

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

*September 2, 2012 Shall We Transgress in Forming Mixed Marriages?
No. 3635*

Rev. Carl Haak

Dear radio friends,

During Nehemiah's brief absence from Jerusalem, the spiritual condition of God's people had declined rapidly. The house of God was forsaken, the Sabbath Day was profaned, and now today we see that the men of Israel had married wives of Ashdod, of Ammon, and of Moab. To this comes the question of Nehemiah: Shall we then hearken unto you to do this great evil, to transgress against our God in marrying strange wives?

If you will remember, in chapter 10 of Nehemiah, a spiritual high point, the people of God had vowed not to do these three evils. They would not forsake God's house. They would not buy on the Sabbath. They would not marry heathen wives (10:30), "and that we would not give our daughters unto the people of the land, nor take their daughters for our sons." They had made a vow.

We, too, make vows. We make a vow in marriage. But, you see, the devil works very hard on our vows. Vows are promises to God. Vows are something we will do for God's sake. But the devil hates promises to God. And he is always working to get you in a position to compromise your vow.

Now all of this, of course, is very applicable to us, for the Scriptures were written with you and me in mind. Marriage must be established in one faith in Jesus Christ, in one truth in Jesus Christ. God says that throughout the whole Bible. For instance, I Corinthians 7:39: that the widow is free to marry whom she will, only in the Lord! There is the qualification: in the Lord. I do not know how to stress this strongly enough. Be faithful to God in your dating. Be faithful to God in your marrying. Ask this question: Does he love God in truth? Does she?

The crucial reason for marrying in the Lord will be shown to us in this passage in Nehemiah today. The crucial reason is: children. For the children of these mixed marriages, of believer and unbeliever (compromised believer – believer in name) – these types of marriages resulted in children who could not speak a spiritual language. We read, "And their children spake half in the speech of Ashdod, and could not speak in the Jews' language." The children could not express spiritual language. Spiritual things were foreign to them.

We consider Nehemiah's question: Shall we transgress in forming mixed marriages? Many of the young men in Judah in Nehemiah's day were ignoring that. They paid lip service to the need for spiritual unity in marriage and were marrying women of Ashdod, of Ammon, and of Moab. The availability of these heathen women was ready because the boundaries were gone.

Now we learn that this practice of mixed marriage—a marriage of one of Israel and one from the heathen nations—had become common and was advocated.

It was common. Nehemiah says, "In those days also saw I Jews that married wives of Ashdod" (v. 23). He witnessed that it was taking place. It was not isolated. And it was even being done by the priests. We read in verses 28 and 29 of that. A grandson of Eliashib the high priest had married Sanballat's daughter. You remember Sanballat. He was the one who opposed

the building of the walls of Jerusalem. His name means: sin gives life. The daughter of the man called "Sin gives life" had married the son of the high priest. It had become a common thing.

And it was being advocated. It was being promoted. We get that from verse 27 of Nehemiah 13. Nehemiah says, "Shall we then hearken unto you to do all this great evil?" That question of Nehemiah implies that the men who were doing this tried to convince Nehemiah and the people that what they were doing was OK. "Shall we then hearken to you?" They were, perhaps, saying to Nehemiah: "We will convert them afterwards. We grew up with the girls of Judah. They are like our sisters. We can't marry them." And they were encouraging others to do it. Evil is always bold. When the bonds of holiness are broken by sexual sin, then that will always result in something being bold. That evil always tries to promote itself as right and good and sexual preference. And if you are against us, then you are a bigot. This evil promotes itself.

The reasons behind these mixed marriages evidently were two. And both were carnal.

The first was lust. The beauty of these women, yes! And the fact that these girls would do what girls committed to Jehovah would not do. They would drink. They would fornicate. They did not see that their body was a special possession of Jesus Christ for the Lord and then, one day, for the husband that the Lord would give. They did not say, "No." They did not see themselves as precious daughters of Jehovah. These unbelieving girls had only this life. They had not the standard of the love of God. They had no reason why they should not give themselves over to the pleasures of sin because they did not know God. So they let themselves be used by men.

The second was greed. That comes from the context of the whole chapter. The impression from this chapter is that the sin of materialism was very strong among God's people. The questions on the heart of the young men and women in Judah when they got married was not "Whom do I need to help me live my life toward heaven as a pilgrim?" That was not the question. But the question more and more was this: "How do we reach our dream home? How do we get what we want? How do we have the things of this life? How do we get the nice new things that we want?"

It was out of lust and greed that these men were forming these marriages. But, really, those were not the reasons. They were the symptoms. Nehemiah puts his finger on it in verse 27 when he says, "Shall we then ... transgress against our God?" There is the point. This was a matter of commitment to God. The Christian's confession is: "God is everything to me. He is my master and my savior. He is the love of my soul. He is fellowship to me. He is life. Therefore I want to be joined to one who truly loves God and loves His truth so that, together, we might grow up into the Lord Jesus Christ." But the men of Judah, in marrying unbelieving women, were saying, "All of that is words. That's all it is to me – just a bunch of words. You must not take religion too far. We believe that God is a private matter that should not control life or affect whom we marry. We believe that it is not really a principle thing if we worship God in the form of Ashdod before Dagon or if we worship Him through Moab's vanity called Chemosh or the abomination of the Ammonites. I can go this way or that way. It's my heart that matters, right?" And, in reality, what mattered to their heart was her body and her money.

Are you ready to get married? Is he ready to marry you? Should you marry him? Should you date him? Is he committed in covenant love to God? Have you convinced yourself of that? Is he ready to obey and serve God and follow God, or does he want to have Jesus and have Jesus his way? You say, "I'm ready to get married. I've got a job. I can manage finances. I can fix a

house.” Very good. You say, “We’ve salted away some cash.” Good. But where is your heart toward God?

Young girl, have you heard him pray? Young man, how deep is her faith? Where is her beauty? Marriage must have a spiritual unity. It must have one God, one faith, one hope in Jesus Christ. Nehemiah exposed the evil of marrying outside of faith by citing first a precept, and then a precedent. The precept is in verse 25. He cites the Old Testament law. We read, “And I contended with them, and cursed them, and smote certain of them, and plucked off their hair, and made them swear by God, saying, Ye shall not give your daughters unto their sons.” Nehemiah was quoting there from Deuteronomy 7. And Nehemiah’s anger and sternness was directed toward the fathers. He is reminding them of Moses’ precepts. He was saying, “Do you have a concern for your son? Do you have a concern for your daughter’s soul? Do you have a concern for their spiritual good? Don’t you see that, as a father, you must counsel your sons and your daughters for the needs of spiritual unity in their marriage?”

Then he quoted a precedent. That precedent in verse 26 is Solomon. He says to them: “Was there ever a king like Solomon—so wise, so acquainted with the workings of sin, so close to God’s heart? He believed God. Yet, what happened to him? He threw away everything that he knew. He worshiped idols. He made himself base in the sight of God. How did that happen to him? He married many wicked wives. The unholy union (lust of the flesh, pornography, sexual sin) slew the world’s wisest man and brought his soul inches from hell and ruined his life and his accomplishments.” Marriage is a place for sanctification, for holiness, for two to be brought into life’s closest bond. Now, are you going to enter into the bond divided spiritually—serving two different gods?

This comes to us with urgency. This comes to us with all seriousness. Marry in the Lord, so that you have a place to go with your problems. Marry in the Lord, so that you are committed together to one thing: to honor God in your marriage. Then you have one goal to strive for. Then you have fellowship with God. Then you are not living with crossed purposes in your marriage. And then you may expect blessings—blessings each morning.

Now, young people, you are most likely to marry someday. When you do, you must ask bluntly and pointedly: What will be the glue of this marriage—what is it that we have in common—why do we want to get married? Be absolutely sure that the answer is: God. One faith, one hope, one love of God in Scripture.

The dreadful result of these mixed marriages, as I was mentioning a moment ago, was to be found in the children of that marriage. The children grew up not understanding the spiritual language of a child of God. We read in verse 24, “And their children spake half in the speech of Ashdod, and could not speak in the Jews’ language, but according to the language of each people.”

