do not understand its real nature we cannot hope to cope with it.

### *The Plight of Faithful Churches*

Secularism affects the membership of pure and faithful churches which recognize it for what it is and are trying to combat it. It affects the membership of competing churches, which tolerate it without challenge. And it affects the public we are attempting to reach with the Gospel of Christ. Every evangelistic effort is up against the fact of secularism. In the minds of all these people, with rare exceptions, there lurks the perverse assumption that religion is a mere fractional incident in human life, or even that God is a mere means to man's happiness and welfare.

A pure and faithful church is surrounded by competing churches which are dominated by the philosophy of secularism. These churches are constantly trying to gain members at the expense of the smaller, purer denominations which they disdainfully call "splinter groups." It is passing strange that the advocates of ecumenical peace and harmony and brotherly love have, apparently, no qualms of conscience whatever about shamelessly stealing members from smaller and weaker denominations. "All's fair in love and war" seems to be their practical attitude, whatever their verbal professions of unity and harmony may be. Consequently every pure

and faithful church of the present day is really "up against it." It is being preyed upon; its members are being enticed away from it, often by very worldly forms of bait.

Why should a person belong to a church that makes sweeping demands concerning his daily life, his social life, his business life, when he can easily, at any time, join a large, popular and respectable church which makes no demands whatever upon him except that of formal membership and profession? Yielding to such reasoning as this, perhaps without full consciousness of its implications, member after member leaves the pure and faithful church of his forefathers and joins one of the large, "tolerant" churches of the community.

### *Secularism Nullifies Christian Profession*

The secularistic assumption lies in the back of people's minds even while they are standing up in church to make a public profession of their faith in Christ and their obedience to Him. They publicly profess allegiance and obedience to Christ as their Lord, but too often in the back of their minds there lurks that tacit assumption, that subtle, subconscious mental reservation—Christ is to be the Lord of their religious life only, not of their life as a whole. This secularistic assumption is the unvoiced major premise of the transaction in the minds of such people. It cancels the meaning of any profession, it nullifies all vows, it contradicts every Christian testimony.

Why is it that church members often attend church only sporadically when they happen to feel like it or find it convenient? It is the assumption of secularism in the back of their minds. Why is it that a church with 100 members will have a prayer meeting attended by perhaps a dozen or two? It is for the same reason. Why is it that it is so hard to get people to practice consistent Christian stewardship? Why is it that people will spend money lavishly on luxuries and will, too often, dole it out with a miserly hand for the extension of God's Kingdom? The answer is secularism.

Why is it that people will publicly take solemn vows, and then break them the following Sabbath? Why will people promise to keep the Sabbath holy and then a few days or weeks later attend a big family reunion picnic on the Lord's Day, or start a vacation trip on the Sabbath

morning, or just stay home from church and loaf? Secularism, again.

### *Why People Change Churches Easily*

Why is it that people so easily change from one church to another, with no investigation or study of the denomination they are joining? Why the steady unremitting drift from the pure and faithful churches to the broad, popular and inclusive ones? It is because of secularism. In such people's minds is the assumption that religion is just a special interest to be confined to a reservation. In their minds is the assumption that religion must not be allowed to interfere in any way with their own plans, ambitions, convenience, activities, preferences, or projects. They want God, but they do not want God to interfere with their lives.

A person may accept any terms of communion; any vows, any confession of faith, any covenant, but if the assumption of secularism lurks in his mind, it means exactly nothing. Secularism is like chlorine bleach. It takes the real color out of everything.

### *Biblical Religion is the Antithesis of Modern Secularism.*

"In the beginning God . . ." These opening words of Holy Writ give us the keynote of the Bible's philosophy of life: In the beginning God. Of Him and through Him and to Him are all things. In Him we live and move and have our being. With Him is the fountain of life, and in His light shall we see light. According to Scripture, God is relevant for human life at every point. And, moreover, God himself is the great purpose of human life. "Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever"; that is not a quotation from the Bible but the thought is Biblical and can be supported from Scripture.

### *Religion the Real Purpose of Life*

"Aiming to live for the glory of God as our chief end . . ."—thus starts our Young People's Pledge. That form of statement, taken from the Covenant of 1871, is based, not on secularism, but on the Biblical view of human life.

According to the Biblical view, life is for religion, not religion for life. We do not have a religion because it

enriches our life; on the contrary, we are alive because it serves the purpose of religion for us to be alive. Everything else in life is to serve the ends of our religion—that is the Christian view of life.

God is the great fact and end of life. The meaning of everything depends on God. Without God life is blank and meaningless and ends in a whirlpool of blind chance or fate. Without God, life is a series of ciphers with no real number placed before them. If we do not start with faith in the God of the Bible, there is nothing in the universe that can have a real meaning to us. Life has meaning only because back of life is God, the infinite God whose sovereign counsel determines all created being. Facts have a meaning only because back of them there is the infinitely wise counsel of the sovereign God who has determined from all eternity, what their meaning shall be.

