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Authentic Faith

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BEACON LIGHTS

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Contents

4 **Letter to the editor**

EDITORIAL

5 **When faith is real**
Brendan Looyenga

FEATURE ARTICLES

8 **O be careful little tongue**
Rev. Michael De Vries

11 **United under one faith**
Garrett Eriks

14 **An irresistible letter**
Renae Baas

17 **Called to be living waters**
Evan DeJong

STANDING RUBRICS

20 **Ask Onderwijzer**

21 **Be ye faithful, even unto the end**
Current events Scott Van Uffelen

23 **The life of Elijah**
Devotional Jake VanderKolk

28 **Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531)**
Lesser-known reformers Prof. Doug Kuiper

31 **Church news**
Ruth Baas

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Dear editor:

This is to express appreciation for the editorial in the April 2024 issue of *Beacon Lights*, "In defense of infant baptism." It is doctrinal. It defends an important truth of the Reformed faith and life. It is polemical.

We need such writings, young as well as old.

The editorial might well have added that the error of re-baptizing an adult, who was baptized as an infant, is a sin—a grievous sin. This is the testimony of the Belgic Confession, in article 34: "We detest the error of the Anabaptists, who are not content with the one only baptism they have once received, and moreover condemn the baptism of the infants of believers," etc. "Anabaptists" are those who are baptized "again" as adults after initially being baptized as infants. I urge the young people to read all of article 34 of the Belgic Confession.

Re-baptism is not a valid administration of the sacrament at all, but a serious misapplication of the sacrament. In fact, the idea of re-baptism ("anabaptism") leaves the one who is re-baptized "*un*-baptized," that is, not baptized with the sign and seal of the sacrament whatsoever. The idea of the re-baptism is that it washes away the water of original baptism as an infant altogether, as though that baptism was invalid. In fact, the second, purported baptism is invalid. This leaves the re-baptized person un-baptized, that is, lacking the sacrament.

Re-baptism is distortion of one of the marks of the true church, the right administration of the sacraments.

Cordially in Christ,
Prof. David J. Engelsma

When faith is real

Brendan Looyenga

How do you know that you have faith? And if you think that you do have faith, how do you know that it's *real*, not just something that comes with growing up in a Christian home?

These are good questions for every believer, but perhaps especially for young people who are on the brink of making confession of faith. Saying to the elders and the church "I believe" is a significant thing. But at the end of the day, they will largely be trusting that you are expressing a real, heartfelt confidence in Christ and that you mean what you say. There are plenty of hypocrites who have taken on the vows that come with making confession of faith only to turn their backs on Christ while walking away from the church. What they said with their words, they denied with their actions.

I don't raise any of these questions or concerns in order to discourage young people from making confession of their faith in Jesus Christ. Being prepared to confess your faith publicly isn't a holiness contest or a sign that you've achieved complete mastery of biblical doctrine. But before you go to the consistory room to make your confession and seek full membership in the church, you should be able to demonstrate to the elders that your faith is real, by which I mean *authentic*.

This was James' primary concern when he wrote his letter to the church. He apparently saw the same thing we see today: people who professed faith in Christ but then fell away. Perhaps even worse, he knew members of the church who professed faith but were content to live just as they had before. There was simply no evidence that their

confession was authentic. James was in no way contradicting Paul or any other apostle by connecting the verbal expression of faith to the need for evidence (James 2:14–18). He was simply pointing out how we are to know when faith is real.

There is a big difference between words and evidence. This was a point that Jesus was making when he confronted the scribes over the matter of his divinity, which he expressed by claiming the right to grant forgiveness of sins (Mark 2:1–12). Here is the question he asked them: Is it easier to say to a paralyzed man "Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Arise, and take up thy bed, and walk?" (v. 9). The obvious answer is that saying someone is forgiven is easy because no one can prove it, while telling a paralyzed person to get up and walk requires the evidence of a miraculous cure. Jesus connected the two by both forgiving the man and healing him. He justified his right to forgive sins by demonstrating his power to heal. Evidence backed up his words, showing that Jesus' claim to be God was authentic.

Throughout the book of James we find a list of "test cases" that put before us the same question over and over: *Is your faith real?* Whether it is the matter of how we view other people, how we use our tongues, or how our selfish desires manifest themselves to others, these tests of real faith put us squarely in front of the mirror of God's word. When we view our lives in the light of Scripture, what do we see? Authentic faith? Or a counterfeit?

Some of the feature articles in this issue will explore James' concerns in more detail, so let's leave the specifics aside for a moment. My concern here is to address James' closing statement in chapter 1:27, which is as follows:

> Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.