Language is more than just words. The problem was not simply that they could not speak Hebrew, as if Hebrew was more holy than English or Spanish or Dutch. One’s language here refers to the expression of his heart, what he held dear, how he talked. That is the point. There is a language of the world. It soon becomes plain, as you listen to the language of the world and to those who are of that world, that this present life, this world of sin, is all that they have. And then there is the language of God’s church and God’s people in Jesus Christ. When you listen to them it becomes very plain that they have a hope in Jesus and that their heart is set upon another world—a world that is ahead.

But the children could not speak that spiritual language. They did not understand it. They could only understand the language of the world. That is the meaning here. They could not speak in spiritual language. They could only speak in the language of the world. The mother in the home spoke the language of this world. And without exception the children followed her. Then Dad came home, and he was a poor example. He tried to talk of the things of God, of spiritual life, but his kids could not understand. It was not just the words that his wife used in the home while he was gone, but it was how she talked with them. For, when she opened her mouth—as whenever one opens one’s mouth—it was her heart that was being seen.

Do not put your children in day-care, where the radio will be blaring the songs of this world, and where the attendant who is with your child is fresh from the class of the world’s child development. No, no. You talk to that little baby. As a believing mother you sing and you cry and you talk heaven’s language with your little baby. Do you know that language? Do you speak it? You say, “Yes, I know it, but I stammer and I stutter.” Continue to speak spiritual language.

What language is spoken in your home? We must know spiritual language. We must learn the words of spiritual language. We must learn the words of Scripture. We must fill ourselves with the Holy Scriptures. We must be conversant in spiritual language. It must not just be the minister on the pulpit. Do your children know the language of the Reformed and biblical faith? Are they conversant in spiritual talk?

What language is spoken in your home? What tongue do you speak when disappointments and troubles come, and when setbacks and trials arise? What language do you speak when other people’s names are mentioned? What language do you use concerning sexual matters? Is it all the language of the world? Is it all the sayings and clichés of TV? Is it all the words of the songs of this world? Is that all that we know? Do we address sexual matters always in an obscene, corrupt, joking manner? Do we know how to talk spiritually?

Are we fluent in the language of sports? Are we knowledgeable in the language of brands of beer and cars and computers? What about the language of God’s people? Are you ashamed of it? Are you ashamed of speaking spiritually as you stand before the world in your office? You know, sometimes people who come from a different country and cannot speak the language are somewhat ashamed to speak because the moment they speak it is evident that they are not natives and they are not at ease in that new language. Are you ashamed of heavenly, spiritual language, talking about Jesus Christ?

This comes from the home. No, this comes from the marriage. This is why you must marry in the Lord, because you must speak one spiritual language.

It is not the vivaciousness of the girl, it is not her smile, but it is whether she loves the Lord and knows and understands the speech of God in her soul. What language will you have spoken in your home? Will it be the language of those who treasure heaven? Will it be the language of those who see that this life is temporary, that the only real peace and satisfaction is to be found in Jesus Christ? Or will it be the language of those who see that this world is just a big playground? Or will it be the language of one who sees that this world is a spiritual battleground for the child of God? Will you have family devotions? Will you pray together? Will you be able to talk together about the Scriptures? Will you be able to teach your children the Scriptures? What language is going to be spoken in your home?

When you marry, will you be able to speak the same language? Imagine marrying someone who cannot speak the same human language as you speak. Certainly we would have a communication problem here. But it is even more so with respect to spiritual language. If you do not talk the same spiritual talk, you cannot communicate. You are of two different worlds. And you will be drawn into her world or his world of unbelief.

You see that Nehemiah's addressing this issue was crucial. Nehemiah saw to it that God's people walked in repentance. He called for them to repent, to marry in the Lord.

May this word of God come to us today. May our hearts not be lifted up in pride so that we see no need for repentance. But let us be upon our knees in repentance and in sorrow of heart before God. Let us cry out for forgiveness at the foot of the cross. And let us be resolved that we shall live as friends of God in this world and that we will set the Lord always before us, seeking to be united as man and woman spiritually in the Lord Jesus Christ, speaking the language of eternal life with each other, having God as our all and all, able to communicate with Him and thus to communicate with each other, in dependence upon Him. And God will bless us.

Let us pray.

Father in heaven, we have heard Thy Word. We pray that it may be addressed now unto our souls. We know, O Lord, that the temptations of our flesh are great. But we pray that we might be held by Thy mighty grace and that we may do all things out of love for Thee. Establish our marriages in the love of God and give us more and more to communicate in the language that He taught us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

September 9, 2012
No. 3636

Remember Me, O God, for Good
Rev. Carl Haak

Dear Radio Friends,

Today we come to the conclusion of our series on the study of the book of Nehemiah. I pray that it has been a blessing of God for you. We pray that the preaching of God's Word in the Old Testament book of Nehemiah may have served to revive the hearts of those who today are called to labor in the church, for, you will remember, the theme of Nehemiah is that Nehemiah was a man who had a heart for God's people and God's church. The cause of God and the church—that is what Nehemiah lived for.

We come to the conclusion of this book in verses 30 and 31 of Nehemiah 13. Please open your Bible and read those verses.

The book closes in a prayer: "Remember me, O God, for good." This was a favorite prayer of Nehemiah. Numerous times in the book, Nehemiah would pray: "Remember me, O my God, concerning this.... Remember me, O my God, concerning this also.... Remember me," he says, "for good."

That is a very short prayer. But it is a very big prayer. Nehemiah was placing his life and his work, his heart and his motives, before God and asking God to take note that what he had done he had done by God's grace working in him. He is asking God to remember, not to forget, the labors that he had performed in God's name—that is, "Assure me that I am held moment by moment in Thy conscious thought and favor in Jesus Christ. Assure me that the Lord takes thought of me in mercy."

Let us make that our prayer today as well. Let us learn to pray, "Remember me, O God, for good." This is a pilgrim's prayer. As we journey through this life seeking to do the will of God, we must do that in utter dependency upon Him. As we seek to do His will, we encounter trials, we see our sins, we experience setbacks and difficulties and sorrows. There are many obstacles that appear to be contrary to all of God's promises. So we need to pray, "Lord, remember me; remember me for good; assure me that I am held moment by moment in Thy thought. Take into account my situation. Remember me and note the labor that I have performed in Thy name by Thy grace. And supply me with Thy grace." We must make this prayer our own. And we must pray it each and every day.

"Remember me, O God, for good."

Nehemiah, first of all, is asking that he be remembered for the deeds that he had performed for God's people. That first. Nehemiah had performed many deeds for God's people. And he is asking that God take note of that, that God pay special regard to what he had done for and to God's church and people. He is referring there to that aspect of our life, of our church life, of the communion of saints, of our calling on earth towards God's people. This is something that God considers very closely. God pays attention to this, because His people and His church are dear to Him. They are blood-bought by His Son. They are eternally loved by Him. His name is upon His people and His church. They represent His truth and His cause. And Nehemiah was

praying: “Lord, remember me as I have loved Thy people and have sought the good of Thy cause.”

Remember again the theme of the book: that Nehemiah is a man who is come to seek the welfare of the children of Israel (2:10). He came to Jerusalem not because he enjoyed a challenge in construction, in the rebuilding of ruined walls, but because those walls represented the needs of God’s people to exist on earth in fellowship with God. He was not simply an impassioned city builder or social reformer. But in a day of materialism, when God’s people’s hearts were being cauterized against God, Nehemiah’s heart beat strong for God and he sought the spiritual well-being of God’s people.

Nehemiah concludes the book by referring to his devotion to God’s people. We read thus: “I cleansed them from all strangers.” That is a reference to the priests who had polluted themselves by marrying heathen wives. He says, “I appointed the wards of the priests and the Levites, every one in his business.” That is, he organized them. He assigned them to their spiritual duties. He called them to be responsible and faithful in the service of the people. As we read further, “And for the wood offering, at times appointed, and for the firstfruits. I saw to it that the wood would be brought in regularly so that there could be some fuel for the burning of the offerings. I took care of the worship of God. I cared about these things. I cared about the holiness of God’s people. I cared about the maintenance of God’s church. I cared that the ministry of God’s Word be supported. I put the spiritual needs of God’s people first,” says Nehemiah. “Remember me, O God, for good.”

