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ON THE ORIGIN OF RELIGION

Charles Darwin, known today as the father of evolutionary theory wrote his well-known book, *Origin of Species* in 1859. Through this book Darwin opened a door that has gotten wider and wider since that time. He suggested an entirely natural process to explain the variation of life forms we see in creation: evolution by means of natural selection.

Natural selection (i.e., providence) is a good explanation for variation among similar organisms and why species change over time. For example, the individuals of the original dog/wolf kind that exited Noah’s ark after the flood have since developed into many species of wolves, foxes, and dogs. Darwin, however, took natural selection several steps further when he suggested it as a means by which complex life might arise from simpler life forms (e.g., man sharing a common ancestor with worms and fish and bacteria). In doing so, he left the door open for a naturalistic explanation for the origin of everything. If one holds to natural selection as the explanation for the development and variation of life from simple, single-celled organisms into complex life forms like humans, they must follow the train of “logic” and see many other things as being the result of natural selection: not just life itself, but religion and culture. Yes, you read that correctly. Much ink has been spilled in scientific journals on the evolution of things like religion, sports, and music.

These aren’t new ideas. In *Origin of Species*, Darwin was largely silent on extending his evolutionary theory to human origins and how to reconcile the existence of a divine presence in a natural world. In his conclusion to *Origin of Species*, Darwin predicted that as his shocking, new theory would be slowly accepted by the world, “light will be thrown on the origin of man and his history.” Darwin soon fulfilled this prophecy by following his own “logic”—if A evolved, then B and C must have evolved also—by publishing another book in 1879, *The Descent of Man*. In this book, Darwin extended his theory of evolution by means of natural selection to the origin of mankind. He also unabashedly applied his theory to the origin of religion. “As soon as the important faculties of the imagination, wonder, and curiosity, together with some power of reasoning, had become partially developed [evolved], man would naturally crave to understand what was passing around him, and would have vaguely speculated on his own existence.” This would supposedly be the first step in the evolution of religion: speculating that there are higher powers out there that cause things to happen. You might call this superstition—superstition being a belief in the existence of other-worldly beings as opposed to religion as worship of these beings. An example of superstition would be the “barbarous people” on the island of Melita, where Paul was

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1 In general, naturalism refers to the worldview that only natural forces operate in the world and that everything that exists originated from natural processes. A strict adherence to naturalism obviously then excludes God from the picture, both as the Creator and as the one who upholds all things by his providence.


shipwrecked on his journey to Rome.
And when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks, and laid them on the fire, there came a viper out of the heat, and fastened on his hand. And when the barbarians saw the venomous beast hang on his hand, they said among themselves, No doubt this man is a murderer, whom, though he hath escaped the sea, yet vengeance suffereth not to live. And he shook off the beast into the fire, and felt no harm. Howbeit they looked when he should have swollen, or fallen down dead suddenly: but after they had looked a great while, and saw no harm come to him, they changed their minds, and said that he was a god (Acts 28:3–6).

A religious people? No. But surely superstitious in their expectation of Paul’s fated, soon to occur death. And when Paul did not drop dead, they regarded him as the being who was in control of fate.

Today, religion is hypothesized as a natural outcome of the human mind. In the popular magazine, Science, Elizabeth Culotta stated: “We are so keenly attuned to the designs and desires of other people that we are hypersensitive to signs of ‘agents’: thinking minds like our own….We tend to attribute random events or natural phenomena to the agency of another being.” 4 In other words, God is a figment of our imagination. Culotta also quoted the conclusions of some researchers who studied the perception of life and death in the minds of children: “We [human beings in general] have this unshakeable sense that our minds are immortal….This kind of belief is universal.” 5 This “belief” is universal because God is universal, and he reveals himself in his creation. The heavens and the earth and all of the events throughout history shout together, “He is God!” The unbeliever clearly sees this revelation of God, but does not worship him.

Under the evolutionary worldview, there are a few explanations given for why religion supposedly evolved. One of the more popular explanations is that religion promotes group solidarity. In other words, it encourages cooperative behavior among strangers and therefore produces stable groups of people, which are more likely to survive and reproduce. The rituals 6 of any given religion are seen as enabling “the expression and reaffirmation of shared beliefs, norms, and values, and are thus essential for maintaining communal stability and group harmony.” 7 Because religion promotes cooperation within a group, it is hypothesized, it also gives that group a selective advantage when it comes to conflict with another group—the more fit group will survive and reproduce, which is the basis of Darwin’s theory. The offspring of these survivors will end up being religious as were their parents, and the practice of religion grows even stronger.

So why do I need to know this? I already know that unbelievers reject God and say that religion is a figment of our imagination. I don’t believe that, so what’s the big deal?

It’s important to know these things because if you open the door just a crack to a purely naturalistic understanding of the origin of life, the devil will try to pry it open even further. The train of thought throughout the life of Charles Darwin is a case study in what happens when you leave that door open. Earlier in his life, it seemed as if Darwin thought positively of reconciling God and natural processes operating in the creation. He spoke several times openly of the Creator or referred to God in passing. For example, in the conclusion of his first book, he stated: “There is grandeur in this view of life [evolution via natural selection], with its several powers, having been originally breathed [by God] into a few forms or into one.” 8 Recall that later on in life he wrote another book, in which he described man as evolving cognitive abilities and soon thereafter using those abilities to speculate on his own existence. Ultimately though, Darwin failed to reconcile the two because they cannot be reconciled.

A purely naturalistic worldview takes God out of the picture. It labels religion as just a natural consequence of our hypersensitive, inquisitive minds or as an imaginary moral force that helps keep the members of a religion in check with no purpose in life except survival and reproduction. Thanks be to God for the purpose in our lives that he instills into us each day: the glory of his name. Remember that the revelation of God in creation does not only serve the purpose of leaving the wicked without excuse viewed as rituals in the evolutionary worldview.

8 Origin of Species, 384.

5 Ibid., 787.
6 Baptism, Lord’s Supper, and preaching would be
in the day of judgment. The elect child of God also reads the “elegant book” of God’s revelation in creation and he magnifies God for his “eternal power and divinity.”

9 Belgic Confession, Article 2.
The magnitude of my sins and miseries is one of the three things I must know to enjoy the comfort of belonging to my faithful savior Jesus Christ and to live and die happily (Lord’s Day 1, Q&A 2). I cannot know how great my sins and miseries are unless I examine and measure my life against the holy law of God. As Christians, we use our knowledge of God and of his law in real time, moment by moment, to measure our heart’s response to everyday situations. We give thanks that our covenantal Father has written his law in our hearts (Jer. 31:33). By God’s grace we take his word of truth with us everywhere we go, just as the successful contractor carries his tape measure on his belt. The child of God constantly evaluates his way, plans his path, and redirects himself to align with God’s word.

Ephesians 5:15–16 exhort us to “walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, Redeeming the time, because the days are evil.” The word “circumspectly” expresses a sense of accuracy about our walk that is generated out of an attitude of carefulness. Our method of measurement must be one that is accurate and carefully administered so as not to contain gross measurement errors. If our actions, thoughts, words, or doctrines are found not to be plumb according to God’s standard, we need to break down these thoughts, words, actions, or doctrines in order to rebuild according to his standard. This self-examination should not be the once-per-week satellite flyby that takes a snapshot measurement of our heart and quickly moves on. This measurement must be a thorough examination of our walk. The outcome of this examination is that we are brought to our knees in humility with the knowledge of how far short we fall from the mark (Rom. 3:23). This leads us to look to another who measures up perfectly to the law of God. That one is Jesus Christ. He is the reference standard by which all our measurements can be traced. “For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth” (Rom. 10:4) and “For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things” (Rom. 11:36). As we count the magnitude of sins forgiven through Christ, our love for Christ is magnified (Luke 7:47). We conclude in confidence with the apostle Paul (Eph. 3:17–21), knowing that by faith Christ dwells in our hearts, which firmly roots and grounds us in love to the end that we may be able to comprehend to a small degree the width, length, depth, and height of Christ’s love for his church and the mystery of salvation in Christ Jesus. To him be the glory in the church throughout all ages, world without end.

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Christian Living Philip Rainey

THE OFFICE OF ALL BELIEVER (1)

Question and Answer 32 occupies a blessed location in our Heidelberg Catechism. It comes in the middle of a section that is all about our Savior. Q&A 31 asks, “Why is He called Christ, that is, anointed?” Q&A 33 asks, “Why is Christ called the only begotten Son of God?” But between them is Q&A 32: “But why art thou called a Christian?” What a wonderful truth the location of this question and answer expresses. It is hidden in the doctrine of Christ! As such, we may see it as a beautiful picture of our union with Christ: “and your life is hid with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3).

