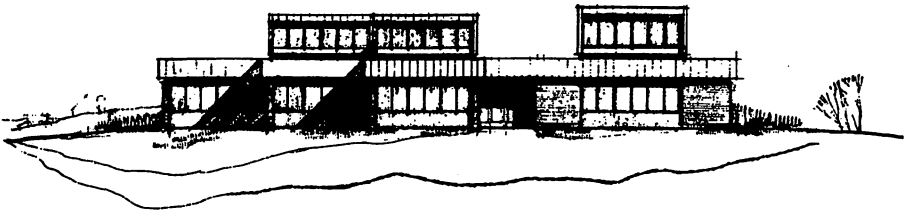


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PROTESTANT REFORMED THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL

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Editorial Notes

We have prepared a variety of material for this issue of the *Journal* which we believe will be of interest to our readers.

Prof. Decker continues his important series on cross-cultural missions. The mission work of the church of our Lord Jesus Christ is of abiding concern for the church, if for no other reason than that the work of missions is a work of obedience to the King of the church who has commanded the church to go into all the world to preach the gospel to every creature. How that work is to be done is a burning issue, for much is being said and written which is contrary to the directives of Christ Himself who alone can gather His church.

The Seminary was privileged in the latter part of the month of April to hear two lectures given on the Seminary premises by Rev. Bassam Madany on the general subject of mission work among the Arabs. Rev. Madany was for many years, until his retirement, minister of the Arab broadcasts of the Back To God Hour. He spoke sharply and clearly to us of the absolute primacy of preaching as the only legitimate method of missions and insisted, often eloquently, on this Reformed distinctive. This led him to subject the whole idea of cross-cultural missions to a searching review and a scathing denunciation. Prof. Decker's article, prepared before Rev. Madany's lectures, sounds the same sharp note.

Prof. Engelsma concludes his series on the history of the views of divorce and remarriage held by the church since Pentecost. He examines the sad and perilous state of evangelicalism and Reformed and Presbyterian churches as, bit by bit, they have capitulated to modern trends and movements. Such concessions have revealed, says Prof. Engelsma, a fundamental antinomianism in the churches and, worst of all, have led the way in the destruction of the holy institution of marriage.

If one truth emerges from this important study, it is the urgency with which the faithful church of Christ is confronted to maintain the sanctity of marriage by resisting with all her might the horrible departures from the teaching of Jesus. And such resistance implies a desperate need for the church to insist upon divorce on the grounds of adultery only, and no remarriage of divorced persons under any circumstances as long as one's spouse lives.

Prof. Hanko continues his study of the teaching of common grace, particularly the view of an inward restraint of sin in the hearts of the unregenerate. He points out that such a restraint necessarily involves a change in the spiritual condition of man so that the doctrine of total depravity is denied. It ought to be clear to all that the doctrine of total depravity is, after all, a doctrine essential to the great truths of the sovereign grace of God in the salvation of sinners.

We covet the prayers of our readers that the *Journal* may be a blessing to many, strengthening the faith of those of like precious faith with us, and encouraging others to stand courageously in the cause of the gospel.

Let us hear from you!

Another Look At Common Grace (7) Restraint of Sin: Is It Biblical?

Herman C. Hanko

Introduction

An important aspect of the doctrine of common grace is the teaching that the Holy Spirit of God restrains sin in the world and in man.

Defenders of common grace present the restraint of sin as taking place in many different ways, among which are: 1) The temporal operations of the Holy Spirit through government, public opinion, knowledge of divine punishments and rewards, etc.; 2) General revelation which comes to all men without exception through the creation; 3) The work of the Holy Spirit enlightening the mind and conscience of man; 4) Such influences of the Holy Spirit which prevent man from becoming a devil or a beast and which enable man to engage in cultural activities which are for man's good.

The result of these restraining influences are: 1) That man is not as bad as he would otherwise be;¹ 2) That he retains some ability to do good; 3) That judgment and divine wrath are postponed as God reveals forbearance and longsuffering towards men while making overtures towards them to persuade them of the desirability of salvation.²

It is generally agreed that these restraints of sin, while in many respects outward, are nevertheless also inward; i.e., they are brought about by an inward operation of the Holy Spirit upon the hearts of men which, though not renewing the heart unto repentance and salvation, nevertheless checks the workings of sin.

It is this aspect of common grace which we consider in this article.

Restraint And Original Sin

As I mentioned in my last article, I do not know of anyone in the history

¹ The distinction is often made between total depravity and absolute depravity.

² See our last article for a detailed description of the many views on this subject that emerge from the writings of defenders of common grace.

of Reformed or Presbyterian thought who has denied that God outwardly restrains the manifestations of sin by His providence. This is so clearly taught in Scripture and so obvious from life that no one could possibly deny it without being accused of irrationality.

The careful reader will notice, however, that in the above paragraph I used the words, "God restrains the *manifestations of sin*," rather than saying merely, "God restrains sin." There is good reason for that difference in wording. And it involves the point at issue.

In this discussion the word "sin" can and must be used in two different ways. Sin certainly can refer to all the wicked and evil deeds of man, not only those which he commits in his outward speech and actions, but also those which are part of his inward life of thought and desire. But sin can also refer to the *spiritual quality or condition of his nature*. I do not suppose that there are any in the tradition of Reformed and Presbyterian thought who would disagree, but the point ought to be emphasized nevertheless. It is often overlooked or ignored, though it is of crucial importance. The latter is called original sin.

Scripture and the confessions of the Reformed and Presbyterian churches speak of "original sin." By original sin is meant original guilt and original pollution. Original guilt is the guilt which comes upon all men for the sin of Adam's disobedience in eating of the forbidden tree. Adam became guilty before God for this act of disobedience; but, because he was created as the federal or legal head of the entire human race, the guilt of this sin of Adam was imputed to all men who are born from Adam. They are guilty for that sin and deserve to go to hell for that sin alone.

Original pollution is the just punishment of God upon those who are guilty of Adam's sin. It is part of the death which God said would surely come upon man for disobedience: "The day that thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die." It is what Paul refers to in Ephesians 2:1 when he describes all men as "dead in trespasses and sins." It is spiritual death. It is a spiritual corruption of the nature of man so that he is incapable of doing any good and inclined to all evil. It is what brought forth David's lament: "Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me" (Ps. 51:5). It is with original pollution that we are concerned.

Original pollution is what is referred to in the Heidelberg Catechism in Q & A 57: "What believest thou concerning 'the forgiveness of sins'? That God, for the sake of Christ's satisfaction, will no more remember my sins, *neither my corrupt nature, against which I have to struggle all my life long....*" The Belgic Confession also speaks of the corruption of the nature when it describes original sin in this way:

We believe that, through the disobedience of Adam, original sin is

extended to all mankind; which is a corruption of the whole nature, and an hereditary disease, wherewith infants themselves are infected even in their mother's womb, and which produceth in man all sorts of sin, being in him as a root thereof; and therefore is so vile and abominable in the sight of God, that it is sufficient to condemn all mankind (Article XV).

In similar fashion, the Westminster Confession says:

They (Adam and Eve) being the root of all mankind, the guilt of this sin was imputed, and the same death in sin and corrupted nature conveyed to all their posterity descending from them by ordinary generation.

From this original corruption, whereby we are utterly disposed, disabled, and made opposite of all good, and wholly inclined to all evil, do proceed all actual transgressions (VI, 3 & 4).

Let it be unmistakably clear: the defenders of common grace mean by their doctrine of the restraint of sin two specific and quite different things. They mean, first of all, that sin in the first sense mentioned above is restrained. That is, they mean that sin as *deed* is restrained. Men's words are restrained — as in the case of a man who will not take God's name in vain in polite company. Men's actions are restrained — as in the case of a driver who will not speed when he notices a police car in the median of the expressway. Even, in a certain sense, men's thoughts and desires are restrained, although they are part of those deeds which belong to the activity of his mind and will. The restraint of his inward psychic activity is also part of external restraint which comes about by the providence of God.

No one ever denied this. This is simply taken for granted in all discussion of Reformed theology.

But the defenders of common grace mean more than all this. They mean an inward restraint which in some fashion *changes man's corrupt nature*. They refer to a restraint of sin which does away with the full corruption of man's nature, though it does not save. As a result of this change in his nature, the natural man is capable of performing some good deeds.

Although the terminology I have used is not that commonly employed by the defenders of common grace, this is nevertheless what is meant by the restraint of sin. This is evident from three considerations.³

In the first place, the defenders of common grace speak of a restraint of sin by the work of the Holy Spirit upon the *heart* of man. It is not a saving

³For quotes of various writers which support these considerations see my last article, in the November, 1994 *Journal*.

change which is wrought; but it is a change which alters the heart sufficiently so that man is not as wicked as he would be without this work of the Spirit.

In the second place, some defenders of common grace speak of a distinction which must be made between “total depravity” and “absolute depravity.” By the latter is meant that the depravity of *the human nature* is as complete as it can possibly be. Man is as wicked as it is possible to be *in his nature*. Although it is not always clear exactly what is meant by “total depravity” in distinction from “absolute depravity,” generally speaking the defenders of this distinction mean that, although *every part* of man’s nature is corrupt, *every part* is not as corrupt as it could be. This surely implies some modification of the corruption of the nature by the work of the Holy Spirit.

And finally, that the defenders of common grace speak of a restraint of sin in terms of an alteration in the spiritual condition of the nature is evident from the fact that they speak of this restraint of sin as a work of God the Holy Spirit which prevents man from becoming a devil (as John Murray spoke of it), or a beast (as Abraham Kuyper said). Now it is apparent that this description of the restraint of sin is a reference to the nature of man. Whether man is a devil or a beast, or whether he remains a rational and moral man is a question of his nature, not his deeds. Thus it is clear that the restraint of sin has to do with a significant alteration in the spiritual condition of man’s nature.

Now this is crucially important. And its importance lies in the fact that such a description of the restraint of sin is indeed a denial of the biblical, Calvinistic, and Reformed doctrine of total depravity.

While we want to look at this a bit more closely later, let it be clearly understood that the real issue here is the doctrine of total depravity. In the Reformed conception, if sinful deeds are restrained by God’s providence, that can and is done by God without altering in any respect the nature of man. Man remains a totally corrupt man incapable of doing any good and inclined to all evil. The *manifestation* of that corrupt nature in a man’s conduct may be restrained without any change in man’s nature whatsoever. But an *inner work of the Holy Spirit operating upon the heart of man* is a fundamental change in man’s very nature, so that he is no longer totally depraved, though he still is not saved and will eventually go to hell.

Outward Restraint

Although the doctrine is not in dispute, we ought briefly to affirm the doctrine of the outward restraint of sin in the lives of men.

What needs emphasis here, of course, is the truth that this outward restraint of sin takes place by God’s providence.

God's providence is the sovereign execution of His eternal and unchangeable counsel.

From before the foundation of the world, God has determined all that comes to pass. His counsel is His own living will. It is God's sovereign determination with regard to all things.

It is a counsel that is in the absolute sense of the word all-embracing. It determines all that happens in all the brute creation, in all the lives of all men, in all of heaven and among the angels, and in all of hell among the devils. No power outside of God exists. Nothing happens by chance and apart from His will. His counsel determines it all.⁴

That counsel is sovereignly efficacious. That is, the counsel is itself the power of its execution. We must remember that God's counsel is His own will. It is not a mere plan. It is not a blueprint for history which is filed away in some file cabinet in heaven consulted by God as the need arises. It is not subject to change or alteration depending on circumstances which may force God to amend His plan. It is not a "good guess" as to what shall transpire in history, or a divine prediction which is always right. The power of the execution of God's counsel lies in the counsel itself. And thus the determinations of God's counsel infallibly come to pass. None can withstand His will; none can resist His purpose. None can force God to change His mind or alter that which He has determined to do.⁵

But there is one more truth of God's counsel which must be remembered. God's counsel is not a mere collection of decrees, arbitrarily thrown together without any rhyme or reason. It is a unified plan and purpose with each single decree perfectly related to the whole, and the whole perfectly adapted to the goal. God has determined to glorify Himself in the highest and best possible way. That way is the way of the salvation of an elect church through Jesus Christ, God's Son, the Mediator of the covenant. All things which God determines to do are perfectly and marvelously willed so that God's great purpose may be accomplished. God's purpose in the creation and in the lives of all men is for the salvation of the church in Christ to the glory of God's grace. All things that happen in heaven and among angels serve the great purpose of God to glorify Himself in His Son. Hell and Satan

⁴ Any other position introduces into theology an intolerable dualism which speaks of two autonomous powers: God and evil.

⁵ God's counsel is also determinative of sin. Sin does not take place outside God's counsel and will so that it takes God by surprise. Although we are not concerned about the question in our present discussion, the great theologians of the Reformed and Presbyterian tradition have all held that God's sovereignty extends also to sin.

and all Satan's hordes are under the sovereign control of God and for His own glory.

Providence is the execution of God's counsel. Providence is not some vague and impersonal force which men generally worship — as in the language of Deists.⁶ Providence is not just a rather general way of saying that God does all things in the world. Providence is God's sovereign execution of His own eternal counsel so that His purpose in Christ may be accomplished.

Outward restraint of sin comes about through this providence of God which has as its purpose the glory of His own name through the salvation of His church in His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

It ought, I think, to be evident that this definition of providence in relation to the outward restraint of sin puts some important limitations on the question.

But be that as it may, God's providence restrains sin in many different ways.

God's providence restrains sin in the lives of individual people by determining all the circumstances of their birth and life. God's providence determines the time in history when each man shall be born, and the time of his birth determines how his sin is restrained. After all, Lamech, who was the first bigamist, could commit adultery, but he could not commit adultery as easily and readily as is possible today with the invention of birth control devices and the approval of abortion. He was restrained from sinning in certain respects because of the time in which he was born and during which he lived. Nor could Cain sin with a TV or an automobile, for the time of his birth, determined by God, prevented him from sinning in these respects.

Other circumstances of a man's birth also restrain sin. A man may be born in very poor circumstances or "with a golden spoon in his mouth." The man born of poor parents is never going to be able to commit the sins which multi-millionaires or billionaires commit. The circumstances of his life restrain sin in this respect. There is, so to speak, no possibility of a poor man committing the sin of a Kennedy. But God's providence determines the circumstances of a man's life and thus determines his sin. So, through providence, God restrains certain sins in the lives of certain people.