Those deeds that Nehemiah had performed for the good of God’s people had been done in the face of great difficulty—so great that the flesh would have despaired and lost hope. There had been physical opposition to Nehemiah. There had been opposition from the outside. Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem had sought many times to put Nehemiah in fear and had mocked him and plotted against him and threatened him and schemed to overthrow his plans. And then the greatest difficulty that he faced came from within – from the people of God themselves, from their own weakness and sins, from the rulers and from the leaders who did not stand with him. Many times he had to stand up alone to admonish them and call them to their duties. There had been much opposition.

But, by God’s grace, Nehemiah had faithfully labored in the difficult day. He had labored in the day that is exactly like ours. We read in the Scriptures, in I Corinthians 10, that all of these things are written for our example, upon whom the end of the world is come. So also all who love God’s church today and God’s cause and God’s truth and God’s honor shall perform that labor now in the face of great difficulties. Nehemiah was able to perform his work and be faithful by grace, a grace that was given him in Jesus Christ, a grace that came to him in the same way that it comes to us: through the Scriptures and prayer.

Long before he had left Shushan the palace and had come to Jerusalem, long before he had set aside his high profile position as the cupbearer of the king of Persia, long before that, Nehemiah had drunk deeply in the teachings of the Holy Scriptures. Long before, he had spent hours in the living and abiding Word of God. He saw the Scriptures not as a book of stories of bygone days to be read for entertainment, not as something that is filled with hard and dark sayings, but as the Word of God unto him. He had lived a life of prayer, prayer that strengthened him, prayer that enabled him, prayer that guided him. Long before, Nehemiah had been built up by God’s grace, through the Scriptures and through prayer, as a man of God.

Now he prays, “Remember me, O God, for my deeds for this people.” We, too, are called today, we are given the privilege today, to labor, to spend our life, in the behalf of God’s people, in God’s glorious cause in the church of Jesus Christ. Do you have a heart for that? Do you say, concerning the church, “I don’t wanna get involved. I don’t want things to interfere with my life. I don’t want people’s problems to interfere with my life. I’ve got a life. I’ve got plans. And right now the church and God’s people just don’t fit into those plans. Besides, those people in the church hurt me! And I’m not gonna care.” Where is your commitment? Where is your priority? Is your priority yourself and the things of this world? Or is it the people of God, the cause of Jesus Christ?

His cause is represented in many ways—in Christian families; mothers and fathers; Christian marriages; youth committed to serve God and not sin; the need for pastors and preachers, for teachers in Christian schools, for elders, for mothers, for husbands; the needs of the communion of saints; the needs of God’s hurting people. The needs are many. Nehemiah saw them. He did not turn back to himself and to his own life. He had a heart of compassion, he had a heart of commitment. He must simply labor for the glory of God in His people and in His church. “Remember me, O God, that I have done this by Thy grace.”

What about you? What does God remember about you and me in our life?

But Nehemiah was also asking that God would remember him for his personal devotion to God. Nehemiah was a man who was devoted to God personally. Now, you could not describe Nehemiah as the most gentle man portrayed in the Scripture. We read in this very chapter that he smote certain people, he pulled out their hair, and he chased them away from him. He was no-nonsense when it came to the opponents of God. But it is very plain that through all of this he was devoted to God, that he knew the incomparable magnitude of God, that he believed in the utter reliability of God, that he trusted in the fathomless depth of God’s love for him, that he committed himself to the limitless power of God. That, more than anything else, is needed in our day—the loving, the adoring, knowledge of God—to know Him the way Nehemiah knew him. To be devoted to God.

Let us look at Nehemiah’s devotion to God. It was rooted in a number of things. It was rooted primarily in a profound knowledge of God. From this book we learn that Nehemiah knew God as the universal Sovereign. To Nehemiah, He was the God of heaven (chapter 1). He was the God in control of the entire world. He was the God who shaped all things and guided all things according to His own purpose. Nehemiah had just come from the king of Persia. But he understood that it was not Persia that ruled, but God who ruled, and God was the One who would clear the way for the honor of His own name, and would accomplish His own purposes even through those who would oppose Him. Nehemiah saw God not as limited, not as removed, but as the sovereign One, sovereign in all of His power. And this knowledge of God’s sovereignty strengthened him in the work of God.

Nehemiah knew God as utterly reliable and faithful. He knew God as the God who keeps covenant and mercy and that he could depend upon God. He could depend upon the faithfulness of God.

Nehemiah knew that God was perfectly holy. In the light of God’s holiness he saw his own sins, and he would often plead for forgiveness.

Nehemiah knew that God was infinitely glorious and that God had brought Israel unto Himself to be to the glory of His name.

And Nehemiah knew God was intimately near to him—He was the God who was present with him.

God has not changed. God *is* all these things. He was not those things back then. But He *is*. He is the great I AM. He is the God who is absolutely sovereign, utterly reliable, perfectly holy, infinitely glorious, infinitely gracious, and intimately near. This is the God whom we must know.

Still more. Nehemiah's devotion was rooted in earnest prayer. It was not simply that Nehemiah knew that he should pray. It was not simply that his prayer was a mumbling of unthought words. Nehemiah, rather, was a man who laid hold of God in his prayer, laid hold of God out of a deep sense of his need and out of a sense of the majesty of God. He knew what it was to plead, to beg and beseech God. He cast himself upon God in his prayer in complete reliance. Where was the secret of Nehemiah's deep spiritual strength? He knew God in the Scriptures and he prayed to God.

And out of this Nehemiah treasured a deep, personal faith. "Remember me, O *my* God, for good." Personal pronouns in the Bible are of great importance. In Galatians 2:20 Paul says that the Son of God loved *me* and gave Himself for *me*. True faith is always personal. True faith is not abstract. True faith is not theoretical. True faith is the uniting of the heart to the Son of God so that He is in me and I am in Him for ever. True faith is not a matter of notions, but it is a matter of inward, true, personal experience. "Remember me, O *my* God, for good."

Thus Nehemiah was asking God to remember him in His grace. That is what he was asking. "Remember me, spare me according to the greatness of Thy mercy," he had prayed. "Remember me for good. Remember me in Thy lovingkindness." How striking! After performing all of those courageous acts; after accomplishing what no one else had been able to accomplish for a hundred years; and after devoting himself so admirably to the cause of God and being so exemplary; Nehemiah, when he is finished, is conscious of the need of God's grace and lovingkindness to be upon him. He never imagined that he had earned something from God. After his best work was finished, he asked for the grace of God and God's unmerited favor to be upon him. He comes to the conclusion of his work, and he asks that God remember him in His lovingkindness. "Don't remember me on the basis of my work, on the basis of myself, on the basis of my devotion for Thee. Don't remember me for any of those reasons. But remember me out of Thy own lovingkindness." He was completely dependent on the grace of God.

That means that our acts as children of God, our works as children of God, do not earn a place with God. They do not add to our justification with God. We are justified by grace alone, without works. That is what we want God to remember. We do not want God to consider our standing with Him to be dependent even upon the works that He gives us to do. Rather, we want God to remember us according to His own commitment, according to His own lovingkindness, according to His decree of grace, according to His eternal love. "Hold me in Thy grace, hold me in Thy love. Do not base Thy acceptance of me in any way upon the work that I perform—not even upon those works that Thou hast performed through me. But let it be based entirely upon Thy own lovingkindness and grace."

So must we. We must pray as Christians: "Lord, remember me by Thy grace; remember me according to Thy lovingkindness. Lord, find the reason to love me in Thine own heart, in Thine own eternal will. Hold me dear according to the counsel of Thine own purpose. Look into Thy

heart and find there the reason to love me, to cherish me, not to forsake me. Remember me in Thy grace.” Do you pray that way?

Nehemiah’s dependency upon God also meant that Nehemiah anticipated the day when the record of earth’s deeds would be publicly revealed. “Remember me then. Remember me when the books are opened and all the deeds of men are revealed; when the works of men (and the motives behind those works) are made plain; when all is opened for all to know; when my life and my work will publicly be reviewed in that day; when everything comes out (even that which was done in secret). Lord, remember me then in Thy grace and love.”