Q&A 32 expresses the truth of the office of all believers: that by virtue of sharing Christ’s anointing, every believer is a prophet, priest, and king. Do you realize, young person, that you hold office in the kingdom of God? Yes, God has ordained and anointed you with his Spirit to a lofty position in his kingdom. That means you have important work to do. It is the work of that kingdom which Jesus
established with his own blood, in which you are a member by regeneration, and in the interests of which kingdom every event in all the history of the world must serve. Yours is a high calling.

At this point, however, there is a grave danger. It is that you might reply in this fashion: “Yes, I see what you mean. Of course I believe there is such a thing as the kingdom of God; that I have some kind of part to play; but really, the idea of me—a fourteen-year-old—being an officebearer in the kingdom is kind of remote stuff. It’s all very well learning this stuff in catechism class (and maybe even in an article in *Beacon Lights*), but really, *me* a prophet, priest, and king!? It may even be the case that we think about office in the church exclusively in terms of minister, elder, and deacon. That is a mistake and one that these articles are intended to correct.

From time to time we hear our ministers preach on Q&A 32. We will have learned it in catechism class. As covenant youth redeemed in the blood of Christ and with his Spirit dwelling in us, we do begin to function as prophets, priests, and kings in God’s kingdom. But it is my conviction that we need to become a good deal more conscious about this matter. I believe we can too easily regard our calling at this point as something of an optional extra. By this I mean that we can have the idea that we can be good Christians, living a life well-pleasing to God, without consciously living as prophets, priests, and kings. That is a serious mistake, one with grave repercussions for our spiritual lives. If we do not understand our office, we will never function in it properly. May God give us to see the blessed privilege and high calling of our office in his kingdom.

**The Idea of Office**

Perhaps one reason we find it difficult to think of ourselves as officebearers in the church is because the very idea of office is despised today. One only has to look at society to see evidences of this. We hear that it is well-nigh impossible to teach today due to the absence of classroom discipline in many places. What is this but a despising of the office of teacher? Or what of the obvious disrespect to the office of parent that we regularly witness in public today? Do we not rather too frequently see children, some of them very young, screaming their refusal of parental authority? And what of the highest public office in our land—that of president? Surely I need not draw attention to the constant, daily stream of slander, mockery, and vitriol flowing in that direction.

Behind all this despising of office is sinful opposition to the authority of God. Office is a position in which one holds and exercises authority over others. And since the source of all authority is God, it follows that a despising of office is an attack on the authority of God. This is the meaning of the apostle in Romans 13:1, where he declares that all authority is God’s: “For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God.” It is to be feared that this general denigration of office we see around us affects our view of office in the church.

In this connection, we should also draw attention to the widespread and wicked despising of office in that which calls itself church today. The so-called Bible churches are built on the rejection of biblical office. There you have either the exercise of every-man ministry or one-man ministry, namely the pastor. This is not even to mention the widespread and abominable spectacle of women in the special offices. But enough of the abuse and denigration of office. We shall now turn to office as God conceived it.

The first thing we have to say about office is that man was created an officebearer. Adam, as he came forth from the hand of God, was created precisely to be God’s officebearer over his creation. And before we go any further and speak of the work of Adam, we need to pause. Yes, pause. And let it be a lengthy pause. For what an astoundingly unspeakable act of grace! We are always too ready to ask, “What does this mean for me, or for man?” But the question for a Reformed man or woman should be rather, “What does this mean for God?” God had no need of a world or of man. If there had never been a world, God would still have been infinitely happy and blessed in his own triune being. As Jehovah, the I AM THAT I AM, he is unchangeable, never lacking anything. Man, the world, and everything it contains, including all of the countless galaxies, never add anything to God. That God chose to reveal himself to another, namely man, is an act of pure grace.

This is a crucial point to establish, for it expresses a fundamental truth about our relation to God—always and everywhere grace precedes works. And not only so, but grace is always the reason for works. Oh yes, Adam was busy in his office in paradise. Opening his eyes on a new day, Adam went to work as God’s king, ruling and consecrating all things in love to Jehovah. What a wonderfully significant and meaningful job! But Adam’s work was only ever fruit. He never earned anything, never merited anything. If you had said to him, “Adam, you’ve worked so long and hard today that you really deserve to be paid overtime,” he would have looked at you with furrowed brow. Adam would have said, “What in the world are you talking about? The very idea is altogether out of the question. I can never earn
anything with God. I am only doing my duty; I can never go beyond it. In all my work God requires me to love him with all my mind, heart, soul, and strength. He created me in his own image so that I could love him and do all this work in love. I love my job as officebearer in God’s kingdom. It’s a delight to me. I don’t need any payment for it. The work is payment enough. For, what do I have that I have not received?” With arms outstretched and the palms of his hands open, Adam would have concluded: “Don’t you see, it’s all pure grace!”

That all the works we perform in our office, which is just to say all the good works we do, are only ever fruit is something we must establish, and establish emphatically. About this there must be no confusion or hesitation. Protestant Reformed young person, this principle you must believe and maintain at all costs. A recent synod had to defend this principle against a certain teaching that said our obedience was necessary to gain something more, something extra, namely our experience of fellowship with God. But this simply cannot be the case for two reasons. First, although it is true that we do many good works in our office (as Adam did), those works are only ever the fruit of God’s work in us. Furthermore, it cannot be the case that our obedience is the reason for or gains experience of fellowship with God for the simple reason that, like Adam, functioning in our office as a Christian is our life with God; it can never be that which brings us into the possession of something more. For what more can there possibly be than living as God’s friend-servant in the midst of the world?

Having now established the Reformed and biblical principle that our office is all of grace and never anything by which we merit, gain, or receive anything from God, we need to see the only ground by which we merit, gain, or receive anything at all. For what more can there possibly be than living as God’s friend-servant in the midst of the world? To put it simply, fulfilling the simple reason that, like Adam, functioning in our office (as Adam did), those works are only ever the fruit of God’s work in us. Furthermore, it cannot be the case that our obedience is the reason for or gains experience of fellowship with God for the simple reason that, like Adam, functioning in our office with all the works we do in it is experience of fellowship with God. To put it simply, fulfilling our office as a Christian is our life with God; it can never be that which brings us into the possession of something more. For what more can there possibly be than living as God’s friend-servant in the midst of the world?

Having now established the Reformed and biblical principle that our office is all of grace and never anything by which we merit, gain, or receive anything from God, we need to see the only ground or basis of our office. That ground is our union with Christ. Jesus Christ is the officebearer in the kingdom of God. The idea of office is a position of authority to which one is ordained and qualified by God so that one functions as a servant of Jehovah. The Old Testament frequently refers to the promised Messiah as the servant of Jehovah: “Behold my servant, whom I uphold; mine elect, in whom my soul delighteth; I have put my spirit upon him: he shall bring forth judgment to the Gentiles” (Isa. 42:1). See also Matthew 12:18.

As a king, God’s first officebearer failed. Willfully disobeying God by eating the forbidden fruit, Adam turned traitor in God’s kingdom, transferring his allegiance to the devil. Adam remained in office, but no longer as God’s officebearer; he became a prophet, priest, and king of the devil. And now we must pause again. Once again a lengthy pause, for the spectacle is truly dreadful. God’s officebearer and son—bearing his own image—plunged himself and all creation, over which he was king, into ruin. Thus Adam made himself subject to the curse of God, and God cursed all things for his sake (Gen. 3:17). And not the least of the horrors of our first father’s treachery are the consequences for all his children. For we too now bear the image of the devil, whose children we are by nature (John 8:44). And what of our office? With father Adam, we too have become prophets, priests, and kings of the devil. And he is a cruel and hard taskmaster.

But God will not allow the kingdom to be wrested from his control. Christ remains God’s “elect.” He is always at the heart of God’s decree of election. As such, all God’s eternal purpose for creation and history center on him, for “all things were created by [Christ] and for him: And he is before all things, and by him all things consist” (Col. 1:16–17). This means the fall, with all its ruinous consequences for our office, was no accident. God was not taken by surprise, wringing his hands pathetically, then picking up the pieces in order to make the best of a bad job. The very idea is blasphemous! Rather, it was always God’s purpose that the first Adam make way for the last Adam; that the original officebearer function as a type of the true officebearer (Christ); and that in Christ our office be restored, and not only restored but raised to a higher level than could ever have been possible in Adam. For the first man is of the earth, earthly; but the second man is the Lord from heaven (1 Cor. 15:47). In him, our office is redeemed and will one day soon be perfected in the heavenly kingdom.