### *Modern Thought is Man-Centered*

Modern secular thought and life, on the other hand, are dominated by a radically different faith. Modern thought starts with man, and assumes that man is sufficient unto himself. Modern thought brings in God—not the God of the Bible, but a so-called "God" of its own making—later, when, as and where needed, if needed at all. Modern thought regards God as a convenience, or at best as a support or sanction for the moral life of man. It does not regard God as the source and end of all things. This is because modern thought is really based, not on the revelation given in the Bible, but on the speculations of human philosophy, and especially on the man-centered view of things which is derived from the German philosopher Immanuel Kant.

### *We Must Frankly Reject Secularism*

If we are going to adhere to the Biblical view of life, we will have to challenge secularism and reject it root and branch. No halfway measures can be effective. We will have to recognize that we are a different and separated people, and that only in God's light can we really see light. By God's grace, let us dare to look the modern world in the face and declare that we accept and adhere to the Biblical, God-centered view of the world and of human life, with all our heart and with all our soul. By thus adhering to the Biblical view of life we will

immediately make ourselves the objects of ridicule and reproach. We will be called “narrow,” “intolerant,” “behind the times,” “obscurantist,” “stuck hopelessly in the backwaters of fundamentalism,” and so forth. We need not fear this reproach, for it is really the reproach of Christ. So long as we are able to give a reason for the faith that is in us, we should hold up our heads and witness for the God of the Bible without compromise or apology.

### *What can be Done to Counteract Secularism*

No real Christian has any right to be a defeatist. As long as God lives and His promises hold true, we must have faith and face the bleak outlook with courage.

The first thing that can be done about secularism is to recognize it for what it really is and call it by its right name. The church has no business playing a game of make-believe and pretending that everything is all right when everything certainly is not all right. Secularism should be plainly, boldly, courageously nailed down and challenged. Not only should the false view of secularism be pointed out, but the Biblical view of human life should be placed sharply in antithesis to it. It is no use to beat around the bush; it is no use to pretend that there is no deep gulf between Biblical Christianity and modern American culture. It is time to awake to the fact that there is a yawning chasm between the two

American secular culture will take over the church if it can. It has already taken over a good many of the churches, which now submit passively to the demands of a man-centered culture and never challenge this or react against it.

### *Calvinism can Challenge Secularism*

Secularism can be successfully challenged only on the basis of real Biblical Christianity, sometimes called Calvinism or the Reformed Faith. Only a totalitarianism can really cope with secularism. Consistent Biblical Christianity—the Reformed Faith or Calvinism—is that totalitarianism. All mediating and halfway systems have the seeds of disintegration in them and are bound to fail. Calvinism contains steel and granite, and will survive.

Over against the assumption of modern secular culture that God is to be placed on a reservation, we must place the full truth of the Bible, that man’s life and everything in it exists for God’s glory. This is the very antithesis of secularism.

No message which aims only at the salvation of souls can counteract secularism. We must aim at the salvation of people’s lives and at the absolute consecration of those lives to the glory of God. In short, we must put God and God’s glory first in all our preaching and witnessing. Even man’s salvation is subordinate to the glory of God. To combat secularism, we must give God His rightful place all along the line. No narrower message can do it.

As to practical procedures to be adopted in combating secularism, I can claim no special success above others, but I shall present some ideas for whatever they may be worth. Perhaps they may help to remove this roadblock of secularism which is throttling the effectiveness of the church.

### *Real Christian Education Needed*

First, the crying need of the hour is the need for real Christian education. The Dutch Calvinistic churches, in Holland and in America, have pioneered in this, and they have profited immensely by it. Yes, I believe in the Bible in the public schools, and I believe in “released time,” and I believe in Vacation Bible Schools, and I believe in Sabbath Schools. But add them all together and they will still not solve this problem of Christian education. What is needed is not a secular system of education with some Christian features added on, but an educational system which puts God first and honors God all along the line—not merely the Bible and religion tacked onto the rest, but the entire curriculum and program unified by the Bible view of life and the God of the Bible.

Schools and teaching inspired by the philosophy of John Dewey do not become Christian by having some Bible reading, or even some Bible lessons added on to the rest. That is at best a makeshift, a palliative. What we need is real Christian education from A to Z. It has been tried in Holland and the Christian people there are reaping tremendous benefits from it. It has been tried in America, and it is the real backbone of the churches that

do it. True, it costs terrifically. It calls for heroic sacrifices. But they are people of heroic convictions and they willingly make the sacrifices in order that their covenant children may be educated in God-centered schools. And they reap the benefits. This is worth looking into, and we should be big enough to lay aside all jealousies and prejudices and look into it with an open mind.

### *Maintain High Membership Standards*

In the second place, I believe we should have a much higher standard in receiving members from the world, and in the case of our own youth being admitted as communicant members. This, of course, is easy to say but hard to do. Probably our formal requirements are high enough. It is the practical part that needs to be raised higher. We are so eager to gain a few members that we tend to hesitate, perhaps, to talk as plainly with them as we should.

I think we should get down to brass tacks in this matter of receiving members. We should ask people pointedly, do they intend to attend church faithfully, or only when they feel like it? Are they really going to practice Christian stewardship, or do they intend to rob God? Will they really keep the Sabbath holy, or are they just saying that to fool the preacher and the elders? When it comes to an issue between the interests of the Kingdom of God and their own private plans and ambitions, will they really put the Kingdom of God first? To be concrete, will they be willing to sacrifice financial gain in order to keep themselves and their family where they can attend and support the church they conscientiously believe in?