But there is more. God's providence also determines where a man is born, and this too has much to do with the sins of which a man can, in the course of his life, become guilty. A native of the jungles of Samoa is in a position quite different from that of a man born in London or Chicago. The

⁶One can find examples of this in the writings of the early fathers of our country as, e.g., *The Declaration of Independence*.

native of Samoa cannot possibly sin in the same way as a man from Chicago's northwest side. These circumstances are determined by God. In this way God determines certain limitations of man's sins.

Let it be clearly understood that all men are exactly the same as far as their spiritual condition is concerned. Cain and Mr. Rothschild are equally depraved. Lamech and Magic Johnson are equally depraved. A native of New Guinea and a Wall St. banker are both equally corrupt in their nature. But the activity of a corrupt nature is quite different. The family man on 132 Elm St. in Elmhurst lives under circumstances different from those of the head of a Mafia clan in Hoboken. They are both totally depraved, but the manifestation of their sin will be quite different.

Outward Restraint and Government

But most will have no trouble with these things. There are other questions which are more difficult. What about government? Or what about man's self-restraint, if I may for the moment call it that?

There are those, among whom is Abraham Kuyper, who find in the institution of government a common grace of God because of the fact that government restrains sin.

Now, apart from anything else, it ought to be apparent that even though it is true that government restrains sin, such restraint is, after all, an outward restraint and by no means an internal work of the Holy Spirit.

But here is a problem. Although by no means do the defenders of common grace clearly explain what their position is, it is important that we attempt to figure out what the underlying idea is all about.⁷

The difficulty lies in the fact that the institution of government is said to be a gift of God's grace. The question is: How can that which only outwardly restrains be a gift of *grace*? Supposing, e.g., that I have a vicious pit bull dog which would attack anyone who ventured past my house. It would be possible to restrain that dog by putting it on a chain and anchoring the end of the chain firmly in the ground. I would in this way be restraining the dog, but one could hardly call that restraint a kind of grace to those who pass by. The point is that government may be a means by which God restrains sin in the world as a chain restrains my pit bull, but it is not at all clear that this is yet grace to those who are affected by the outward restraint of government. It is merely God's means of preserving good order in society for the sake of the church.

But the defenders of common grace seem also to mean that govern-

⁷One sometimes wishes that the defenders of common grace would make themselves clear in their own writings, which are often characterized by vagueness, and not leave it to others to explain precisely what they mean.

ment comes into being by an *inward* restraint of sin in the hearts of men. It seems the idea is that man's willingness to establish government and his willingness to live in obedience to government is due to God's gracious influences upon man's heart which enables him to do these good things.

It is in connection with these ideas that some have introduced the notion that without the restraint of sin, outwardly through government and inwardly by the Holy Spirit operating on the heart of unregenerated man, man would have become a beast.

Dr. Abraham Kuyper and many others have argued that, if God had not intervened in His common grace after Adam's fall, this present earthly creation would have become a wasteland, a wild howling wilderness, an abode of jackals and predators; and man himself would have become an animal or a devil. The result would have been, except for the intervention of common grace, that society would have been reduced to chaos and all culture would have been absolutely impossible. But since common grace intervened and the Holy Spirit restrains sin inwardly so that man did not become a beast or a devil, the creation, though under the curse, is still a very beautiful place to live, and society functions quite well on the whole with law and order prevailing for the most part and with criminals put away where they cannot bring chaos upon society's institutions.

There are here important questions.

Once again I remind our readers that we must view this question from the viewpoint of God's providence, and not merely from the viewpoint of what we see around us. Surely this means fundamentally that all which is ascribed to God's common grace and some inward restraining power of the Spirit is, in fact, God's providence.

But, of course, this does not automatically solve the problem. It may still be argued that God's providential control over all things includes a gracious attitude of favor towards all men revealed in the work of the Holy Spirit, who successfully restrains sin.

It must, however, be remembered that God's providence is not an arbitrary rule of all things, but is God's salvation of His elect church in Jesus Christ. Whatever best serves that purpose God has decreed to do. God may use government to restrain sin in the world to make the world a place where the church can be gathered. The world is like a leashed pit bull held by the chain of government to prevent the church from being mauled. But the fact that government is the leash and the world the fierce dog does not involve a change for the good in man's nature either in government itself or in the world whose vicious character is restrained by government. The question is: Is that work of providence grace? And is that work of providence accomplished by the restraint of sin through the operation of the Holy Spirit?

That question shall finally have to be answered, of course, on the basis

of Scripture itself. And we shall examine such scriptural passages which have been quoted in support of this position.

But for the moment, there are other considerations which we do well to take into account in evaluating these ideas. And we consider it legitimate to work in this way because the defenders of common grace gain most of their proof for their position from what they see in the world about them, and only after coming to certain conclusions on the basis of their observations do they seek some scriptural support.

The first question which we face is this: Is it true that man, after the fall, would have become an animal or a devil if God had not intervened in His common grace to restrain, through the Holy Spirit, these effects of the fall? And let there be no mistake: It is not a question merely of man becoming *as wicked as* a devil or *as ungovernable as* a beast; rather man would have become in fact a beast or a devil.

Now it ought to be evident immediately that this notion does not come from Scripture, and no one, so far as I have been able to tell, has ever made an effort to prove this rather strange idea from God's Word. It is a deduction which comes from man's thinking, not from Holy Scripture. It is a conclusion only, and is not taught in God's sacred Word.

It ought further to be evident that, from a certain point of view, it would have been preferable for man to become an animal after the fall than to remain a man. Common grace, it would seem, would be more clearly revealed if man had been changed into an animal than if common grace preserved him as a man. After all, animals cannot sin, and be punished, and go to hell. But men can.

Nevertheless, all this is impossible on the very surface. If the fall means that man would have become a beast or a devil apart from God's common grace, then the essential nature of man would have been changed. Man would have ceased to be man. That is flatly impossible. God created man. Man sinned. Man fell. Upon man comes God's judgment. Man dies while he remains man. Man is judged by God and endures the awful punishment for his sin. To claim as some do that the fall, apart from common grace, would have altered man's essential being is absurd on the face of it. The horror of life here in this world is that man always remains man.

But what about government. It simply is not true that government is an institution which was added to man's life by God in God's common grace. Government belongs to the creation order. Man was created as friend-servant under God. He was, by virtue of his creation, God's representative in God's world to carry out God's purpose in God's name and to God's glory. As such he was made the head of the creation. He ruled over the creation and all in it.

If God had given Adam and Eve children in the state of perfection — which surely would have happened (Gen. 1:27, 28), Adam would have been ruler over his family. And from that one family unit would have come forth the human race over which Adam would have been the head.

And so, even though the fall intervened, all the relationships of life which involve authority and obedience develop originally from the family. This is why the Heidelberg Catechism can interpret the fourth commandment, which requires obedience of children to their parents, as a commandment which obligates us to “show all honor, love and fidelity, to my father and mother, and *all in authority over me*” (Q & A 104).

Government was not, therefore, instituted by God as a fruit of His common grace; it was the natural and organic development of the family in the more complex relationships of life. Government is an institution of society created by God which can be either good or bad depending upon those who occupy the positions of authority in government. It has nothing to do with any operation of the Holy Spirit restraining sin.

That government actually does restrain sin is obvious. Indeed it is true that if no government existed society would fall into total chaos. Where there is no law and order there is chaos. But society would not long endure under those situations.

Government is part of God’s providential rule of man. By it God restrains sin. He restrains sin so that there may be peace and quietness in the world where the church lives so that the church can perform its calling to preach the gospel to every creature. If chaos prevailed, the church would be destroyed. That government functions is due to God’s providence, which creates an environment in which God can accomplish His purpose in Jesus Christ. Thus providence is for God’s eternal purpose to save His church in Christ.

We are even commanded to pray for magistrates, partly because God is pleased to save magistrates too, but also because through the magistrates God enables us to lead quiet and peaceful lives (I Tim. 2:1-4). But such restraint is outward only and not necessarily grace, except to the church.

Nevertheless, it is also true and readily to be admitted that God’s providential rule over governments involves also a desire on the part of men to establish an orderly state in which laws are made and enforced which will bring tranquility to men in the civil realm. Most men see clearly, whether regenerated or unregenerated, that it is advisable to have society institutions which enforce certain laws and precepts that make life in human relationships possible.

Restraint of Sin and Good Works

The question is: Does the fact that unregenerated men recognize the

value of government necessarily imply common grace and the operation of the Holy Spirit?

There is another question involved in this, of course. That question is: Is it a *good work* on the part of men, whether regenerate or unregenerate, to have some regard for virtue and good order in society?

This is a question which is answered in the affirmative by those who teach common grace. They insist that such regard for virtue and good order is a good work. It is not our intention to enter into that question at this point — although, admittedly, it is inescapably bound up in the problem before us now. But that question of the “good” of which the unregenerate are capable is a question to be discussed at a later date.⁸ For the moment we only quote an important article in the Canons of Dort which deals with this question.

There remain, however, in man since the fall, the glimmerings of natural light, whereby he retains some knowledge of God, of natural things, and of the differences between good and evil, and discovers some regard for virtue, good order in society, and for maintaining an orderly external deportment. But so far is this light of nature from being sufficient to bring him to a saving knowledge of God, and to true conversion, that he is incapable of using it aright even in things natural and civil. Nay further, this light, such as it is, man in various ways renders wholly polluted, and holds it in unrighteousness, by doing which he becomes inexcusable before God.

But the point which we now need to consider is the fact that it is not necessary for the natural man to have in his heart the work of the Holy Spirit which changes his nature in order to have some regard for virtue and good order in society.

He is a rational and moral creature. He remains such even after the fall. He did not become a beast or a devil. He still possesses a mind and a will. His mind and will are wholly corrupted and incapable of doing anything aright. But he still has such a mind and such a will.

Because he possesses and continues to possess his rational and moral nature, he is also capable of seeing and understanding that order in society is far preferable to chaos. He can understand that it is better for himself, his wife, and his children if murderers are locked up rather than permitted to roam the streets. It does not take a work of the Holy Spirit to show him that

⁸ It ought to be obvious to all that, if the regard for virtue and good order in society which unregenerate men are capable of showing is the fruit of the Holy Spirit in their hearts, these works are also good works, for the simple reason that the Holy Spirit always produces nothing but good works. He is incapable of producing evil works.

it is preferable to have traffic lights in busy cities and policemen to see to it that everyone stops when the light is red than to have everyone flying around without any laws governing his conduct behind the wheel of his automobile. If there is no speed limit enforced by government agencies and no traffic lights to control traffic, he would almost certainly be in an accident before long and he would never make it to work on time. Why does the Holy Spirit have to give him this knowledge by restraining sin in his heart? Any man can see that.

In other words, a man will surely see that his own life in the world and, in large measure, his own comfort in the world are dependent upon government. In fact, as law and order continue to break down in our society, a man can see that even a dictatorship is preferable to a democracy if a democracy no longer seems capable of maintaining law and order. And that is precisely what will presently happen in our society. The liberals who are intent on maintaining society by pleading for the rights of everyone but the law-abiding citizen will soon learn that they are destroying democracy and paving the way for a dictatorship in which no one will have any rights. But no rights in a safe society is preferable to all kinds of rights in a society where I may be robbed or shot in the next fifteen minutes. There is no need for a gracious operation of the Holy Spirit to understand that. Even a totally depraved man can see that an orderly society is better for his pursuit of sin and will enable him to enjoy sin more fully than if he is a prisoner in his own house.

This understanding of the benefits of civil government puts the benefits of government under the providence of God, who rules sovereignly over all in order that His own purpose in the salvation of the church may take place.

It is interesting to observe how all these principles operate in society today.

Governments and peoples are interested in their own carnal pursuit of pleasure and prosperity. The only reason sin is somewhat restrained is because man sees that to refrain from curbing sin in all its manifestations is necessary to create a climate and environment where he need not suffer the consequences of sin. But if the least possibility of sinning and escaping its consequences presents itself, he will quickly turn to sin.

Sometimes, of course, even suffering the consequences of sin is insufficient to deter people. It is, e.g., a fact that the transmission of the HIV virus comes about through sexual contact (especially among homosexuals) and drug usage. There are some who advocate sexual restraint, but for the most part the terrible sins which bring about these horrible consequences continue unchecked.

Nevertheless, as a general rule, the consequences of sin can act as a

powerful restraint. But such restraint does not change the nature of man, for if a man determines that he can sin and avoid the consequences of sin, he will surely favor the sin. If the consequences of immorality can be avoided by various birth control devices, or, as a last resort, by abortion, he will be as promiscuous as it is possible for him to be. There are still, quite naturally, the consequences of divorce, broken homes, one-parent families to consider, and in some instances these consequences will prove to be something of a deterrent; but as the social stigma of divorce disappears and the law itself becomes more lenient, divorce with its sad consequences is no longer a restraint of sin.

The reason is that, although God in His providence has created many ways in which sin is restrained, the nature of man remains unchanged. He is always the same totally depraved man he always was and will always be apart from the regenerating grace of God.

And that is, after all, the nub of the matter. Restraint of sin by an internal operation of the Holy Spirit in the heart of man is a change in his nature. And a change of this sort in his nature is a change in the corruption and depravity of his nature.

Total and Absolute Depravity

The distinction between total depravity and absolute depravity will not hold up. It is, first of all, a distinction not found in the Scriptures. No one who has supported this distinction has ever, so far as I know, made any effort to find it in Scripture. Scripture and the Reformed confessions teach, in keeping with the Calvinism of the historic Reformed and Presbyterian faith, that man is totally depraved.

If by total depravity in distinction from absolute depravity is meant that man is depraved in every part of his being, though every part is not totally depraved, this is a denial of total depravity on the very surface of it. Total depravity means that depravity is total. And any effort to mitigate that simple truth is a playing with words which cannot be tolerated in any theological discussion.

Scripture and all the confessions of Reformed and Presbyterian people teach that man is as bad as he can possibly be. That does not mean that he sins in every possible way, is perpetually guilty of the most heinous crimes, lives like a mafia gangster or heroin addict, behaves like a lust-filled homosexual every single second of his life. Of course not. Total depravity has to do with man's nature. That nature, the nature of a man, a rational and moral nature, has, since the fall, become corrupt. It is totally corrupt in every respect.