This is the glorious gospel of the kingdom—not the miserable earthly kingdom of the cultural mandate of common grace so proudly proclaimed in local Reformed colleges, but the triumphant proclamation of God’s officebearer, who as prophet, priest, and king exercises his office in the redemption of the creation with the elect at its center. Thus does the apostle John speak of him as “Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, and the first begotten of the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth. Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, And hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen” (Rev. 1:5–6). Do you see it, young person? This is why you are called a “Christian.” It is exactly the answer of the thirty-second question and answer of our Heidelberg Catechism.

What an amazing privilege is yours—to hold
office in God’s glorious kingdom! What lengths has not Christ gone to, to make you kings and priests unto God? It is the price of his own blood. How can we not then serve God with all our hearts!?

(to be continued)

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COMPETING SPECTACLES: TREASURING CHRIST IN THE MEDIA AGE


We are living in an age of spectacles. No, I’m not referring to the fact that people have started to wear eyeglasses for purely fashion purposes. I’m talking about things like YouTube celebrities, political scandals, Super Bowl ads, social media influencers, viral news stories, sports highlights, virtual reality video games, pornography, and the latest “binge-worthy” show on Netflix. All of these are spectacles, visual images that are manufactured and presented to us in order to grasp our attention. They come at us by means of our smartphones, laptop screens, televisions, and even billboards that we pass on the highway. And when these graphic spectacles do capture our attention, they do not just steal our time, but also claim our affections and impact our actions.

What we focus our attention on shapes us. As humans, we were created with the desire to behold the greatness of God so that we could become more like him and bear his image. But sin has corrupted this good creation so that we can be very easily convinced to waste our time beholding worthless or sinful things instead. As we fill up on the sugary treats of earthly spectacles, we begin to lose our appetite for the unseen things of God. And the more that we indulge ourselves, the more our longing for media diminishes our longing for Christ and negatively impacts things like our personal devotions and prayer life. Yet there is hope for God’s people in the death of Christ on the cross—the ultimate spectacle—which is revealed in creation and Holy Scripture, and by means of faithful gospel preaching and the sacraments. The ability to pull our eyes away from worthless spectacles will not come from our own willpower, but from the powerful work of his Spirit in our hearts.

The tension between these earthly and heavenly spectacles that compete for our attention is the focus of Tony Reinke’s most recent book. (Hopefully some of you recognize the author’s name from having read 12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You, another one of his books that I would highly recommend.) Competing Spectacles serves as a thought-provoking discussion of how Christians can spiritually thrive in an environment where they are constantly bombarded with media images. The chapters of this book are very brief, most of them only a few pages, which is fitting because they present very weighty topics that demand further contemplation by the reader.

Both young adults and older adults would benefit from reading this book with discretion and considering how they personally should interact with the multitude of digital images that are available to them each day. By the grace of God, I hope that others who read this book are also encouraged more and more to “seek those things which are above” (Col. 3:1) rather than being distracted by mindless entertainment, and that they would sincerely pray along with the psalmist in Psalm 119:37, “Turn away mine eyes from beholding vanity; and quicken thou me in thy way.”

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THE DAILY PRESS

“press toward the mark…”
(Philippians 3:14)

September 8  Read Luke 16

In this chapter, we have the parable of the wicked servant who shrewdly uses his master’s money to make others indebted to him, so that they will help him after the master throws him out. Two of the main questions that come to mind after reading this parable are why does Jesus tell us to make friends of the unrighteous mammon, and why is the wicked thief an example to us?

Rev. Lanning answered these important questions for us in a sermon on the chapter. Mammon here refers not to men themselves, but to the money that is the object of man’s worship. Therefore, when Jesus says to make friends of the unrighteous mammon, he is telling us to take all that God has given us and use it to glorify his name and for the cause of the kingdom. The wicked servant is an example to us, not because of his stealing, but because of his single-minded purpose. We must have the one goal of glorifying God and focusing on the kingdom of heaven. The wicked are very good at focusing on their one goal of glorifying man, and we must have that same laser-focus on God. Sing or pray Psalter #308.

September 9  Read Luke 17

In Luke 17:7–10, Jesus compares our relationship to God by describing a slave who works hard all day and comes in dead tired at supper time, only to have his boss command him to get his supper before he eats himself. The slave is expected to obey at once without praise or thanks. The point here is that we are unprofitable servants, even if we do everything that’s required of us. This was even true of Adam before the fall. He obeyed perfectly, but deserved no thanks from God, because he was only performing what was required of him, nothing extra.

Rev. Ron Hanko says this truth must be brought to people who believe in a covenant of works. Those who hold to the Federal Vision, for example, believe we can lose our salvation when we don’t obey God’s word. If perfect Adam was still an unprofitable servant and could do nothing to merit with God, then who are we to think we may be able to? Although it makes no sense, this error is so appealing to the pride of our sinful nature, that, as Martin Luther said, it’s almost impossible to get out. Sing or pray Psalter #284.

September 10  Read John 11

Yesterday, we mentioned the Federal Vision in connection with the truth that we are unprofitable servants. Today, we see that false doctrine refuted again in a sermon by Rev. Nathan Langerak covering the story of Lazarus’ resurrection. Rev. Langerak explains that the believer lives immortally, meaning there is no sin we can commit by which we lose our life. Through Christ’s sacrifice on the cross, we have been resurrected unto eternal life, and that promise can never be taken away from us. We all experience hardships in this life, but alongside all that, we always have the joy of the forgiveness of sins. We have the promise that our true home is in heaven. Mary and Martha didn’t fully understand that heaven was their real hope. Why would they want their brother to come back to this life of sin when death for the believer is merely the passage into eternal life?

I’d like to end with a thought question today. Since death is the realization of our heavenly goal, why did Jesus raise people from the dead? Doesn’t that sound cruel? What do you think? Sing or pray Psalter #238.

September 11  Read Luke 18

Prof. Gritters preached a sermon entitled “The Justification of Sinners” on Luke 18:9–14 and Lord’s Day 23. In this sermon, he clearly explained what justification is and what it does. Justification is the blessing of God from which all the other blessings flow. Justification is our standing before God just as if we’d obeyed perfectly. We can’t justify ourselves, although we often try. Those who are justified receive and experience the removal of guilt and the imputation of righteousness by faith. God doesn’t make us righteous by giving us good works so that we don’t sin anymore, but he imputes it to us so that we stand...
before God as one who’s innocent. Our legal standing is different. It’s not like a blood transfusion, but a verdict. We’re sinners who will keep on sinning, but we’ve been declared to be righteous. We are perfect from the point of view of justification, because that’s how God sees us. This is what the publican experienced, and it must be our experience as well. *Sing or pray Psalter #111.*

**September 12**  
Read Matthew 19  
In preparation for this devotional, I listened to a 1987 sermon by Rev. Kortering on Matthew 19:6, 9. He explains that there were two schools of Jewish thought at Jesus’ time regarding Moses’ teaching on divorce in Deuteronomy 24:1–4 (please read this). Many claimed anything that was found undesirable in the wife was reason for divorce, while others said it was only allowed if the wife had committed some kind of sexual sin other than adultery (since she would have been put to death for that). Jesus makes it clear here that both schools of thought are wrong. Moses wasn’t telling the Israelites to give their wives bills of divorcement in Deuteronomy 24; he was merely presenting them with a situation. The husbands were told they couldn’t take back their wives after divorcing them, because God was teaching them the consequences of their sin. Jesus’ words make it clear that divorce is a separation, not a dissolution of the marriage bond. For one, why would remarriage be outlawed if the bond had been broken? Even when divorce becomes necessary, the marriage bond is still intact, because “What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.” *Sing or pray Psalter #292.*

**September 13**  
Read Mark 10  
Prof. Cammenga preached about the healing of blind Bartimaeus, recorded here at the end of this chapter. Bartimaeus, who is a picture of us spiritually, pleaded to Jesus for mercy, demonstrating the apostasy of the church at that time. They had stopped caring for the poor as God had commanded them. A church’s care for its poor gives you a good indication of the spirituality of the congregation. Bartimaeus not only cried out to Jesus, but he was also very persistent in his crying. Jesus ignored him at first, but he wasn’t offended. Instead, he showed faith by calling Jesus his Lord. When Jesus finally acknowledged Bartimaeus and his companion, he asked them what they wanted. This was done to impress upon the man the desperate nature of his condition, and to cause him to give a public testimony of that great need. Bartimaeus asked that his eyesight be restored, not his sins forgiven, because he already enjoyed the forgiveness of sins, and he knew that the Jesus who granted the one would grant the other. Blind Bartimaeus wanted his eyesight restored so he could see the Jesus on whom he believed. *Sing or pray Psalter #400.*