It will take courage to adopt such a program as that. I am not sure I have the courage to try it myself. The trouble is, it is extremely difficult to start something like that, because the people you are talking to know perfectly well that there are members already in the church who do not make any attempt to live according to such a high standard.

In receiving members from the world, and in admitting our covenant children to communicant membership, the authority of the pastor and the session is terribly weakened by the fact that everyone knows that there are members of long standing who have made exactly the same profession and taken exactly the same vows, yet are

breaking them, and nothing is done about it.

I have heard women in China threaten their children by telling them they will cut their ears off. The impression produced on the children is exactly zero. They have been told hundreds of times that their ears will be cut off, but they know very well that nobody's ears are going to be cut off, so they go on doing as they please. And in the same way, secularism has a free course in the churches and among the members, and all the vows and professions that are taken do not make any difference. I do not say, of course, that none are sincere, but I do say that too many have a secularistic major premise hanging on a hook in the back of their mind. They take the vows, but they intend to break the Sabbath, rob God, stay home from church, and so on, if they feel like it. They feel that God has no right to meddle with their private lives.

### *Scriptural Church Discipline Needed*

Therefore, I feel, the third thing necessary to combat the inroads of secularism is a return to the exercise of Scriptural church discipline. Church discipline has almost vanished from the life of the churches today. If a man runs away with someone else's wife, I suppose something will be done about it. But in the ordinary and very common cases of flagrantly broken vows and professions, nothing whatever is done about it and everyone knows that nothing will be done about it. But church discipline is a subject in itself, and I propose to leave that for the next lecture.

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## Reforming Presbyterian Worship

by

D. G. Hart and John R. Muether



What is the *Directory for Worship* and what is its function? In 1997, the Committee on Revisions to the Directory for Worship admitted to the General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church that there was significant uncertainty in the church on those questions. Specifically, sessions seemed confused over two sets of instructions contained in the Directory: circumstances that are “biblically appropriate” and elements that are “biblically mandated.” When, in other words, is the Directory suggestive and when is it conscience-binding?

If Orthodox Presbyterians are confused over the purpose of their Directory, they are not alone. This confusion is long-standing in the history of American Presbyterianism. According to Julius Melton, for American Presbyterians the *Directory for Worship* has become the “least of the standards,” and often a “non-directive directory.”

The Westminster Assembly produced a Directory for Worship to provide worship instruction based on the regulative principle of worship, which it articulated in its confession: “The acceptable way of worshiping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his revealed will.” At the point of offering specific guidance, the Assembly found it necessary to strike a compromise between, on the one hand, the set liturgy of the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* and the individualistic and spontaneous whims of the minister. Historian Bard Thompson hailed the result as a “monumental effort to comprehend the virtues of form and freedom.” But other critics lamented the victory of Puritan anti-formalism in the Assembly, and the Directory’s subsequent role in steering Presbyterianism in a non-liturgical direction. Of course, its general guidance does not prohibit the use of liturgical forms, and the Divines surely would recoil at the irreverence and spontaneity taking place in churches today, even those that claim to be Presbyterian. The Westminster Directory, its defenders claim, assumes a disciplined congregation worshipping with order and dignity.

But that assumption would be tested as Presbyterianism reached the New World. In colonial American Presbyterianism, debates arose over the use of uninspired hymns in worship. What is interesting for our purposes is less that hymns were eventually permitted than the logic that sanctioned them. Revivalist preachers of the Great Awakening were successful in heightening the emotional experience of the worshipers, and consequently Presbyterians began to measure the use of the means of grace by the effectiveness they had in stirring emotions. Thus hymns, a prominent part of the awakening, were permitted in the worship of the church, when the American Presbyterian Directory was approved in 1788. Compromises of this order continued in the American Presbyterian tradition. According to one historian, “the dominant tendency was for pragmatic adaptations, without official attention to theory in the revision of Presbyterian liturgical practice.”

The pragmatic urge was no more keenly felt than with the challenge of New School Presbyterianism, and in particular with the New Measures introduced by Charles Finney. Finney would eventually leave the Presbyterian church, but not before he successfully recast the elements of worship into an immediatist and evangelistic character. Altar calls, prayers by the laity, songs sung to sinners – these and more were introduced into Presbyterian worship in the nineteenth century. Together, they represented an impatience with the gradualism that Presbyterians traditionally saw at work with the means of grace, and a growing intolerance towards formalism in worship. Albert Barnes spoke for the New School when he asserted that “evangelical religion never has, and never can co-exist with a religion of forms.”

But forms would receive another hearing through the work of Charles Baird, a Presbyterian pastor whose 1855 book, *Presbyterian Liturgies*, uncovered the pre-Puritan Reformed tradition on worship. Baird claimed that the Puritan opposition to the use of set forms owed to now-obsolete historical circumstances. He

argued for the use of discretionary (i.e. non-imposed) liturgies, and he found precedent in the liturgies of Calvin and Knox, as well as in the French, German, and Dutch Reformed Churches. Calvin himself wrote, “I highly approve of it that there be a certain form from which ministers be not allowed to vary: that first, some provision be made to help the simplicity and unskilfulness of some; secondly, that the consent and harmony of the churches one with another may appear; and lastly, that the capricious giddiness and levity of such as affect innovations may be prevented.”