That total corruption means on the one hand that such a man is totally incapable of any good. The Heidelberg Catechism is, e.g., quite clear on the

point: "Is man then so wicked and corrupt that he is incapable of doing any good and inclined to all evil? Indeed he is, except he is regenerated by the Holy Spirit" (Q & A 8).

That total corruption means, therefore, that he cannot think one thought pleasing to God; he cannot desire one good thing; he cannot even will to be saved — his will wants only sin. He is incapable of any good word or deed which is according to God's law and is pleasing to Him.⁹ He is, indeed, as wicked in his nature as it is possible to be.

That sinful nature does not always reveal itself in overt sins of the most heinous kind. It is apparently this that confuses those who want to find good in man. Does a man have to spend every moment lying, cheating, murdering, fornicating, blaspheming to be totally depraved. By whose standard? According to whose criteria?

Sin is, after all, not limited to the outward violations of the law which are manifestly wrong. The sins which are particularly awful in the sight of God are often of other kinds. The man who smiles at his fellow member in the church with hatred in his heart, and who will destroy his neighbor with his tongue just as soon as he is out of earshot is hateful in God's sight as much as (or more than) the man who sticks a knife in his neighbor's back. The man who sits in his pew in church looking pious while figuring out ways to cheat at his business is just as bad as (if not worse than) the man who lies on his income tax. The latter may be caught and imprisoned as a thief, but the former is as great a sinner, though he has done no overt wrong.

The fornicator may contract HIV virus and show to all the world that he is guilty of crass fornication, but the man who is outwardly faithful to his wife in a monogamous relation and works every day to support his family may be considered a man with an abundance of common grace; but God knows that in his heart he lusts after every woman he sees. Who can say that the one is a greater sinner than the other?

The totally depraved sinner can do no good in the sight of God. His total depravity does not manifest itself as fully as it did in Hitler or Stalin. But that does not mean that his nature has been improved to the point that it is no longer totally depraved, though it remains depraved in all its parts. This is nonsense on the surface of it. A man may not be "as bad as he can be" in his outward actions, but this does not mean that he is not "as bad as he can be" in the depravity of his nature.

That the notion of total depravity as proposed by the defenders of common grace is absurd is evident from the fact that common grace of this

⁹The whole question and problem of good works we will discuss, the Lord willing, in a later article.

sort proposes to us the possibility of a man who is no longer totally depraved (in the sense, at least, of being as bad as he can be in his nature), but is nevertheless unconverted and can very well go to hell. The Holy Spirit works in his heart so that sin is restrained by a change in his nature which, while leaving every part of his nature depraved, results in a nature which is partially good. Yet he remains unregenerated and unconverted, and unless regeneration and conversion is given him, will still go lost. Such a man is a spiritual and ethical monstrosity.

But such a denial of total depravity leads to outright Arminianism. For, after all, common grace teaches that part of the good which such a man in whom sin is restrained by an inward operation of the Holy Spirit is capable of doing is to accept the overtures of the gospel and hear the pleadings of God who expresses in the gospel a desire to save him. Two points may be observed in this connection. The first is that common grace implies a revelation of God's love and favor towards all men by expressing in the gospel His desire to save all men. The second point of connection is that by an *inner* restraint of sin upon the heart through the work of the Holy Spirit, man is put into such a spiritual condition that he is able to accept or reject the offers and pleadings of the gospel — which reaction to the gospel will determine his ultimate fate in heaven or hell. It is impossible to separate the restraint of sin by the Holy Spirit from the well-meant offer of the gospel. The Holy Spirit enables the sinner to accept or reject the gospel, on the basis of which decision he will be saved or perish. And here is the Arminianism of it all. Total depravity means, after all, that salvation is by grace alone. It is the free gift of God in our Lord Jesus Christ. Common grace means that now man is able to make a decision by the activity of his own free will which becomes decisive in salvation.

One more point needs to be made. Should the proponents of common grace hold to a total depravity which is indeed *total* and still maintain a restraint of sin which is able to produce good works, it is a strange total depravity indeed. A depravity which makes it impossible for one to do any good is nevertheless a total depravity which, under the restraining power of the Holy Spirit, can make room for good. A thoroughly rotten apple still has good parts to it. A totally dead man still has some signs of life. A totally dead tree still produces some branches which bear fruit. This is a strange depravity which is a flat contradiction in terms.

Thus the Reformed faith is lost and the truth of Scripture is cast to the winds. God's glory is sacrificed on the altar of man's pride.

Conclusion

There are those who speak of a providential restraint of sin in the lives of men. With those we have no quarrel at all. There are those who speak

of common grace as nothing more than a providential restraint of sin. With these too we have no quarrel, although we could wish that the defenders of this position would not call such a restraint “grace,” for, as we noticed in an earlier article, it is far from that.

But there is nothing biblical or confessional about an operation of the Holy Spirit which so restrains sin that the nature of man is spiritually altered and man is capable of doing some kind of good. This view is destructive of Calvinism, inimicable to the Reformed faith, and an intolerable concession to Arminianism and Pelagianism. For such error there can be no room in Reformed theology. ▲

A History of the Church's Doctrine of Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage

David J. Engelsma

“Divorce by now is prayed for as if it were the proper sequel of marriage.”

— Tertullian

“The divorce controversy is not really a controversy about divorce. It is a controversy about remarriage; or rather about whether it is marriage at all.”

— G. K. Chesterton

“Adultery is bad morals but divorce is bad metaphysics.”

— Charles Williams

“And because iniquity (Greek: ‘lawlessness’) shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold.”

— Matthew 24:12

4 Contemporary Lawlessness

In the November, 1993 issue of this journal, I set forth the doctrine of marriage that is taught and practiced by the Protestant Reformed Churches in America (PRC). This is the doctrine that sees marriage as a lifelong, unbreakable bond of communion of life established by God between one man and one woman. Divorce is permitted only on the ground of the sexual unfaithfulness of one's marriage companion. All remarriage after divorce is forbidden as long as one's wife or husband is living. The PRC were led to this doctrine of marriage largely through the instruction of Herman Hoeksema, whose own thinking on the subject underwent significant development.¹

The article that followed considered the stand on marriage, divorce, and remarriage of the Reformed tradition, including the Reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin. The Reformed tradition, although regarding marriage as ideally a lifelong bond, inconsistently permitted the remarriage after divorce of the "innocent party," that is, the wife or husband whose marriage companion is guilty of fornication. There has been a definite tendency in the tradition to extend the right of remarriage also to the believer whose unbelieving marriage companion has deserted him on account of his faith. Other prominent representatives of the tradition, however, have rejected the effort to interpret I Corinthians 7:15 as adding a ground for divorce to the one ground given by Jesus and as permitting the deserted Christian to marry again.²

A third article in this series examined the teaching of the early church after the apostles. This article demonstrated that, in permitting the remarriage after divorce of the "innocent party," the Reformed tradition significantly deviated from the *Christian* tradition. For some 400 years, the post-apostolic church held that divorce was permitted only on the ground of fornication and that all remarriage after divorce, including the remarriage of the "innocent party," was forbidden. This was the doctrine of Augustine. The Western church maintained this stand for some 600 years after Augustine.³

This concluding article in the series on the history of the doctrine of marriage in the church calls attention to the widespread, deliberate disregard for the teaching of Jesus and the apostles on marriage, divorce, and

¹David J. Engelsma, "The Development of Herman Hoeksema," *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* 27, no. 1 (November, 1993): 4-12.

²David J. Engelsma, "The Reformed Tradition," *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* 27, no. 2 (April, 1994): 4-20.

³David J. Engelsma, "The Catholic Consensus," *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* 28, no. 1 (November, 1994): 8-25.

remarriage in evangelical and Reformed churches today. These churches or their theologians approve divorce for many other reasons besides fornication. They also approve, or permit, remarriage after divorce for those who divorced, or were divorced, on unbiblical grounds and even for the “guilty party” in a divorce, that is, the man or woman who committed adultery.

This is lawlessness, not in the world but in the churches.

Appalling as this is, especially in churches that by their name “evangelical,” or “Reformed,” boast of fidelity to the Word of God, still more appalling is the defense of this lawlessness by appeal to the gospel of grace. Theologians and churches readily acknowledge that Christ and the apostles taught marriage as a lifelong bond. They admit that divorce on other grounds than fornication and remarriage after divorce, at least for all but the “innocent party,” are sinful. Nevertheless, they permit these acts and receive those who are guilty of them as members in good standing in the congregations. To justify their sanction of deeds that are contrary to the law of Christ and their reception of men and women living in flagrant disobedience to the will of Christ in the most basic of all earthly relationships — marriage — they appeal to the grace of God in Jesus Christ. Grace permits one who is unbiblically divorced to live with a good conscience in an adulterous marriage, often with another man’s wife.

This is not simply lawlessness. This is antinomism. Antinomism is the heresy that finds in grace an excuse, if not a warrant, for sinning. It is the error that denies that justification is invariably followed by sanctification. It is the false doctrine that Jehovah’s prophet condemned as “lying words” in Jeremiah 7:8-10: “Behold, ye trust in lying words, that cannot profit. Will ye steal, murder, and commit adultery ... and come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, We are delivered to do all these abominations?” It is that perversion of the gospel of grace which gleefully concludes, “(Let us) continue in sin, that grace may abound” (Rom. 6:1). Against this revolting doctrine, the apostle reacted with a horrified “God forbid!” (Rom. 6:2).

The Jezebel of Thyatira was promoting fully developed antinomism when she proclaimed, “Know the depths of Satan!” (Rev. 2:20-24).

The gospel of grace does not make void the law but rather establishes it as the rule of the holy life of the redeemed and thankful believer. There is, to be sure, forgiveness for those who have committed adultery, wickedly divorced, and remarried. But there is forgiveness only in the way of repentance. And true repentance never goes on happily in the sin repented of, but rather breaks with the sin, whatever the cost.

To assure an impenitent sinner of forgiveness or to accept as genuine repentance a mere profession of wrongdoing that fails to show hatred and

disgust for the sin by turning from it in abhorrence is as really antinomism as is the cry, "Let us sin that grace may abound."

This article will consider the evangelical and Reformed churches and theologians. These churches and theologians claim to teach a gospel of grace that sanctifies as well as justifies. They profess to honor the law of God as the authoritative guide of the Christian life. They are committed to a view of the Christian life as costly discipleship.

We can dismiss the Roman Catholic Church despite its noisy, public statements on the sanctity of an unbreakable marriage bond. By its readiness to grant annulments, especially to the rich and powerful, Rome shows that it merely professes godliness in the matter of marriage, while denying the power thereof. The church that grants an annulment to playboy Frank Sinatra and to adulterer Edward Kennedy and blesses the remarriages of such as these, thus accepting them as members in good standing in the Roman Church with their new wives, is unworthy of any further consideration.⁴

The apostate, "mainline" Protestant churches pay no attention to the biblical teachings on marriage, divorce, and remarriage because they openly renounce the inspiration and authority of Scripture. Marriage and sexual ethics are determined by the prevailing culture. These churches are busy drawing up and adopting reports that approve sex between consenting, unmarried adults, including homosexual sex. What interest do such churches have in what the Bible might or might not teach about divorce and remarriage?⁵

⁴ "When is a Marriage not Really a Marriage," *Newsweek* (March 13, 1995), pp. 58, 59. In 1981, a Vatican commission approved a new code that "substantially extends worldwide the grounds for marriage annulment." The key article in the code adopts the criterion, "severe psychological immaturity," for annulment (see the *Chicago Tribune*, October 29, 1981, p. 8). The shrewd church, having taken marriage into its own hands, can do anything it chooses with any marriage by means of "severe psychological immaturity." It was this kind of unscrupulous manipulation of marriage by Rome that was the reason, in part, for the Reformers rejection of what they considered Rome's doctrine of marriage, including, alas, the teaching of the unbreakable, lifelong bond.

⁵ That the liberal Presbyterian Church (USA) came to its present lawlessness in sexual and marital matters by way of antinomism with regard to remarriage is evident from the book by James G. Emerson, Jr., *Divorce, the Church, and Remarriage* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961). The Princeton Seminary graduate and Presbyterian minister pleaded for his church's acceptance of any and every remarried person on the ground that "realized forgiveness (dispenses with) concern for the law" (p. 51). Again and again, he called on the church to forgive without so much as mentioning the necessity of the sinner's repentance. The brazen antinomism that would eventually lead to

But evangelical and Reformed churches do confess to believe an inspired Scripture that is, therefore, authoritative for the churches' doctrine and discipline and for the lives of the members.

These churches are increasingly lawless in the fundamental area of the Christian life that consists of marriage.

These churches manifest themselves as antinomian, not by speaking God's Word of pardon to those who truly repent of their unbiblical divorce or of their remarriage but by excusing and approving impenitent behavior on the grounds that "these are not unforgivable sins" and that God is gracious.

The gross contemporary lawlessness of divorce and remarriage has not gone unrecognized. How would this be possible in view of its public nature and in view of its calamitous consequences for the family and, therefore, for both church and society? Although he was decrying conditions in society at large, secular author Allan Bloom's searing indictment of divorcing America applies with special force to evangelical and Reformed churches:

Of course, many families are unhappy. But that is irrelevant. The important lesson that the family taught was the existence of the only unbreakable bond, for better or for worse, between human beings. The decomposition of this bond is surely America's most urgent social problem. But nobody even tries to do anything about it. The tide seems to be irresistible. Among the many items on the agenda of those promoting America's moral regeneration, I never find marriage and divorce.⁶

A few evangelicals have dared to speak out. Shortly before his death, Francis A. Schaeffer charged that

church approval of the vilest of sexual perversities found expression in Emerson's assertion that a remarriage after divorce is a better picture of Christ's union with the church as taught in Ephesians 5 than was the original marriage (p. 166).