At first glance this seems like an oddly narrow test for "pure religion." Is caring for widows and orphans, along with personal holiness, all we need to be concerned about when testing the authenticity of our faith? The answer, of course, is no. This isn't what James is saying, so we need to dig a bit deeper.

What James has in his sights with his statement about "pure religion" is a summary of what authentic faith looks like. He is essentially saying that we can put many of the various pieces of evidence for faith into two main categories. The first category has to do with how we understand ourselves in relationship to other people. The second category has to do with the location of our heart.

Starting with the first category, we can ask ourselves a few key questions. Do I see myself as a cut above the rest? Or perhaps just "the first among equals"? Or do I, by God's

grace, look around me and humbly "esteem other[s] better" than myself (Phil. 2:3)?

How we view ourselves relative to others is often a reflection of how we understand our place before God. When my perspective is like that of the Pharisees, what I see in myself is someone whom God probably should love because I'm pretty good—at least compared to others. But when my perspective matches that of the apostle Paul, who saw himself as the greatest of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15), I can only marvel at the grace of God in saving someone like me. It also means that when I look around, I see everyone else as better and more deserving of God's grace. That is true humility.

True humility that flows from authentic faith in the saving work of Jesus Christ manifests itself concretely. One who knows the grace of God in its deepest sense will seek to serve others around them, especially those who might be deemed "unworthy" of that service. That's who the orphans and widows were in James' day. They were weak and pitiful outcasts of society who couldn't possibly return a favor done for them. Anyone who was willing to care for widows and orphans could have no other motivation than charity. As 1 Corinthians 13:4–5 reminds us, charity is longsuffering, kind, and humble, not self-seeking or proud. This sort of behavior is good evidence that one's faith is authentic.

The second test of pure religion that James mentions is that one keeps himself "unspotted from the world." In the narrower sense this is a reference to personal holiness, though that can be a tricky test for the authenticity of faith. How often do we project outward holiness while in our hearts we are not right with God? This may be a result of secret sins that we are good at hiding from others in order to avoid the repercussions of getting found out. But even more dangerous is the possibility that we view our own personal holiness as the way to earn God's favor. Just because we look good outwardly doesn't always mean our faith is real.

So what value is this second test for authentic faith? The answer to that question quite literally gets to the heart of the matter. In his earthly ministry Christ was quick to reach this point precisely because he was so often confronting groups of people, like the scribes and Pharisees, who believed their outward holiness was what would get them to heaven. In response to this error Christ reminded them, "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Matt. 6:21). If our treasure is found in the material riches, entertainment, social status, or sinful pleasures of this world, that is where our heart will be found. When these "spots" begin to show in our lives, evidence has emerged that our hearts are not right with God.

This leads us to the main question: Is your life aligned with your confession, or do you make a claim to faith that doesn't have much evidence to back it up? Your answer matters a lot because wearing the name "Christian" means that you represent Jesus Christ to others you encounter. This point is made effectively by Paul Tripp:

> As ambassadors, we are not only called to speak the truth but to be real, living, flesh-and-blood illustrations of it. We are not just God's spokespersons; we are examples. We are not only God's mouthpieces; we are his evidence. Our lives testify to the power of his grace to transform hearts. It is seen in the way we display the love God has shown to us.[1]

Looking in the mirror of God's word is hard, which is why we need the grace of forgiveness in Christ each and every day. But that same grace, which is also *power* to transform us into the image of Christ, is what produces the evidence that our faith is authentic. When the evidence is present, there can be no doubt that your faith is real.

1 Paul David Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2002), 134.

O be careful little tongue

Rev. Michael De Vries

What an amazing gift is the gift of speech! The tongue is a very small part of the human body, but what a wonderful, significant member of the body it is. That little member, the tongue, enables us to

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communicate, sharing our thoughts, our experiences, our knowledge, and our wisdom to the edification of our fellow saints and to the praise of our God. Parents eagerly strain to hear the first "Dada" or "Mama" from the lips of their young child. How it warms the heart to hear that "Amen" from the tongue of the toddler at the end of family devotions. How sweet to hear little ones singing "Jesus Loves Me."

But another song we frequently teach our children has the line, "O be careful little tongue what you say," for we are inclined by nature to use our tongue to speak all sorts of lies and deceit, which the Heidelberg Catechism labels "the proper works of the devil."[1] In Romans 3 the apostle Paul describes our natural depravity, also with a view to our tongues. Referring to various Old Testament passages, he reminds us, "Their throat is an open sepulchre; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips: whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness" (vv. 13–14). Truly, there is no sin mentioned in any of the ten commandments that is not committed by the evil tongue! James addresses this sad reality in some detail in chapter 3 of his epistle, summing it up in verses 8–10:

> But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be.