Baird’s point was that Reformed worship cannot be sustained merely by the careful identification of the proper elements of worship. It was vital, especially given the challenge of the New School, to pour Presbyterian content into the elements of worship. Following Baird there were several Presbyterian efforts to construct collections of worship forms, including A. A. Hodge’s *Manual of Forms* (though following his father’s suspicion of liturgy, A. A. Hodge restricted his collection to “special services”). Eventually the northern church would publish a *Book of Common Worship*, to complement the Directory, for “voluntary use in Presbyterian Churches.” Including simple forms such as the Psalter, the Lord’s Prayer, the Ten Commandments, and the Apostles’ Creed, the book was an effort to promote order and unity without coercion or monotony, to guard against “contrary evils of confusion and ritualism” and to encourage “unity and the spirit of common praise.”

The Orthodox Presbyterian Church approved its first Directory for Worship in 1939, at the 6th General Assembly. Writing in the *Presbyterian Guardian*, Ned B. Stonehouse noted the conservative character of the Directory: “It is by no means characterized by the introduction of numerous innovations. It is faithful to the best traditions of historic Presbyterianism.” To be sure, much of its wording was a return to the 1788 Directory. Still, it showed the influence of revivalist elements as well, such as its insistence that worship demonstrate “life and power” (2.7). Further, the OPC would not follow the Northern church in creating a supplemental Prayer Book, reiterating a Puritan antipathy toward forms. “The Lord Jesus Christ prescribed no fixed forms for public worship.”

The failure to reckon with worship forms continues to plague contemporary discussions of worship. Consider, for example, how it affects debates over worship music. That the first edition of the *Trinity Hymnal* (1961) included in the back 68 “Hymns for Informal Occasions” was, at the very least, an acknowledgment that different occasions called for different forms. But no such distinction characterized the second edition, published in 1990.

Forms, as Calvin put it, are a way to establish uniformity in worship. To acknowledge the importance of forms is to deny that *any* possible form, notwithstanding its “sincerity,” is appropriate for worship. Writing in the *New Horizons* in 1985, Jack Peterson noted that a different rationale lay behind efforts to revise the OPC Directory. “Why a new Directory? Because we have changed our styles of worship. . . . There is diversity found in the worship of our churches.” This logic – to express diversity rather than cultivate uniformity – raises the question of whether the Directory is a lamp (which ought to prescribe worship) or a mirror (which merely describes current practice). And the answer to that question, of course, determines how (and how often) the Directory ought to be revised.

If, on the other hand, the Reformed faith is a tripod whose stability requires the triple support of uniformity in doctrine, polity, and worship, then the OPC must ask whether its identity can be sustained if the church remains united in its doctrine and polity and yet increasingly divided in its worship. And if the church grants constitutional sanction to worship diversity, how can the OPC maintain uniformity in her worship? Perhaps the place to begin is by rethinking Puritan resistance to a prayerbook.

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## SOME CONSEQUENCES OF SEX BEFORE MARRIAGE

by

Rev. Dr. R. D. Anderson

It is clear from Scripture that God has forbidden sex before marriage. God expects all of us to marry in a state of virginity (Cf. Deut. 22:13-21). Still, no matter how sad, people do fall into this sin. How should we view such situations? What are the consequences of this sin? It is to these questions that we wish to address ourselves in this article.

The first matter that many seem to raise is whether this sin is as serious as people sometimes make it out to be - "Isn't swearing a sin too?" Why is such an emphasis placed on this sin? It is important to understand that the seriousness of this sin and the emphasis placed

### Why is such an emphasis placed on this sin?

upon it comes directly from the Bible. In 1 Cor. 6:18 the apostle Paul admonishes us: *"Shun immorality. Every other sin which a man commits is outside the body; but the immoral man sins against his own body."*

But is sex before marriage immorality? Paul uses a word (porneia) that alludes to all forms of forbidden sexual activity, including sex before marriage as well as adultery after marriage. Paul singles out sexual sin from among all others. Special emphasis is placed on this sin. Why is that? It is because with this sin one sins against his own body. This matter is further explained in the following verses: 1 Cor. 6:19-20 *"Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body."*

It is not only that with participation in forbidden sexual activity we sin in our bodies, but by it the Holy Spirit is also grieved (Cf. Eph. 4:30). If we are believers the Holy Spirit dwells within our hearts. In this way our bodies become temples of the Holy Spirit. By means of sexual sin this temple becomes defiled. The holiness of God is affected. That's why the apostle

Paul admonishes - "Shun immorality" (literally "flee sexual sin"). It is not merely a matter of forbidding, but also a command to run away from this sin. We must be careful not even to come near such sins. Paul is aware how easily and strongly our sinful desires can become inflamed!