**September 14**  
Read Matthew 20  
There’s nothing wrong with wanting to be great in the church, preached Prof. Decker. In fact, 1 Timothy 3:1 speaks favorably of men who desire the office of a bishop. This greatness, however, has nothing to do with exercising authority. We must aspire to true greatness, which is defined strictly in terms of service to one’s fellow believers. This definition creates a sharp contrast between greatness in the world and greatness in the church, a truth that Salome needed to understand in Matthew 20. Being great in the church is not prestigious. The minister exists for the sake of the church, not the church for the minister. Prof. Decker shared the wonderful advice given to him by Rev. Vos, back when he was first getting into the ministry. This great aging man in the church said the best advice he could give Decker was to be humble from the heart and allow God’s people to then bear him up. May we all pray for humility that we serve each other and allow them to care for us in return. *Sing or pray Psalter #298.*

**September 15**  
Read Matthew 21  
Reading about Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a colt made me think of a book that was recently brought to my attention, entitled *Wild at Heart,* by John Eldridge. This book, which was published back in 2001, remains one of the most popular books on Christian living and has sold over 4 million copies in the US alone. The book teaches that God is a wild, unpredictable, risk-taking deity, and man is created in his image to be the same. Man, says Eldridge, needs to stop beating himself up and living a lie and become the wild and free being that God has called him to be.  

This portrayal of God and leaders in the church is in complete opposition to what we read in Matthew 20 and 21. Yesterday, we learned that being great in the church means serving others, not living for self and throwing off our responsibilities. Today, we see Jesus’ extreme meekness as he rides into Jerusalem. The king of heaven and earth made it clear he was NOT the kind of manly man the world would flock after. He was a servant, and that’s what we must be as well. *Sing or pray Psalter #47.*
Prof. Hanko took time in a sermon on Luke 19:1–10 to explain that the Puritans didn’t understand that we come to the table of the Lord confessing we’re lost. They made a distinction between the law and the gospel. According to the Puritans, you hear the preaching of the law, come to conviction of your sin, realize you are lost, use common grace to allow you to be persuaded to close with Christ, and then complete that closing when you hear the gospel preached. In other words, those who are lost are able to find their own way out. They just need to realize they’re lost by hearing the law preached to them, and then they are ready to accept Christ. The power is in man’s hands. He chooses Christ; Christ doesn’t choose him.

That’s not what we read in Luke 19. Zacchaeus didn’t approach Jesus first. Jesus confronted him. Zacchaeus didn’t invite Jesus to his house, Jesus told him he was coming. Zacchaeus didn’t accept Jesus into his heart, Jesus gave him a new heart through his death on the cross. *Sing or pray Psalter #66.*

Rev. Eriks helps you imagine you were there in his sermon about Jesus’ cleansing of the temple. I had never really thought about this before, but the noise in the temple must have been horrific and deafening. The place would have smelled like a stockyard or fair. Still, this scene might have seemed practical and helpful at first glance. After all, the people needed to exchange their money, and many would rather buy their sacrifice animals there than haul them on the long journey. However, the Jewish leaders were taking advantage of the people by charging a high price for the exchange of currency and selling sacrificial animals for inflated prices. The focus was no longer about worshipping God, but about making money.

This sin is prevalent in the church today as well. Many religious leaders get rich off their followers by convincing these poor people that they are doing God’s work when they donate money to them. Church discipline goes out the window in an attempt to make this life as pleasurable as possible. We must never fall into the trap of dead orthodoxy, but live out the truth that has been written in our hearts by Christ’s blood. *Sing or pray Psalter #94.*

Rev. Haak sets the scene for us in a preparatory sermon on the first part of this chapter. Martha was serving, as she always was. Lazarus, who knew he had been dead and now was alive, sat at the table with Jesus. Mary came and washed Jesus’ feet. They all had different ways of expressing their love for Jesus. Jesus loved them too and sought their fellowship as the wrath of God started to come on him. We too should seek the fellowship of our godly friends when we are going through trials.

Risen Lazarus is a picture of us as we come to the Lord’s Supper. We were dead and rotting in sins, but now we sit at the Lord’s table as those who have been resurrected.

Rev. Haak also points out that Jesus is the host having Lazarus to his table, even though it’s Lazarus’ house. This happens again when Jesus eats with the travelers to Emmaus. This teaches us that, although we might have built the table and the church it sits in, they are the Lord’s. Everything belongs to him. *Sing or pray Psalter #129.*

There were a few things that stood out to me regarding the law in a sermon by Rev. Regnerus on this chapter and Lord’s Day 2. The law of God is a code of conduct that God demands of his people. God didn’t have to contemplate what laws to give us, because his laws reveal himself. Therefore, the law is covenantal. It’s given to God’s people and separates them from the world. The goal of the law is for God’s people to live in covenantal fellowship with him. Wicked man is utterly foolish for rejecting this law. As we will discuss tomorrow, the main focus of the law is loving God. This command is followed up with one to love our neighbor as ourselves. Those prone to hating the neighbor are good at perceiving evils that have been committed against them. Rev. Regnerus said one of the worst ways we can show hatred for the neighbor is by showing indifference towards them, not caring if they go to heaven or hell. Let us flee from this sin and obey the command of the law to love God and the neighbor. *Sing or pray Psalter #131.*

The Pharisees loved to debate God’s laws. In this chapter, they pose Jesus with one of the questions they debated about: What is the greatest commandment of all? As with all their questions, the Pharisees sought to trap Jesus here, because there were hundreds of laws to choose from. As Rev. Guichelaar points out, by answering, Jesus would be sure to anger at least one faction of the Pharisees. By choosing one as the greatest, Jesus could then be accused
of being soft on others. However, instead of playing their game, Jesus explained that by asking their question they demonstrated they were missing the entire point of the law. The Pharisees wanted to put all the focus on the external show, instead of obeying from the heart in love. Therefore, the greatest of all commandments is not something outward like giving a certain amount to the poor or only taking so many steps on the Sabbath, but it’s the inward command to love God as he has loved us. By nature we’re full of hatred, but that sinful nature was crucified with Christ, and our new heart is full of love for the one who’s saved us from death. Sing or pray Psalter #403.

September 21 Read Matthew 23

Matthew 23:12 reads, “And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted.” The Pharisees of Jesus’ day loved to exalt themselves, sitting in the highest seats and bestowing grand titles upon themselves. Rev. Slopsema brought out how ironic man’s exaltation of himself is because if anyone has reason to be humble, it’s fallen man. The Pharisees loved to twist things around and make a big show out of their supposed humility. Others love to wallow in their unworthiness to gain advantage, but, in Christ, we are valuable, and it’s a false humility to say otherwise. Rev. Slopsema recalls a man the church was in contact with for a while who acted extremely humble, but they soon discovered he was the only one able to interpret the Bible in his group, and he was really leading a cult. True humility is seeing who you are and understanding that we have only a small beginning of the new obedience. May we humble ourselves before God, so that he doesn’t have to teach us humility. Sing or pray Psalter #141.

September 22 Read Luke 20

Here the Sadducees bring a ridiculous situation to Jesus in which a woman married seven brothers in order to trap him by asking whose wife she’d be in heaven. By this question, the Sadducees were attempting to prove heaven didn’t exist. They believed the soul died with the body, and there is no reward or punishment after this life. Jesus preaches to them that he is the God of the living. In John 11: 25 and 26, Jesus raised Lazarus to show the truth that he’s the God of the living.

In Luke 16:19–26, we have the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, where Lazarus is seen in heaven in Abraham’s bosom. In Philippians 1:21, Paul said that he desired to be with Christ and to die was gain, but he knew he was needed in the church. Scripture’s emphasis regarding heaven is that there we will see Christ, not that we will see our family members again. We will all fully experience being part of the same spiritual family. Sing or pray Psalter #246.