Your days and my days must pass before the review of the Almighty. Our work in the church, the home, in marriage, wherever we have been will be reviewed in that day. It shall be revealed in that day before all.

And after you are gone, your work on earth will, in a sense, also continue to speak. As does Nehemiah’s. What will your work say of you? What will be revealed concerning your work? When others ask, “Why did you live?” Ask the question about Nehemiah: “Why did he live?” It is very plain, is it not? He sought the good of God’s name in His people. He laid down his life for the honor of God in His people. Why did you live? What did you seek? What was the principle of your life? What will they say about you? “She lived for herself.” “He lived for the world.” “He was a man of pride.” Or: “His life was spent, by God’s grace, in the *only* worthy pursuit: the church of Christ, the building of God’s kingdom, the advancing of God’s name, honor, and glory in the gospel.”

Young people, a life lived in the service of God and in the service of His people and in the service of His cause is a life that is not wasted. All other life, lived for any other motive, is a wasted life. But a life lived in the service of God’s covenant, in the service of God’s name and church, is worth living. All other pursuits, all other lives, have no value. They end up worthless. But whosoever lives for the good and the welfare of God’s people shall enter into the joy of the Lord.

Live as Nehemiah. “O Lord, Thou knowest I have sought Thy glory. That’s why I wanted to live. That’s what motivated my days. Now remember me, take note of me, see me in Thy grace.” Nehemiah went to heaven and heard these words: “Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of thy Lord”—the words that all who live for the glory of Christ shall one day hear.

Let us pray.

Father, we thank Thee for our time in the book of Nehemiah, and we ask for Thy blessing upon it. We pray that we may live our life conscious of our dependence upon Thy grace. Remember us, O God, for good.

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

*September 16, 2012 Christ's Letter to the Ephesian Church
No. 3637*

Rev. Wilbur Bruinsma

Dear Radio Friends,

Thanks you for tuning in today. I count it a privilege to be given the opportunity by the Reformed Witness Hour to address you for the next several months through its broadcast. I wish to devote my time to what I believe is a timely subject: the truth concerning the church. The teaching of the Bible about the church is one of the most misunderstood and maligned truths of Scripture. While many in our day are intrigued with such subjects as salvation, creation, or the last things, few take time to ponder the nature of the church.

The letter of Paul to the Ephesian church, although not a comprehensive study of the doctrine of the church, nevertheless gives us solid instruction concerning it and our calling in it. For that reason it is my intention to spend the next several weeks with you in a study of this book of the Bible.

It is important for us to know what the Bible teaches us about the church. There is a modern push toward the unscriptural view that a person can belong to the body of Christ in this world without joining himself to a church institute. We will learn in this letter of Christ to the Ephesian church that Christ condemns such an error. This letter, written to the Christian congregation in Ephesus, has much to say about the unity of the church, the offices in the church, and the place of the believer in the church institute.

We begin our study of Ephesians with the first couple of verses of chapter 1. They read: "Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, to the saints which are at Ephesus, and to the faithful in Christ Jesus: Grace be to you, and peace, from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ." These verses present us with an introduction to this letter.

Paul's address in the verses we consider is already packed with instruction regarding the church. Paul identifies himself, first of all, as an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God. Immediately Paul lays claim to the apostolic authority entrusted to him by God. Immediately, therefore, Paul silences the gainsayers who would argue that the word that he now writes is the word of a man. He is an apostle of Jesus Christ—an apostle, that is, belonging to Christ. The word he now writes is not his word but Christ's Word. In this way Paul asserts that the church need not listen to him as a man, but it certainly must listen to and learn from Christ. This is true because Christ has been ordained by God and anointed by the Spirit to hold office in the church. Paul uses that particular name of our Savior: the name Christ. That name means "anointed one." In the Old Testament, a man was anointed to hold office in the church. This anointing Christ received when He was baptized in the Jordan River. At that time the Spirit anointed Christ to be the chief officebearer of the church. Christ sits in heaven as our chief Prophet and Teacher, who fully reveals to us the counsel and will of God concerning our redemption. Likewise, He sits in heaven as our eternal King, who governs us by His Word and Spirit.

In other words, Christ gives the Word. He is the Wisdom of His people. Our calling as God's saints is to listen to Him. It pleases God to govern His own church. He has given that privilege to no man. And God reigns over His church by His Word, a Word before which all men must bow. When God anointed Christ with His Spirit and then exalted Him at His right

hand, God gave Christ the authority to speak the Word to His church. Christ earned this right by His own death and resurrection. Paul acknowledges all of this in the way that he identifies himself: “Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ.”

Since Christ is our chief Prophet, who alone imparts to His people His perfect knowledge, Paul insists that he is an apostle of Christ. Paul does not make an issue of this in these verses. He was called to be an apostle directly by Jesus Christ Himself on the road to Damascus. His conversion and calling are recorded for us in Acts 9. There were those in some of the churches of Paul’s day, however, who hotly disputed his apostleship. If you care to read Paul’s defense of himself as an apostle, you need only read the first couple of chapters in Galatians. You will be left with no doubt that Paul was indeed called by Christ and that Christ was then speaking through His chosen ambassador. But this point was not being argued in the church of Ephesus. That is why Paul really makes no more of an issue of it than merely to identify himself in this way.

It is important that we understand the significance of being an apostle of Christ. You see, Christ had appointed Paul as an apostle to speak His Word of life. For the welfare of His church on earth, Christ called and appointed this servant to the work of teaching His Word. Certainly we can understand this. Christ is our chief Prophet. But Christ is no longer with us on earth as He was when He walked the earth with His disciples. Christ is in heaven. And for that reason Christ Himself chooses men to particular offices in the church in order that they might make known His Word to His church today. Paul was chosen and appointed in the church to be an apostle. We will learn a little later in this letter the particular function of this special office appointed in the church. But the truth is, when Paul taught God’s Word, he taught what Christ had chosen to speak to His church. It was not Paul’s word, but the Word of His master, Jesus Christ. That Paul preached and taught God’s Word does not contradict that Christ is the sole teacher of His church. That, in the first place, we understand.

In the second place, Paul was an apostle by the will of God. Paul’s office in the church was appointed him by God. It was God’s will. God had determined his place in the church from the foundations of the earth. Paul, therefore, was an apostle by virtue of the sovereign, determinate will or good pleasure of God. Who could question that?

But the beauty of it all is this, that God willed that Paul be an apostle for the welfare of His church. God so loved His church from eternity that He chose to give them the gift of His apostles. And the Word that Paul now writes is God’s Word given to His church through Paul in order that His church might have peace and joy through Christ.

This Word of God already teaches us something very practical. In the first place, it teaches us that in order to maintain order in His church, God appoints and calls men to hold office in His church. And the charge that He gives to them is: “Teach My Word.” God does not give that charge to anyone or everyone in the church. Paul was called to his office and given by Christ the charge that he had. So is every officebearer in the church lawfully called into office by the church.

John Calvin, in commenting on this very phrase here in Ephesians, writes: “For if a man were the most gifted and excellent in the world, yet if he thrusts himself forward under his own impulse, he disturbs all order. And we know that God will have order and not disorder amongst us. He then that speaks, at least to teach, must have a calling. That is to say, he must be

admitted and have his charge given him so that every man may not put himself forward by reason of an unadvised zeal.”

Paul speaks of his office as apostle in defense against those in the church who would challenge his office by flashing as a badge their own knowledge of the Scriptures. In doing this, of course, he also defends the office Christ has appointed in the church, especially the office of the ministry of the Word and sacraments. That is not to say, of course, that Paul defends those in office who would use it to advance themselves and their own ideas. The officebearer in the church who uses his office to advance his own cause, even if that man were an apostle, does not speak on behalf of the ascended King. But that minister of God’s Word, lawfully called by the church, and who, by faithful service, expounds the Word, sacrificing himself in the building up of Christ’s church, that man speaks on behalf of Christ. He is Christ’s ambassador, even as the apostle Paul, though he does not speak infallibly the Word of God as did the apostles. He is a minister of Jesus Christ, by the will of God.