The seriousness of this sin is also explained in Scripture by its consequences. Sex before marriage is not a sin that can be solved with a simple prayer for forgiveness. God has attached important consequences

to it. These are clearly described in His law: Ex. 22:16-17. *"If a man seduces a virgin who is not betrothed, and lies with*

*her, he shall give the marriage present for her, and make her his wife. If her father utterly refuses to give her to him, he shall pay money equivalent to the marriage present for virgins."* Deut. 22:28-29. *"If a man meets a virgin who is not betrothed, and seizes her and lies with her, and they are found, then the man who lay with her shall give to the father of the young woman fifty shekels of silver, and she shall be his wife, because he has violated her; he may not put her away all his days."*

Both of these laws speak about consenting sex before marriage. They show us that pre-marital indulgence in these privileges, reserved by our Lord for the bond of marriage, involves the obligation to marry. A boy and a girl who have become physically one must marry, regardless of whether the girl has become pregnant (see below for an exception). God has restricted physical unity to marriage. That is also why, in the Old Testament, the Lord commanded a fine to be paid to the father of the girl, namely fifty shekels of silver. This fine is called "the marriage present" in Exodus 22, but the translation can be confusing for it might appear that a dowry is meant. That is not the case.

At this point I should clear up any misunderstand-

## Some Consequences of Sex Before Marriage

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ing. It certainly was, and is, an Eastern custom for a dowry to be paid when a daughter is given away in marriage. We learn from the Bible that this was also the practice in Israel.<sup>1</sup> But, and this is particularly noteworthy, God's law says nothing about this practice at all. You will not find rules for dowries anywhere in the Bible. The only thing we read in this regard is that when there has been sexual intercourse before marriage a fine of fifty shekels of silver must be paid to the father of the girl.

When we consider that the average annual salary for a laborer in Moses' time was ten silver shekels, we may conclude that such a fine was roughly equivalent to five years wages!<sup>2</sup> If such an amount could not be raised the only solution would be debt-slavery. In this way we can see that this sin was not small in God's eyes. Stealing the gifts of marriage in advance has clear consequences.

Along with the demand to marry in these circumstances God has also given a safety rule. This demand is not etched in stone. The father of the girl (as head of the family) has the right to refuse permission for such a marriage.<sup>3</sup> This may be done to protect the girl. When such a sin occurs, it is often the case that the boy and girl are deeply in love. But love can be blind. It is possible that the boy is not at all suited for the girl. This is something that the father of the girl should ascertain. Sex before marriage does not automatically lead to a forced marriage. However, we must remember that the participants have stolen in advance what rightly belongs only to marriage.

The Bible speaks from the position that a father gives his daughter away to her husband (e.g. 1 Cor. 7:36-38). It is important that the father (thus the parents, with father as head) grant permission for his daughter to marry. That is also why we still have the practice of a young man asking permission from the father of his fiancée to take her hand in marriage. This is not just a nice, laudable practice, but a tradition with a Biblical foundation.

Sometimes the question is raised whether it is

necessary to seek the parents' permission if the girl has already done profession of her faith. This exposes an apparent misunderstanding about the nature of public profession of faith. A child that professes his (her) faith does, indeed, publicly say that he wants to live in faithfulness to his Lord and accept all the responsibilities of full membership in Christ's church. That includes admission to the Lord's Supper table. But it does not mean that before doing profession of his faith he had no personal responsibility for his faith. Indeed, if a baptized member falls into sin the consistory has the right (even the duty) to deal with this matter, and may even put him under discipline. (That's also why we have a Form for the Excommunication of Non-

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It is not necessarily wrong for a boy and a girl to get to know one another before they marry, but the permission to marry given by the parents of the girl remains a Biblical requirement.

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Communicant Members.) Neither does profession of one's faith undo previous authority-relationships. A person who has done profession of faith must still obey his boss at work. The same

goes for obedience to parents (when he/she lives at home). They remain his parents. Of course the relationship between parents and children in regards to responsibilities must change as children become older, but public profession of faith does not eliminate such a relationship. When Paul, in 1 Cor. 7:37-38, gives advice to fathers concerning the marrying off of their daughters, he does not add the clause "unless your daughters have done public profession of their faith." Nor do we find such a clause in Exodus 22:17. It is not necessarily wrong for a boy and a girl to get to know one another before they marry, but the permission to marry given by the parents of the girl remains a Biblical requirement. The Bible clearly speaks (with reference to the father) of giving in marriage. Through the formation of a new marriage-bond the authority of the parents comes to a definitive end (Gen. 2:24). If a woman were to marry for a second time she would do so independently (1 Cor. 7:39).

Circumstances can become complicated if parents irresponsibly refuse permission to marry. In such cases it may be possible to appeal to the consistory who should judge whether the parents are sinning in their refusal (for example, if they want their daughter only to marry into money).

All of this shows that when sex has occurred before marriage, the boy has certain responsibilities over against the father of the girl. It is the father's duty to give his daughter away in marriage, regardless of her age (see 1 Cor. 7:36-38). The sin must also be humbly confessed to the father.<sup>4</sup> A Christian boy will also be the more humbled when he realizes that in the Old Testament an amount of five times his annual salary would have been paid to the father. The girl, whose virginity has been eternally lost, becomes his responsibility and under his care. And the father must be reminded that in such a case the Lord has demanded marriage, unless the father refuses permission (with good grounds). If the father notices that both the boy and his daughter show genuine repentance<sup>5</sup> for their sin and also a desire to bring it before the Lord - and if there are no other serious reasons to prevent it - the marriage ceremony, in obedience to the Word of God, should be arranged as soon as possible.

