

Even then, God told Abraham to offer Isaac as a sacrifice, in order to test and purify the old man's faith (Gen. 22). Later, Abraham's servant goes to great lengths to obtain a godly bride for Isaac, lest he marry a pagan girl from Canaan (Gen. 24).

Let us now think of this narrative and subsequent history in terms of numbers. Abraham and Sarah are first introduced as two dry sticks, as you might say. After many years and various wrong turns, the chosen son, Isaac, is born, of whom God said, "In Isaac shall thy seed be called" (Rom. 9:7; Gen. 21:12; Heb. 11:18). Later, elect and beloved Jacob is born to Isaac and Rebekah, along with his twin, reprobate Esau, whom God hated (Rom. 9:13). Jacob has twelve sons. When they marry and have children, his family numbers seventy. At the time of the exodus from Egypt, Israel consists of more than two million. In the reigns of David and Solomon, Abraham's descendants are even more numerous.

Now we can understand the text: "look unto the rock whence ye are hewn, and to the hole of the pit whence ye are digged" (Isa. 51:1). That is, consider your origin, consider your origin *historically*, consider your origin historically *in Abraham and Sarah*: "Look unto Abraham your father, and unto Sarah that bare you" (2).

Now think about the three verbs in the remainder of verse 2: "for I *called* him alone, and *blessed* him, and *increased* him." God "called" Abraham with the effectual call to salvation in Jesus Christ in the promised land. Jehovah "blessed" him with covenant blessings according to His covenant promises. The Almighty "increased" Abraham so that that one man's seed grew to seventy and even to millions. This is a wonder of grace! The whole inspired narrative underscores repeatedly and in vivid ways the amazing truth that God alone did it and not man, to whom this was impossible.

Thus the message to Isaiah's readers, heart-broken over the smouldering ashes of Jerusalem, is that God has multiplied His people from very small beginnings before. He *can* do it again and He *will* do it again!

Those who believe this promise are the true children of Abraham (for they follow in their father's footsteps) and chips off the old block, so to speak, for God "is able of ... stones to raise up children unto Abraham" (Matt. 3:9). Just like us believing Gentiles!

This then is the connection between verses 1 and 2 of Isaiah 51: "look unto the rock whence ye are hewn" (1), that is, "*Look unto Abraham your father*" (2). This is not in conflict with looking to the living God in Jesus Christ, as we are commanded to do in Isaiah 45:22: "Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else," for six chapters later we are also exhorted, "Look unto Abraham your father" (51:2).

The call to look at Abraham does not mean that he is the object of our faith, as if we are saved by believing in the patriarch. Rather, we look at Abraham to see what God did for him in Jesus Christ. This is a standing lesson to the church, for just as Abraham was once numerically small, so God blesses His church by increasing her.

Next time, we will conclude our study of Isaiah 51:1-3 by looking more closely at the beautiful promise of verse 3 and how the whole passage is fulfilled. *Rev. Stewart*

# Covenant Reformed News

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## The Rock Whence We Are Hewn (3)

In the last two issues of the *News* and in this issue and the next, we are considering this glorious prophecy of Isaiah: "Hearken to me, ye that follow after righteousness, ye that seek the LORD: look unto the rock whence ye are hewn, and to the hole of the pit whence ye are digged. Look unto Abraham your father, and unto Sarah that bare you: for I called him alone, and blessed him, and increased him. For the LORD shall comfort Zion: he will comfort all her waste places; and he will make her wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the LORD; joy and gladness shall be found therein, thanksgiving, and the voice of melody" (51:1-3).

In last month's *News*, we drew attention to the word "alone" in Isaiah 51:2: "Look unto Abraham your father, and unto Sarah that bare you: for I called him *alone*, and blessed him, and increased him." In order to understand the significance of the little word "alone," let us consider the life of Abraham as recorded in Genesis 11-25, in connection with God's covenant with the patriarch and his seed.

Abraham was an idolater in Ur of the Chaldees (Josh. 24:2). There were many idolaters in that city, but Isaiah 51:2 states that God "called him *alone*." "But what about Terah, Abraham's father?" someone might object. Abraham was the one who was principally called (Acts 7:2-3) and his father merely accompanied him. Terah never even reached the promised land, for he died in Haran (Gen. 11:32). "But what about Lot, Abraham's nephew?" Though he made it to Canaan, Lot left Abraham (Gen. 13; 19).

God promised Abraham that He would multiply his seed, so that they would be as numerous as the stars of the heavens and the sand on the beach. Jehovah would make of Abraham a great and mighty nation, and all of the families of the earth would be blessed in him.

There was just one problem! Abraham was an old man—too old to beget children—and Sarah was an old woman—too old to bear children.

Yet whom did God call out of Ur? Just one man—not many men—and that when he and his wife were past having children. As Romans 4:19 puts it, "his own body [was] now dead" (as regards having children) and there was also the barrier of "the deadness of Sara's womb."

