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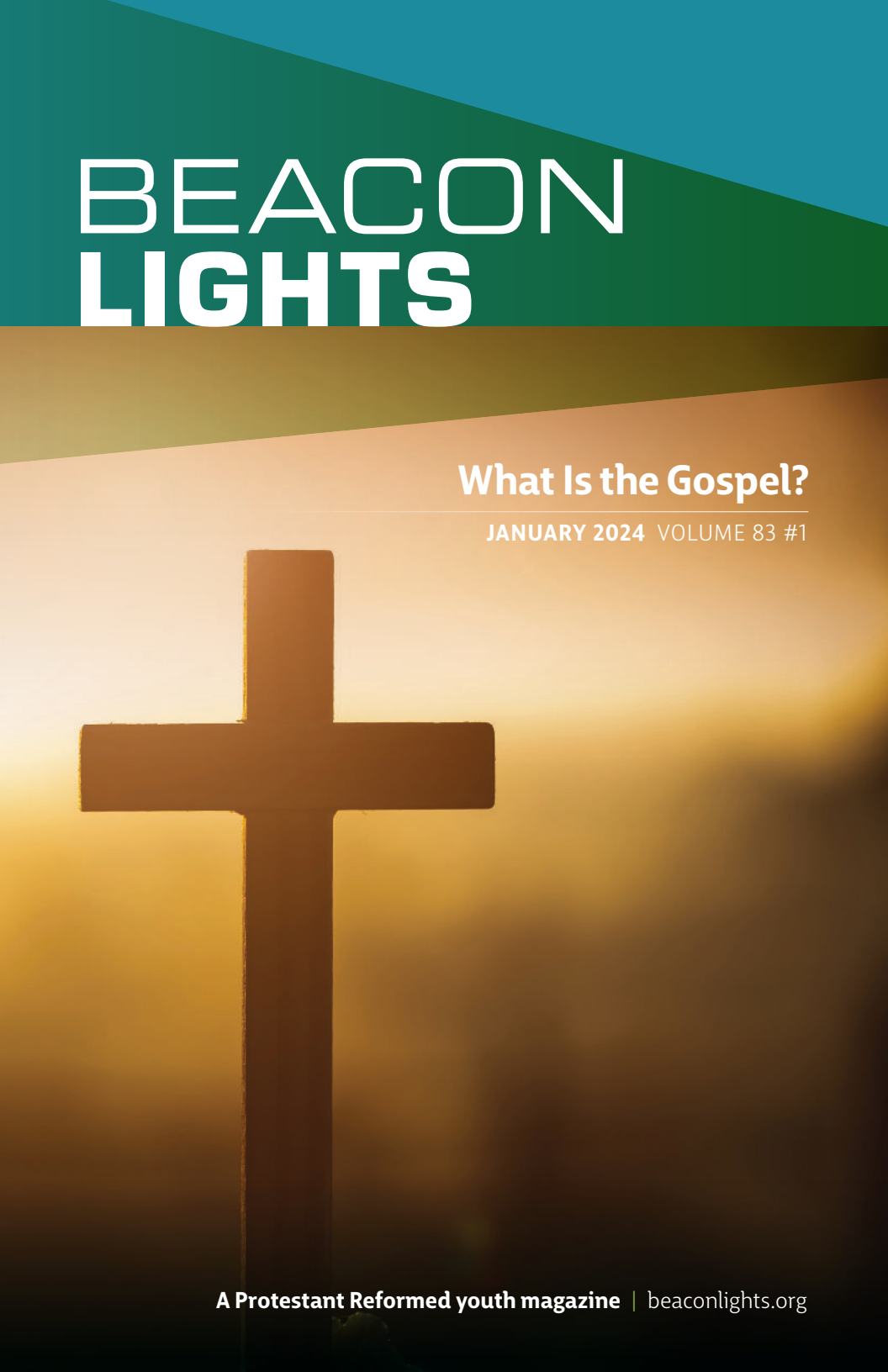

What Is the Gospel?

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BEACON LIGHTS

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THE ISSUE AT HAND Brendan Looyenga

What is the gospel?

What better way to begin the new calendar year of *Beacon Lights* than to start with the central message of the Christian faith? No matter how familiar the gospel might be to us, it remains the single most important topic to know, to understand, and to share with others who don't know Christ as their Lord. This truly is the "good news" that stands above any other message we can communicate to others.

As we consider the content of the gospel message, it's good to remember what we mean. While the word is sometimes used broadly to refer to the entirety of God's word (as in 1 Tim. 1:10–11), what is intended in this month's issue is its narrower use. Simply put, this narrow use of the word "gospel" is the good news "that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" (v. 15).[1] This means that Christ is the focal point of the gospel and his saving work on the cross is the heart of its message.

Much of the content in this issue of *Beacon Lights* is intended to round out this truth. Our feature articles address four key aspects of the gospel. Together these articles will explain Christ as the *object* of the gospel, preaching as the *means* by which the gospel is proclaimed, repentance and faith as the *calling* of the gospel message, and finally, the *warning* of God for those who hear the gospel and reject it in unbelief. This warning needs to be heard in our country today, as the heart of the gospel has been largely neglected by many churches and individuals who associate themselves with Christianity but have left "the faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3). None of this ought to leave us without hope, however. The devotional this month, which is focused on the "light" of the gospel, is good evidence that God is faithful to his word and will never leave or forsake those who live by faith.

This year we look forward to a new series of church history articles by Prof. Doug Kuiper and also welcome Jacob VanderKolk as a regular contributor to the devotional section of *Beacon Lights*. Thanks be to God for providing us with the opportunity to spread the gospel through printed word and the means to continue with this work as we begin the year afresh!

1 See also Cory Griess, "Is the Law Part of the Gospel?" *Standard Bearer* 94, no. 16 (May 15, 2018): 375–77.

The new American religion

Brendan Looyenga

About twenty years ago, a landmark study was published by sociologists Christian Smith and Melina Lundquist Denton, who set out to describe the religious attitudes and beliefs of American teenagers. The book they wrote, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*,[1] contains remarkable findings about the state of Christianity in America. My purpose in this editorial, however, is not to do a book review. Instead, the point I hope to make for readers is that confusion about the basic content of the Christian faith is prevalent in our country. So much so, in fact, that what most "Christians" believe really isn't biblical Christianity at all.