September 23 Read Luke 21

I listened to a sermon from a series Rev. Rodney Kleyn did on personal finance in preparation for this devotional. The texts for this sermon were 1 Chronicles 29, Proverbs 3:9–10, and Luke 21:1–4. In 1 Chronicles 29, David knows Solomon is going to build the temple, so he and the people give for that cause. David thanks the Lord that he could witness the people’s willingness, and he prays that the people be given a right attitude toward the things God has given them. We must remember all things belong to God and give to the work of the Lord. In Proverbs 3:9–10 we’re commanded to honor the Lord with our first fruits. We must give right away, not only if we decide we have enough after everything else has been paid for. Finally, in Luke 21:1–4, Jesus talks about the widow who gave two mites. The Pharisees gave much more, but she gave all the money she had, while they wouldn’t even notice the difference. This manifests to us that we should all give proportionately according to what God has given us, and poverty isn’t an excuse for not giving. Sing or pray Psalter #113.

September 24 Read Mark 13

In Mark 13:34–37, Jesus tells his disciples a parable about a master who goes on a long journey and tells his slaves to take care of the place while he’s gone. The slaves must do their work diligently and be ready for the master to return at any moment, because they don’t know when that will be. As Rev. Bruinsma points out, the summary of the parable is the command to watch.

As you probably already know, Jesus is talking here about his second coming. Christ’s journey started when he ascended. While he sits at God’s right hand preparing a place for us, he commands us to live a life of godliness and holiness. At the appointed time he will return in the night. This is significant, because nighttime is when we’re asleep. Christ will return when things are spiritually dark. The world will have completely given itself over to
sin and darkness. Even the church will be lulled into sleep to a certain degree, as demonstrated from the Parable of the Ten Virgins, which we will examine in a couple of days. We must realize the perilous times we live in and take up the calling to watch! 

September 25 | Read Matthew 24
Prof. Cammenga spoke at an evangelism lecture covering the Olivet Discourse, which is Jesus’ answers to his disciples in Matthew 24 and 25, Mark 13, and Luke 21. The focus of this lecture was understanding postmillennialism and preterism. Postmillennialism says the church will gradually bring the entire world under the rule of Christ. Christians will control every facet of society. Preterism is derived from the Latin word meaning “past.” This teaches that the prophecies have already been fulfilled, because they were all speaking of the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. Within this faction are two schools of thought: some say there’s no other coming of Jesus Christ to look to, while others say most of the prophecies have been fulfilled but there are a few that speak of a future return. These two ideas are inseparably connected. Post-mills use preterism to explain away passages like Matthew 24, saying it’s already been fulfilled. It’s true that the destruction of Jerusalem was a fulfillment of this passage, but it wasn’t the fulfillment. These false teachings play right into the hands of Satan because there’s a kingdom coming that will bring world peace for a short time and be very powerful. 

Sing or pray Psalter #120.

September 26 | Read Matthew 25
“Watching and Waiting as In the Days of Noah” was the theme of this year’s Young People’s Convention. Before the convention, Rev. Noorman preached a handful of sermons on the topic, since his church was co-hosting the event. He started by explaining the difference between betrothal and engagement. During Jesus’ time, a couple would be betrothed by their parents for a relatively short time before their marriage, during which they were already regarded as married. In this parable, the end of the betrothal has come, and the bride and her attendants are waiting for the groom to come. It was customary for the bride to wait for the groom to come bring her to the wedding feast when he was ready.

This parable has a lot to teach us. It reminds us that we are married to Christ, although the marriage hasn’t been consummated yet. We are waiting for the return of our bridegroom, and we need wisdom in order to watch properly. Oil symbolizes God’s word and the Holy Spirit, without which we will not be prepared. Those who don’t have this oil are foolish. Do we have oil in our lamps? Sing or pray Psalter #192.

September 27 | Read Matthew 26
A number of the sermons I listened to on the chapters for this month’s devotionals were about the Lord’s Supper. This one was preached by Rev. Smit. He began by instructing us to come to the Lord’s table with humility and reverence, contemplating how Jesus suffered unjustly and alone for our sakes. He who knew no sin was made sin for us, which is expressed in Galatians 3:13. It’s amazing to think about the fact that the eternal, living God in the flesh became a dead man. He did this to save his people and destroy the world that raged against him, as we read in Psalm 2. We must remember Christ’s words, “It is finished,” and not think that anything must be added to what he did for us. This thinking would lead us to despair, and we must be careful not to head down that path. Through the preaching, Christ comes to us and declares his perfect death on the cross. The Lord puts the bread and wine in our hands and tells us to look away from ourselves. We look at, touch, and taste the bread and wine and remember what Christ did for us personally. Sing or pray Psalter #174.

September 28 | Read Mark 14
Christ is truly present in the Lord’s Supper. That was the thrust of a sermon by Rev. Smidstra on this passage. The Lord’s Supper is a feast of covenant fellowship because of Christ’s presence, as explained in Lord’s Day 29. The question isn’t whether Christ is present, but how is he present at the table? In other words, how do the signs of the Lord’s Supper relate to the things they point to? First of all, the signs do not turn into the body and blood of Christ, as the Roman Catholics teach. This idea goes against the very definition of a sacrament, for they are visible signs and seals of invisible grace. How can a sign of grace turn into grace itself? However, although we don’t physically eat Christ at the Lord’s Supper, there is still a very real connection between the two. There is a real, spiritual presence of Christ at the communion table. We say, “the cup is the communion of the body of Christ,” because he’s there with us. Understanding this real, spiritual presence, we can enjoy real, spiritual partaking. Sing or pray Psalter #180.
**September 29** Read Luke 22

One important question that Rev. Laning addressed in a sermon on Luke 22:47–53 and parallel passages was, “What does it mean that Jesus was bound to free us from our sins?” First, it means that he has taken away the burden of our guilt. Can you imagine how guilty the disciples must have felt about running from Jesus at the time of his greatest affliction? We all have guilt for the sins we commit throughout our whole life. If that burden had not been lifted by Jesus it would crush us. Similarly, it means that we are not enslaved to sin, but are free to do what God calls us to do. The world loves to talk about freedom in terms of fulfilling every lust of the flesh, but that’s bondage. The Jews thought they could use swords against the man who just raised someone from the dead, even after he makes them all fall on their backs. That’s the bondage and folly that Jesus has saved us from. In contrast, true freedom is having the burden of sin lifted off your back, so you can sing forth praise to God for all his wonderful mercies. Sing or pray Psalter #170.

**September 30** Read John 13

In John 13:1, we read that Jesus loved his disciples “unto the end.” Rev. Huizinga used this as the theme for a sermon, in which he explained how important it is for us to know our Savior loved us unto the end. Talk of love is cheap. It’s easy to say, “I love you,” but it’s hard to truly mean it. Sometimes the false love of a spouse, parent, friend, or child can wax cold, but that never happens with God’s love. To love is to delight in another as precious and dear, giving yourself for their highest good. This is exactly what Jesus did for us. Jesus demonstrated this love here by washing his disciples’ feet. This humiliation was a tiny sign of how humiliating it was for him to take all our sins upon himself.

Rev. Huizinga went on to further examine the word “end”. This word can mean termination, but also goal. That’s why Jesus didn’t stop those who took him and why he didn’t come down from the cross. That was his goal. What is our goal? Are we ready to die to self for the one we love? Sing or pray Psalter #90.

**October 1** Read John 14

John 14:2 reads, “In my Father’s house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.” Rev. Barnhill preached about this place that Jesus goes to prepare for us. He says that the word “mansions” in the text can better be translated as “dwelling places” or “rooms.” Heaven isn’t literally a house like our houses, but the image helps us understand—just like the house is large and spacious, so there will be plenty of room for all God’s people in heaven. It’s a house, not a tent, meaning it’s permanent. A house is a place of fellowship, just as heaven is. We will enjoy perfect communion with our brothers and sisters in Christ, the angels, and the triune God forever. When we move to a new place, it can take a while to adjust, but that will not be true with heaven. There we will immediately know we are in our true home. Jesus prepares this place for us there by his death, resurrection, and ascension, his intercession, and his working in us. He will come again to gently and tenderly receive us unto himself. Sing or pray Psalter #91.

**October 2** Read John 15

“Objections to Justification by Faith Answered” was the theme of a sermon by Rev. Decker on this chapter and Lord’s Day 24. This Lord’s Day addresses three false teachings regarding good works. The first is that our good works contribute to our righteousness. There’s part of us that wants our works to have power in salvation. We like to think things like, I’m glad I’m not him or her, or I’m better than those people because I go to a true church. However, it’s all or nothing with God. He does it all; we don’t contribute anything. The second false teaching is our reward implies merit. It’s true that we are rewarded for our good works, but it’s a reward of grace. Our best works are full of sin, and the good works God rewards are his work in and through us. Finally, there is the idea that justification by faith alone leads to a profane life. It’s impossible to be truly implanted into Jesus Christ without his life showing itself in our lives here. In our new man, we want to obey him out of thankfulness for what he has done for us. Sing or pray Psalter #172.