The rest of the Abrahamic narrative develops this theme. Time and time again, God repeats His promise to Abraham of a vast number of children as his descendants. We read of Abraham's unbelieving and sinful arrangement with Hagar and the birth of Ishmael, with all the grief that caused (Gen. 16). Finally, Abraham and Sarah have a boy! She was 90 and he was 100. They called their son, Isaac, which means laughter!

(continued on p. 4)

## The Work of the Holy Spirit (2)

In 2008, the British Reformed Fellowship (BRF) held its tenth biennial conference at the Share Centre on the shores of Lough Erne in County Fermanagh, N. Ireland. The subject was “The Work of the Holy Spirit.” Later, the speeches and sermons were published in book form. One reader recently asked me a series of questions about the contents of the book, wanting to have the answers included in the *News*.

His second question reads, “What is the difference between the Spirit now as the Spirit of the risen Christ rather than just the Spirit of Christ? You mention that the Spirit could not work the reality of salvation because all he had to use was a picture book [*The Work of the Holy Spirit*, p. 34]. Could you expand on that? I think the footnote on page 35 goes a long way to answering that—the anointing teaches you all things (I John 2:27). The Spirit of truth ... and more truth than before! On the next page you say it was difficult for Old Testament saints to pray and impossible for them to call God ‘Father.’ But nevertheless many examples can be found and there are instances where Israel calls God ‘Father.’”

These are good questions: apparently my presentation at the conference was not as clear as one could wish. I appreciate the opportunity to expand on these things further.

I must, however, make one correction. I did not distinguish between the Spirit of Christ and the Spirit of the risen Christ. Rather, I distinguished between the work of the Spirit in the church of the old dispensation and the work of the Spirit that was given to Christ at the time of His exaltation (Acts 2:33).

It is true, though, that there was a certain manifestation of the Spirit of Christ in the old dispensation but then the same is true of Christ Himself, who appeared in the old dispensation as the Angel of Jehovah. So also the Old Testament prophets could not have spoken in such an (almost) New Testament way (e.g., Isa. 53) without speaking in the church of the knowledge given to them by the Spirit, who revealed to them the things of Christ.

However that may be, and without going into the question in detail, there are especially two ways in which the work of the Spirit in the old dispensation differed from the work of the Spirit in the new dispensation. The first is that the Holy Spirit always does His work in the hearts of the people of God through the Word! It is never any different. He binds Himself in an unbreakable bond to the objective Word of God and always works through it. But in the old dispensation, the Word of God came to the church through types and shadows. Christ had not yet come. All the church had were pictures of Christ and His wonderful works.

As everyone knows, as nice and as accurate as a picture may be, it is not the reality. I cherish a picture of my wife, but I would far and away rather have her with me. So it was with the Old Testament church. The Word that came through pictures, which the Holy Spirit used, was subject to the same limitations as a picture always is.

In the new dispensation, with the work of Christ and the reality embodied in the

New Testament Scriptures, the Spirit gives us a much clearer understanding of the great mystery of godliness, God become flesh (I Tim. 3:16). We see the reality, not a picture.

The second difference between the work of the Spirit in the old dispensation and the new was that God’s people did not hold the office of believers. I do not say that they were not believers, for they were. Read Hebrews 11. But they did not hold the office of believers.

That office of believers had three aspects to it: the offices of prophet, priest and king. No believer held these offices in the old dispensation. The result was that these offices were held by individuals who were chosen by God, anointed with oil and given their assigned work by Him.

If an Israelite wanted to know the will of God, he had to go to a prophet. If the nation wanted to worship God, they had to go to a priest who would make the necessary sacrifices. And when there was no king in Israel, every man did that which was right in his own eyes (Judg. 21:25).

Each saint in the new dispensation, through the work of the Spirit of Christ, is, in his own right, a prophet (I John 2:27), a priest who can worship God anywhere and at any time (I Pet. 2:5), and a king who rules his own life under Christ, as one who knows and does God’s will (Rev. 1:6).

These are fundamental differences. And we ought to be thankful for the work of the Holy Spirit, who brings us the reality of Christ and all He did through the infallible Scriptures.

Prof. Hanko

*Westminster Confession VII:* “5. This covenant was differently administered in the time of the law, and in the time of the gospel: under the law it was administered by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the paschal lamb, and other types and ordinances delivered to the people of the Jews, all fore-signifying Christ to come, which were for that time sufficient and efficacious, through the operation of the Spirit, to instruct and build up the elect in faith in the promised Messiah, by whom they had full remission of sins, and eternal salvation; and is called the Old Testament. 6. Under the gospel, when Christ the substance was exhibited, the ordinances in which this covenant is dispensed are the preaching of the word, and the administration of the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper; which, though fewer in number, and administered with more simplicity and less outward glory, yet in them it is held forth in more fullness, evidence and spiritual efficacy, to all nations, both Jews and Gentiles; and is called the New Testament. There are not therefore two covenants of grace differing in substance, but one and the same under various dispensations.”

### Covenant Protestant Reformed Church

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