⁶ Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), p. 119. In a wicked, deadly thrust at those who divorce despite the misery that this causes their children, Bloom notes that "the divorcés are eager to get back to persecuting the wretches who smoke or to ending the arms race or to saving 'civilization as we know it' " (p. 121). The same sublime hypocrisy characterizes Reformed preachers and editors of religious periodicals today. Tongue-tied with regard to the raging epidemic of divorce and remarriage that is destroying multitudes of baptized children, these champions of the social implications of the Reformed religion are loud against the pernicious evil of smoking and in favor of politically correct environmentalism.

much of the evangelical church, which claims to believe that the Bible is without error, has bent Scripture at the point of divorce to conform to the culture rather than the Scripture judging the present viewpoints of the fallen culture? Do we not have to agree that in the area of divorce and remarriage there has been a lack of biblical teaching and discipline even among evangelicals? When I, contrary to Scripture, claim the right to attack the family — not the family in general, but to attack and break up my own family — is it not the same as a mother claiming the right to kill her own baby for her “happiness”? I find it hard to say, but here is an infiltration of the surrounding society that is as destructive to Scripture as is a theological attack upon Scripture. Both are a tragedy. Both bend the Scripture to conform to the surrounding culture.⁷

Carl F. H. Henry has similarly criticized his fellow evangelicals:

While evangelicals seek to penetrate the culture, the culture simultaneously makes disconcerting inroads into evangelical life. This is specially evident in the widening notion that divorce and remarriage are simply matters of free moral choice. The church's credibility is compromised by an evaporation of discipline even when congregational values are deeply breached.⁸

Both of these evangelical leaders put their finger unerringly on the explanation of the abounding sin of divorce and remarriage in evangelical churches, as well as the tolerance of the sin by the churches: conformity to the culture. The biblical name for this corruption of the churches in the last days is “worldliness.”

To their credit, some evangelicals have attempted to stem the tide of the shameful marital unfaithfulness in their circles by setting forth, persuasively, the biblical doctrine of the lifelong character of marriage. In a scholarly work that ought to have had the effect of a bombshell on the playground of American evangelicalism, William A. Heth and Gordon J. Wenham showed that Jesus and the apostles teach marriage as an unbreakable bond for life. The New Testament allows divorce only on the ground of fornication, but forbids remarriage as long as both original marriage companions live. The New Testament forbids the remarriage even of the “innocent party.”⁹

⁷ Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Great Evangelical Disaster* (Westchester, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1984), p. 63.

⁸ Carl F. H. Henry, *Confessions of a Theologian* (Waco, Texas: Word, 1986), p. 388.

⁹ William A. Heth and Gordon J. Wenham, *Jesus and Divorce: The Problem with the Evangelical Consensus* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 1985). The decidedly unenthusiastic reception of the book by evangelicals

Heth and Wenham pointed out that the Reformers departed from the virtually unanimous position of the early church and embraced the notion that adultery dissolves the marriage bond under the influence of the humanist Erasmus: "The Protestant Reformers latched on to Erasmus' interpretation of the divorce texts and defended his exegesis from the moment they became known."¹⁰

Meant to Last: A Christian View of Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage, a popular study of the biblical teaching on the subject, concludes by asserting that a "believer who suffers the misfortune of a divorce has two clear options: remain unmarried or be reconciled to one's mate. To teach anything else is inconsistent with God's standard for marriage."¹¹

In 1993, Eerdmans published the magisterial work, ***Divorce & Remarriage: Biblical Principles & Pastoral Practice***, by the Anglican Andrew Cornes. In this careful, thorough, 500-page examination of the biblical doctrine and practice of marriage, divorce, and remarriage, the Anglican vicar shows that Scripture teaches marriage to be a bond that is dissoluble only by death. Scripture, therefore, judges all remarriage after divorce as adultery. Cornes calls on the church, particularly his own Church of England, to reject all exceptions to the rule against remarriage.¹²

From Reformed theologians and churches, however, virtually no voice is heard objecting to the abounding lawlessness of divorce and

and Reformed is evident from the reviews of it in *Christianity Today* (December 13, 1985) and in the *Calvin Theological Journal* (April, 1987). See also William Heth, "Divorce, but No Remarriage," in ***Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views***, ed. H. Wayne House (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1990), pp. 71-129.

¹⁰ Heth and Wenham, *Jesus and Divorce*, p. 79.

¹¹ Paul E. Steele & Charles C. Ryrie, ***Meant to Last: A Christian View of Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage*** (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1986), p. 115.

¹² Andrew Cornes, ***Divorce & Remarriage: Biblical Principles & Pastoral Practice*** (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993). Reviews of this important, well-written book have been scarce. One wonders why, in view of its treating a vital issue and in light of its having been published by a major evangelical publisher. Its daunting bulk (528 pages) should not frighten off the reader. No layman will have any difficulty with it. It is easy, and interesting, reading. All Protestant Reformed pastors and elders ought to read it. Cornes goes wrong at the end by (grudgingly) allowing those who are already remarried to remain members in good standing in the church despite their living in continuing adultery, although he does require confession of sin (pp. 398-412). Heth and Wenham made the same concession under the pressure of the

remarriage. No call goes out to the saints to honor God by honoring His institution of marriage. Much less is there a reexamination of the Reformed tradition's conception of marriage as a breakable contract, implicit in the permission of the remarriage of the "innocent party," in light of the prevalence in Reformed churches of remarriage after divorce for many reasons.

Many evangelicals and most of the Reformed (including Presbyterians) rather accommodate the ungodliness by advancing a permissive doctrine of remarriage that amounts to antinomism.

In what follows, I will show that contemporary evangelical and Reformed theologians and churches have forsaken what has been the Reformed tradition, if it has not been the Protestant tradition, namely, that remarriage is permitted only to the "innocent party," for a doctrine of divorce and remarriage that permits remarriage to all, regardless of the nature of the divorce.

To the question of His Pharisee tempters in Matthew 19:3, "Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?" Jesus' answer today is, "Yes, indeed!" In addition, He graciously permits the man who has divorced his own wife for any reason whatever, if not to remarry his neighbor's wife, whom he has seduced, then to live in remarriage with her after he has married her. This is the new doctrine of Jesus in the teaching and lack of

circumstances. The reviewer of Heth and Wenham's book in the *Calvin Theological Journal* caught this inconsistency:

Having argued that everyone who remarries after divorce is committing adultery, Heth and Wenham tell individuals in this situation that they should remain married, for this is now God's will for them; that they cannot return to their former spouses; and that they are forgiven and now called to follow Christ. This would be excellent pastoral advice from an Erasmian, but what legal or scriptural basis do Heth and Wenham have for making such recommendations? If marriage creates an unbreakable "metaphysical" bond, how can the church countenance the continuance of an adulterous marriage? Why do they not advocate celibacy for the remarried individuals as they do for those divorced and not yet remarried? Or does God's forgiveness create new beginnings? If it does, what has happened to the original kinship bond? I am confused — not by the advice as such but by its apparent inconsistency with the position Heth and Wenham advocate (David E. Holwerda, "Jesus on Divorce: An Assessment of a New Proposal, *Calvin Theological Journal* 22, no. 1, April 1987: 120).

My review of Cornes' book appeared in the *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* 27, no. 1 (November, 1993): 45-48.

discipline of the evangelical and Reformed churches. This is also the obvious doctrine of Jesus in the incontrovertible fact of the church membership of these churches. The churches are filled with men and women who are divorced from their own mates for many reasons and married to the wives and husbands of others.

Evangelicals

Evangelical ethicist Norman L. Geisler holds that "the position that permits divorce for many reasons has a great deal of merit." The merit of the position is that it encourages the remarriage of those who are divorced. Regardless of the reason for the divorce, those who divorce are permitted to remarry, because God forgives the sin of the divorce. Geisler thinks that it would be "unwise," however, to permit evangelicals to divorce and remarry a second time.¹³

John Jefferson Davis teaches that "the guilty party in . . . a divorce may . . . legitimately remarry . . . if the guilty party has truly *repented* and attempted to make restitution for personal and financial obligations." The grace of forgiveness permits the remarriage of the guilty party. Davis states that professing Christians who "are divorced on unscriptural grounds (are) free to remarry another," if they have repented and have sought reconciliation with the original wife or husband.¹⁴

In the recent InterVarsity publication, *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views*, former Wheaton College professor Larry Richards boldly defends the position that grace permits men and women to divorce and remarry any number of times. For the church to judge anyone's divorce and remarriage as sinful would be "legalism." "It is the sole responsibility of husband and/or wife to determine whether or not the marriage is really over and it is time to divorce." "Persons who divorce for any reason do have the right to remarry." Mr. Richards assures us that he would willingly officiate at the wedding of an imaginary "Tom" who was marrying after divorce "a fourth time."¹⁵

¹³ Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Ethics: Options and Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), pp. 277-292.

¹⁴ John Jefferson Davis, *Evangelical Ethics: Issues Facing the Church Today* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1985), pp. 92-105.

¹⁵ Larry Richards, "Divorce & Remarriage under a Variety of Circumstances," in *Divorce and Remarriage*, ed. H. Wayne House, pp. 213-248. Richards' licentious doctrine of marriage renders the book's subtitle false: *Four Christian Views*. At least one of the views — Richards' — is unchristian.

Writing for “conservative and evangelical Christians,” Craig S. Keener contends specifically for the right of the remarriage of the “innocent party.” He argues that in I Corinthians 7:15 Paul added yet another ground for divorce and remarriage — desertion — to the one ground permitted by Christ. This implies that the biblical grounds for divorce and remarriage are not intended to be restrictive, but exemplary. Keener concludes that remarriage after divorce for reasons other than fornication and desertion is permissible.¹⁶

Even the guilty party in a divorce, that is, the husband or wife who is responsible for the divorce by his or her sexual unfaithfulness, is permitted to remarry:

It is my belief, based on inference from New Testament texts about forgiveness, that the guilty parties or party are also allowed to remarry if they have genuinely repented and done their best to make any necessary restitution.¹⁷

The explanation is the grace of forgiveness. Grace so blots out the sin of an unbiblical divorce and of an adulterous remarriage as to justify, sanctify, and glorify the adulterous remarriage: “God’s forgiveness also covers past divorces even for guilty parties, if they have repented and the marriage can no longer be recovered.”¹⁸

Reformed and Presbyterians

The opening of the door of remarriage widely to men and women who have divorced for any reason is especially remarkable in Reformed and Presbyterian circles. In these circles, the tradition has been to restrict the right of remarriage to the “innocent party” in a divorce and to a believer whose unbelieving wife or husband has deserted him or her on account of the faith of the believer. Indeed, the distinctively Reformed tradition has rejected desertion as a biblical ground for remarriage, limiting the right of remarriage to the “innocent party.”

The recent spate of books on the order of *Four Christian Views of...* promotes a wretched relativism regarding Christian doctrine. Are four different, violently conflicting doctrines all “Christian views”?

¹⁶ Craig S. Keener, ... *and Marries Another: Divorce and Remarriage in the Teaching of the New Testament* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1991), p. 105.

¹⁷ Keener, ... *and Marries Another*, p. 200.

¹⁸ Keener, ... *and Marries Another*, p. 49.

In recent years, as the lawlessness of divorce and remarriage increased in the world, prominent Reformed theologians and churches have advocated and approved the remarriage of those divorced for reasons other than the fornication of their mates or desertion. In a short time, these theologians and churches have approved the remarriage of the *guilty* party.

The popular and highly regarded Jay E. Adams counsels his conservative audience that “remarriage, in general, is not only allowed but in some cases encouraged and commanded. It is looked upon favorably in the NT.” To the question, “Who may remarry after divorce and under what conditions?” he answers, “All persons properly divorced may be remarried.” “Properly divorced,” he informs us, means “those who are released without obligations.” In further identifying those who are “properly divorced,” Adams declares that a professing Christian who has divorced his unbelieving wife contrary to the command of Paul in I Corinthians 7:12 may, nevertheless, be free to remarry. One improperly divorced by the apostle’s standards is “properly divorced” by the Presbyterian’s standards.

But this is nothing strange, for even the guilty party in a divorce may well be “properly divorced” so as to be free to remarry. Regardless whether he destroyed his marriage by his adultery “before or after conversion,” if he repents, he may remarry: “Remarriage after divorce is allowed in the Bible and ... the guilty party — after forgiveness — is free to remarry.”

Note well what this lawlessness means, and let none say that the possibility is remote, for the Reformed and Presbyterian churches are suffering this very thing. After 30 years of marriage, a man may fall in love with an alluring young lady, divorce his wife, abandon his children, marry the beauteous secretary, repent, be forgiven by the church, carry on with his new wife, and sit down at the Lord’s Table with orthodox Presbyterians.

It is very important, however, that his forgiveness by the elders be “note(d) in the elders’ minutes book.”¹⁹

In 1992, a committee presented a lengthy study on divorce and remarriage to the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). The report was

¹⁹ Jay E. Adams, *Marriage, Divorce, & Remarriage in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), pp. 84-96. One thing that is plain from this sophistry is that Protestant Reformed ministers and elders must do their own marriage counseling. The reputedly conservative marriage counselors, like the others, are ready to tell troubled husbands and wives what they often madly desire to hear: you may divorce and remarry with God’s blessing. The elders’ minutes book that records the elders’ forgiveness of the remarried guilty party, and thus their approval of his adultery, will be brought up one day as a testimony against the elders.

entitled, “*Ad Interim* Committee on Divorce and Remarriage to the Twentieth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America.”²⁰ Beginning with the assertion that Scripture allows only the remarriage of the “innocent party” and the deserted believer, the report continues by permitting the remarriage of one divorced on unbiblical grounds if his mate remarries and by sanctioning the remarriage of those who “have been in an unbiblical divorce and have already remarried.” The latter are to repent and rededicate their lives to Christ. The reason given for approving the remarriage of those divorced on unbiblical grounds is that “we must remember that adultery and divorce are not the unforgivable sin, but that they along with other ungodly sins are covered by the blood of Christ.”²¹

The General Assembly of the PCA decided to present to the ruling and teaching elders for their careful consideration the guidelines in Chapter 3 of the report, “Pastoral Perspective on Divorce and Remarriage.” The second guideline is, “Where divorce occurred prior to one’s conversion, it is unclear whether the believer may remarry.” This is no guideline at all. It is either a charge that Scripture is obscure or a confession of the ignorance of the church. But it will certainly serve to encourage the remarriage of those who are divorced for every reason, if only the divorce occurred “prior to one’s conversion.”

The fourth guideline permits remarriage “where a former spouse has remarried and the Session ... is convinced that the parties seeking remarriage are born-again ... regardless of the reasons for the divorce or who was the offending party.” This allows the woman who broke up her marriage by her adultery — the guilty party — to remarry, if only her original husband has since remarried and if she can convince her Session that she is “born again.” She may well remarry her lover, if he too is now “born again.”

Everyone is free now to remarry: the “innocent party”; the deserted believer; those divorced unbiblically before conversion; and the guilty party.²²

Such a liberating power is the forgiving grace of God in Jesus Christ.

The Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRC) had earlier come to this permissive position on remarriage after divorce. In 1956, the CRC decided that

²⁰ *Minutes of the Twentieth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, June 15-18, 1992, Roanoke, Virginia* (Atlanta, Georgia: The Committee for Christian Education and Publications, 1992), pp. 513-636.

²¹ *Minutes of the PCA*, pp. 564, 565.

²² *Minutes of the PCA*, pp. 588, 589. The General Assembly recommended these guidelines to PCA ministers and elders in II, 4, on p. 636.

people who are guilty of unbiblical divorce, or who are divorced as the result of their own adultery and having remarried, seek entrance or reentrance into the Church, shall be expected to show their sorrow and genuine repentance during an adequate period of probation.²³

This decision represented a radical change in the stand of the CRC. Prior to this decision, the CRC had restricted the right of remarriage to one divorced on the ground of a marriage companion's fornication, that is, to the "innocent party." Those remarried after divorce on other grounds were declared to be living in sin and were refused membership in the church. By the decision of 1956, the CRC permitted remarriage on the part of its members even though their divorce was unbiblical. Indeed, their divorce may have been due to their own adultery. The remarriage of the guilty party was approved. Nor was this approval limited to those who might have divorced and remarried prior to any knowledge of the teaching of the Word of God on divorce and remarriage. By its reference to those who might seek "reentrance into the Church," the decision embraced that member of the CRC who would commit adultery with the wife of a fellow member, divorce his own wife, marry the object of his lust, leave the church for a time, and then seek readmission to the church, expressing "repentance."

The basis for this departure from its own tradition, and from the Reformed tradition generally, was a curious, twofold, negative declaration:

1. No substantial and conclusive Scriptural evidence has been produced to establish the thesis that parties remarried after being divorced on the ground of their own adultery, or divorced on non-Biblical grounds, are living in continual adultery.
2. No substantial and conclusive Scriptural evidence has been produced to warrant the demand that a person remarried after being divorced on the ground of his own adultery, or divorced on non-Biblical grounds, must, in order to prove the sincerity of his repentance, cease living in the ordinary marriage relationship with his present spouse.²⁴

The "Guidelines for the Ministry of the Church" that the CRC adopted in 1980, to help the churches "in handling the important matters of marriage, divorce, and remarriage," do not change the decision of 1956.

²³ Cited in William P. Brink and Richard R. De Ridder, *1980 Manual of Christian Reformed Church Government* (Grand Rapids: Board of Publications of the Christian Reformed Church, 1980), p. 268.

²⁴ Brink and De Ridder, *Manual of Christian Reformed Church Government*, pp. 268, 269.

They do prove that the CRC sinned in 1956 against better knowledge. For the “guidelines” expressly acknowledge that “God wills a lifelong unity of husband and wife in marriage” and that “the basic declaration of Scripture is that divorce and remarriage while one’s spouse is alive constitutes adultery.” The synodically adopted “guidelines” proceed, deliberately, to contradict the will of God and to ignore the basic declaration of Scripture by approving and permitting remarriage after divorce, not only on the ground of adultery but also on many other grounds.

The explanation of this approval of that which the CRC itself condemned as “adultery” is that grace voids the law. First, the CRC thinks that repentance (itself a “grace”) in an adulterer is perfectly compatible with his pursuing the pleasures of his sin without interruption. “I am sorry now that I stole my brother’s wife and that I left my own poor wife, but I intend to enjoy my brother’s wife as long as I live (or, until I find someone else I prefer).”

Second, the CRC holds that the forgiveness that Christ gives through the gospel approves, blesses, and sanctifies the sin for which forgiveness has been received. The adultery of living in marriage with someone other than one’s own wife, or with a woman who is the wife of another, is validated by forgiveness. Indeed, forgiveness causes the adultery of the forgiven sinner to be no longer adultery. It changes adultery into something else, something holy and good. God forgets the original, abandoned wife of the forgiven adulterer and the first husband of the woman with whom the forgiven adulterer continues to sleep.

Third, the CRC’s implicit antinomism appears when it defends its permission of remarriage as belonging to the church’s “pastoral ministry,” while warning that to refuse all remarriage that fails to meet definite standards would be a “strictly legal approach.” Grace — a “pastoral ministry” — rules out the law. Law — the authoritative Word of Christ and the apostles on divorce and remarriage — would compromise grace.²⁵

Evidently, the same error concerning the Word of God on divorce and remarriage characterizes the sounder Reformed churches in South Africa. *Orientation*, the international circular of the Potchefstroom University for Christian higher education, devoted the December 1990 - December 1991 issue to a study of marriage. The issue was called “A Mirror on Marriage.”²⁶

²⁵ For the CRC’s “Guidelines for the Ministry of the Church in Matters of Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage,” see Brink and De Ridder, *Manual of Christian Reformed Church Government*, pp. 269-274.

²⁶ *Orientation* (Dec. 1990 - Dec. 1991). The journal is available from Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education, Potchefstroom, 2520 RSA.

The issue included a sound, uncompromising article by Neels Smit that not only opposed all breaking up of a marriage but also grounded this prohibition solidly upon the Word of God. God made marriage, so that those who break up a marriage “negate the great God.” God is witness at every marriage, so that those who break up a marriage deny God’s presence at the ceremony. Although not a sacrament, marriage is a sign of Christ’s covenant with His church, so that those who break up a marriage show contempt for Christ’s relationship with the congregation. The covenant God uses the marriages of believers to bring forth and rear future generations of His children, so that the one in the church who breaks up a marriage “demolish(es) the roof above his children’s heads.... He/she damages the line of the covenant stretching into the future.”²⁷

But the issue also included an article by Gert Kruger, “Marrying a Divorced Person.” Kruger too knows the biblical doctrine of marriage. “There really are no grounds for divorce.” “Somebody who marries a divorced person therefore in reality marries the wife or the husband of somebody else, even though they are divorced. For that reason the Bible equals such a marriage with adultery.” This is the case “even where the divorced person concerned is the ‘innocent’ party in the divorce.” For the “innocent” party “still belongs to somebody else.”

Nevertheless, the church permits remarried persons who repent to live in the church with a good conscience, regardless of the grounds for the divorce or the circumstances of the remarriage. “The church is thus very firm in its point of view, but supple in its application of this viewpoint.” The suppleness of application is due to God’s “forgiveness towards repentant sinners.” Even though marrying a divorced person is “forbidden by the Bible” and even though the person married to a divorced man or woman is in every case “really married to someone else’s husband (or wife),” God’s mercy makes it possible that such a marriage is “very happy” and that it may “well succeed.” Most importantly, mercy transforms the remarriage into a good and godly thing.²⁸

“Christian Reconstruction”

The doctrine of “Christian Reconstruction” on divorce and remarriage with the corresponding practice belongs in a category by itself. The

²⁷ Neels Smit, “Why may a Marriage not be Dissolved?” *Orientation*, pp. 111-117.

²⁸ Gert Kruger, “Marrying a Divorced Person?” *Orientation*, pp. 62-68.

leading spokesman is Ray Sutton in his book, *Second Chance: Biblical Principles of Divorce and Remarriage*.²⁹ This work challenges the writing of Martin Bucer on the subject for the distinction of being the most licentious book on divorce and remarriage ever to appear in Reformed circles. It is certainly the most preposterous. Among the grounds for biblical divorce and remarriage are idolatry; blasphemy; false prophecy; witchcraft; divination; spiritism; sabbath-breaking; sexual sins; murder, including physical abuse, desertion (“physical and sexual”), and the stubborn failure of a father to “provide economically for his family”; contumacy, which is defined as “rebellion to Biblical authority”; and malicious perjury.³⁰ The husband or wife who could not find a basis for divorce and remarriage in this list is lacking in imagination. A church committed to these “principles” would be hard pressed to deny any member who really wanted a divorce.

The member who did manage to divorce on an unbiblical ground and subsequently remarried need not be alarmed. For, in the name of Christ, Sutton offers the right of remarriage to the guilty party in a divorce as well. The sole exception is the man who has AIDS.

May a guilty party remarry? Yes and no. No in the case of the man with a fatal, sexually transmitted disease.... Yes, there can be remarriage on the part of the guilty party in other cases where he repents, pays restitution, and there are no lasting consequences that would be destructive to the new spouse.³¹

In multiplying biblical grounds for divorce, Sutton — and the “Christian Reconstruction” which he accurately represents — holds the law of God in contempt. In Matthew 19:9, God the Son clearly, explicitly lays down the law that there is one, and one only, ground for divorce: the “fornication” of one’s husband or wife. Even then, there may be no remarriage. The Son of God expressly tells us that this is the law governing marriage laid down by God the Father from the beginning in the institution of marriage at creation (vv. 4-6). Adding grounds for divorce and remarriage is lawlessness.³²

²⁹ Ray Sutton, *Second Chance: Biblical Principles of Divorce and Remarriage* (Fort Worth, Texas: Dominion Press, 1988). The title page gives the subtitle as “Biblical Blueprints for Divorce and Remarriage.”

³⁰ Sutton, *Second Chance*, pp. 57ff.

³¹ Sutton, *Second Chance*, pp. 110, 111.

³² That this is done by a movement that boasts of its promotion of the law — “theonomy”! — is ironic. Fundamental to the discovery of myriad grounds for divorce for New Testament Christians out of the Old Testament is “Christian Reconstruction’s” radically mistaken conception of Old Testament Scrip-

In approving the remarriage of the guilty party, Sutton is antinomian. For it is the grace of God in the cross of Christ that authorizes the remarriage: "Redemption makes this possible."³³ Sutton's gospel is not only antinomian, but also Arminian. In the risen Christ, God "offers a true second chance to all men through the second, or new, covenant in His blood." From this it follows (so, Sutton) that God now offers at least to all who are biblically divorced on one of the many grounds Sutton has listed a "second chance" at marriage.³⁴ This explains the title of the book.

One grievously erroneous argument by Sutton for divorce and remarriage is his assertion that Jehovah God Himself divorced a wife, Israel, and married another wife, the church.³⁵ This is not only corruption of the Christian life but also a total misunderstanding of the history of redemption and an attack on the faithfulness of God. God did indeed divorce Israel, but only in the sense that for a time He officially separated from her. He never dissolved the bond of the covenant that He had graciously established with her. How could He? He had established it by unconditional promise and had

ture in relation to the New Testament. Those in the Reformed churches who are inclined to be favorable to "theonomy" may well consider what this interpretation and application of Old Testament law does to the church's doctrine and practice of marriage, divorce, and remarriage. Straining at a gnat (fences around swimming pools and observing the dietary laws), "theonomy" swallows a camel (divorce and remarriage for every reason). For myself, I reject "theonomy," among other reasons, because it is lawless in vital areas of the life of the church and of the Christian. Ray Sutton has taken his lead in the matter of divorce and remarriage from Rousas J. Rushdoony. See Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law* (n.p.: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1973), pp. 401-415).

³³ Sutton, *Second Chance*, p. 111.

³⁴ Sutton, *Second Chance*, pp. 105-109. Sutton's lack of seriousness in treating the saint's obedient life in marriage comes out when he considers the divorce and remarriage of officebearers in connection with the apostle's insistence in I Timothy 3 that the bishop be "above reproach" and that he have "a good reputation with outsiders." Sutton recognizes that a minister or elder's divorce and remarriage "might affect his reputation inside and outside of the church." His solution? Let him "take a leave of absence until things cool down" (p. 203).

³⁵ Sutton, *Second Chance*, pp. 112, 113. General Editor Gary North proposed this horrendous theology in his "Editor's Introduction": "God divorced Israel God soon remarried; He gained a new bride, the Church" (p. xii).

sworn that it would be everlasting. According to His faithful Word, He took Israel back as His wife — “remarried” her.³⁶

The New Testament church is not a second wife in the place of Old Testament Israel. She *is* Israel. The church is the *reality* of Israel. The marriage covenant of God with Israel is not *replaced* by a marriage covenant with the church; it is *realized* in Christ with the church of elect, believing Jew and Gentile. God has only ever had one wife. Although He is the only perfectly “innocent party,” greatly offended by an adulterous wife, He did not, does not, and will not remarry. Let Ray Sutton and the Reformed in general draw implications from this grand truth for marriage, divorce, and remarriage.³⁷

Concluding Analysis

In an article devoted to the history of the church’s doctrine of marriage, divorce, and remarriage, it would be out of place to conclude by setting forth and defending the biblical doctrine from which the contemporary church, particularly the Reformed church, has departed. I have done this elsewhere.³⁸

Here it needs only to be noted, as the article has demonstrated, that the doctrine and practice of divorce and remarriage in much of today’s evangelicalism and in many Reformed and Presbyterian churches are lawless. The churches permit and approve the remarriages of many whom the churches themselves admit were divorced and are remarried contrary to the commands of Christ and the apostles.

The churches take refuge in a gospel that is antinomian. Grace allows the unbiblically divorced to remarry. Grace allows those who are already remarried to continue in the adulterous marriage with a good conscience.

This “grace” is not the grace of the gospel of the Scriptures. The grace of the gospel of the Scriptures will not welcome sinners who have lived in

³⁶ For God’s divorce of Israel, see Jeremiah 3:8. For the fact that the divorce did not dissolve the marriage, see Jeremiah 3:14. For God’s taking Israel back again as His wife in the living relationship of marriage, see Jeremiah 3:11ff. and Ezekiel 16:60-63.

³⁷ On the unity of Israel and the Church, including the oneness of the covenant in both dispensations, see Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1964). Biblical proof includes Acts 15:13ff.; Galatians 4:1ff; 6:16; I Pet. 2:9, 10.

³⁸ See my *Marriage: The Mystery of Christ and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1975; repr. 1983) and my *Better to Marry* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1993).

sin to the end into the kingdom of Christ in the Day of Judgment. Forgiving grace calls the forgiven sinner to walk now in holiness of life. The divorced man may not remarry. Grace will enable him to live a single life. Forgiving grace calls those who are already remarried to stop living in that state which Jesus describes in Matthew 19:9, Mark 10:11, 12, and Luke 16:18 as continual adultery. Grace will enable the repentant, pardoned adulterer and adulteress to do this.

It is the very nature of the grace of repentance itself to break with the sin sorrowed over and confessed. The penitent brings forth works worthy of repentance. Only this repentance is genuine. Only this repentance finds forgiveness with God, regardless what the churches may say.