Obviously the line from the children's song must be taken seriously: "O be careful little tongue what you say!"

Our hope must be in God—the true and living God who speaks. He speaks within himself as the triune, covenant God. By the word of his mouth he created all things: "For he spake, and it was done; he commanded, and it stood fast" (Ps. 33:9). Far more wonderfully, God speaks in the gospel of Christ, the Word made flesh who dwelt among us! By the Spirit of Christ we are given new life, and we are called out of darkness into his most marvelous light. We are united to our Savior by the bond of a true and living faith. We are new creatures in Christ that we might declare God's praises in gratitude now and forever!

Yet by nature we are children of our father the devil, who was a liar from the beginning. It is here that we find the struggle, the real battle of faith. There is great power in our speech whether for good or evil. The tongue can encourage, comfort, complement, and put at ease. Or it can fill with fear, sorrow, pain,

1 Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 112, in *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005), 133.

and anger. No doubt we remember the childhood rhyme, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names can never hurt me." But we know that is not really true at all. Cruel names and words hurt others. And the hurt goes deeper and lasts longer than the pain of a stick or stone! James compares the tongue to fire, emphasizing the horrific damage it can do: "Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth!" (3:5). We all know that a carelessly tossed match can spark a monstrous, raging wildfire. One carelessly tossed word can do the same damage from a spiritual point of view, in our home, school, or church, or even in the whole world!

The untamed tongue will spread lies about God and his word by spouting false doctrine. The unruly tongue will speak evil of the brother and ruin his reputation. The backbiting tongue will exaggerate or embellish the truth (or half-truths) to the hurt of the brother. How quickly we can speak to blame someone else and excuse ourselves. How easy it is to gossip about others. How inclined we are by nature to spread stories, sometimes true, sometimes untrue. With the untamed tongue we can cruelly tease or bully someone. In a fit of temper, angry, rebellious, and even profane words can be shouted. Today this hurtful speech can be spread instantaneously—and often thoughtlessly—around the world in a text or email. The experience and enjoyment of trust, unity, peace, and love with brothers or sisters in the Lord, or even with family members, can so quickly be harmed or destroyed. And through this Satan gloats in delight at the devastation he has instigated.

Is it hopeless? James declares that the tongue can no man tame. Our best intentions or sincere resolutions are of no avail. No influences of political correctness, polite society, or common grace are able to restrain the evil tongue. Our only hope and only escape from the evil power of the tongue is in Christ. We can be delivered from sins of the tongue by the saving work of Christ and the power of his Spirit. With sincere sorrow and in heartfelt repentance we flee to the cross of Christ. Christ's atoning death made perfect satisfaction for all the sins of the tongue committed by his people. The cleansing power of his shed blood washes away these guilty stains of the untamed tongue. And the power to turn from these sins of the tongue is also found in Christ alone, for he is the way, the truth, and the life. Here, too, faith is the victory that overcomes the world!

As the children of God, we receive the spiritual strength to speak "the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15). Through the working of Christ's Spirit, love more and more governs the use of our tongues. We love and confess the truth of God found in his word. And increasingly we "speak every man truth with his neighbour: for

we are members one of another" (v. 25). Speaking in love, we will speak thoughtfully, carefully choosing our words. Sometimes we will say little or nothing at all, taking heed to the Scriptures to "be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath" (James 1:19). A timely quote of Elisabeth Elliot is this: "Never pass up an opportunity to keep your mouth shut."

Speaking the truth in love, we seek the spiritual welfare of others. In humility and love we will encourage, warn, exhort, and even admonish. Always the use of our tongues must seek the goal of edification, that is, building up of others. Paul says that our mouths should speak "that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers" (Eph. 4:29). May the Lord so enable us by his grace and Spirit to use our tongues for his glory and praise and the welfare of others.

United under one faith

Garrett Eriks

Imagine you are entering your church building on a Saturday evening for an event. As you walk in the door, two young adults come in the doors on either side of you. On your left, a young man named Blake opens the door, and you see he is wearing khaki pants, a brand-new button-up shirt, and a nice pair of Dude shoes. His short hair is neatly spiked up and he acts confident. On your right, a young woman named Ava opens the other door, and you see that she is wearing a worn-out pair of black pants and a dress shirt that is considered out of style. Her shoes have holes in them, and she seems a little shy.