Yet one more consequence follows for the newly married couple. Where sexual intercourse has occurred before marriage, the Lord ordains that the couple may never divorce. Such a marriage may never be annulled. Herein a certain protection is again afforded to the girl. She may never be abandoned. Her husband will always be responsible for her well-being, even if they should come upon difficult times in which it is necessary to separate. He will, as long as he lives, be responsible for her protection and support.

May the Lord grant us the strength and power not to fall into this sin. By becoming aware of the weight and seriousness of this matter in the eyes of the Lord we will be motivated all the more to do everything we can to prevent it. And not only to prevent it, but to run away from it. Should one fall into such a sin, the way of reconciliation with our Lord is clear. Let us never try to cover up such sins. The consequences of doing that are eternal. Pray to God for the necessary strength and humility to follow His way in these matters.

Translated from the Dutch, with permission, by Peter de Boer. Canada, 1998

### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Gen. 34:12; 1 Sam. 18:25 for the custom of paying a dowry to the father of the girl, and 1 Kings 9:16; Mic. 1:13-14 for the custom of paying a dowry to the girl herself.

<sup>2</sup> See R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (2nd ed., Darton, Longman & Todd; London, 1965) 76. This comparison can only give a relative impression of the size of the fine. The position of a laborer in Old Testament society cannot be identified with that of today. The amount of the fine was also the equivalent value of a healthy mature man between the ages of 20 and 60 years, cf. Lev. 27:3. In Lev. 27:4 a woman is valued at only 30 silver shekels because the valuations here concern usefulness for work in the tabernacle.

<sup>3</sup> It is not my intention to suggest that the mother has no role to play (see Prov. 6:20). In our society it would be normal (and also good) that parents discuss these matters together. The father, as head, will provide leadership and bear the final responsibility (just as Adam - not Eve - had to bear the final responsibility for the fall into sin).

<sup>4</sup> Although Deut. 22:28 speaks of two people who are "found out", the Lord expects us, if we have genuine repentance for our sin, to come forward and confess it. Repentance involves humbly accepting the punishment and consequences of our sins. Any attempt to hide our sins in order to circumvent our biblical responsibilities shows a lack of repentance and effectively blocks any private prayer for forgiveness.

<sup>5</sup> Genuine repentance for a sin not only entails sorrow before the Lord, but also that we seriously work at avoiding this sin in the future. This may require that two persons engaged to be married need to agree no longer to see each other in situations where they are easily compromised, e.g., babysitting together in the evening. They might, in such situations, agree always to invite a third party to prevent temptation getting the better of them. The prayer "lead us not into temptation" cannot be very sincere if we insist on placing ourselves in tempting situations!

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## GRACE AND TRUTH FOR LIFE

by

Larry Wilson

Beloved congregation,

I've been receiving a lot of questions from quite a few of you about the congregational meeting. Let me try to explain...

One of the great blessings of "presbyterianism"—when we actually believe its principles to be biblical, when we actually take them to heart, and when we actually act on them in faith and obedience—is that we rely on our Lord personally to superintend a corporate decision-making process by means of a series of checks and balances. One example is the call to me by the Committee on Christian Education. (I want to explain this in some detail because another example would be a congregation's calling a pastor. The same principles apply.)

Let me try to spell it out. The underlying principle is this: The living, exalted Christ—King Jesus—actively rules his church by his Spirit working in the hearts of his people through his Word. And so a call to a minister (or an elder or a deacon) is not just an individual's subjective decision. There is a series of decisions by different parties, all working together as checks and balances. As each party seeks the Lord, and seeks to esteem one another as better than themselves, and seeks to submit to their brethren in the Lord, the Lord sovereignly orchestrates this process.

Therefore, please set aside worldly comparisons. For example, I don't have a "career;" I have a calling. I don't "work for a company;" I serve the bride of Christ which he loved and for which he gave himself. "Pastor-teacher" is not something I do; it's what I am, whether paid or unpaid. Money is irrelevant. The Lord hates mercenary ministers ("hiringlings" in the KJV), and so do I. (I suppose that if you must have a model, the military model does come closest to the way God's Word presents it. King Jesus is the Commander-in-Chief. His wish is my command.)

So—to apply this in my case—remember that "presbyterianism" believes that the Bible teaches that the church comes to visible expression on different levels—local, regional, and whole. Each level has a governing body. So the local church is governed by its Session (the

pastors and elders ruling collectively). The regional church is governed by its Presbytery (the pastors and a representative elder from each congregation in a region). And the whole church is governed by its General Assembly (representative pastors and representative elders from each Presbytery).

An agency of the General Assembly—the Committee on Christian Education—extended a call to me. I assure you that I did not seek this call. It sought me. Thirteen mature pastors and elders who had been elected by respective General Assemblies came to the unanimous conviction that the Lord wanted ME for this task. I can't describe to you how humbling...how frightening...how sobering that is! We're not talking about a question of personal preference. We're talking about a call from the Lord. We're talking about orders from the Commander-in-Chief of the universe.