One thing more. The contemporary lawlessness with its dishonoring of God, its misery for so many, and its ruin of multitudes of children ought to cause the Reformed to reexamine the position of the Reformers and the Reformed tradition on marriage, divorce, and remarriage. Is not this chaos, in part, the fruit of the doctrine that marriage can be broken by human sin? Once the possibility of remarriage for the “innocent party” and for the deserted Christian has been allowed, is there any restraint against the remarriage also of others and even of the guilty party?

One doctrine of marriage withstands all the pressures of this or any other age. This is the doctrine taught by Christ and the apostles in harmony with God’s original institution of marriage. This is the doctrine born of God’s own life with His people in Jesus Christ in the covenant.

Marriage is a bond established by God between one man and one woman for life, “until death do us part.” Humans cannot dissolve it.

The unbreakable bond of marriage. ▲

CROSS-CULTURAL MISSIONS (2)

Prof. Robert D. Decker

We insist, on the basis of Holy Scripture, that the chief task of the church in her mission work is the preaching of the gospel. In other words, mission work consists chiefly in the preaching of the Word of God.

Preaching is the chief means by which the Son of God “gathers, defends, and preserves to himself ... out of the whole human race, a church chosen to everlasting life.”¹ This is what the missionary must do publicly and from house to house (Acts 20:20).

In this study of cross-cultural missions, therefore, we wish to examine especially the preaching of the apostles, but also other aspects of their work as these are recorded in the Epistles and the Book of Acts. There are several sermons of the apostles recorded in Acts which we propose to study. These sermons, we believe, are not recorded merely for historical interest, but for a reason. The point is we can and, indeed, we must learn from them. If we wish to know *what* the church must preach and *how* the church must preach in a foreign culture we can do no better than to pay careful attention to apostolic preaching.

Because the pouring out of the Holy Spirit marks the beginning of the exalted Christ’s work of gathering His church out of the nations we begin with that event. Acts 2 informs us that when the day of Pentecost was fully come, the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the one hundred and twenty believers. The signs of the Spirit’s presence were the sound of a rushing, mighty wind, the cloven tongues of fire, and the speaking in tongues. A large multitude gathered to whom the disciples preached. These people who were from every nation under heaven (Acts 2:5) were amazed to hear the disciples speak in their various tongues the wonderful works of God (v. 11). Some doubted as to the meaning of it all and others mocked the disciples, saying they were drunk. At this point Peter rises and preaches a powerful sermon explaining what had happened (cf. Acts 2:14-40). Convinced that there is much we can learn from it about proper preaching in the mission context, we examine this sermon in a bit of detail.

If the reader will consult his Bible he will notice that Peter comes with no gimmicks, no sophisticated sales pitch, no slick Madison Avenue prepackaged gospel appeal. Peter had had no training in communication theory. There is a good deal of writing and talk in Missiology these days about the proper approach on the mission field. The gospel, so we are told, needs to be “contextualized,” i.e., adapted to the foreign culture so as to be intelligible to the hearers. How can the missionary best approach people and present to them the gospel in order to win them for Christ? The whole assumption is that with the proper approach one will be successful in winning souls and planting churches and with an improper approach he will not. To employ the proper approach and thus be successful the contempo-

¹ *Heidelberg Catechism*, Question 54: cf, also Romans 10:13-17.

rary missionary needs a thorough background in cultural anthropology and training in communication theory.

Understand well what we are not proposing! We do not mean to say that the missionary/pastor ought to be uneducated. We stand in a tradition (continental Reformed/Calvinistic) that has always and still today places a high priority on a well-trained ministry. Aspirants to the ministry who study in the seminary which produces this *Journal* cannot be admitted to the seminary without a Bachelor's Degree from an accredited college or university. Before being recommended for oral examinations before the Synod of the churches the student must complete a four-year curriculum of rigorous study. He must be adept in the original Hebrew and Greek languages of the Scriptures. He must be thoroughly grounded in the history of dogma and the church. He must be knowledgeable in and deeply committed to the truth of Holy Scripture (Reformed dogmatics) and he must acquire preaching and pastoral skills. This is as it should be!

The point, however, is that we must learn from the apostle Peter's example in Acts 2. What did he do? He was faced with a tremendous opportunity. Peter stood before a multitude of people who numbered in excess of three thousand. And these people wanted to know what was going on. How was it possible, they wondered, for these unlearned men to speak in all these languages? What did Peter do? He did what every missionary/minister of the gospel must do. Peter simply expounded the Scriptures! Peter preached the Word! He told them that what they witnessed was spoken of by Joel the prophet. Peter quoted Joel 2:28-32 where the prophet speaks of the pouring out of the Spirit upon all flesh. The apostle then showed them from Psalm 16:8-11 that David spoke of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And from verse ten of that Psalm Peter showed that David spoke of the ascension of Christ to the right hand of God. The apostle expounded the Word of God. He simply preached Christ crucified and raised and exalted at the right hand of God from the Holy Scriptures.

This was the content of that sermon: Jesus Christ and Him crucified! Jesus of Nazareth, whom they knew from the miracles He performed, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, was crucified by their wicked hands. This Jesus was raised from death and this Jesus has shed forth the Holy Spirit, "which ye see and hear" (v. 33). The conclusion is: "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ" (v. 36).

Note well that in preaching Christ crucified the apostle preached sin. In fact in very sharp language Peter told them that they had taken the Lord's Christ and with their wicked hands crucified Him. This simply meant that apart from Christ whom they wickedly crucified they stood condemned! If,

therefore, the church will be faithful in its preaching to the nations, she must preach the great theme of sin and grace. The church must mince no words. She must declare to all to whom God out of His good pleasure sends the Gospel that they are depraved, wicked sinners. The church must preach that their only hope is in Christ crucified. In the preaching the church must command them to repent and believe.² The church must not be afraid to do this. Peter was not. In our mission preaching we must follow his example.

Because Peter's sermon is Christocentric it is Theocentric. The apostle preached God in all His sovereignty and glory. God did the miracles, the signs and wonders by Jesus, so that Jesus was approved of God among the Jews. Christ was delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God. Note that! Peter did not hesitate to preach the eternal counsel of God. This is profound and deep doctrine! God raised up Jesus from the dead. God did not suffer His Holy One to see corruption but raised Him up and exalted Him to His own right hand. Christ received the promise of the Holy Spirit from God the Father. In sum, God made Jesus both Lord and Christ through the terrible way of the crucifixion. This was the message the apostle preached that day. The very heart of it was God in all His sovereignty and great glory as revealed in the crucified, raised, exalted Lord Jesus Christ. It was, as the late Herman Hoeksema was fond of saying, "no gospel on a thumbnail." It was no simple Sunday School lesson. Peter did not come with some easy steps to finding happiness in Jesus. That sermon of the apostle was full of sound doctrine and based solidly on an exegesis of the Old Testament Scriptures.

It is precisely this kind of preaching which is needed on the mission fields in our day. Altogether too much mission preaching is far too superficial and, worse than that, a corruption of the gospel. Certainly, and we do not deny this for a moment, the truth of Holy Scripture must be explained carefully and in language which people who have had no contact with the gospel can understand. It is also true that the whole counsel of God must be preached. This is what Peter did, and as we hope to see. This is what the apostle Paul did as well. This, therefore, is what we must do too!

Exactly because in faithfulness to the infallible, inspired Scriptures Peter preached God in Christ there was no well-meant offer of the gospel in the apostle's sermon. Peter did not offer salvation in Christ to all in that multitude. He did not tell them that they had the will (ability) to choose Christ, nor did the apostle urge them to do so with some kind of "altar call." Some, many in fact, 3,000 in all, among the multitude were pricked in their hearts as a result of Peter's sermon (v. 37) and they said, "... men and

² *Canons of Dordt*, II, 5.

brethren, what shall we do?" Peter's response was, "Repent, and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost" (v. 38). The apostle did not beg or cajole or offer. He commanded them to repent and be baptized for the remission of sins. Those verbs are in the imperative mood!

Peter continued by giving the ground for this twofold command, "For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call" (v. 39). The apostle preached both the *command* of the gospel and the *promise* of the gospel. That promise of the gospel is unconditional and particular. Though both the command and the promise of the gospel must be proclaimed promiscuously to all whom God out of His good pleasure sends the gospel, and though that command and promise are heard by both elect and reprobate, the promise of the gospel is unconditional and particular.³ The promise is to "you and to your children, and to all that are afar off, *even as many as the Lord our God shall call*" (v. 39, emphasis mine). For this reason they must repent and be baptized! In addition, we are told, Peter testified and exhorted (he did not beg or offer) with many other words saying, "Save yourselves from this untoward generation" (v. 40). In the hearing of that vast multitude the apostle preached the divine imperative of the gospel and the particular and unconditional promise of the gospel of Jesus Christ according to the Scriptures. Peter simply commanded those who had been pricked in their hearts by means of his preaching to repent and be baptized.

In the light of this evidence the charge that the Reformed churches, which preach and are committed to the particular and unconditional promise of the gospel, have no gospel to preach especially on the mission fields is sheer nonsense! Peter preached the only promise of the gospel that Scripture knows. He preached the gospel of the sovereign grace of God in Jesus Christ in whom alone the multitude then and we now find remission of sins and everlasting life.

By anyone's standards the apostle was "successful." Approximately three thousand souls gladly received the Word and were baptized. These continued steadfastly in the apostle's doctrine and fellowship (vv. 41-42). This was the fruit of Peter's preaching that first Pentecost. Let the missionaries of God's church go forth into the nations of the world preaching and teaching that same precious gospel of God's sovereign grace in Christ which gives the glory to God. This preaching will bear rich fruits.

³ *Canons of Dordt*, II, 5. Let no one say that the Protestant Reformed or anyone else who believes in a particular promise are unable to preach the gospel to the nations!

Perhaps there will be no multitudes of three thousand added to the church in one day and as a fruit of the preaching of one sermon. In fact, it is highly unlikely. There will, however, be fruit. The elect will be pricked in their hearts and they will gladly receive the Word and be baptized. Unbelievers will scoff and oppose that gospel and those who preach it and believe it. They shall perish. In both, the faithful church and her missionaries triumph in Christ and, in both, they are a sweet savor of Christ unto God (II Cor. 2:14-17).

The second recorded sermon of the apostles is found in Acts 3:12-26.⁴ This sermon too was preached by Peter. It was occasioned by a wonderful and well-known miracle. As was apparently their custom, Peter and John were on their way to the temple at “the hour of prayer” (v. 1). As the two apostles approached the temple they encountered a man who had been lame (unable to walk) from birth lying near the gate of the temple called Beautiful. This lame man was brought daily to the temple where he asked alms of those who came to worship and to pray. When he saw Peter and John he asked alms of them. Peter, commanding the man to look at them, said, “Silver and gold have I none; but such as I have give I thee: in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk” (vv. 5-6). Peter then “took him by the right hand, and lifted him up: and immediately his feet and ankle bones received strength. And he leaping up stood, and walked, and entered with them into the temple, walking, and leaping, and praising God” (vv. 7-8). He was really healed! He not only could stand for the first time in his life, and he not only could take a few tentative steps, but immediately after Peter had spoken he leaped to his feet and he continued walking and leaping and praising God! The effect of this miracle of healing on the people was instantaneous: they took note that this leaping man was he who sat daily at the temple asking alms, and they were filled with wonder and amazement (vv. 9-10). Soon a crowd gathered in Solomon’s porch; all were greatly wondering (v. 11). Peter, seeing the crowd, seized the opportunity and began preaching. It is obvious that the purpose of the miracle was to serve as an occasion for the preaching of the gospel.

But before we examine the content of this sermon we ought to answer an objection that might be raised. It is conceivable that some may argue that this sermon cannot serve as a model for contemporary mission preaching because it is addressed to “children of the covenant.” It is addressed to a Jewish audience. Of that there can be no question. It is also true, however,

⁴ Because the passage is too lengthy to quote we ask the reader to consult his Bible.

that these people, though they knew Jesus of Nazareth, had not yet believed on Him and in fact had crucified Him. If ever there were a potentially hostile audience it was here! Let us note how Peter “handles” them, i.e., the approach which he employs. We can learn much from this.

The main theme of the sermon is this: the miracle which they had just witnessed was a manifestation of the power of the resurrected Christ whom they had crucified. This theme the apostle drove home along the following lines. Peter denies that he and the apostle John had healed the lame man by their own power. Why do you marvel at this and why do you look at us as if we had done this and made this man walk, Peter asks. Peter emphasizes that it was not on account of their holiness or power that the man was healed. The apostle explains that God had glorified His Son Jesus, Whom they had delivered up and denied in the presence of Pilate (v. 13). The apostle deliberately speaks of God as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He is the covenant God, the ever faithful God of their fathers. One must be impressed with this emphasis. Just as he had done in his Pentecost sermon, the apostle now proclaims the God of the covenant, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. It was God’s power by which that man was made to walk, not man’s. God brought glory to His Son Jesus through this miracle. It was all the work of God, the sovereign One.

This certainly is a key element, no, indispensable element of all proper preaching, also preaching on the mission field. The missionary must, if he will be faithful to the Christ who sends him, preach God as He is revealed in Jesus Christ in all of His sovereign power and glory. Those to whom the missionary is sent must be brought into a *confrontation* with the sovereign God in Christ by means of public preaching and private counsel. Missionary preaching as well as all preaching must be *God-centered*. It is precisely at this point that so much preaching, especially mission or evangelistic preaching, is to be faulted. It is not so much that there is heresy being preached (though there is plenty of that too!) but much contemporary preaching on the mission fields fails to bring the people face to face with the sovereign God in Christ, the God of the Scriptures. Preaching, especially evangelistic preaching, concentrates on “a Jesus” who is sweet and lovely, who loves all men and desires to save all men. In so doing, this preaching fails to bring people to come to terms with God in all His glory. It inevitably becomes man-centered. This runs contrary to the entire thrust (sweep, as they say these days) of the Bible. In Scripture the first priority is not man and his salvation but God and His Christ and His glory. This is what mission preaching must proclaim.