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As you look for a table to sit at, you find that the only one left is with a group of people that includes Blake and Ava. As the event progresses, you find that Blake is an extremely outgoing person and is quick to contribute to the discussion being held. Ava is quieter, and she is harder to converse with. She seems slightly awkward and doesn't contribute to the spiritual conversation as much as Blake.

Based on those character descriptions, who would you rather be around, and who would you respect more? If you are like me, you would rather be around the fun, engaging individual instead of the quiet one. We often draw conclusions and respect people more or less based purely upon what they look like and how mature they seem. Respect of persons is something we all need to think about.

What does respect of persons mean?

Respect of persons can be thought of both spiritually and physically. The first aspect we typically think of, and what is referred to most clearly in James 2, is the *physical* aspect. James 2:2–4 says this:

> For if there come unto your assembly a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment; and ye have respect to him that weareth the gay clothing, and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place; and say to the poor, Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool: Are ye not then partial in yourselves, and are become judges of evil thoughts?

We often decide on the way we view someone based on their appearance. Matthew Henry's commentary explains it this way: "You act partially, and determine wrong, merely because the one makes a better appearance, or is in better circumstances, than the other."[1] This quote is phrased in such a manner that it brings out the foolishness of respecting persons.

Think back to the story at the beginning of this article. A young man enters and is wearing nice, clean-cut, "appropriate for the occasion" clothes, and he seems like a confident, outgoing person. At the same time, a young woman enters wearing slightly out-of-date, worn clothing and is shy. Would it not be natural for you to be drawn to the company of the young man? It is our natural tendency to welcome the presence of the young man and say, "Hey, sit by me!" Meanwhile, we neglect the presence of the young woman or simply avoid her altogether.

1 Matthew Henry, "An Exposition, With Practical Observations of the General Epistle of James," *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible Unabridged* (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library), chap. 2, https://ccel.org/ccel/henry/mhc6/mhc6.Jam.iii.html.

James uses the figure of a footstool to illustrate the attitude described above: "Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool" (2:3). In New Testament times, it was considered dishonorable and lowly (the place of a servant) to be placed at someone's footstool.[2] Neglecting an individual based on their appearance is the same as considering them of little significance! Take a second to process that.

There can also be respect of persons in a *spiritual* sense. This aspect is not the focus of James 2, but that does not change the reality of it. We may respect one person over another simply because they seem more spiritually mature. Think back to Blake—he talked more and was eager to share in spiritual conversations. Ava was not as eager to share in spiritual conversations and was shy. We might be more impressed with Blake because of his openness, but does the fact that he is more outgoing than Ava make him more of a child of God? Respecting one individual over another based on how they present themselves socially is wrong. We are judging what is in their heart, which we cannot see.

The common factor

Why do we respect one person over another? Is there a common factor interwoven in both the spiritual and physical aspects?

The answer is yes. The common factor is personal gain. We are quicker to befriend a person who has nice clothing because he might benefit us in some way, either socially or materially. What would Ava have to offer? We may think to ourselves, "She seems nice enough, but she has poor taste, she's quiet, and she doesn't really contribute to conversation. Blake dresses well, and he's outgoing, friendly, and quick to share. I would much rather spend time together with him than Ava."

"The faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory"

James 2:1 says, "My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons." This passage offers a warning and commands that all who have the faith of Jesus Christ should not have respect of persons. Importantly, we are to remember the unity of the church. One commentary phrases it this way:

> The faith of Christ, which, as a doctrine, is delivered by him to all the saints, and as a grace, he is both the author and object of it; and is the faith of their common Lord and Saviour, and who is the Lord of glory, or the glorious Lord; and the poor as well as the rich are espoused by him, as their Lord and husband; and are

2 "What Is the Significance of a Footstool in the Bible?" *GotQuestions*, October 7, 2019, https://www.gotquestions.org/footstool-in-the-Bible.html.

redeemed by him, and are equally under his government and protection, and members of his body.[3]

What a glorious truth! No matter whether we are rich or poor, no matter the spiritual gifts we have been given, we are united in the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ and are members of the same body. Because we have the uniting faith of Jesus Christ, we are not to respect one individual over another on account of their physical appearance or apparent spiritual maturity.

James 2:5 summarizes this well when it says, "Hearken, my beloved brethren, Hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he hath promised to them that love him?" Let's live out this faith, knowing that every saint, rich or poor, is united under the same Lord, because that is what authentic faith looks like.

3 John Gill, "James 2," *Exposition of the Entire Bible* (Internet Sacred Texts Archive, 1746-63), https://biblehub.com/commentaries/gill/james/2.htm.