But that this one party concluded that the Lord is calling me to this does not make it so. Our Lord calls his officers through his church. He does so by means of a series of checks and balances. OPC Form of Government XXII.12 explains the decision making process from there:

"When the call is to the pastor of a congregation, and he is disposed to accept the call, he shall inform the congregation of his desire and ask them to concur with him in requesting their presbytery to dissolve the pastoral relationship;"

Note that there are four parties which are part of this decision making process — (1) the calling body, (2) the pastor, (3) the congregation, and (4) the presbytery. The first party extended its call. That put the ball in my court.

And so I wrestled with this decision in prayer and fasting and seeking advice from a multitude of counselors. I finally concluded that the Lord is calling me to this. But that does not necessarily make it so either. Remember, our Lord calls his office-bearing servants through his church. There is a series of checks and balances.

Now it goes to the third party in the decision-making

process. This puts the ball in your court:

“such request shall be voted on by the congregation at a regularly called meeting of the congregation.”

That’s what we’re going to do this Lord’s Day. The Session has called a special congregational meeting for this Sunday, June 4, right after our Morning Worship Service to ask you to concur with me in requesting our presbytery to dissolve my pastoral relationship to this church with my last day of service being August 13, 2000. OPC Form of Government XXII.12 explains your options in the decision-making process:

“If the congregation concurs in his request the pastor shall request their presbytery to approve the call and to dissolve the pastoral relationship.”

“If the congregation declines to concur in his request he may — if he is still disposed to accept the call — request the presbytery to dissolve the pastoral relationship; in such a case the congregation shall be given the opportunity to be represented at the meeting of presbytery to plead its cause.”

And so I ask you to concur with me in requesting our presbytery to dissolve my pastoral relationship to this church.

Some of you have been asking me to express my subjective feelings about this call. But that’s not the question. The question is not, “Do I love you?” If that were the question I’d never be “disposed” to accept another call. The question is not, “Do I want to stay with you?” I do. Moreover, the question is not, “Do you love me?” You have made it abundantly clear that you do. The question is not, “Do you want me to stay with you?” You’ve made it evident that you do. I can’t help but think of Acts 13:1-3. “In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.” I think the church at Antioch was a regional church (made up of a number of local churches) and that this describes what we would call a Presbytery meeting. But can’t you imagine them saying, “Lord, we can’t afford to lose Barnabas and Saul! They’re too important here!”? But the Lord continued to work in and through the church in

Antioch even after Barnabas and Saul were sent on their mission. Likewise, the question for us is, “Is our Lord saying, ‘Set apart for me Larry Wilson for the work to which I have called him?’” I would hope that — if the congregation and the presbytery both approve — you would have a sense not of losing me, but of sending me and my family.

At the congregational meeting, you will be asked to vote on this question, “Do you concur with Pastor Larry Wilson in requesting the Presbytery of Ohio to dissolve his pastoral relationship to this church with his last day of service being August 13, 2000?” You must each vote your conscience before the Lord as part of the process of arriving at the objective call of our Lord through his church. Then the process goes to the fourth party ... the Presbytery. The Presbytery has these options:

- “When the presbytery has received a request to approve a call and to dissolve a pastoral relationship it may
- (a) grant the request,
  - (b) require the pastor and congregation to give the matter further consideration, or
  - (c) require the continuance of the relationship.”

And so this decision will not be final until the Presbytery of Ohio makes it final. In fact, OPC Form of Government XXII.12 says:

“No minister may leave his charge without the prior approval of the presbytery.”

I’m content to trust our Lord to superintend this process. Do you see? Our Lord has promised that he will never leave nor forsake his church. He will never leave you nor forsake you. The Lord is the only indispensable person here. Whatever we do, let’s not grieve him or quench his Spirit! If our Lord is calling me to other service, he has not forgotten you. The God who knows the end from the beginning is already prepared. He won’t leave his faithful people without a shepherd.

I also hope you don’t underestimate the gifts our Lord has already given you in your present Session — gifts which he will use to help you through this process! There will be seven ruling elders and two ministers still serving on the Session even if I am gone. Many congregations have successfully weathered this process with much weaker leadership. Our gracious Lord is always faithful! You can trust him in this.

In the Lamb,  
Pastor Larry Wilson



# Some Timely Thoughts from John Calvin On Differences among Christians

by Stephen Doe

How do we deal with the differences among Christians? There are different views of various practices within the Orthodox Presbyterian church, between the OPC and other Reformed churches, and, most broadly, between Reformed churches and other Christian churches. How do we handle these differences? How do we gage the relative importance of doctrines and practices which exist in Christianity?

Not surprisingly, John Calvin, the devout servant of Christ and devoted son of the church, thought about these things. Calvin makes three key distinctions in his writings which can be very helpful to us.<sup>1</sup> He spoke of “the essential”, “the important”, and “the indifferent”. This schema helps to explain many things about Calvin’s reactions to people who differed from him on a variety of points.