The most basic problem with the modern American version of Christianity is that it has forgotten the central message of the gospel. This message is simple: all who believe on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ in true faith and repent of their sins will be justified freely by God's grace and forgiven through Christ's sacrifice on the cross (Rom. 3:21–25). As we will see, this simple gospel message has largely been abandoned in favor of self-centered moralism that sees no real need for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In their book, Smith and Denton describe the mainstream view of religion in America as *moralistic therapeutic deism*, which I will abbreviate as MTD for the sake of simplicity. This form of religion is a melting pot of age-old Christian heresy mixed up with modern American individualism. We will

1 Christian Smith and Melina Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

break down this term in the next few paragraphs, but first it will help to know the five basic beliefs that many Americans teens associated with their faith. These are listed as follows:[2]

1. A God exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.

Seeing these core beliefs is helpful in trying to understand each part of the term *moralistic therapeutic deism*. Let's work backward through these parts, starting with deism and then moving to the two adjectives (moralistic and therapeutic) that describe this new form of American religion.

That mainstream "Christianity" has become a form of deism can be identified from the first and fourth points above. Remember that deism was a Christian heresy that grew out of the Enlightenment in late-seventeenth-century Europe. Deists (including many of the founding fathers of the United States) believed that God is like a "divine watchmaker" who designed and built creation but leaves it to run on its own after starting the process. They denied divine providence and saw little need for regular worship, prayer, or devotion to God.

Deists are usually secular in their outlook on society, meaning that they see little use for religion in day-to-day life. They also tend to be naturalistic in their view of Scripture, meaning that they deny miracles, including the virgin birth of Christ and the resurrection. What they emphasize is the moral order of creation, which is described as a sort of "natural law" for humanity's good. This is the basic framework that many self-proclaimed "Christians" in America use for their religion today.

What separates modern American religiosity from classical deism, however, is the two adjectives that Smith and Denton use as descriptors. The *therapeutic* aspect of MTD can be seen in the third point in their list. For those who subscribe to this worldview, the entire purpose of religion is focused on self. What God wants is for people to be happy, and anything that serves this purpose is "good." This version of religion is therefore almost entirely subjective and individualistic. What

2 Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 162–63.

is good for me might not be good for others—and that is just fine! The popular phrase "You do you" captures this perfectly. My faith and my beliefs are about me, not about God. My self-fulfillment is above everything else.

Along with being therapeutic in its focus, the religion of modern America is also *moralistic*. This aspect of MTD is evident from the second and fifth points in the list of beliefs cited above. A religion that is moralistic focuses on adherence to a list of rules that define what it means to be "good." The American version of these rules is simple. Good people are nice to others and fair in their dealings. They do their best not to harm anyone and are generally pleasant to be around. They certainly do not judge anyone else and are easygoing when it comes to matters of lifestyle and personal choice. And assuming they do their best to follow these rules, they can expect to go to heaven because God is pleased with "good people."

It should be evident from the description above that MTD is not Christianity. Any version of deism that denies the active involvement of God in his creation and the authoritative revelation of Scripture is a false version of the Christian faith. What is most alarming about MTD, however, is the complete absence of Jesus Christ in any of the core beliefs identified by Smith and Denton. Without Christ there is no gospel, and without the gospel there is no hope for sinners.

What has replaced the gospel of Jesus Christ in modern American religion is a return to law. This isn't necessarily the law of God found in the decalogue, but rather a loose set of rules about what it means to be a "good person." According to many self-proclaimed Christians today, Christ isn't really necessary. Was he a good moral example? For sure! Was he the most caring person who ever lived? Absolutely! But do I need the covering of his blood shed on the cross to be saved? Well…no, not really. The substitutionary atonement is an old Christian doctrine we discarded long ago, they say. We don't need that anymore. All we need is to be well-intentioned and good—at least most of the time. That is the way to heaven, where we can be happy and fulfilled forever.

Readers both young and old ought to be aware that this is the religious environment in which we live today. The teenagers who were interviewed for Smith and Denton's study are by now well into their thirties. What was a spiritual crisis among teens twenty years ago is very much the mainstream view among young and middle-aged adults today. We are truly in a post-Christian society that still claims the name of Christianity and has "a form of godliness, but [denies] the power

thereof" (2 Tim. 3:5). Any version of the Christian faith that lacks the gospel is a false version of the faith. And a false version of Christianity cannot save anyone, regardless of how well they follow the law or any other list of commands. There is only one hope: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved" (Acts 16:31).

There is also a warning here. When we speak to others at college or in the workplace, it is absolutely critical that we don't fall into the trap of moralism when we describe the reason for our hope (1 Pet. 3:15). What others first notice about us might be our visible prayer life before meals, our Sabbath day observance, or our unwillingness to participate in various forms of sinful entertainment. But these outward acts of thankful living are not what define the Christian faith. What defines true Christianity above all else is the gospel of Jesus Christ. When you have the opportunity to share your faith with others, don't start with "do's and don'ts." Start with the good news of salvation in Christ Jesus. That good news includes the confession that you are a sinner saved by grace in Christ, and that faith in Christ is the only way to heaven.

Above all else, never forget where to point when you talk about your salvation. The credit is not yours—you can't even claim the initiative for "accepting Christ." Salvation is all about grace, which always points upward to God. It's good to be thankful and to reflect to others what God has done for you. But make sure when you share your witness that the glory ends up where it belongs. "For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen" (Rom. 11:36).

Christ, the heart of the gospel

Jonathan den Hartog

Christ is the heart of the gospel. Without Christ and his perfect righteousness, there is no good news. There is no gospel. But to appreciate Christ and what he has done, we must consider his work against the dark backdrop of the fall and sin. *Our* sin. We must consider the Holy One against whom we have sinned.

Who is this God against whom we have sinned? This is the God who created a most beautiful heavens and earth; something so intricate, so majestic, so vast, so perfectly interconnected and intertwined as the universe we live in. From the tiniest particle smaller than an atom and the mysterious forces that govern it, to the vast heavenly bodies with the incomprehensible violent heat that comprises the stars, God made them from nothing and perfectly controls every last one of them, directing them to exist in space and pass through time (both of which he also created). At the head of that creation he placed man, who in himself is an astoundingly complex creature. God made man as one who could have sweet fellowship with him—a finite creature dwelling with the holy, perfect, infinite Creator.

And yet, man rebelled against this God of amazing power. Man listened to the lie of the devil, who said, "God is not right in what he said." Man said yes, where God said no. Can you think of anything more foolish? More horrific? A puny creature of the dust rebelling against the majestic Creator of this vast and glorious creation! Sin against an infinitely holy God. *Our* sin.