**October 3** Read John 16

Interestingly, Prof. Dykstra used this chapter as his text for a sermon on the Lord’s Supper and the different positions regarding it, stating that it reminds us that Jesus is with us spiritually by his Holy Spirit in the sacrament. The first of these views is the Roman Catholic view of transubstantiation, which says that Christ is physically present in the elements of the Lord’s Supper. When we eat the bread, we are actually eating Christ’s flesh. Closely connected to this is Luther’s strange teaching of consubstantiation.
This view says that the body and blood of Christ are present physically alongside the elements in the Lord’s Supper. Third, we have the Zwinglian view and that of the Anabaptists today, which says that Christ isn’t present at all in the sacrament. It’s simply used to commemorate Christ’s death, like the 4th of July commemorates the start of our country. In contrast, the Reformed view says that Christ is present spiritually in the Lord’s Supper, and by it we are brought closer to him in covenant fellowship and “are as really partakers of his true body and blood” (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 29). Sing or pray Psalter #337.

**October 4**  Read John 17

The Trinity is clearly displayed in John 17, as preached by Prof. Kuiper. In this sermon, he immediately established the importance of this doctrine. There are at least three confessional indications that the Trinity is foundational to the Christian faith. The Apostle’s Creed is structured after it, the Heidelberg Catechism begins its explanation of the Christian faith by starting with the Trinity, and the Athanasian Creed has a very long explanation of this doctrine. The Trinity is so foundational because it distinguishes the Christian religion from all others. It also sets the basis for the saving work our God performs in Jesus Christ and is the source of the covenant. In fact, it’s only because God is triune that he can be the Savior. How could God recreate sinners without the satisfying of his justice? Man had to pay for man’s sins, but only God can atone for sin, so the second person of the Trinity had to sustain God the Father’s wrath. Now the Holy Spirit continues to work in the church to draw us closer and closer to God. Sing or pray Psalter #228.

**October 5**  Read Matthew 27

Prof. Gritters preached about the fascinating account of graves opening and saints appearing to many after Jesus’ resurrection. There are so many unanswered questions we have when considering this event, but this points us to focus on the Lord Jesus Christ. Although the very earth beneath our feet may fall away, the things of God can never be shaken.

Prof. Gritters also brought out the antithetical elements of the sign. Just as the cross of Christ is salvation to some and judgment to others, so too with the raising and appearing of the saints. It’s important to note that all those who were raised were holy, signifying that the resurrection blessings of Christ are only for those who are holy. Negatively, the wicked Jews buried Jesus and stamped down the earth hard, so to speak, to get rid of him and his miracles. Well, they thought they had problems before, but now dead men are appearing to people all over the city and giving testimony of this Jesus! He is risen! Sing or pray Psalter #404.

**October 6**  Read Mark 15

Quite a few years ago, there was a movie that came out entitled The Passion of the Christ, which dramatized the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. This movie was extremely popular, and some churches even set up viewing parties. Rev. Haak addressed this movie in a message for The Reformed Witness Hour, making it clear that the film is blasphemy and distorts the gospel of Christ. For one, huge amounts of profit were made over Christ crucified. The movie also makes Mary a co-mediator with Christ and is idolatry. They use a sinful man to portray the holy God. No camera could record the wrath that was poured out upon Christ during the three hours of darkness. The true passion of Christ shows us that God takes sin seriously and that our only hope is found in Christ crucified. There’s nothing we can do that takes away our sin. In addition, preaching is an effective way to teach us about Christ’s suffering and death. Paul also had to deal with people wanting drama that aimed at their emotions, but the preaching must be enough. It’s the wonderful means by which we are taught all that he’s done for us. Sing or pray Psalter #387.

**October 7**  Read Luke 23

Luke 23:12 tells us that Pilate and Herod became friends at Jesus’ death. They had not been friends before, since they were rivals, and rulers back then would often kill their family members to keep them from taking over. Back in Luke 13:1, we read that Pilate massacred the Galilean Jews at the temple, which would have made Herod very angry, since those were the people he ruled over. Despite this, their shared hatred for Jesus led these two men to become friends.

Rev. Huizinga connected this with what will happen in the end times. All the nations of the world will unite under the antichrist. It will be an amazing time of world peace, but a fragile peace founded purely on hatred for God and his church. Still, even this wicked kingdom, which will nearly extinguish the church on this earth, is nothing but a tool in God’s hands. He used the friendship of wicked men as an instrument to bring Jesus to the cross, and he
MUSICAL GIFTS? HOW MUSIC IS LEARNED

There once was a girl who lived on a farm. The privileges she loved on that farm included shoveling manure, stacking hay bales, and regularly mistaking her fingernail as the nail head. Blood, blisters, calluses, cuts; her hands were no dainty figures. Now a fourth generation American long removed from the life of the Netherlands, America's country music became a part of her along with squealing hogs and folksy etiquette.

That girl, however, was thankful for the many blessings of being where God placed her, country things included. She was blessed with parents who loved God and brought her to church, who loved her with their lives, and who taught her to be grateful. Other qualities, she would absorb from the surrounding community and its traditions: daily laboring with joy until the job gets done, paying the bills on time, and straight talk so others never wondered what she meant.

At the same time, since all men are a mixture of pluses and negatives, striving was needed in some areas: of higher education, and in good, godly, and skillful culture of the higher arts. There remained opportunity for advancement, of things in creation of breath-taking beauty beyond the simple life; things made by God and entirely discoverable by our girl.

I tell you now, that girl went to college for piano performance. Of all things! How did that come about? Did she get the “gift?”

No child plays the piano from birth. This may seem extreme, but this is the idea implied with the words “gift” and “talent.” Though these words are often used as a compliment and necessary tribute to the work of God in a child’s life, they lose sight of the fact that advancement in the arts comes from much education and hard work. Such language severely limits young people who respond to challenges with “I don’t have the talent for that,” or “I wish I had that gift,” leaving room only for excuses and disappointment. This can often arise from language parents use when falsely searching their own DNA and capabilities for answers to their child’s future: “Neither my wife nor I have musical talent, so there’s no point sending our child to piano lessons,” I’ve heard some say; “We knew after the first few lessons that our son didn’t have the gift for music.” How can anyone but God predict a child’s future? Many leave music lessons to the child’s fleeting desires, presuming that the gift will take them to the goal. This we deny as false.

To gain the truth concerning music and how it is learned, let us remember the Lord our maker. Didn’t he say, “Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?...When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God [angels] shouted for joy?” (Job 38:4a, 7). Music, as God’s possession, was built into the creation, given even to all of the angels! Then God created man: a very special creature. Created in his own image (Gen. 1:26), we (his elect) are esteemed by God himself as “his workmanship” (Eph. 2:10), “a peculiar people” (Deut. 26:18), “a royal priesthood” (1 Pet. 2:9), created with “the mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 2:16) “unto all good works” (Eph. 2:10). How special we are!

I make this point because I fear that the ethereal nature of music leaves many of us with the notion that we must possess a mysterious trait to understand what appears intangible. But music is not intangible. Music is a part of all human life, embedded in the image of God (though the reprobate use it not to the glory of the Creator). You see, as this beautiful creation, we all possess the ability to “contemplate the invisible things of God” (Belgic Confession, Article 2), which include the orderly laws of creation found not only in mathematics and science, but also in music.

Think of it as a language. Biologically speaking, music and language are cultivated by the same systems of the brain, both of them requiring the processing of strict sets of rules and ongoing memorization. Do we say that each one of us has “the gift” for the English language? Of course not; it takes years of immersion from the moment you were
In 1924, the Christian Reformed Synod of Kalamazoo made the striking claim that the Canons of Dordt support the theory of common grace. The synod did not merely claim that the theory of common grace did not conflict with the Canons, but also that the theory of common grace was actually to be found within the Canons. This article will briefly examine the portions of the Canons that the synod cited in support of the theory of common grace. It will reveal that common grace is not to be found in the Canons.

The first place that the Synod of Kalamazoo claimed to find common grace in the Canons was in Head II, Article 5. Here the Canons were quoted to support the first point of common grace, which teaches that God reveals his “favorable attitude... toward humanity in general and not only to the elect,” in (as the Canons say) the “promiscuous[ly]” preached gospel message “that whosoever believeth in Christ crucified shall not perish, but have everlasting life.” The synod noted that the Canons speak of God’s good pleasure in commanding that the preaching of the gospel be brought to all nations, including many men who are not elect.