The apostle continues by pointing to the sin and guilt of the people. If one faithfully preaches God in Christ he will necessarily preach sin. They denied the Christ before Pilate, even when Pilate was determined to let Him

go (v. 13). They denied the Holy One and the Just and desired a murderer instead. They killed the Prince of Life (vv. 14-15). All this they did in spiritual ignorance (v. 17). Peter declared that God raised Jesus from the dead. Note that emphasis once more. God did that! God raised Jesus from the dead! "And his name through faith in his name hath made this man strong, whom ye see and know: yea, the faith which is by him hath given him this perfect soundness in the presence of you all," says Peter (vv. 15-16). The apostle explains that all the things concerning the suffering and glorification of Christ were the fulfillment of what the prophets had foretold. In other words Peter emphasizes that Scripture ("the law and the prophets" with which they were so familiar) had been fulfilled by Jesus of Nazareth. They have no excuse for their sin (v. 18)

What does all this mean? It means they must repent of their sins and be converted: "that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord; And he shall send Jesus Christ which before was preached unto you: Whom heaven must receive until the times of restitution of all things which God hath spoken by the mouth of his holy prophets since the world began" (vv. 19-21). The apostle concludes by pointing to Moses' prophecy concerning Christ as a Prophet whom they must hear. Those who do not hear Christ the Prophet shall be destroyed from among the people. Not only that, but all the prophets from Samuel on had spoken of these days (vv. 19-24). Peter reminds them that they are the children of the prophets and of the covenant which God made with the fathers. The apostle emphasizes that God sent the gospel of Jesus Christ whom He raised from the dead to them first of all (vv. 25-26).

As is the case with the Pentecost sermon, so also in this sermon the one element which most people, even in Reformed circles, claim to be essential to preaching generally and to mission preaching in particular, *viz.*, "the free or well-meant offer of the gospel," is missing. If the "offer" is so crucial that some go so far as to assert that the Protestant Reformed Churches are not able to preach the gospel from their pulpits and certainly are not able to preach in a mission context, why do we not find an offer either in this sermon or the Pentecost sermon which Peter preached? There simply is no "well-meant offer" of the gospel. The whole concept is foreign to Scripture. Using not one but two *imperatives* the apostle by virtue of his holy office commanded them to "repent and be converted" (v. 19). Peter preached no offers. He confronted the multitude with the promise and the command of the gospel. He brought them before their obligation. Christ is not to be accepted or rejected. He must be believed and served! God must be worshiped and praised as He is revealed in Jesus according to the Scriptures. This is not an option for man. It is a *must!* All who refuse to believe perish. All who believe, "by grace through faith, the gift of God," are saved (Eph.

2:8). Peter proclaimed the sovereignty of Almighty God and the sovereignty of His grace in Jesus Christ.

And the fruit? Many opposed the gospel in unbelief (4:1-2). The leaders of the Jews put Peter and John in prison (4:3). But many others believed. The number of the men which now believed was about five thousand (4:4). God gave a tremendous increase. That is always the fruit of the pure preaching of the Word of God. Where the Word is preached in all of its truth and power the thoughts and intents of the hearts of men are revealed. The elect are converted and brought to faith in Christ. The rest are hardened and they stand condemned, for they reject the Lord's Christ. In both God is well pleased. In both the Church of Christ triumphs (II Cor. 2:14-17).

May God grant the missionaries and ministers of His church the grace to preach that gospel of His sovereign grace in Jesus faithfully and to the glory of His ever-blessed Name. By that power Christ will gather His church out of the nations.

A third sermon of the apostle Peter is recorded in Acts 10.⁵ It was preached to Cornelius and his household. Cornelius, a devout man who "prayed to God alway," was an officer in the Roman army who resided in Caesarea. An angel of God appeared to him in a vision telling him that his prayers and alms were answered and instructing him to send men to Joppa to call for Simon Peter (vv. 1-5). Peter, the angel said, "... shall tell thee what thou oughtest to do" (v. 6). This Cornelius did.

On the next day, as the men sent by Cornelius were approaching Joppa, Peter went to the housetop to pray. In a vision from God the apostle saw heaven opened and a great sheet let down in which were all kinds of wild animals. A voice said to him, "Rise, Peter; kill, and eat" (v. 13). Peter, in characteristic fashion, quickly responded, "Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten any thing that is common or unclean" (v. 14). This happened three times. While Peter doubted concerning the meaning of the vision, the men from Cornelius came to the house calling for him. At the same time, the Holy Spirit instructed Peter to go with these men, "... doubting nothing: for I have sent them" (v. 20). Peter accompanied the men back to Caesarea where he met Cornelius and a goodly number of his relatives and close friends. Peter explained to Cornelius that, "God hath shewed me that I should not call any man common or unclean. Therefore came I unto you without gainsaying, as soon as I was sent for: I ask therefore for what intent ye have sent for me?" Cornelius answered by relating his vision to Peter, concluding, "Now therefore are we all here present before God, to hear all things that are

⁵The sermon is found in verses 34-43.

commanded thee of God" (v. 33). Peter then preached to them, exclaiming, "Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons; But in every nation he that feareth him and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him" (vv. 34-35).

Concerning this incident and the sermon preached by Peter there are several points which we ought to note. This is the first time that the Word of God was preached strictly to Gentiles. It is true that Philip had preached to the Samaritans, many of whom believed and received the Holy Spirit when Peter and John came, but there was some Jewish blood in them (Acts 8). Cornelius and those "many" who were with him were Gentiles. Hence this is the beginning of the spread of the gospel beyond the borders of Israel to the nations of the world. Centuries earlier the prophets had spoken of the "Day of the Lord" when all nations would "flow into Jerusalem."⁶ The beginning of the fulfillment of that prophecy takes place with Peter being sent to and preaching to Cornelius and his relatives and friends.

This is a highly significant event in the history of the church of Jesus Christ. Evidence of this significance may be found in Acts 15, where the apostles and leaders of the church gathered in Jerusalem to discuss the question of the circumcision of the Gentile converts. There Peter related the entire incident concerning Cornelius, and this became one of the deciding factors in the final decision by the conference concerning the "Gentile-circumcision" question. At this conference the church finally realized that, "God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him" (Acts 10:34-35).

It is to be noted as well that Cornelius was not a pagan Gentile. He was not an idolater who had no knowledge of God. In fact the passage describes him as, "A devout man, and one that feared God with all his house, which gave much alms to the people, and prayed to God alway" (v. 2). But it is also true that Cornelius knew nothing of Jesus Christ as his Savior and Lord. One receives the impression that he had never even heard of Jesus of Nazareth. It is precisely for this reason that God brings the apostle Peter to him and prepares Cornelius to receive Peter and the gospel which he preaches.

Thus the incident serves a double purpose. On the one hand, Cornelius and his family and friends must be brought to the consciousness of faith in Jesus Christ and gathered into the church through baptism and the work of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, Peter and the church must understand that the time has come when Christ will gather His church out

⁶ Isaiah 2:1-4; Micah 4:1-7.

of all nations in obedience to the will of God, who is no respecter of persons (vv. 34-35).

Concerning the content of the sermon Peter preached, it follows exactly the pattern we observed in Peter's Pentecost sermon and the sermon he preached in Jerusalem upon the occasion of the healing of the lame man at the gate of the temple. The sermon is completely *theocentric*. All of the emphasis is upon God, the sovereign God who is revealed in Jesus Christ, "the Lord of all" (v. 36). The apostle begins by affirming, "God is no respecter of persons." Those who fear God and work righteousness in every nation are accepted with God (vv. 34-35). God is the One who sent the Word by Jesus Christ. "The word which God sent unto the children of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ: (he is Lord of all) That word I say ye know, which was published throughout all Judea, and began from Galilee, after the baptism which John preached" (vv. 36-37). It was God who anointed Jesus with the Holy Spirit unto His ministry and saving work. "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Ghost and with power: who went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil; for God was with him. And we are witnesses of all things which he did both in the land of the Jews, and in Jerusalem; whom they slew and hanged on a tree" (vv. 38-39). This Jesus, Peter proclaimed, "God raised up the third day, and shewed him openly" (v. 40). The risen Christ was not shown to all the people, "... but unto witnesses chosen before of God, even to us, who did eat and drink with him after he rose from the dead" (v. 41). It was God who commanded the apostles to preach to the people. In that preaching they were to testify that It was Christ who was ordained of God to be the Judge of the living and the dead (v. 42). To this Christ all the prophets gave witness, "that through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins" (v. 43).

It is perfectly obvious from Peter's sermon that God is absolutely sovereign in all the work of redemption. Man neither conceives of it nor does he execute that work of redemption. What does Peter preach concerning man? Nothing except that it was man who crucified Jesus, and man is a sinner who can be saved only through faith in the name of Jesus. It is all God's work!

At the risk of being redundant, it must be emphasized again, this theme, God, must be dominant in all preaching. This must dominate all preaching from the pulpits of the established churches. And this theme must permeate all mission preaching as well! Only this gospel which is strictly according to the Holy Scriptures is the good news! The missionary must not hesitate to proclaim the absolutely sovereign God in all his preaching and teaching. To the degree that he fails to do this he robs the gospel of its power, its efficacy. Indeed, to that extent he preaches a false gospel, the very antithesis of the gospel of the Scriptures.

Because the apostle proclaimed God he preached Christ. This is true because God is revealed in Christ and Christ is of God. Peter proclaimed the good that Jesus did especially as that was revealed in Jesus' healing ministry in Galilee and Judea. The apostle preached the cross of Christ. The heart of his preaching was that God, who ordained Jesus to be the Judge of the living and the dead, raised Christ from the dead. Peter preached forgiveness of sins through faith in the name of Jesus.

Notice how everything the apostle preached fits together. Take away any one element and the gospel is lost! There can be no gospel without God, without Christ, without the cross, or without the resurrection. Without sin the gospel is meaningless. Without faith it is impossible to please God (Heb. 11:6). In all its beautiful harmony and power this unlearned former fisherman preached the blessed gospel of God. There was no undue emphasis on one element or point to the neglect of the others. Peter proclaimed the entire gospel. It was not a watered down, simplified gospel which becomes no gospel at all. The sermon was doctrinal! It was meaty! It was the truth of God in Jesus Christ. Because it was all of that it was eminently practical. The gospel is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes, the Jew first, but also the Greek (Rom. 1:16). What could be more practical than that?

While Peter was still preaching (v. 44) the fruit came a hundredfold. The Holy Spirit fell upon them and they began to speak in tongues. Through that sign God showed the Jewish Christians that indeed He, "also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life" (Acts 11:18). Seeing this, Peter said, "Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we? And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord ..." (vv. 47-48).

What a wonder! What the church must understand is that when she preaches that blessed gospel of the sovereign God in Jesus Christ to the nations, God the Holy Spirit still performs the wonder of conversion in the hearts of His elect and gathers His church out of the nations. ▲

Book Reviews

Paradigms in Polity: Classic Readings in Reformed and Presbyterian Church Government, by David W. Hall, Joseph H. Hall, editors. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994. Pp. xiii-621. \$29.99. (paper). [Reviewed by Prof. Robert D. Decker.]

This book ought to be in every minister's library. The two introductory essays by the editors are must reading especially in our day. David Hall writes,

As most quickly recognize, unfortunately many of us are led to our positions in church government not with forethought but in a posture of reaction. We often learn government only when threatened. It would be much better if we would study the Word of God and come to our values in biblical conclusions not as reactionaries but as positive Protestants seeking to hold forth the whole counsel of God in matters of government as well. James Henley Thornwell is helpful again. Responding to those who allege that church government and restraint is an unlawful imposition, Thornwell wrote, "Is the law of God tyranny? And does man become a slave by being bound to obey it? Is not obedience to God the very essence of liberty, and is not the

Church most divinely free when she most perfectly fulfills His will? What is it that has made this 'free, exultant Church of ours,' but the sublime determination to hear no voice, but the voice of the Master? And what made the mummied forms of medieval Christianity, but the very principle ... that the Church has a large discretion? She claimed the right to command where God had not spoken; she made void His law, and substituted her own authority and inventions.... It is because we love the liberty where-with Christ has made us free, that we renounce and abhor the detestable principle of Prelatists, Popes, and loose Presbyterians, that whatever is not forbidden is lawful. The Church may be very wise, but God is wiser" (p. 33, 34).

A paradigm is an outstandingly clear example or pattern of something. The bulk of the book (pp. 55-602) consists of an anthology of what the editors consider to be the best writings of the church fathers, as well as excerpts from the confessions on the subject of church polity or government. Each of these is preceded by a brief, very helpful biographical/historical introduction. The editors believe, and rightly so, that these writings are paradigms of what a Reformed/Presbyterian

church polity ought to be. They urge us not to " ... 're-invent the wheel.' The biblical aspects of government need not be ignored by each successive generation, nor rediscovered by the alternating generations. We could profit much by studying the 'ancient paths' (Jer. 6:16; 18:15) and attempting to mold our inchoate governments after the progress of our spiritual ancestors. That, far from being a pharisaic expression of traditionalism, is the better part of wisdom, as we seek to rule out those inefficacious modes of governing" (p. 20). If nothing else, this anthology will guide the serious student of Reformed/Presbyterian church polity to the primary sources. The anthology is divided into five sections treating "The Historical Foundation of Church Polity," "Continental Europe and Reformation Politics," "Dutch Reformed Politics," "Scottish and British Politics," and "North American Politics."

The anthology is introduced by two excellent essays by the editors. Joseph Hall writes on the "History and Character of Church Government"; and David Hall's essay is entitled "The Pastoral and Theological Significance of Church Government."

Joseph Hall's thesis is that the marks of the church (pure preaching of the Word, administration of the sacraments, and biblical discipline) are the "essential ingredients of true church government" (pp. 3-4). Moreover, both editors insist that church polity ought to be biblical in

its origin. Joseph Hall sees congregational/independent churches and the prelatic (Anglican and Roman Catholic systems of church government) as "aberrational forms of government" denying one or more of the fundamental characteristics of the church. The former denies her catholicity and the latter her scriptural foundation (p. 4).