That sin plunged us into death. Life is to have sweet communion with this great God. Separation from that fellowship is death (Ps. 73:27). A man will not have any joy dwelling on this earth while knowing God is against him, though he may try mightily. In the

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short breath of this life, he cannot figure out how to live in true happiness, to have a purpose that is not vanity. He has abandoned and rejected the laws and ordinances of his Maker. Even if he wanted to live in obedience (which he does not), he cannot, because his lusts and his heart drag him continually to sin and keep him in bondage. He is in utter misery. Life on this earth quickly is shown to be vanity, to be drowned in entertainment, a hobby, or some other idol. Physical death is a terror to him because he knows it will bring him exposed before his Maker in judgment.

Because of sin, all seems lost. Even if we could start keeping God's law perfectly from this moment on, we couldn't restore that sweet fellowship with our Creator. We couldn't gain his favor and have his face shine upon us in love. We have an impossible debt of sin we've accrued against that awesome Creator. No unholy thing can dwell before God's face. Thus we stand by nature, outside of Christ: miserable, wretched, hopeless, with only eternal death before us. Do you see that, O sinner?

Against that awful, seemingly hopeless backdrop is Christ and his perfect work. Against that darkness of the world, the Light enters and shines gloriously (John 1:9). A man, who is also very God, humbles himself to walk this earth. In a way that seems entirely foolish to men, he suffers throughout his life and ultimately gives up his life on a cross, making the payment that we cannot. He does it in perfect love toward the Father, and in love for his people who had rebelled.

As Messiah, Christ accomplishes a most amazing salvation for his people. Those rebellious sinners have their debt paid by the one against whom they sinned. Christ's righteousness is imputed to them as a gracious gift. They didn't have to improve themselves in some small way before God would look upon them in mercy and impute Christ's righteousness to them. This is the "hinge on which salvation turns."[1] Not *my* obedience, but Christ's. Righteous by faith alone. Nothing I could ever do, not even the smallest thing, could earn that. What a breastplate against the attacks of the devil (Eph. 6:14)! This was what freed Martin Luther when he agonized over whether he had done enough to be saved. Faith in Christ's righteousness alone is what protects our heart when the devil would accuse us and fill us with doubt.

Yet that is not all. Not only does Christ erase our debt, but he also regenerates and sanctifies us. That work of regeneration in itself is

1 Alternatively, *"the principal ground on which religion must be supported."* John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 3.6.1, trans. Henry Beveridge (1845), https://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes.v.xii.html.

mysterious and amazing! The Canons of Dordt call this work "supernatural…delightful, astonishing, mysterious, and ineffable," meaning there are no words to describe it.[2] It is compared to God's act of creation. Remember how we previously have contemplated the amazing nature of creation? The new life we have in Christ is not unlike that!

As sanctified, we have been born again into life and are able—in a small way—to serve God and walk in his statutes. Remember how miserable it is to walk in wickedness. It may be enjoyable for a season, but man was not created to walk in those ways. Those ways destroy him and lead him to destruction. We were created to walk according to God's ordinances. Before our salvation, we couldn't walk in those ways even if we wanted to. But now God works the gracious blessing of sanctification as we go through this life.

This gracious renewal is no cause for pride, but further reason for praise as we see that we are "enabled to believe with the heart, and love [our] Savior."[3] We can do this without worrying if it makes us good enough to earn our Father's love, simply focusing on showing our gratitude to God for his great gift. And even more amazingly, our glorious Creator, in his marvelous way, is pleased to use our new life to work more miracles of new creation, which happens when others are gained to Christ by our godly conversation.[4] In heaven that work of sanctification will be completed to perfection, so that we will be able to serve God with *all* our heart, soul, mind, and strength—forever!

That is the gospel. Do you begin to see the wonder of Christ's work? Do you *know* that work by faith? Christ came to save sinners. As God reveals to us what he accomplished, we cannot but marvel. In eternity, we will sing, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain" (Rev. 5:12), because in all of eternity we will be unable to exhaust reasons for praise as we contemplate detail after detail of what God wrought in Jesus Christ to save his people.

2 Canons of Dordt 3–4.12, in *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005), 169.

3 Canons of Dordt 3–4.13, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 169.

4 Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 86, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 120.

The preaching of the gospel

Rachel Buiter

The gospel is the good news of our salvation in Jesus Christ. It is foundational that our entire salvation is from and of the triune God. God the Father eternally elects us, God the Son redeems us by his death on the cross, and God the Holy Spirit unites us to Christ and all his benefits by a living faith. In his sovereignty and wisdom, God has chosen to use *means* in the salvation of his people. The chief of the means of grace is the preaching of the gospel.

The church has been given the calling to proclaim this gospel. As this good news is proclaimed to us, the Holy Spirit works in our hearts, so that we believe and confess our faith in that gospel.

Romans 10:13–17 lays this out clearly for us. First, in order to call on the name of Jesus, one must believe in him. Calling on Jesus is a conscious activity of faith, something we neither would nor could do apart from this gift of God. Second, in order to believe, one must hear of Jesus and, by the work of the Spirit, hear Jesus himself. Man's word, full of man's working and man's attempts at righteousness, is useless. We need to hear the good news of the Son of God who came down from heaven to lay down his life for our sins. We need Christ's word, which says, "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). We need to hear our Shepherd's voice calling us his sheep to come and follow him (John 10). Finally, to hear, there must be a preacher. This preacher must be sent by the established church to preach these glad tidings to us.

One might, however, raise these objections. Is the Bible alone not good enough for salvation? Are not there some who come to faith without sitting under the preaching? Is God not powerful enough to save outside of an established church? Yes, God is all powerful and nothing is impossible with him. God certainly

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could have chosen to save his people by individual special revelation, or by mystical intervention in our lives, or by dramatic performances. And even if some may have come to conscious faith without sitting under the official preaching of the gospel, this exception would not disprove God's regular use of means. God has revealed that his ordinary plan is to establish and strengthen the faith of the elect through the means of the preaching of the gospel by ordained officebearers in his church.

This is evident in Matthew 28:19, when Jesus commissioned the disciples, and by extension the church, to go forth and teach all nations. We can also look at Peter's confession that Jesus was the Christ in Matthew 16. Jesus said he would build his church upon this confession, thus giving the disciples, the early manifestation of the church institute, the keys of the kingdom of heaven. The church exercises these keys when it proclaims the good news of Jesus, which was the heart of Peter's confession. The early New Testament church was faithful in its calling to preach the word, as we see in Peter's sermon on Pentecost, Philip's preaching to the Ethiopian eunuch, and Paul's missionary journeys. The church today fulfills this calling in the official proclamation of the gospel.