Though Canons II, 5 does indeed speak of God’s good pleasure in sending the gospel to all nations, a common grace to those nations makes no appear-

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2. Ibid. 8, 9.
The offer of the gospel is a well-meant offer.3 In response to the false charge that Calvinism cripples the basis for mission work, the fathers at Dordt were reasserting that God’s church must preach the gospel to as many as we are able, for it is God’s will, his good pleasure, to send out the gospel promiscuously.4 If common grace is to be found within the Canons, Canons II, 5 does not contain it.

The second place in the Canons that the Synod of Kalamazoo spotted common grace was in Heads III/IV, Articles 8 & 9. In these articles, the statements that those who hear the gospel are “unfeignedly called” and that what is “acceptable” to God is “that they who are called should come unto him” were taken by the synod to be expressions that the preaching of the gospel is grace to the hearers and (significantly) that it is God’s desire that all those who hear the gospel respond positively to it; the offer of the gospel to as many as we are able, for it is God’s will, his good pleasure, to send out the gospel promiscuously.4 If common grace is to be found within the Canons, Canons II, 5 does not contain it.

The third place that the Canons were used to support the theory of common grace was in Heads III/IV, Article 4. This article was cited in connection with the third point of common grace, which teaches that through a non-saving operation of the Holy Spirit, the unregenerate can perform civil good in God’s eyes. The portion of Canons III/IV, 4 that the Synod of Kalamazoo quoted was as follows: “There remain, however, in man since the fall the glimmerings of natural light, whereby he retains some knowledge of God, of natural things, and of the differences between good and evil, and discovers some regard for virtue, good order in society, and for maintaining an orderly external deportment.”8 According to the proponents of common grace, these “glimmerings of natural light” in natural man are what account for his ability to perform “good” in God’s eyes and are manifestations of God’s common grace.9

Notably, in their official declaration of the three points, the Synod of Kalamazoo failed to include the second half of Canons III/IV, 4, instead referencing only the first half of the article.10 This choice is strange, because the portion of the article that was omitted gives the reader some important information about the nature of the glimmerings of natural light:

“…But so far is this light of nature from being sufficient to bring him to a saving knowledge of God and to true conversion, that he is incapable of using it aright even in things natural and civil. Nay further, this light, such as it is, man in various ways renders wholly polluted, and holds it in unrighteousness, by doing which he becomes inexcusable before God.”11


3 Ibid. 10, 11.


6 Ibid. 14.

7 Hoeksema, Homer C. The Voice of Our Fathers.
Given its broader context, the article is saying in essence: “Make no mistake, man is dead in sin. Don’t confuse ‘some retention of the knowledge of God’ with goodness done ‘aright’ in his eyes, and don’t confuse ‘some regard for maintaining an orderly external deportment’ with goodness done ‘aright.’” Nowhere do the Canons suggest that these retained characteristics in natural man are pleasing to God. How can they be? Rather than being used to reflect a life of true knowledge, righteous, and holiness, “this light, such as it is, man in various ways renders wholly polluted, and holds it in unrighteousness, by doing which he becomes inexcusable before God.”

The Canons of Dordt do not contain common grace. Instead, they illustrate the comforting, timeless message of God’s sovereign, particular grace. In Jeremiah 6:16, the Lord commands, “Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls.” Those who twist the words of the confessions and depart from them say, “We will not walk therein.” Young people, will you walk therein? Read the confessions. Know the confessions. Love the comforting truths of the confessions. In those paths you will find rest for your souls.

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Christian Living
Rev. Heath Bleyenberg

A CRASH COURSE ON HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE

Have you ever felt that way? The way the Ethiopian eunuch felt as he was reading the Bible? He had his Bible open to Isaiah 53. He read it. But he couldn’t understand it!

Has that ever happened to you? You’re around the dinner table. After eating, your father opens the Bible and reads a passage. Then he asks some questions. Is it the case that you’ve ever said, “I don’t know what it means”? Or you’re in Young People’s Society. After reading the scripture passage, your young people’s leader begins to ask questions about the passage. Maybe you feel stumped. Is it the case that you’ve ever said or thought, “I don’t know what it means. It means what it says”? That’s something we all can relate to because it’s happened to all of us at one point or another in our lives.

But we don’t want that to happen! We want to open the Bible in school and at home and in the Bible society, and we want to understand what it means. After all, these are the holy scriptures we’re talking about: the revelation of God unto us in Jesus Christ our savior! Herein is contained truth. You know no truth at all unless you know Jesus, for Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” The Holy Spirit says concerning scripture, “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works” (2 Tim. 3:16–17). The Bible, as the object of our study, is from beginning to end the revelation of our Savior and the work he set out to do and accomplish to save us from our sins and bring us to glory. Therefore how important is the Bible! And how needful it is for us to understand it!

The theme for this article is “A Crash Course on How to Study the Bible.” It’s not easy. It takes work. But with time and diligent study, and through much prayer, God will give you that deeper understanding of the Bible that you so crave. We take our cue from this history of the Ethiopian eunuch from Acts 8.

Please keep in mind, the list that follows on how to study the Bible is by no means exhaustive. It is simple. It is basic. It is designed so that you may take this list and go to any passage of the Bible and apply it, and by God’s grace study the Bible and profit from it.

1. Read the Bible.

In the first place, and probably the most important; something so simple, and yet so profound; something that’s so easy to do, and yet at times it becomes a chore to do it; this is so very important in your study of the Bible—you have to READ the Bible! That’s what the Ethiopian eunuch was doing. He was reading the Bible. You will not be able to study the Bible, let alone understand it, if you do not read the Bible.

There are no excuses here for any of us. It doesn’t
matter if you don't like to read. You must read the Bible! I am not only referring to the time you read the Bible as a family around the dinner table; not only referring to the reading of the Bible in church twice every Sunday. Yes, those times of scripture reading are important. But I have in mind when it's just you sitting down and reading the Bible whenever that has to be, whether in the morning before you go to school, at night before you go to bed, or better yet, even multiple times throughout the day. But YOU have to set aside time every single day and read the Bible and have your own personal devotions.

You may not say, “But I don’t have time.” I suppose the Ethiopian eunuch could have said that too. “I don’t have time to read the Bible. I’m a man of great authority! I have so many responsibilities being in charge of all the queen’s finances, and I’ve got to get back to Ethiopia and get back to work.” I daresay the Ethiopian eunuch was much busier than any of us are. Yet what was the case for him? He found the time. He made the time to stop and take a break from his labor. He rested for a bit and read the Bible even in the midst of his busy schedule.

How do you study the Bible? First, you've got to read the Bible.

2. A Desire to Understand

Second, when you read the Bible, you have to desire to understand what you read. It doesn't do you any good if you read the Bible not exerting yourself to understand it and lacking the desire to comprehend the words you read.

Sometimes that happens to us. Have you ever opened a book and started reading a paragraph or two, maybe an entire page, then suddenly come to the realization, “I have no clue what I just read!”? Perhaps you were tired. Maybe your mind was elsewhere. One thing is certain—your desire to understand what you were reading was lacking. And for all the words you read, it simply never processed in your brain. Why? Because you got off on the wrong foot. You didn’t have the desire to understand. Similarly, when you read the Bible, you have to desire to understand what you read.

Isn’t that true with the Ethiopian eunuch? When he was reading Isaiah 53 he was thinking about the words he read. You can see him sitting in his chariot, and his mind was working! He was pondering the word of God. He was trying to understand it. And for that matter, that was the concern of Philip too. Philip approaches him and says, “Understandest thou what thou readest?” Philip was very concerned that the man was not only reading but understanding what he was reading. That ought to be our approach to the Bible: reading, but reading with knowledge and understanding.

3. Asking The Right Questions

In the third place, closely connected with the desire to understand what you read, in order to study the Bible profitably, you have to ask the right questions about the passage.

The danger is that you start asking the wrong questions: questions that may be somewhat relevant to the passage, but questions that really only distract and lead you away from the true meaning of the passage. For example, consider Job 40 and 41. In these two chapters God speaks to Job out of the whirlwind. God teaches Job, and us, of two great creatures—behemoth and leviathan. Usually the question we ask right away is, “What is the identity of these two creatures?” Some of the answers (or shall I say, speculations) you might hear are as follows. Behemoth—“It’s an elephant! No, it’s a hippopotamus! No, it’s definitely a brontosaurus!” With regard to leviathan, “A blue whale! No, it was a giant crocodile! No, it was some ancient sea creature!” Now, there is a place for that kind of a question and discussion. But my point is this: if that's the only kind of question you ask about Job 40 and 41, “What kind of creatures are these?” then you're missing the whole point! The right questions would be, “What is God’s purpose in speaking about these great creatures? Why would God so impress upon Job so many details about these creatures?” If you want to get at the meaning of a passage, you have to ask the right questions.