First of all Calvin spoke of “the essential”, dogmas which are essential or fundamental for salvation. These are the things most certainly believed among us (Luke 1:1), the things received as of first importance (I Corinthians 15:3). For Calvin these essential matters cohere to three points<sup>2</sup>: 1) the only authority is the Word of God (Ephesians 2:20), 2) Jesus Christ must be confessed as the Son of God and the object of faith to those who are saved (I Corinthians 3:11, I John 2:22), 3) the church is the place where faith is to be expressed as the pillar of the truth (I Timothy 3:15). Only errors which deny “the essentials” may truly be called heresies for rejection of any of the above three endangers one’s eternal salvation.

Secondly, Calvin spoke of “the important”. His understanding of this category is significant. It encompasses things which are often lumped in the final category of the “indifferent”. By the “important” Calvin meant anything that is taught in Scripture, certainly “the essentials”, but also whatever God has seen fit to record in His Word. We cannot be unconcerned about any biblical revelation, but not all things revealed in Scripture are essential for salvation, so men may differ on the “the important” without

endangering their eternal salvation. Calvin, for instance, would have put church polity in this category.

The third category for Calvin was that of the “indifferent” (adiaphora). These are matters which are not dealt with in Scripture and therefore cannot be made a matter of church discipline. Fundamentalists, like the Anabaptists of Calvin’s day, have too often taken those things which are not discussed in Scripture like attending movies, and elevated them to the status of disciplinary matters. Heresy cannot be defined nor schism justified with the matters in this category.

There are implications here for our relations with those with whom we disagree. Calvin would warn us not to be dogmatic about such things as are not addressed in Scripture directly. One man’s “good and necessary” consequence from Scripture is not always another’s. It was the category of “the important” in which Calvin saw the greatest possible room for the development of unity among the churches. Those things which are “essentials” are not subject to negotiation or compromise. Those things which are “indifferent” are never obstacles to church unity because they are not grounded in Scripture and therefore cannot be reasons for separation or schism. Frequently division has come in the area of “the important”. Calvin, never one to seek vacuous organic unity, nonetheless saw the need to discuss “the important” doctrines of Scripture, reach the greatest possible degree of clarity in understanding, and then recognize that even disagreement over “the important” does not end the fundamental unity of churches where “the essentials” are held.

We deal best with the disagreements within the churches by attempting to see things in their “proper proportions”.<sup>3</sup> As Reformed believers we must be careful that we not forsake what we believe to be the teaching of Scripture such as are summarized in the Reformed creeds. Perhaps, however, we must also give renewed attention to Calvin’s approach to what is important and what is essential if we, like Calvin, value the peace, purity, and unity of the church.<sup>4</sup>

“The pure ministry of the Word and pure mode of celebrating the sacraments are, as we say, sufficient pledge and guarantee that we may safely embrace as church any society in which both these marks exist. The principle extends to the point that we must not reject it so long as it retains them, even if it otherwise swarms with many faults.

“What is more, some fault may creep into the administration of either doctrine or sacraments, but this ought not to estrange us from communion with the church. For not all the articles of true doctrine are of the same sort. Some are so necessary to know that they should be certain and unquestioned by all men as the proper principles of religion [the “essential”]. Such are: God is one; Christ is God and the Son of God; our salvation rests in God’s mercy; and the like. Among the churches there are other articles of doctrine disputed which still do not break the unity of faith. [the “important”]. Suppose that one church believes -short of unbridled contention and opinionated stubbornness- that souls upon leaving bodies fly to heaven; while another, not daring to define the place, is convinced nevertheless that they live to the Lord. What churches would disagree on this one point? Here are the apostle’s words: “Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, be of the same mind; and if you be differently minded in anything, God shall reveal this also to you” [Phil. 3:15]. Does this not sufficiently indicate that a difference of opinion over these nonessential matters should in no wise be the basis of schism among Christians? First and

foremost, we should agree on all points. But since all men are somewhat beclouded with ignorance, either we must leave no church remaining, or we must condone delusion in those matters which can go unknown without harm to the sum of religion and without loss of salvation.

“But here I would not support even the slightest error with the thought of fostering them through flattery and connivance. But I say we must not thoughtlessly forsake the church because of any petty dissensions. For in it alone is kept safe and uncorrupted that doctrine in which piety stands sound and the use of the sacraments ordained by the Lord is guarded. In the meantime, if we try to correct what displeases us, we do so out of duty...we are neither to renounce the communion of the church nor, remaining in it, to disturb its peace and duly ordered discipline.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This is fully developed in an unpublished doctoral dissertation by David Anderson Bowen, *John Calvin’s Ecclesiological Adiaphorism: Distinguishing the “Indifferent,” the “Essential,” and the “Important” in His Thought and Practice*, 1547-1559. (Vanderbilt University, 1985) which first attracted my attention. Cf. Martin I. Klauber, “*Calvin on Fundamental Articles and Ecclesiastical Union*,” *Westminster Theological Journal*, 54 (1992): 341-48.

<sup>2</sup> Bowen, *ibid.*, pp.71-108.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.138.

<sup>4</sup> Anyone wishing to see how Calvin handled his doctrinal disagreement with Melancthon, may contact the present writer.

<sup>5</sup> *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV.1.12 (Battles translation).