For the Jews who were looking for an earthly savior, Jesus was a stumbling block. For the Greeks who were fascinated with the wisdom of the world, the simple gospel was foolishness. Although men may despise and disdain the gospel of Christ, God is pleased to save his people by it (1 Cor. 1:17–31). Verse 18 calls the preaching of the cross "the power of God" unto those who are saved, and verse 24 further explains that Christ is this power. This closely parallels Romans 1:16, which calls the gospel "the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth." Putting these two texts together, we see that God uses the preaching of the gospel powerfully for the salvation of his elect people.

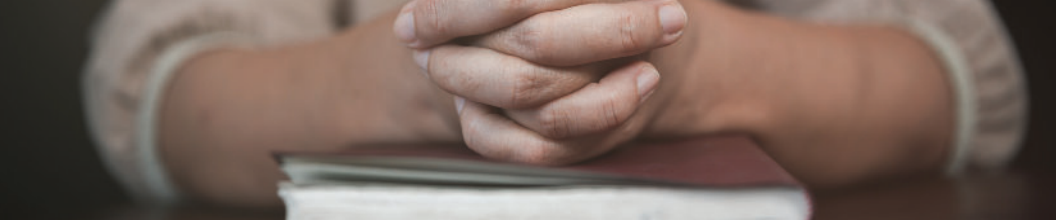
Notice that the preaching of the gospel is this: the good news of Christ Jesus. Christ is central to the preaching. Christ, and him crucified, is the content of the message (1 Cor. 1:23). Christ is the one who speaks to us in our hearts so that we believe and worship him.

There is then both a warning and a comfort to ministers of the word. This is a warning because a minister must preach Christ. He must be faithful to the word of God, expounding it to the congregation. The pulpit is not a place for man's words or man's opinions (1 Cor. 2:4–5). There are grave warnings in Scripture to all false teachers and those who seek to add to or take away from the word of God (Rev. 22:18–19). But this is also a comfort, because God is the one who works, not man. Imagine if the efficacy of the preaching

depended on the oratorical skills of the speaker. How weighty it would be if the minister himself needed to convince the congregation to believe! A minister must simply bring God's word, trusting that God will quicken the hearts of the elect and harden the hearts of the wicked. As Hebrews 4:12 states, the word of God is "quick, and powerful…a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart." God be thanked that the efficacy of the preaching does not depend on weak and sinful men, for who is sufficient for these things (2 Cor. 2:16)?

We ought not be ashamed of this truth, thinking that our ways are better than God's ways. We must cling to the word of God, maintaining the inspiration and infallibility of Scripture. As a church we must maintain the necessity of clear, exegetical, expository, antithetical, edifying preaching. We ought not be swayed by any who would tell us we need to revamp our worship service, exchanging the simplicity of the gospel for something more engaging. We also must be thankful for the faithful preaching of the word. Saints have died throughout history for the sake of proclaiming and holding to the truth. Even today, saints in other lands are not able to worship openly and freely. May we understand what a blessing we have and praise God for it.

 Photo: *courtesy of Dan VanDyke / Faith PRC*



The calling to repentance and faith

Michael Hoekstra

One of the most important aspects of the gospel is its emphasis on repentance and faith. This two-part emphasis is seen throughout the Bible and across different characters and events. Familiar stories include Paul on the road to Damascus, David turning away from the sin of adultery, and even Joseph's brothers coming to repentance years after their sin. Strikingly, much can also be learned where repentance and faith are absent, including the examples of Judas Iscariot in his plot against Jesus and Esau, who sold his birthright. Throughout most of these stories, aspects of faith and repentance are connected with good works, but they are also kept distinct, as we will see.

Although faith, repentance, and good works are often found together in Scripture, they are separate concepts. In his blog series "Preaching Repentance and Forgiveness," Rev. Martyn McGeown helps readers understand these distinctions. First, he defines repentance as being "a change of mind."[1] However, repentance does not end in changing the mind; it bears fruit. The initial fruit of repentance is that we turn away from our sin and we stop committing it. The additional fruit of repentance is that good works flow out of it.

While repentance is defined as a change of mind and a turning away from sin, the Heidelberg Catechism defines good works as "those which proceed from a true faith, are performed according to the law of God, and to His glory."[2] Notice that repentance is not in the definition of good works. McGeown explains this distinction by noting that the

1 Martyn McGeown, "Preaching Repentance and Forgiveness (1): Repentance," Reformed Free Publishing Association, April 27, 2022, https://rfpa.org/blogs/news/preaching-repentance-and-forgiveness-1-repentance.

2 Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 91, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 122.

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regret (or sorrow) we experience in repentance does not fulfill the law of God, which requires simple obedience.[3]

An example of this is seen in Esau's life. Esau sold his birthright for one morsel of meat and was rejected by God. Hebrews 12:17 says that "he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears." While Esau's reaction was one of regret, it was a regret over missing his chance at a blessing rather than a turning from his sin. Simply having regret does not make us right with God. Rather, there needs to be a proper regret with true sorrow and turning from sin to show the fruit of repentance.

The Bible makes another further distinction between repentance and good works. In Acts 26:20 the apostle Paul explains that the content of his preaching to the Jews was "that they should repent and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance." Likewise, Revelation 2:5 gives the command, "Repent, and do the first works." In both instances, repentance comes first, and good works follow. Though often seen together, repentance and good works are separate activities.

An especially clear example of this is seen in Paul's life. Paul describes his life before his conversion in Galatians 1:13 when he says, "For ye have heard of my conversation in time past in the Jews' religion, how that beyond measure I persecuted the church of God, and wasted it." Before his conversion, Paul did not do good works; rather, he persecuted and destroyed the church. He was, however, eventually converted and brought to a true faith, which led to repentance and finally good works. It is the fruit of his labor that we still see today in God's word, many books of which were written by Paul.

Although repentance and faith cannot be separated in the same way as repentance and good works, one ought to recognize the difference. The Catechism defines faith as a "certain knowledge, whereby I hold for truth all that God has revealed to us in His Word, but also an assured confidence, which the Holy Ghost works by the gospel in my heart."[4] McGeown describes repentance and faith as being two sides of the same coin: "By faith we look to Christ and by repentance we look away from sin."[5] Therefore, there

3 Martyn McGeown, "Preaching Repentance and Forgiveness (2): Classifying Repentance (a)," Reformed Free Publishing Association, May 2, 2022, https://rfpa.org/blogs/news/preaching-repentance-and-forgiveness-2-classifying-repentance-a.