Consider the Ethiopian eunuch. He didn’t get sidetracked with wrong questions. He asked a good question. “Philip, who is the prophet Isaiah speaking of? ‘He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; and like a lamb dumb before his shearer, so opened he not his mouth: In his humiliation his judgment was taken away: and who shall declare his generation? But the Lord was pleased to bruise him, and was delighted with theábuse of his soul: because the transgression of my people was offered for him.’ Is the prophet speaking this of himself, or of another?” That’s a good question! It gets to the heart of the passage.

And you can never go wrong when you ask questions that have to do with Jesus. “What does this passage teach me about Jesus? What does it teach me about his obedience, about his suffering, his death, his resurrection, his ascension, his coming again on the clouds of glory? What does this passage teach concerning a particular blessing of salvation Jesus merited for me on the cross?” The key to profitable Bible study is to ask the right questions.
4. Compare Scripture with Scripture.

In the fourth place, in order to study the Bible you need to go to other places in scripture. Compare scripture with scripture.

That’s what Philip did with the eunuch in Acts 8:35. “Then Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus.” Notice, he began at the same scripture (Isaiah 53), implying that Philip also went to other passages of scripture: went to other passages in Isaiah that spake of the Messiah, then perhaps went to Moses, then went to the psalms and to the other prophets. What Philip did was the same thing Jesus did with the travelers to Emmaus. “And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:27). Philip did the same thing. He went to many other places in scripture to help explain and interpret Isaiah 53 to the Ethiopian eunuch.

This means that when you’re having a difficult time understanding a passage, go to other passages that shed some light on the one you’re studying. That’s what we call comparing scripture with scripture. Let scripture interpret itself. Don’t try to come up with some unique and novel understanding of a text. But always ask yourself, “Does what I think this passage teaches fit with the rest of scripture? Does it fit with the teaching of the rest of the Bible?”

To help you compare scripture with scripture, it’s very helpful to have a Bible with cross-references. The cross-references will point you to parallel passages, to other passages where the same word is used, to passages where the same doctrine is taught. If you don’t already have a Bible with cross-references, I would advise you to invest in one that does. In order to study the Bible, you must compare scripture with scripture.

5. Get Help.

So you’ve performed steps one through four, and yet you’re still having difficulty understanding a passage. Now is the time you get help! That’s what the Ethiopian eunuch did. He read the Bible and tried to understand it. He was asking the right questions. But he still had a hard time of it. God sent Philip to help him in his study. And Philip explained what the passage meant and made clear its meaning.

When you’re having difficulty ascertaining the meaning of a passage, don’t be hesitant to seek help. You may seek the help of commentaries. What did John Calvin have to say about this passage? What did Rev. Herman Hoekema write about this verse? You can ask your minister. Ask your elders. You can search in old volumes of The Standard Bearer or Beacon Lights for commentaries on particular verses. The Spirit of God has worked in the church of the past, and we do wrong if we would not stand on the shoulders of others. The Ethiopian eunuch received help in his study of the Bible, and so may we.

However, don’t get this one out of order. I have this listed at number five. Do not put this at number two, so that first you read the Bible and then instantly resort to the commentary without even bothering to try to understand it for yourself. That’s when somebody reads a passage and says, “Well, I read it. Now is the time for me to get help, and somebody else must tell me what it means.” That’s the wrong order!

I think that happens too often in our circles, where there isn’t enough critical thinking taking place first, and a person says, “Just give me the answer! Just tell me what the passage means!” And nowadays we have study Bibles—study Bibles with the Bible on the top half of the page and a commentary on the bottom half. Yes, they are very good and worthwhile commentaries. But do you see what the temptation is? The temptation is that I read the Bible passage on the top of the page, and I go right down to the commentary without even thinking about it for myself first.

So when you’re studying the Bible, there comes a time and a place when you may seek help. But don’t seek that help too quickly and without doing some of the hard work yourself first.

6. Pray.

Last, in order to study the Bible, you need to pray. I have this listed at the end, but it’s something that has to happen at the beginning too. Really, it ought to be interspersed throughout all your studying of the Bible. If you will ever be a serious student of scripture, you must be a man, a woman, of prayer. You have to acknowledge before God that unless God reveals the scriptures unto you, you will know nothing. Therefore pray unto God that he will open your mind, that he will open the scriptures, that you may be given the Holy Spirit, and that the Spirit would lead you in your study of God’s word.

A crash course on how to study the Bible. A few simple, basic steps we learn right here from Acts 8. Follow these steps and discover from God’s word treasures both old and new.

Rev. Bleyenberg is the pastor at Providence Protestant Reformed Church in Hudsonville, Michigan. This article is the text of a Young People’s Mass Meeting speech he delivered in April, 2019.
Before the Reformation, singing in church was often done by a group of performers instead of the whole congregation. The Reformers believed that the whole congregation should sing to give praise to God together and be an active part of worship.

By 1524, only seven years after the Reformation began, Martin Luther, working with a few others, put together a psalmal of eight songs, most of them based on the Psalms. This small pamphlet of songs became so popular, it was reprinted later that same year with even more songs. While not all of the songs in either of these collections were based on the Psalms, there was an emphasis on singing songs based on scripture passages, even if those passages weren’t the Psalms. While these songs could be sung in church, they were mostly intended for singing in the home or in small gatherings.

The demand for psalters and spiritual songs continued to grow, and the First Wittenberg Hymnal was published in 1524, now with 32 songs, with 24 written by Martin Luther. This hymnal has sometimes been called the “root of all Protestant song music.” It was the beginning attempt at creating a songbook for worship in Protestant churches.

This hymnal was intended for use both in church and outside of it, written with a four-part harmony for singing by the whole congregation. Martin Luther wrote in the preface that he wanted to provide the young people specifically with spiritual songs they could sing instead of worldly songs. Even at the very beginning, the psalmal numbers were intended not just for the adults in the church, but the children and young people as well.

Many of the psalmal numbers Martin Luther wrote are still in use in German psalters and hymnals today. In the Psalter we use in the Protestant Reformed Churches, we use one psalmal number from the ones Martin Luther wrote. This is his melody and versification of Psalm 46, Psalter #128, though the version we sing has been translated into English and the words have been reworked to fit better with the wording of the Psalm.
**BAPTISMS**

“Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of heaven.” Mark 10:14

The sacrament of holy baptism was administered to:
- Presli Kate, daughter of Mr. & Mrs. Dave & Abby VanTil—Hudsonville, MI
- Blake Beverly, daughter of Mr. & Mrs. Gerrid & Kylie Mouw—Hudsonville, MI
- Mason James, son of Mr. & Mrs. Dan & Annie Langerak—Hudsonville, MI
- Benjamin Reid, son of Mr. & Mrs. Chad & Mary Nienhuis—Hudsonville, MI
- Aubrey Kathleen, daughter of Mr. & Mrs. Jason & Katie Westra—Hull, IA
- Zoe, daughter of Bro. Ace & Sis Len Flores—Provident, Philippines
- Maxwell Robert, son of Mr. & Mrs. Zach & Jodi Poortinga—Southwest, MI

**CONFESSIONS OF FAITH**

“Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven.” Matthew 10:32

Public confession of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ was made by:
- Audrey Linker—Immanuel, Alberta, CAN
- Lanae Wierenga—Immanuel, Alberta, CAN
- Bro. Ace Flores—Provident, Philippines
- Sis. Len Flores—Provident, Philippines
- Faith Hoksbergen—Randolph, WI
- Caleb Buiter—Redlands, CA
- Wesley Feenstra—Redlands, CA
- Jori Baas—Southwest, MI
- Rachel Kamps—Southwest, MI
- Holly Kuiper—Southwest, MI

**MARRIAGES**

“For this God is our God for ever and ever: he will be our guide even unto death.” Psalm 48:14

Mr. Brandon Miersma and Miss Maria Korver—Hull, IA
- Mr. Joel Baker and Miss Mandi Andringa—Hull, IA
- Mr. Derk Burgers and Miss Katrina Regnerus—Hull, IA
- Mr. Ian Wierenga and Miss Elena Bos—Loveland, CO