Woe to that man who does not teach the Word of that One who appoints him to office. That is Christ’s order in the church. That is what Christ has ordained for the benefit of His church. This order is established for the peace and joy of His church. In this way the word of salvation, the word of reconciliation, might be proclaimed to the church of Jesus Christ, as Paul writes in I Corinthians 4:1: “Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God.” Christ has given such gifts unto men for the building up of His church.

Paul addresses this letter to the saints who are in Ephesus and to the faithful in Christ Jesus. These are the same body of saints. They were both holy and faithful. Further, they were members in the congregation of believers in Ephesus. In other words, Paul addresses the saints who are members of the church, the local congregation that was established in Ephesus. He is not addressing a vague body of people, the membership of which he could not be certain. This letter was addressed to the church institute in Ephesus and was probably read by its minister or one of the elders during a gathering of the church. We must recognize already at the outset in this letter that the church of Jesus Christ in this world becomes manifest in the institution of the church. It always does. We will discover that the church of Christ is that body of believers that He gathers and preserves from the beginning of time to the end and from various lands. But, wherever Christ chooses to save His people, He does so in connection with the church institute.

The church in Ephesus was such a church—a local body of people that gathered for worship under the rule of elders. This church was located in the large metropolis of Ephesus. It would be worthwhile to check a map to see for yourself where Ephesus was located. Ephesus was a city in the province of Asia, on the west coast of Asia Minor, a little inland from the Aegean Sea. It was a large, busy city, one of the top five cities of importance in the Roman Empire during the first century. It was a typical city in its culture and development of the arts and, of course, in the development of its sin, too. There was a huge temple built there as a monument to the Roman goddess Diana. The temple and its worship was one of the wonders of the ancient world. This city was known, therefore, for its worship of and the trades surrounding Diana. In this large worldly city, God had chosen to establish His church through the missionary labors of Paul.

Paul had labored there for some two years during his third journey and had learned to love the saints there dearly. This particular letter Paul sent to Ephesus while he was imprisoned in Rome. More than likely it was intended as well to be read in other of the churches in Asia. Take note, however, how this letter was sent to the church as a whole. It may be that Paul addresses the saints and faithful in Ephesus, but this designation was given the congregation as a whole. In

other words, this local church in Ephesus was made up of saints and faithful. Paul addresses this congregation organically, that is, as a unit. As we mentioned earlier, he was not writing to a group of scattered, unrelated individuals in Ephesus. He was writing to a particular body of people. And he addresses them now as the saints and faithful.

This does not mean that every individual in that church was a saint or was faithful. The church institute does not consist of all believers. The church as the body of Christ does, but when the church organizes into an institution, it is not made up of only saints and faithful. But, you see, that does not matter. This letter is sent to a church of Jesus Christ. And that church, as a whole, may be addressed as saints and faithful because that is what the church is. The church consists of those called out of sin and into the fellowship of Christ. It is made up of those who are sanctified and holy in the Lord. The church is the embodiment of those who believe in Christ and follow Him. The faithful church institute is viewed collectively as saints and believers, even though there may be weeds mixed in with the wheat. And this is why the instruction of this letter of Paul can be readily applied to a congregation in the church today: faithful saints.

That is how Paul addressed members of the church, in particular the members of the church of Ephesus. He calls them, first of all, saints. A saint is an individual who is sanctified through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As a result of that work of Christ, he is holy unto the Lord, that is, he is set apart by God unto the service of God. This service of God, however, is not mere lip service. It is not an outward form of service that consists in outward deeds. When one is a saint, when one is sanctified, he is cleansed from within. His heart is renewed. And the result is dedication and consecration to God in the heart. He purposes in his heart to serve God. As a result, his mind, his will, his actions are that of holiness. By means of calling these believers saints, Paul reassures them that they are the “set-apart ones,” they are God’s people, who by grace belong to God and His Son. This is true of them as they are in Christ Jesus.

I realize that it seems as if Paul simply writes that they are faithful in Christ Jesus. But that phrase “in Christ Jesus” applies both to the term saints and to the term faithful. These saints were holy because they were in Christ, that is, united to Christ, so that they were one body with Him. The holiness of Christ became theirs. They possessed holiness just as they possessed faith in Christ Jesus. That is the idea of the term “faithful” in this address, too.

These saints possessed faith. They knew Christ. They were committed to the cause of Christ in this world. By grace, they were saved, through faith. They knew Christ and were confident that He was the One who had separated them from the darkness of unbelief and called them unto Himself. As a result of this work of faith, they belonged to Jesus Christ. They were one body with Him.

This address, therefore, was meant to encourage the church in Ephesus and her individual members. In it, Paul reveals the great love of God in Jesus Christ toward them.

So also did the blessing Paul now pronounces on the church. Read verse 2: “Grace be to you, and peace, from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ.” Now, we need not develop the concepts contained in this particular salutation of Paul to the church, since they will be developed in coming passages. But notice whose greeting this is. It is not Paul’s salutation. It is God’s and Jesus Christ’s greeting to the church. Obviously Paul recognizes that this letter, though written by his hand, was sent on behalf of God and Christ. And this is really what makes this letter mean something. It is sent by God. Even more, it is sent by God, our *Father*. These saints were called into the fellowship of God. In His great mercy toward them, God had adopted

them to be His very own children. This is true of you and me, fellow believers. We have a God in heaven who says to us that He is our Father. God Himself tells us that. He tells us that in this blessing. What is true of the saints in Ephesus is true of the saints in the church of Jesus Christ today. God is our Father. He has entered into an intimate bond of fellowship with His church, with you and me as believers. Likewise, the church today and her members hear such greetings from our Good Shepherd, our Chief Prophet, the One who laid down His life for us. This is what our Father and our Savior say to us: "Grace to you and peace."

When they pronounce such upon us, what joy that gives to us as God's children in the church. Jesus Christ, on behalf of our heavenly Father, reveals His grace, His undeserved favor, to His people. How foolish to imagine that God reveals His favor upon those who walk outside the confines of His church and kingdom in this world. Those who refuse to walk in the sphere of Christ's church can only be the objects of God's curse. But those who are in Christ are the objects of God's favor, His grace, His sovereign, free, undeserved favor. God smiles upon us always. Under every circumstance of life we are under God's divine favor.

And that means peace. We are at peace with the living God. The wrath of God is no longer revealed against us. We have been reconciled unto God in Christ. Christ has made peace between us and God. That peace is declared to His church in this world. And that peace results in peace in our hearts. Peace to you, saints of God. Come, hear now what Christ writes to us in this blessed epistle to the Ephesians.

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

September 23, 2012
No. 3638

The Election of the Church
Rev. Wilbur Bruinsma

Dear Radio Friends,

We are considering together Paul's letter to the church of Christ in Ephesus. This particular congregation is one of the places in which the body of Christ was manifest. The church, as the body of Christ, is always evident on earth within the church institute. In other words, one cannot be a member of the body of Christ and deliberately live in separation from the church institute. Paul addresses this letter to the body of Jesus Christ by addressing it to the instituted church in the city of Ephesus.

In the verses we consider in today's broadcast, Paul speaks to the church of her election. Ephesians 1:4-6: "According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved."

We have in these verses one of the classic passages that teaches the truth of sovereign predestination. If a person denies the truth of God's sovereignty in predestination, he must completely ignore or deny this passage of Scripture. The vain attempts of some Bible commentators to twist this passage to say something it does not say are transparent. But there is more here than a mere teaching that you and I as individuals are elected to be God's people. Paul addresses the election of the church as a whole, as a body. This does not deny, of course, that we are each one chosen in Christ. But we are elected always and ever in connection with the church and never separate from it. In these few verses, Paul lays the foundation for the doctrine of the church. The church, and each member in it, is chosen by God in Christ from eternity.