4 Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 21, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 90.

5 Martyn McGeown, "Preaching Repentance and Forgiveness (3): Classifying Repentance (b)," Reformed Free Publishing Association, May 6, 2022, https://rfpa.org/blogs/news/preaching-repentance-and-forgiveness-

can be no true repentance without faith in Christ. A person can only hate sin and draw near to God if he loves God already (James 4:8). And a person can only love God if he has true faith.

An example of the relationship between faith and repentance can be seen in David's repentance after his sin with Bathsheba. David cries out in Psalm 51:1, "Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions." This is a heartfelt plea that can only come from true faith in God and from the heart of a repentant believer. Therefore, while faith and repentance are separate activities, they are always connected in the life of the believer.

The distinct activities of repentance and faith are connected under the broader theme of conversion, which is a necessity in the Christian life. In fact, according to Zacharias Ursinus' commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism, "Man's conversion in this life is so necessary, that without it no one can obtain everlasting life in the world to come."[6] The Bible teaches in John 3:5, "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." Being born (again) by "water and… the Spirit" is God's work of conversion, which produces repentance and faith in his elect children. To be saved, therefore, one *must* repent and believe.

Ursinus' commentary also describes the effects of conversion, which are that the believer has a true love for God and the neighbor. This love shows itself by the believer's desire to obey God's commandments without exception, to live in good works, and to convert others by leading them toward salvation.[7] These fruits of conversion demonstrate that God is working in us, through Christ and the Spirit. By God's sovereign operation we have faith, which leads to repentance and a life dedicated to good works.

Scripture is filled with stories that provide important examples of faith and repentance, from David to Paul. While understanding the difference between repentance, faith, and good works is significant, each of us needs daily to hear the call of the gospel to repent and believe. This daily work of conversion, graciously provided by our heavenly Father, is the true hope of the gospel.

3-classifying-repentance-b.

6 Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. G. W. Williard (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1956), 468.

7 Ursinus, *Commentary*, 474.

Chorazin: God's curse for rejecting the gospel

Mike Velthouse

It is called the "Evangelical Triangle"—three towns on the north side of the Sea of Galilee: Capernaum, Bethsaida, and Chorazin (KOR-a-zeen).[1] Jesus spent over seventy percent of his ministry in this region. The people here witnessed more than half of Jesus' recorded miracles. The area *should* have countless loyal followers of Christ, the most significant number of conversions, and be the center of the Christian world, right? No.

"Woe unto thee, Chorazin! woe unto thee, Bethsaida! for if the mighty works, which were done in you, had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes" (Matt. 11:21). Tyre and Sidon? Those were pagan Gentile cities! "And thou, Capernaum…it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for thee" (vv. 23–24). Really? *That* Sodom?

We are probably quite familiar with Capernaum and Bethsaida, as these cities appear in the Bible numerous times. Bethsaida existed on the northeast shore of the Sea of Galilee just to the east side of the Jordan River. Several disciples were from this town: Peter, Andrew, Philip, James, and John. Jesus performed several miracles here: giving sight to a blind man (Mark 8), feeding five thousand men (Luke 9), and walking on water (Mark 6).

Capernaum is even more well-known. It stood on the north side of the Sea of Galilee and to the west of the Jordan. This was Jesus' "hometown" when he visited the area. He probably stayed at the home of Peter's mother-in-law, whom he healed according to Matthew 8. In Capernaum, Jesus cured a centurion's servant (Luke 7). He

1 "Chorazin—The Cursed City," Israel Advantage Tours, accessed November 3, 2023, https://israeladvantagetours.com/chorazin-the-cursed-city/.

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also "healed many that were sick of divers diseases, and cast out many devils" here (Mark 1:34).

But what of this town, Chorazin? Chorazin gets mentioned out of nowhere in the "woe" passages above, only to disappear from Scripture by the very next verse.

Chorazin is two miles north of the Sea of Galilee, almost directly above Capernaum. Beneath its land is an abundance of volcanic rock, which made Chorazin a thriving agricultural center in the New Testament times.[2] This soil would cause the ground to heat up more quickly than other places, thus producing the highest quality grain. Chorazin flourished as a town. But Jesus pronounced a woe on it!

The curse on Chorazin has been realized through its failure to maintain existence throughout history.[3] Its inhabitants abandoned it in AD 135 when the Jews were expelled from Israel by the Romans. Although it was rebuilt in the third century, an earthquake destroyed Chorazin around the year 330. Repeated attempts to revive Chorazin as a sustainable town have failed over the past seventeen hundred years. What man attempts to establish, God can destroy at any time.

Nevertheless, some of Chorazin's history is alive today due to excellent archaeological work over the past several decades. Let's visit Chorazin and examine some fascinating things they have unearthed.

The remains visible today in Chorazin are thought to have come from the third century, before the devastating earthquake.[4] Historians estimate that Chorazin's population consisted of one thousand to fifteen hundred people. Visitors can see a cobblestone public courtyard and a ritual bath that would have been used for cleansing and purification before entering the synagogue for special feast days. Even ruins of tiny stone homes remind us that people lived here.

The masterpiece of Chorazin, however, is the synagogue, unearthed and ready for visitors to enter. Located in the center of town on an elevated site, its layout is similar to how it would have been during Jesus' visits. The entrance faces southward because the doors of all synagogues must face Jerusalem. As visitors approach, they must go up a twelve-step stone staircase. From the patio at synagogue level, they enjoy a spectacular view across a beautiful two-mile vista of rolling, green hills meandering down to the coast of the Sea of Galilee.

Inside the fifty by seventy foot synagogue is one large open hall where visitors will notice the stone benches that go around the entire

2 "Chorazin," Israel Advantage Tours.

3 "Chorazin," Seetheholyland.net, accessed November 3, 2023, https://www.seetheholyland.net/chorazin/.

4 "Chorazin (Korazim)," Holy Land Site, accessed November 3, 2023, https://www.holylandsite.com/chorazin-korazim.

perimeter of the room. No upper gallery exists, meaning that men and women were not segregated in this synagogue.[5] The middle of the room is open because the people sat as they listened to the teacher. If visitors walk to the back, they will find a cabinet shell that contained the Torah and all the scrolls that could be read. Looking more closely at the walls, one can see beautiful carvings in the stone: plants, local animals, stone lions, and even the head of Medusa. These artifacts indicate the influence of Roman and Greek paganism that even made its way into a Jewish synagogue. This paganism may have influenced the people in their unbelief of Jesus.