Hall contends that the main principles of the presbyterian form of government derived from Scripture are: "the rule of a plurality of elders in the local church, the submission of the local governing body to a higher governing body, and the unity of churches finding its most concrete representation in the connection of the churches and their elders in regional bodies, sometimes called 'courts' when discipline is undertaken" (p. 5). Both editors assert that these fundamental principles are evident from Acts 15 — the "Jerusalem Council," which dealt with the question of circumcision (pp. 5, 17-19). The decisions of the elders and apostles at that council in Jerusalem applied to all the churches. "Strangely absent from this record is the thought that each church, on this question, would do just as it pleased. These (the decisions of the council in Jerusalem) were standards by the whole church for the whole church. It was one church with the same beliefs and practices, not just a consortium of loosely affiliated churches. The decision of the Assembly of Jerusalem was for all churches" (p. 17). According to Acts 16:4 these

decisions ("decrees," according to the Greek) were delivered by Paul and Silas to the churches and received by them with joy!

Both editors are convinced that the biblical principles of church government as enunciated by the apostles and early post-apostolic church, and as restored by the Reformers of the sixteenth century (notably Calvin) are the principles of Reformed/Presbyterian church polity. This reviewer agrees! What is missing, however, is a recognition and an explanation of the important and fundamental principle of the autonomy of the local church as so beautifully woven into the Church Order of Dordt. In addition to this, David Hall's position that "All government is necessitated by human depravity and the Fall and, as such, is necessarily a mechanism of response to that fallen condition" simply is not true. Government finds its origin in the will of the sovereign God who created the heavens and the earth. Adam had dominion, rule, in paradise. Christ is God's King and will certainly rule in the New Creation.

Both introductory essays, but especially is this true of the second by David Hall, are characterized by highly technical, unfamiliar, and obscure terminology which makes them difficult for anyone lacking a college or seminary education. Among these are terms like "repristinator of presbyterianism," "recrudescence of the presbyterian system," "*praxis*," "harmartiology,"

and "heuristic value." But if one has a dictionary at his elbow he should be able to make his way through the essays.

Joseph Hall was formerly professor of church history and librarian at Knox Theological Seminary, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and currently teaches at Mid-America Seminary. His son, David Hall, is pastor of Covenant Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Oak Ridge, Tennessee.

The book is greatly enhanced by a "Bibliographical Essay" by David Hall and an index. ♦

Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension, by D.A. Carson. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, Publishers, 1994. Pp. xii-271. \$19.99 (paper) [Reviewed by Prof. Herman Hanko.]

Dr. Carson, Research Professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical School, Deerfield, IL, has written extensively in New Testament studies, including a lengthy commentary on the Gospel According to John. This present work is a popularization, if I may put it that way, of his doctoral thesis at Cambridge University submitted in 1975. This edition is a reprint, the original book being published in Great Britain and the US in 1981.

The topic is an interesting one for it has been an issue in the church and a subject for discussion since the time of Augustine when the great bishop of Hippo did battle with the Pelagians and semi-Pelagians. Any-

one with an interest in Reformed doctrine tends to be eager to read what such a notable scholar as D.A. Carson has to say on the subject. Undoubtedly Protestant Reformed people would be especially interested in a discussion of this subject, for they would eagerly devour a book devoted to a defense of the absolute sovereignty of God. It is with some disappointment, therefore, that already in chapter 2 one reads:

On the one hand the words, "so it was not you who sent me here, but God" (Gen. 45:8) are hyperbolic: Joseph does not minimize the ugly fact that the brothers with evil intent (50:20) did indeed sell him (45:5). The text will not allow the brothers to be classed as puppets and thus to escape their guilt. On the other hand, neither does it picture God as *post eventu* deflecting the evil action of the brothers and transforming it into something good (p. 10).

It is the footnote here that is interesting. Apart now from the fact that Carson calls Joseph's confession of God's sovereignty an exaggeration, the footnote makes it very clear where the author intends to stand on the issue. The footnote reads in part: "On the one side, cf. H. Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids, 1966), and, less rigid, G.H. Clark, *Biblical Predestination* (Nutley, 1969)." So at the outset Hoeksema's position, the traditional Reformed position of the Reformed

and Presbyterian creeds, is laid aside as too rigid. This does not bode well for the contents. (We might note here in passing that one great weakness of the book is its failure to refer in any respect to the historic creeds of the church — although this is characteristic of modern evangelicalism.)

It is in the very last chapter that Carson deals in detail with the problem that confronts anyone thinking about these matters: How can God be absolutely sovereign while man remains responsible for his wicked deeds? In some respects Carson is on target. While recognizing that the final understanding of this problem lies beyond us, he acknowledges also that God is sovereign and man is responsible because man's sins are committed voluntarily (cf. pp. 207ff.).

Nevertheless, in the material leading to his final analysis of the problem, one finds serious shortcomings. In his interpretation of John 3:16, he rejects those who interpret the passage 1) as teaching universal salvation; 2) as teaching that God's purposes in saving all men are frustrated; and 3) as teaching that "*world*" refers to the elect (174). The conclusion is: "The passages in John which deal with the 'cosmic' sweep of God's purposes... function in such a way as to increase human responsibility in the light of God's gracious and available salvation" (175).

The author deals with John 12 and the clear statement concerning

reprobation in the chapter, but defines reprobation as "realized eschatology of condemnation" (196; see also the summary on pages 197, 198).

But, when one examines the whole matter a bit more closely, one begins to have serious doubts about Carson's exegetical methodology. These doubts first begin to surface when one discovers that in just over 200 pages of text, no fewer than 80 pages are devoted to a careful analysis of extra-canonical writings: the Septuagint, the Apocrypha, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and other Jewish writings. Why ought these writings to be considered in the matter, one wonders?

This uneasiness is increased when one discovers that, while in the early part of the book various New Testament passages are briefly referred to, and while the Gospel According to John is extensively treated, almost no attention is paid to other New Testament passages which are crucial to an understanding of the matter. One need only think of Acts 2:23; 4:28; Ephesians 1:3ff.; Romans 9; I Peter 2:8; and many such-like passages with which the New Testament abounds.

But the reason comes out on pages 201ff. After summarizing the teachings of all these extra-canonical writings, and after saying some things about John's Gospel, the author writes: "There are points of contact between John and the DSS (Dead Sea Scrolls). Both share a pessimistic view of man. Both em-

phasize election and both hark back to the Old Testament and claim to interpret it" (204). After reading this section one is left with the inescapable conclusion that Carson's work with John to the exclusion of the rest of the New Testament is due to a higher critical approach which, if not placing the extra-canonical writings on a par with John, give to them some authority in matters of doctrine nonetheless. John becomes, it seems, important because John alone (or, perhaps, especially) puts the Old Testament writings in their proper perspective and gives proper direction to the extra-canonical writings which are also important in one's consideration of these problems.

The fact of the matter is that I do not care a snap what the Targum and the rabbinical writings have to say about God's sovereignty and man's responsibility. I desperately care about what *all* Scripture says on this matter. And I find that Scripture tells us in clear and unmistakable language that, while man is indeed accountable for all his sins and is justly punished for them, God is absolutely sovereign: sovereign over all things, sovereign over sin, sovereign in election and reprobation, sovereign in the work of salvation in Christ. And He is sovereign that to Him may be all glory forever and ever, world without end.

If that is "rigid," so let it be. God's sovereignty is too important to worry about such caricatures. ♦

Book Notices

Grace and Glory: Sermons Preached in the Chapel of Princeton Theological Seminary, by Geerhardus Vos. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1994. Pp. xii-296. \$15.95 (cloth). [Reviewed by Prof. Robert D. Decker.]

Geerhardus Vos (1862-1949), best known for his *Biblical Theology*, emigrated to the United States in 1881. After intensive theological training Vos declined an invitation to teach Old Testament Theology at the Free University of Amsterdam. Instead he taught at Calvin Theological Seminary (Systematic and Exegetical Theology) from 1888-1893. From 1894 until he retired in 1932 Vos taught at Princeton Theological Seminary. He was ordained as a minister in the Presbyterian Church in the United States in 1894. His wife, Catherine, is the author of the well-known and loved, *Child's Story Bible*.

Grace and Glory is a collection of sermons preached by Dr. Vos in the chapel of Princeton Seminary. Vos, as these sermons indicate, was a keen exegete of the Scriptures. His insights are profound. The sermon titled "Rabboni!" based on John 20:16 (the appearance of the risen Christ to Mary Magdalene) is itself worth the price of the book.

Ministers, Christian School teachers, Bible study leaders, and lay members of the church will find a veritable spiritual feast in this book. It is not easy going, but if one takes the time to read it through at his own pace, he will be edified.

The late John Murray described Vos in these terms, "Dr. Vos is, in my judgment, the most penetrating exegete it has been my privilege to know, and, I believe, the most incisive exegete that has appeared in the English-speaking world in this century." Those of us who were privileged to know Herman Hoeksema and hear his preaching and teaching would no doubt disagree with Murray. Nevertheless, Geerhardus Vos was a gifted, erudite theologian and certainly ranks among the best preachers in the Reformed tradition. ♦

Leadership Handbooks of Practical Theology: Outreach and Care, James D. Berkley. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Company, 1994. Pp. xvii-480. \$19.99 (cloth). [Reviewed by Prof. R. D. Decker.]

This book is a "handbook," i.e., it is intended to provide the pastors and elders of the church a quick, brief reference to a wide variety of practical concerns in the

church. This volume has seven main sections dealing in order with the following areas: Evangelism, Missions, Social Involvement, Pastoral Care, Pastoral Counseling, Christian Education, and Chaplaincies. Part V which deals with mental illness is particularly helpful. The volume is enhanced by helpful, although in most instances very brief, bibliographies for further study at the end of each main section.

The contributors are too many to list. All are, as best this reviewer could determine, in the evangelical tradition.

The book will prove helpful for pastors. Because it lacks a Reformed perspective the book must be used with discretion. ♦

Historiography Secular and Religious, by Gordon H. Clark. Jefferson, Maryland: Trinity Foundation, Publishers, 1994. Pp. xii-379. \$13.95 (paper). [Reviewed by Prof. Herman Hanko.]

Gordon Clark has written with learning in many different fields, including history and philosophy. In this volume he examines and analyzes all the major philosophers and writers who have incorporated into their writings or concentrated on theories of history. The book is divided into two parts, the first part dealing with secular writers and the second with "religious" writers. Among the secular writers are Kant and Marx; among the religious writers are Barth and Bultmann.

The point of the book, however, is not merely to describe various philosophies of history, but rather to demonstrate the emptiness of most secular and religious historiographers who refuse to be governed by an objective starting point and who refuse to allow their philosophy of history to be directed by divine revelation.

Clark argues, beginning with Augustine's well-known *De Civitatis Dei*, that there is no such thing as "objective, value-free" history, but that true history begins with God's revelation. As such it has meaning, significance, and purpose. Standing out in Clark's analysis is his commitment to God's sovereignty. Holding firmly to that great truth, history is no longer "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." From the perspective of God's sovereignty, history becomes an important part of the revelation of God, of abiding significance for God's people.

The book is not for the faint-hearted, but is important reading for all Christian historians. ♦

The Serpent and the Cross: Religious Corruption in an Evil Age, by Alan Morrison. K & M Books, Publishers. Pp. 638. (paper). [Reviewed by Prof. Herman Hanko.]

Mr. Morrison is intent on demonstrating that the New Age Movement, which so completely dominates our present age, is nothing but a revived Gnosticism. He himself

describes the main contents of the book in these words:

As we progress through this book, we will see the numerous twists and turns of historical development which have made possible the prevailing conditions of the present day. We will come to see that the influence of the New Age Movement is sweeping through the formative institutions of Western culture — especially the intelligentsia, the “caring” professions (social work, nursing, etc.), medicine, psychology, psychotherapy, multi-national industry, the major religious faith, global agencies and world government organizations (61, 62).

The author has his eschatology pretty straight (e.g., he has no time for post-millennial ideas of the kingdom) and proceeds from the basic viewpoint of the great battle which Satan wages to destroy the cause of God in the world. He traces the history of the reappearance of Gnosticism (an ancient 2nd and 3rd century heresy) to the present, and examines many different movements to demonstrate that they are all cut of the same fabric. He describes in detail the New Age Movement and shows how all-pervasive it is, the countless organizations promoting it in one form or another, and the theories and ideas which go to make it up. He demonstrates how theological liberalism, the “New World Order,” various esoteric and theosophic movements, occult practices, parapsychology, feminism, the

Charismatic Movement (of which he is scathing in his denunciation), etc. all manifest the same basic evil intent.

Each step of the way the author provides his analysis on the basis of Scripture and is especially concerned that the Christian, armed with this knowledge of the New Gnosticism, may better engage in his evangelical calling.

The book includes an extensive Bibliography and Index.

It can be ordered from: Michael Kimmitt, 47 Elvetham Road, Birmingham B15 2LY, England. Mr. Kimmitt informs me that, while the book costs £15, he is willing to ship it to anyone who will send \$20.00 to cover the cost of the book and shipping and mailing. ♦

The Impact of the Reformation, Heiko A. Oberman. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Publishers, 1994. Pp. xi-263. \$19.99 (paper). [Reviewed by Prof. Herman Hanko.]

Heiko Oberman is an acknowledged scholar in the field of medieval and Reformational studies. This book, intended to be a companion volume to an earlier book, *The Dawn of the Reformation*, is also a collection of essays written over the years on different aspects of Reformation history. It therefore lacks coherence and unity.

On the foreground of these essays are such subjects as the agreement or lack thereof between Martin

Luther and Johann von Staupitz, the Modern Devotion, the anti-Semitism of Reformation times, and in how far Luther himself was opposed to Jews.

The book is not for the faint-hearted; it is highly technical and deals with abstruse subjects. In fact, its value is limited pretty much to scholars, for it is filled with Latin and German, most of which is untranslated.

Although it deals with some interesting subjects, one wonders sometimes about all this "scholarship." The book is written by a scholar for a scholar. That would not be so bad if it contributed significantly to important aspects of the Reformation. But as often as not, the book deals with extremely peripheral subjects and seems to lose sight of the forest because of the minute plants on the forest floor. When scholars can write books and essays

and engage in long debates about what Staupitz meant by the expression "the Babylonian Captivity" in his statement in a letter to Luther: "I was the one who became the forerunner of the holy gospel and still, as always, hate the Babylonian Captivity," one wonders whether matters concerning the Reformation are not a bit out of perspective. Is it possible that in some sense modern scholarship strains at the gnat (of a minor historical detail) and swallows the camel (of losing sight of God's great work of salvation in the history of the church)?

With all due respect for the scholars and their painstaking work, give me the great themes of God's faithfulness in preserving the church.

At any rate, the book is of value to those who are interested in such minutiae. ♦

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