Many in the church like to talk about the wonderful plan God has for each of us in our lives. But this language, and what is meant by it, is far from what the Scriptures teach us about God's plan. The term "plan" is synonymous with the word "counsel" in Scripture. This term makes reference to the plan in which God eternally conceived or envisioned all things that occur in time. We bring this up because Paul makes reference to this eternal counsel or plan of God in verse 5 of the verses we consider today. Notice, "Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself [and now these words], according to the good pleasure of his will." God's plan or counsel is the "good pleasure" of God's will that is spoken of here. God's plan is His will. Everywhere Scripture uses the idea of God's will in reference to God's eternal plan. You see, before time began, in eternity, God determined everything that He was going to do in time. He did so because this was His divine will or desire. And that which God desires, He does. His is also the divine right. So God, in His plan, determined everything that takes place in this world—from its beginning at the time of creation to its end when Christ shall return.

Why? Why was this God's will to plan all things? We learn in verse 5 that this was His good pleasure. The psalmist teaches us in Psalm 135:6: "Whatsoever the LORD pleased, that did he in heaven, and in earth, in the seas, and all deep places." God planned all things because, very

simply, it was His good pleasure to do so. It delighted Him, it pleased Him. According to that good pleasure, He would fulfill exactly everything that He planned.

Now, all of this may sound abstract and far too complicated for our finite minds. But it is really so, so simple. Imagine this. God planned everything that would take place in this world, from its beginning to its end. Nothing takes place in this world without the sovereign will and good pleasure of God. It all happens, in its minutest detail, according to the counsel of God's will. That lies at the heart of the instruction that Paul gives us in these verses. Before time began, God determined the birth of every person in this world. No one is born into this world by chance. Every birth is determined by God in eternity. So is every death. Not a person dies before or after the exact time that has been determined by God in eternity for that person to die. God determines everything that will take place in every person's life. God determines the events of history. History unfolds according to the good pleasure of God's will. Every event in creation, from the blowing of the quiet, still breeze to the thundering winds of a hurricane or tornado has been planned and determined by God in eternity.

But now God's Word clearly teaches us in verse 5 what so many men, even in the church, have come to despise. Our eternal destiny—that is, where a person goes when he dies—is also determined by God before time began. It is not simply known by God, it is willed or purposed by God. He conceived of it and determines it according to the good pleasure of His will. There are only two eternal destinations to which a man can go when he dies, that is, heaven or hell, and God determines to which of these a man will go. In fact, as we will find, God chooses men unto one of these two places. He does not leave that choice up to man. God makes the choice. And that is what the Bible identifies for us as predestination.

This shocks, it stuns, and even highly irritates the unbelieving man. He is quick to judge God according to his own standards. In his mind, God would not do that. That would be unfair of God. This makes God cruel and unrighteous. Rather than bowing humbly before God's Word, the unbeliever vents his frustration on those who teach this truth. The Bible, he says, does not teach that God has determined the eternal destiny of men. Men only try to twist the Bible to say this. That is the accusation that is heard.

But such an accusation is puzzling. We do not make of God anything other than what He tells us of Himself in the Bible. We read in Ephesians 1:5: "Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will." "According to the good pleasure of his will," that is, according to God's eternal plan, He predestinates us. Destiny—the end of one's journey. Pre—before. God predetermines the eternal end of the journey of each person's life. God has determined before time began the eternal state of every person. He determines whether that man's journey will end in peace or whether it will end in weeping and gnashing of teeth. The eternal destiny of every person is not left up to man. It does not belong to his choice. It is of God's sovereign choosing.

No, no, no, some will say, you are twisting the meaning of predestination. But this idea of the term predestination is made perfectly clear in verse 4 of Ephesians 1: "According as [God] hath chosen us in [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love." God has chosen us in Christ, we are told, before the foundation of the world. That is, before God created this world we were chosen or elected by God according to the good pleasure of His will, that is, according to His sovereign plan for all things, before God called this present creation into existence.

There is no doubt that this is a mind-boggling truth. We cannot help but stand in awe before God and humble ourselves before Him. God has appointed some to eternal life! Others God has appointed to eternal destruction! How humbling. And as to our flesh that seeks in pride to rebel against this truth, we hear God's instruction to us in Romans 9:14-16: "What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? God forbid. For he saith to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy." Why has God chosen some as His people and not others? Because so it seemed good in God's sight. It is the good pleasure of God to do so.

But instead of questioning why, the church of Jesus Christ should rejoice. Paul gives us this instruction to comfort and strengthen God's saints. The truth of sovereign predestination gives us great reason to rejoice, because God has chosen us in Christ. It is striking how often this phrase appears in Scripture. God's people are in Christ. We are one with Him because we are never viewed apart from Christ. We are in Christ in His death. We are in Christ in His resurrection. We are mysteriously united together with Him as one body. Well, this applies to our election, too. In eternity, when God chose or elected to Himself His church, it was in connection with Christ. This means Christ was first in the plan of God. Christ was chosen, elect and precious, to be the cornerstone of the church. The church was then elected to be built upon Him. And each of us, as a lively stone, is selected by God to be placed in the building of the church. Now *that* is security! Never has God viewed His people apart from Christ. We were chosen in Christ by God, according to the good pleasure of His will. It pleased God to choose a church that He loves for Jesus' sake. That is why we rejoice in this truth.

Because all those who are chosen in Christ are predestinated unto a certain end, the adoption of children by Jesus Christ, we also rejoice. The instruction of these verses comes to all who are saved in the blood of Christ. God predestined us to be His own children through our adoption. We are adopted by Jesus Christ. In other words, we are adopted to be God's very own children by means of the work that Christ has performed for us on the cross and in His resurrection. We could not be God's children without the saving work of Christ in His death. By paying the price of sin, Christ has reconciled us to God. He has made us righteous before God. Through His work, therefore, He earns for us our place in God's household and family.

The point is, we have been chosen unto this end. "That we, through Christ's work on the cross, might be the very children of God." We have not only been predestinated to heaven, we have been chosen to be God's very own children. Before time began, God purposed in Himself to glorify His name by means of a people chosen to be His children for Christ's sake. In His counsel, God willed our particular place in the church in connection with the death and resurrection of Christ. He views His people together as the body of Christ. He knows us. He loves us. He adopts us because He elected us in Christ. We are His adopted children.

We all know what it is to be adopted. An adopted child is not a natural-born child of his parents. He is an orphan. He is one without the love of a mother and father. He is one who is alone, left behind as it were. His mother and father either have abandoned him or they have died and he is left without the necessary care and nurture of parents. Adoption is an act of mercy and love. It is when another man and his wife decide to take this child and make him or her their own. They go through the legal process known as adoption in order to make this child their very own. He never becomes a natural-born child but his parents now bestow on him all the love and the rights of a natural-born child. He becomes a part of the family and household of his new

father and mother. He receives their care and nurture. He basks in their love. Their possessions and their title become his.

This is what has become true of the members of Christ's church. God has, by His grace, chosen us unto that adoption of children. We become accepted in the beloved. That is to say, we become a part of those whom God loves from all eternity. We are chosen to be the adopted children of God by Christ Jesus. We are chosen to be loved by God our Father. So, not only are we elected unto heavenly glory, not only is our destiny determined for us in God's plan, but let us not forget the whole picture. Each step of our life in this world is determined by God. And that life is within the family of God, His church. We are predestinated to be God's very own children. And He makes us a part of the body of the church.

That is the idea also of verse 6 of Ephesians 1. "To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved." God has elected His people by grace to be accepted as His own beloved children in His family. There is no doubt about it. This election takes place according to God's grace. It is a gracious election. It is not that we have somehow proved to God that we are deserving of a place in His family. We did not merit anything that would work toward our election. It is not as some would have it, that somehow God saw before time began that we would be worthy of our election, that we would accept Him by faith or perform some great deeds that earned us our eternal election. Predestination was decreed before the foundations of the earth. God freely, sovereignly, that is, according to His good pleasure, chose us to be His children. God shows us His unmerited favor, His grace by electing us unto the adoption of children by Christ Jesus. So, by grace, we have become accepted in the beloved.