The crown jewel of this synagogue, however, is called The Seat of Moses.[6] Discovered in 1920, it is a decorated stone seat on which only the most authoritative teachers could sit and read the Torah to the people. Jesus references this piece of furniture in Matthew 23:2–8: "The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not…But all their works they do for to be seen of men."

Although the woes Jesus spoke were applied to all three towns, the application to Chorazin stands out because this denunciation is all the Bible tells us of this city. We can summarize the cause of these curses in one word—*unbelief*. Think of all the time Jesus spent in this area. Think of all the miracles he performed in the sight of these people. But still they did not believe in Jesus! Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom never had the extraordinary revelation that Chorazin did: God in the flesh. These pagan cities had the general revelation of creation, which still left them without an excuse for unbelief (Rom. 1:20). Yet Chorazin and the other towns had the living gospel. Although Chorazin has experienced this curse throughout history, all three cities will undergo a final judgment more terrifying than the judgment on Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom.

Let us heed this warning also. We have the word of God. We have the faithful preaching of the word each week. And we have so many means by which we can grow spiritually every day: books, devotionals, podcasts, Bible studies, and more. The book of John, along with the rest of Scripture, was "written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name" (John 20:31). By the grace of God, let us obey the calling to believe!

5 "Chorazin," Seetheholyland.net.

6 Wayne Stiles, "Chorazin—Sitting In The Seat But Missing The Message," Wayne Stiles blog, accessed November 3, 2023, https://waynestiles.com/blog/chorazin-sitting-in-the-seat-but-missing-the-message.

Blindness healed

Scott Van Uffelen

The current event that I have been asked about the most in the past few months has been the war between Israel and Palestine. Apart from questions about the history between the two nations, how this conflict started, and the role of the United States in the conflict, the most frequent questions I've received have been about the Jews themselves. Reports of antisemitism abound throughout the United States, especially because of the unrestrained rhetoric of social media. This article is an attempt to direct us toward an understanding of what is happening to the Jews, and why. I encourage all readers to continue this discussion in their homes and in their church societies.

A common theme expressed today is that the Jews deserve war, death, and perpetual unrest because they have been cursed by God for rejecting Christ as the Messiah and murdering him on the cross. His blood, it is said, is now on them (a reference to Matthew 27:25). This is a broad statement that bears analysis. Ask yourself, who exactly were the Jews who denied Christ and crucified him? We know it was not *all* the Jews from the simple fact that Jesus himself was a Jew, and so were his disciples, family, and close friends. So not *all* the Jews rejected Christ. But does that still leave open the possibility that those who did were cursed?

Paul, also a Jew, answers this question in Romans 11. His key point is that God did not reject the Jewish people whom he foreknew in Christ (v. 2), meaning that all members of the true, spiritual Israel will be saved. Jews as a people have not universally been rejected by God, as his unconditional covenant made with Abraham is still being upheld. To claim they are cursed is to go against the covenant God has made, making God a liar and his covenant promises to be untrue.

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Yet the Jewish nation, directed by their leaders, did reject the Messiah, and they have suffered ever since. Within one generation the judgment of God was revealed as Jerusalem was destroyed and the Jews were scattered. For almost two thousand years there was no homeland or nation for the Jewish people. There were deep and profound spiritual ramifications for their rejection of Christ as the Messiah.

Even then, however, there remains hope for salvation of Jews. In Romans 11:13–28, Paul uses the picture of grafting to explain how it is that both Jews and Gentiles will be saved. That picture is striking for two reasons. First, the "natural branches" (Jews) have not been forsaken but are still connected to the tree rooted in Christ (v. 16). Second, the Jews will be grafted in again, for the same God who grafts in the Gentiles is able to graft in the Jews if they do not persist in unbelief (v. 23). The gospel message is the same for both the Jews and the Gentiles. The difference is that the Gentiles will be more receptive to the message than will those who rejected the message firsthand.

The Jews truly stumbled over the stumbling stone, the rock of offense who is Christ (1 Cor. 1:23). And they were blinded by the Lord (Ex. 4:11). What is revealed is that there is an antithesis between the physical Israel and the spiritual Israel, the same as there is with the physical Gentiles and the spiritual Gentiles. Many of the Jewish people followed in the way of unbelief and pursued after their own righteousness before the law. Caught up in their own self-righteousness, they stumbled over Christ and would not accept him as the promised Messiah. What a clear and present warning for all who do not hear or see the clear message of the gospel, the message that justification before God is by faith in Christ alone apart from works.

There are Jewish believers in Christ as there always have been. The book of Acts records the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon both Jews and Gentiles, which followed sermons calling them to repent and believe. Acts also records conversions of prominent Jews, like Paul and Lydia, and the sending forth of the apostles as ambassadors of Jesus Christ throughout the nation of Israel. Peter continued to labor in Jerusalem as an apostle to the Jews, while Paul took the prominent role as apostle to the Gentiles. But even in his mission work, Paul first went to the synagogues, where the Jews were found, to preach. The message he preached was universally received and rejected by Jews and Gentiles alike. This has always been God's purpose, that some hearing the gospel will believe, while others hearing it will be blinded and hardened in their unbelief. "Even so then at this present time also there is a remnant

according to the election of grace" (Rom. 11:5).

True, the Jews were blinded by the unexpected form of Messiah that God sent, but the Lord loves to heal blindness. The conversion story of Saul is symbolized by his blindness and his needing to be restored to see the true light. Ananias didn't want to baptize this Saul of Tarsus, fearing him as a man opposed to God. But God told him, "Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel" (Acts 9:15). Straightway after he was healed, Paul preached Christ in the synagogue, proving the words and ministry of Jesus Christ. God gives spiritual eyesight so that we might see his mighty works throughout history and worship our enthroned Lord as our Savior.

More than asking questions about the Jews, the current situation should cause us to ask questions about ourselves. Do the Old Testament messianic prophecies speak to us? We are just coming through the time of year where our focus has been on the festivities, joys, and gifts of the season. But during this time, has the messianic prophecy of Isaiah 53 spoken to *our* souls?

> Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all. (vv. 4–6)

Jesus Christ, the Messiah, was a stumbling block to the Jews. Was celebrating the birth of our Messiah a stumbling block to me during my holiday parties and New Year celebrations? I ask myself, have I gone astray after my own self-indulgence, celebrating a Messiah whom I can unwrap when desired and then put back on the shelf, forgotten, even rejected, far away from my heart and mind? I need the gentle reminder that I did not ask for the gift I truly need, who was freely given to me by grace. What a joyous thing to celebrate, whether Jew or Gentile! Lord, give me eyes that I can see!

The light of the gospel

Jake VanderKolk

Every Christian has in some way felt the effects of the darkness of sin. We have all experienced being sinned against by others, such as being bullied, seeing conflicts between parents in the home, or being lied to. We also have all experienced the darkness of our own sin, whether it be temptation, addiction, pride, or greed. Sin always leads to separation from God, and throughout the Bible this is often portrayed as darkness. On the other hand, joy and peace with God are symbolized as light. It is only the light of the gospel that can bring sinners out of the darkness of their sin. God graciously pulls his elect out of darkness so that we are able to praise and thank him forever through our works.

As we start a new year, I thought that it would be fitting to focus on "that…Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world" (John 1:9). In order to get a better grasp of what this means, I've put together a collection of passages that contain the word *light*. Since there are so many instances of the word in Scripture, I had to leave the majority of them out, so I tried to focus on the most symbolically applicable uses of light. I left out all the Psalms and Proverbs because many of them are very familiar, and also because the Psalms are covered in the daily Psalter number.

Looking at the idea of light in the Bible from a bird's-eye view helps us to see how this theme plays out over and over throughout redemptive history.

God creates light on the first day of the week and it is good. Man then falls into spiritual darkness, needing spiritual light, which God metaphorically gives through the promise of Genesis 3:15. Later, when the Israelites are in the bondage of Egypt (darkness), God faithfully leads them out, and in the wilderness, by the light of a

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pillar of fire, he continues to lead them onward to the promised land. During the time of the kings, a light is prophesied to come out of the seed of David, and that prophecy is fulfilled in Christ. As Christ lives on the earth, he spreads this spiritual light of hope among the Jews, and during the time of Paul and the apostles, this light spreads even farther to the Gentiles.

Spiritually, we are both blind and dead, but Christ shines light into our hearts, making us able to see and also to live, capable of walking in the light. As Christians, we are called to walk in the light and to spread the message of light across all the earth.

This month's devotional starts with the first chapter of the Bible and closes with the last chapter of that same inspired word, showing that the idea of light really does span the entirety of Scripture. Revelation 22 depicts the new heavens and earth as a place without darkness and night. It is a perfect, sinless place, where God is the light. As we start this month, I hope that we can all focus on the light of the gospel and the hope that is found in its promise, which is the future light of heaven.

"*And there shall be no night there; and they need no candle, neither light of the sun; for the Lord God giveth them light: and they shall reign for ever and ever*" (Rev. 22:5).

Date	Read	Study	Psalter
Jan 8	Gen. 1:1–5	In verse 4 God saw that the light was good. In what ways do you think that light is good?	384
Jan 9	Ex. 10:21–23	God withheld light from the Egyptians. Do you think this is more severe compared with the previous plagues?	22
Jan 10	Ex. 13:17–22	How does verse 22 comfort you as you walk as a pilgrim on this earth?	213 (vv. 3, 5)
Jan 11	1 Kings 11:36; 2 Kings 8:19; 2 Chron. 21:7	God said he would not destroy the tribe of Judah because he promised a light to David. What are some ways that we see God preserving this line of David and also his promise?	90 (v. 3)
Jan 12	Neh. 9:11–19	"The cloud departed not from them" (v. 19). Recall some events from your own life. How has God never departed from you?	334
Jan 13	Job 2:13; Job 3	How are earthly trials and darkness similar?	247

Jan 14	Isa. 5:20–30	What is God's warning to those who willfully call darkness light?	146
Jan 15	Isa. 42:1–7, 16	How do these prophecies of Christ eventually come to pass?	268
Jan 16	Isa. 50:10–11	The man who tries to light his own fire will have sorrow, but we must trust in the Lord. What are some ways that you might try to light the fire of your own salvation without God?	35 (v. 4)
Jan 17	Isa. 60:1–5	How is the antithesis portrayed in these verses?	325
Jan 18	Isa. 9:2; Matt. 4:12–17	Is it significant that the first words of Jesus' ministry are a call to repentance? How is repentance portrayed in verse 16?	188
Jan 19	Matt. 5:1–16	What are some ways that we might be tempted to hide our light under a bushel?	264 (v. 7)
Jan 20	Matt. 6:19–23; Luke 11:33–36	How are Jesus' teachings in verses 22–23 a restatement of verses 19–21?	246 (v. 2)
Jan 21	Matt. 17:1–9	Jesus' face shone like the sun because the glory of God was in him. What are some ways that we shine when the Holy Spirit is in us?	311
Jan 22	Luke 1:67–80	In verse 79, how is John the Baptist's calling to give light to those who are in darkness similar to the calling "to guide our feet into the way of peace"?	322
Jan 23	John 1:1–5	What are some ways today that the darkness of the world does not comprehend the light?	382 (v. 5)
Jan 24	John 1:6–18	How can we be witnesses of the light (Jesus Christ)?	267
Jan 25	John 3:14–21	What are some ways that even Christians love the darkness rather than light?	141
Jan 26	John 5:33–36	How is Christ's light greater than anyone else's?	383
Jan 27	John 8:12–20; 9:5	What does "the light of life" look like in your life?	153 (v. 4)
Jan 28	John 11:9–10	What are ways that we can walk in the light so that we avoid stumbling?	40 (v. 2)

Jan 29	John 12:20–36	How do spiritual highs in our life compare to the disciples walking physically on the earth with Jesus?	242 (v. 2)
Jan 30	John 12:37–50	How does the act of believing repel the darkness in our lives?	27
Jan 31	Acts 9:1–6	How does the conversion of Saul symbolize the regeneration of every Christian?	34 (v. 6)
Feb 1	Acts 26:12–23	Do you have a personal testimony like Paul's that can help in your witness to others?	163 (v. 2)
Feb 2	Rom. 13:11–14	How is putting on the armor of light the same as putting on the Lord Jesus Christ?	73
Feb 3	2 Cor. 4:3–6	What are some ways that you see the shining of God's light in your own heart?	7
Feb 4	Eph. 5:6–14	How is sanctification similar to walking in the light?	1
Feb 5	1 John 1:5–7	How does walking in the light enable us to have better fellowship with each other?	318 (v. 6)
Feb 6	1 John 2:8–11	Why does John make such a stark contrast between the light and darkness in this passage?	71
Feb 7	Rev. 22:1–5	How is the picture of heaven symbolic of the Christian's life with God, even yet while we are on earth?	317

Introduction

Prof. Doug Kuiper

In 2023 we met men who played a significant role in ancient church history (AD 100–590). This year we will skip over the medieval era (AD 590–1517). During this era of church history, some notable men defended and positively developed truth (Ratramnus, Gottschalk, Anselm, and Thomas Bradwardine). Others were pre-reformers (John Wycliffe, John Hus, Jerome of Prague, and Girolamo Savonarola) who helped prepare the church for the great sixteenth-century Reformation. To study them would certainly be profitable.