The term "beloved" refers to Christ's church. The church, after all, is beloved of God because Christ is beloved of God. And the church is the body of Christ. For Christ's sake, God loves His church with love unspeakable. Loved with a deep, affectionate love by which He holds her to His bosom as His most precious child. The church as a whole, the church as a body of Christ gathered from the beginning of time to the end, is God's beloved. And Paul reassures the saints and faithful of Ephesus that, by the sovereign grace of God, He has made these saints, this church, the church there in Ephesus, acceptable in His beloved.

These people who were no people, this body of believers who in themselves were not worthy of a place in God's kingdom, these men and women and children who at one time were lost in the world of unbelief and sin, fulfilling the lusts of the flesh, these saints in Ephesus God had chosen to be accepted in His church. And now, they too were numbered among God's beloved. They need not worry about that, they need not doubt that. This is the mystery of God's church. These Gentiles have become fellow heirs of the same body of God's saints, His beloved. They have become heirs with the saints of the promise in Christ by the gospel. That is the beauty of this passage for believers today.

You are not a believer? Then the command of the gospel is repent and believe! It is only in this way that you will become a member of the church of Jesus Christ in this world. This is what happened to the Ephesian believers. And this still happens today. Then all that we have spoken will be true of you, too.

Believers? Here is the beauty of this passage of God's Word: men and women, young people, children, all unworthy in yourselves, God has chosen you by His grace to be numbered among the assembly of elect. We were chosen by God to be accepted in the beloved.

As individuals? Oh, yes. But always together with our fellow saints in the church. We are the church and we are the beloved of God for Christ's sake. We have been adopted as God's very own children. We are of the same body with the Ephesians and the Old Testament church. We are heirs to the promise of the gospel, chosen as such in Christ Jesus.

Why? Why would God be so gracious to elect us? Why us, O Lord? Paul answers this question: to the praise of the glory of God's grace. That is the only answer. God elected us in order to show forth His grace to His glory. How does God do this in you and me? God chose us in Christ to be holy and without blame. God's elect have been chosen in the blood of Christ to be holy and without blame (that is, without fault) before God. God's election of some does not result in a people who will deliberately walk in the ways of sin and bring slander upon His name. God does not elect people who will, because of their election, become careless and profane. He does not predestinate unto the adoption of children those who say they believe yet live like the wicked world. He chooses people whom He sanctifies in the blood of Christ and who, therefore, strive to live a holy life before Him.

His chosen ones labor to walk without blame in this world. This is exactly how God has chosen to bring glory to His name—through the praises of His people. Do you praise God by the way you live? Is your holiness seen by men to the praise of the God who chose you and saved you? Then praise be to God for the work of His grace. He has taken sinners and, by His grace, has made them holy.

We bow before the counsel of God, before His inscrutable wisdom, before the good pleasure of His will, and we thank Him for the wonder of His grace.

Let us pray.

Father in heaven, we thank Thee that Thou hast given unto us a word of assurance and comfort. Thou art a God who has chosen us unto Thyself in all eternity and has bestowed upon us the blessed gift of faith so that we might indeed believe in the truth of Thy Word and be assured of our place within Thy church and within Thy kingdom. Wilt Thou continue to watch over us in this week. Forgive us of all sin, for Jesus' sake, Amen.

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

*September 30, 2012
No. 3639*

*Christ: Head of the Church
Rev. Wilbur Bruinsma*

Dear Radio Friends,

The letter to the Ephesians is the Bible's great treatise on the church. The designation "church" is used for the first time in this letter in the verses we would consider today. These are the last two verses of Ephesians 1, that is, verses 22 and 23. "And hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all."

Though it is true that Paul mentions the word church for the first time in these verses, that does not mean he has not expounded the doctrine of the church prior to these verses. We already found, in the address of this epistle, that Paul addresses the church in Ephesus. In our last broadcast we learned that the church of Jesus Christ is made up on those whom God has chosen or elected unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ. Everything this letter to the Ephesians teaches us about the church, therefore, is rooted in sovereign, free election. What we learn of the church today, too, is grounded in that truth. So, though the term "church" is first used in the verses we study today, this whole chapter has defined for us already somewhat the doctrine of the church.

The focus of these verses before us is not really the church as much as it is Jesus Christ. They speak of Christ as the head of the church. What we study today, therefore, is the relationship of Christ to His church and why such a relationship exists.

A proper understanding of our text today hinges on what it means to be a head. We read of that figure in verse 22: God gave, or has set, Christ to be "head over all things." In verse 23 Paul uses the term "head" in relation to the body: our head dictates to the various members of the body what to do. When the head, or the brain in our heads, sends an order to the mouth to speak, the mouth speaks. When it sends an order to the feet to move, we walk, and so on. The head of the body dictates what the body does. The body, therefore, is subject to the head.

Well, such is Christ. He is given by God to be head, or to be ruler, over the church in all things. One who is a head is a master or lord. We use this word in that sense all the time. We refer to the head of state, or speak of a person heading a project. So this idea is certainly not foreign to us.

The term as used in the verse we consider makes reference to one's preeminence over others. Christ has the preeminence. He is supreme ruler over all things and, in that connection, ruler of the church as well. Everything is subject to Him.

This figure is supported by the rest of verse 22. There we learn: God has "put all things under his feet." Now, here is another figure Paul uses. This figure is a little more puzzling perhaps, because we do not use it anymore, but it was well understood by the saints then. You see, when a king defeated another nation's army and another nation's king in battle, there was a certain ritual that was held with the surrender of that defeated king. The king whose army defeated the armies of the other nation would force the defeated king to the ground and would

put his foot on the neck of that defeated king. We read this, for example, in Joshua 10:24-26. This, then, is where the expression “and has put all things under his feet” comes from.

Through His cross and resurrection, Christ has won a great victory over His enemies. As a result of that victory, God puts all things under His feet. That is to say, everything in heaven and on earth has become subject to the rule of Jesus Christ, and He reigns supreme over all. He has conquered His enemies. Every knee in heaven and on earth must bow to Him. We will come back to this in a moment after considering how Christ attained unto the position of head over all things.

We learn of how Christ attained unto this position of highest glory in verse 20. There we learn that God wrought this power in Christ “when he raised him.” It becomes clear that Christ attained unto His headship by means of His death, resurrection, and, really, His ascension, too. These are great events in the exaltation of Jesus Christ, events that the church even commemorates every year. Christ earned His place as head over all things when He died, first of all. Christ went to the cross as our conquering king. There He fought a battle against our enemies: sin, Satan, and the wicked world. There He won the battle. Christ defeated the hold of sin over us. Christ crushed the head or power and rule of Satan over us. And Christ has overcome the wicked world. This victory Christ received from God when God raised Him from the dead. By means of the resurrection, Christ proved that sin and the grave had no hold over Him. He rose from the dead a victor. It was then that He put His foot on the neck of Satan. Christ now lives, instilling in us His resurrection life so that we live in connection with Him.

Then we read that God set Christ at His own right hand in heavenly places. Christ rules in heaven, supreme in might and power. All things have been subdued by Him and, therefore, everything is subject to His will. He has been given the preeminence, we learn in Colossians 1:18. He is now become the head of all things. This, then, is the way Christ has attained to His headship. He earned it through the work of the cross and He received it from God in His resurrection and His ascension to God’s right hand.

Now, we have not yet addressed the scope of Christ’s headship. We have not yet tied Christ’s headship together with the church, His body. And that, too, the passage before us does. We read in verse 22, “And gave him to be the head over all things to the church.” Now, we might think, when we read this verse superficially, that the headship of Christ is much more general than just over His church. His headship is said here to be over *all things*, and therefore the conclusion that is assumed in verse 23 that just the church is His body—well, that cannot be true. But if Christ is head over all, then everyone in this world, wicked and righteous alike—indeed, even the fallen angels in heaven—belong to Christ’s body. That is not the idea expressed here.