But we are Reformed, and we owe a huge debt to the reformers who came after the medieval era. Yet we know only a few. Other than Martin Luther and John Calvin, which names can you think of? Do you know who the first "Reformed reformer" was, and his successor? Do you know who succeeded Luther or Calvin? Do you know the names of other first-generation reformers in England and Switzerland?

Getting to know sixteenth-century reformers better

Let's spend 2024 getting to know better the first- and second-generation reformers, those who lived and worked in the sixteenth century.

The first Reformed reformer was Ulrich Zwingli, who was succeeded by Heinrich Bullinger. They worked in Zurich (German Switzerland). In Germany, Luther was succeeded by Philip Melanchthon; in French Switzerland, Calvin was succeeded by Theodore Beza. Other men in Switzerland (Martin Bucer, John Oecolampadius, William Farel, Pierre Viret, and Peter Martyr Vermigli) and England (Thomas Cranmer, John Knox, Miles Coverdale, Nicolas Ridley, and Hugh Latimer) are also worthy of note. We will meet some of them, and perhaps others, this year.

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We want to focus on men we don't know as well. So we will mostly pass by Martin Luther and John Calvin—apart from what I say in the rest of this article.

Martin Luther (1483–1546)

With good reason, anyone who thinks of the sixteenth-century Reformation thinks of Martin Luther. Lutherans, Reformed, Presbyterians, and Baptists all appreciate the work he did.

First, Luther emphasized the sole authority of Scripture. At the Diet of Worms in 1521, he made clear that he would bow to the authority of Scripture alone and that he did not view the pope as having authority. To be clear, some think of Luther as an independent thinker who would not acknowledge any other authority. That is not true. Scripture was his authority, and the pope was the head of a church that had departed from God's word.

Second, Luther emphasized justification by faith alone. At first he attacked only some of Rome's practices (indulgences and its view of penance), but later he saw that at the heart of Rome's teaching is a wrong view of how man becomes righteous before God. Rome teaches justification by faith and works. Luther emphasized that Christ, as an all-sufficient savior, provides all our righteousness and that we are justified by faith alone, not faith and works.

In sum, Luther's contribution to the sixteenth-century Reformation is that of attacking and tearing down Rome's institution, doctrines, and practices.

For his stand, Luther expected to be arrested and imprisoned, or even killed, at any time. After all, Rome had killed most pre-reformers because of their opposition to Rome. But Luther was never arrested. The papacy in Luther's day was weak and the German nobles and princes supported Luther. When the bull (papal decree) of Luther's excommunication was publicized in Germany in 1521, the people didn't regard it. As a result, Luther was able to live for many more years and continue his work of reforming the church.

When Luther died in 1546, Philip Melanchthon succeeded him. Let's meet Philip next time.

John Calvin (1509–1564)

Whereas God used Luther to tear down what must be removed (Rome), he used John Calvin to build up the Reformed faith. First, Calvin was different from Luther in that he developed Reformed teaching far beyond the idea of justification by faith alone. Calvin developed the Reformed doctrines of sanctification, predestination, and the church. His *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (the fifth edition was published in 1559) testify to that.

Second, Calvin laid a better exegetical foundation for the Reformation. In other words, Calvin explained the Scriptures better than Luther. To be

clear, Luther's exegesis of Scripture was doctrinally good. But Calvin understood the original languages (Hebrew and Greek) better than Luther and worked more closely with the grammar of the text.

Third, Calvin took a different approach to worship than did Luther. For Luther, anything that Scripture did not clearly forbid was permitted. For Calvin, anything that Scripture did not clearly command in worship was not permitted. This difference had many practical results we see even today in Lutheran and Reformed worship.

Finally, Luther and Calvin both taught sanctification and insisted on personal godliness. In Calvin's Geneva, however, the matter was more strongly enforced, for Calvin insisted that the church's elders would discipline those who lived in ungodliness. This matter of church government was also a significant difference between Lutherans and the Reformed.

Enough on Luther and Calvin. Many good biographies of these men can be found, even for younger readers. Now let's meet other men, like Philip Melanchthon.

Church news

Ruth Baas

Baptisms

Clara Jean, daughter of Ryan & Joni Buiter Doon, IA

Sydney Ann, daughter of Joey & Sherry Mantel Doon, IA

Laney Claire, daughter of Trevor & Katie DeVries Grace, MI

Harper Mae, daughter of Seth & Rosie Engelsma Grandville, MI

Verity Grace, daughter of Rev. & Keri Mahtani Hope GR, MI

Charlotte Rose, daughter of Stephan & Rachel DeVries Hull, IA

Simeon James, son of Joel & Mandi Baker Hull, IA

Pippa Ruth, daughter of Brad & Taylor Ophoff Southeast, MI

Harper Noelle, daughter of Patrick & Madalyn Medemblik Unity, MI

Isla Elizabeth, daughter of Aaron & Tessa Talsma Unity, MI

Wyatt James, son of Grant & Jessica Lenting Unity, MI

Crew Henry, son of Jaycen & Kendra Klamer Zion, MI

Jettson J., son of Jonny & Katie Dykstra Zion, MI

Theodore David, son of Josh & Morgan Bouwkamp Zion, MI

Confessions of faith

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Josie Timmerman, Raeanne Brummel, Evan Korhorn, Seth Engelsma, Natalie Langeland Georgetown, MI

Reinhard Goosen Lacombe, Alberta, CAN

Emma Scritchfield Loveland, CO

Ethan Gurevich, Nathan Gurevich, Aaron Gurevich, Andrew Tolsma Pittsburgh, PA

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Brendon Kuiper, Kayla Kuiper, Kaleigh Lubbers, Evan Petroelje Southwest, MI

Anthony Griess, Zach VanBaren Trinity, MI

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