The idea is this. God gave Christ to be the head to the church. Or, Christ is the head pertaining to the church. Or, more simply yet, Christ is the head of the church. And, as head of the church, He also rules over all things on behalf of the church. We must not overlook the beautiful truth that Paul is teaching his church here. By means of His death, resurrection, and ascension to God’s right hand, Christ has been given the power and the preeminence over all creatures. He rules. He rules over all things—the brute creation, the nations of this world. He even rules over all principalities, powers, might, and dominion in heaven. In other words, Christ’s rule indeed does extend over men—the wicked as well as the righteous. Christ’s rule does extend over the nations of this world and what happens in the governments of this world. Christ’s rule extends over the highest and most powerful angels, including the devils who have

fallen together with Satan. All are under Christ's sovereign rule. And Christ rules over these, for the benefit of His church over which He is the head. As the head of the church, He directs all things in this world for her protection and her care. Christ, and all the blessings found in Him, are God's gift to the church.

Neither ought we to overlook that He is God's gift. God put all things under Christ's feet. God gave Christ to be the head of the church. God does this. Why? In order to fulfill His plan or counsel to bring glory to His name through the salvation of the church unto Himself. We may not divorce the instruction of these verses from the election of the church. God chooses His church, in eternity, and He loves that church with an unchangeable love. He gives the church her head, Jesus Christ, out of that sovereign, free love and grace.

Ah, yes. The church. Here at the end of this first chapter, we are given the official name of the saints and faithful whom Paul addressed in verses 1 and 2. Together, these saints and faithful are the church. And that church is the body of Christ.

Paul uses the figure he began in verse 22, where he calls Christ the head of the church: Christ is the head, the church is His body. This is a figure common to Scripture. Paul uses this figure to describe the church, for example, in I Corinthians 12, where he spends much time speaking of the members of Christ's body and their relationship to each other. Paul will use this figure throughout Ephesians. And it is common, likewise, in Colossians. The figure is a beautiful one. The church as a whole is one unit, that is, one living organism, one entity together with Christ. When we spoke of the election of the church, we noticed that the church was chosen in eternity already in Christ. God has never viewed the church apart from Jesus Christ, not even when He predestinated her. When speaking of the church, therefore, in the verses before us, we can define her, first of all, as that body of people elected in Christ from eternity. Every member of the church is elect, chosen of God, to be a member of that body.

In the second place, the church is that body of saints saved in Christ. This was specifically that body of people whom God gave to Christ, for whom He died on the cross. Jesus recognized this when He said in John 6:37, "All that the Father giveth me shall come to me." Or, again, in John 10:14: "I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep." Or, once more, in John 17:6: "I have manifested thy name unto the men which thou gavest me out of the world: thine they were, and thou gavest them me." This is exactly why the church is called the body of Christ. It is made up of those people out of this world whom Christ loved and laid down His life to save. The names of these are written in the Lamb's book of life. They belong to Jesus in such a way that they are inseparably connected to Him as one flesh.

Further, this body of people, the church, is that over which Christ stands as its head. He rules this body. He is its king. Her members are the citizens of this kingdom. Just as the members of the body are subject to the head and willingly fulfill exactly what the head wills, so also the members of the church.

Further, this church is united to Jesus Christ in one flesh because the church consists of those who have been called out of darkness and into that church. The term "church" literally means "called out ones." The church is made up of all those who have been irresistibly called out of sin by God's grace in His Holy Spirit. No man of himself would desire to come to Jesus and to be a part of His body in this world. But God, who is rich in His mercy, while we were yet sinners sent forth His Spirit to dwell within each one of His chosen people. As a result, they hear the call of the gospel. And by God's grace, they separate themselves from this wicked world of sin

and cast in their lot with the saints and faithful in Christ Jesus. They do this by means of faith. God works faith in their hearts, that is, a conscious knowledge and confidence by which they flee to Christ. They seek their salvation in Him and they join together with the other members of Christ's body. That is the church.

There is more to the definition of the church, however. The term "church" means those who are called out to assemble in worship. The church is a gathering of citizens called out of their homes into an assembly gathered for worship. This stands in keeping with the Old Testament definition of the church. This means, dear readers, that the term "church" does not simply refer to a vague, ill-defined body of people that have little to do with each other. It refers to the church institute, as she is called out of this world and unto the assembling of itself together. Yes, the body of Christ as the body of elect believers must needs be distinguished from the church institute where these believers gather for worship. But, to make a false disjunction between the two is wrong. The elect body of Christ always manifests itself in the church institute. And this church institute manifests itself, in turn, in the gathering together of that body of believers in worship. In the house of God, in our very worship, we manifest the body of Christ, the church.

Now, the implications of this Word of God are very plain. In the first place, Christ, as the head of the church, fulfills all the needs of the church and her members. Paul calls this to our attention in verse 23 when he states that Christ is He that fills "all in all." This simply means that Christ supplies all the needs of everyone of the members of the church. Christ is head not only in the sense that He rules the body, but also in that He takes care of the members of His body. Every need that any one of the members of His body has is filled by Christ. He fills those needs in all, that is, every member of the church.

And this, in turn, means that in times of trouble, when we need comfort, courage, and strength, we turn to God alone in Christ. When we seek direction in the right way to walk, we ask God through Christ. We may pray to no one else. To do so is an insult to God. We do not need to pray to deceased saints. They have no ability to supply our needs. To ask favors of angels is pure superstition. Angels, too, are useless when it comes to supplying our needs. The angels have no authority to do anything of themselves. God alone, through Christ, fills us all in all. These only supply our needs. Ask of them and it shall be given unto you.

There are a couple of other applications of these verses that are clear too. First of all, there is only one head of the church, that is Christ. There is no other head. No man can fill that position. For a man to claim to be the head of the church, or the vicar of Christ, is the height of folly and arrogance. The Bible is clear in II Thessalonians 2:3, 4 that a man who makes this claim is that man of sin, the son of perdition. He is the wicked one who sits in the temple of God making the claim that he is God. Christ alone is the head of the church, and He gives that position to no man. All church government must be based upon this one fundamental principle: Christ alone is the sole head and the ruler of the church.

One final application. If the church is indeed the assembly of those called out to worship, then we must realize that the church exists to worship. The body of Christ in this world is called to assemble itself together in order to worship. The reason is clear. It is by the praises of the church met together in worship that God chooses to glorify Himself. This is the purpose of God's counsel—to bring glory to Himself through His church. And this He does when He calls His church to worship.

It is often argued that having two worship services every Sunday is merely unnecessary tradition. And, I suppose, in a certain sense, that is true. But then, meeting once each Sunday is tradition too. But meeting in worship on the Lord's Day is a practice that flows out of the very purpose of God for His church. We are called out of the darkness of sin in order to show forth God's praises. The church is called out of this wicked world and into an assembly as a body, as a whole, in order to praise God in worship. This is why God has set apart the first day of the week as a day of rest—so that the body of Christ, the church, might become manifest in a worship.

This, in turn, reveals what Paul also writes in verse 23. The church is the body of Christ, "the fulness of him." The church is the fullness of Christ. It is true that Christ fills the needs of every one of His children. He fills all in all. But, on the flip-side of the picture, we find that the church is Christ's fullness. We are the body of Christ. A head is never without a body. Christ is never without the church. In a certain sense, we could say that Christ is incomplete without the church. We fill Him. This is true because Christ was elected as the chief cornerstone of the church. Christ was chosen in eternity as the firstborn among many brethren. We belong to Him, chosen and saved, as one body with Him. Right now that picture is so fragmented. The body of Christ is scattered throughout this world. And it is so small and so despised. Besides, the body of Christ is spread out through the annals of history. We cannot see that body of Christ as a whole. But the day comes, my friends, when that body of Christ will be seen in all its fullness. Then our faith will be made sight. We will see that glorious body of Christ with all its members in heavenly glory.

But until then, we see that body of Christ only in the church as she becomes visible in this world through the walk and witness of her members. And we see her when she gathers together for worship on Sunday. Oh, how the believer enjoys that time when he can be with his fellow saints and faithful in Christ. In the house of God we experience a little taste of what heaven will be like. There is the fullness of Christ. I am not alone. I am a living member of the church of Christ.

Let us pray.

Father in heaven, we thank Thee that we are members of the body of Christ in this world and that we might be able, as Thy children, to gather together for worship. May our worship be to the praise of the glory of Thy name. Bless us, Father, as the members of Thy church. For Jesus' sake we pray. Amen.