An irresistible letter

Renae Baas

"A letter from the king? For us? Shall we go, Father?"

Such might have been the question from a persistent young person in the time of wicked King Hoshea of Israel. All through the land, messengers brought an urgent letter from Judah's king, Hezekiah. Some shameless youths may have readily joined in with the scoffing of others at such a ridiculous request. But God pricked the hearts of his people with the sharp words of King Hezekiah: "Turn again unto

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the LORD…and he will return to the remnant of you" (2 Chron. 30:6). Invited to a restored passover in the land of Judah, the Israelites who obeyed the summons were ultimately saved from the captivity and destruction of Israel.

Hopefully you do understand, young people, that you, too, have been called to appear before the King. Indeed, your situation is different from the calling sent to the people of the Old Testament. No mountain, no highway, no journey stands in the way of your reaching the presence of God. The simple means of prayer is yours, but it has come at a high cost to your Savior. Does God see you in his throne room, or are you distracted by the foolishness of the neighboring kingdom?

Practically, what does this appearance before the King look like in your life? Undoubtedly, a loud and jubilant song rises from your lips as you praise the Redeemer for saving you from sure disaster, from being swallowed up by the enemy. But if the silent words of your heart end in distraction, try this. Pray aloud! This conscious activity forces you to focus on the important parts of prayer. Audibly you will hear yourself using words that extol God. As you address the Comforter, the Omnipotent One, the Holy One, you will be humbled that so great a God chose you to be in his throne room!

When you pray aloud, vain repetitions will reach your own ear and you will want to extol God differently. Concentrate on acknowledging the King's greatness and make a list of his magnificent powers both in creation and in your life. Give honor where honor is due! As James exhorts in James 4:7, "Submit yourselves therefore to God."

Those who left Israel for the celebration in Jerusalem undoubtedly spoke to each other of God's greatness. Together they repeated God's goodness to one another and walked faithfully in expectation of a great celebration. "Going to see the spotless King!" was their jubilant song.

"What shall I ask of the King when in his presence I bow?"

This question might have coursed through the Israelites' veins at the excitement of being called to the temple. Weary from travel and having left behind their friends, their hunger for the Lord's communion was apparent.

What shall *you* ask of the King, child of God? Open his word! Find Jonah calling from the depths of the sea, "Salvation is of the LORD," and confess the same (Jonah 2:9). See the swine running from the demon-possessed man and hear Jesus say to you, "Go…tell them how great things the Lord hath done for thee" (Mark 5:19). Uncover the power of God when he sends home Gideon's warriors, forcing Gideon to depend on him alone (Judges 7). Understand Hezekiah's prayer for

the immigrants of Israel, "The good LORD pardon every one that prepareth his heart to seek God" (2 Chron. 30:18–19). Hear Isaiah declare to those who do not want a sign, "The Lord himself shall give you a sign" (Isa. 7:14). Keep God's written word open before you as you pray, and let his word guide your own. With Christ as your guide, you will mourn for your sin and truly want the meditations of your heart to be acceptable in his sight.

As the sojourners headed to the temple, the temptation to turn back may have nagged their souls. But God's call was victorious: "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you… Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded. Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep" (James 4:7–9). Being called to appear before the King brings expectation and hope. When you bow in humility before the all-wise King of kings, he will answer, "Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you" (v. 8). He holds his glorious scepter before you because you belong to him. When you fall on your knees and pour out your heart, he hears. When you ask for grace sufficient for the day, he gives it. When you request that his Spirit rule your heart, God uses you for his service. The answer to your prayer may not be what you expected, but he will answer. Expect the perfect answer, one that is part of his sovereign plan. The King of kings has power and authority beyond any in the land. Appear before him!

Countless sacrifices lined the way to the temple as the wayfaring sinners arrived in Jerusalem. Evidence of a God merciful to forgive sinners based on the blood of another was all around them. These saints had never before seen the beauty of the temple. Now, in the presence of God, joy overflowed from their inmost beings. What had they done to receive such a call? Nothing. God had called his children home. Word came some time later that the Assyrians had destroyed Israel and brought the citizens of Israel into captivity. What? This too? Saved from destruction!

Only the truly humble child of God will understand that nothing except the grace of God brought them home before the throne of the King. "Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up" (James 4:10). Your King is calling *you* to pray. Respond aloud to his power and saving grace in thankfulness!

The King had ordered a return to God's temple. The answer to the letter was clear.

"Yes, we're going. We can't resist!"

Called to be living waters

Evan DeJong

"*He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water.*" *John 7:38*

Our calling as children of God is to live before him with a true and living faith. The Holy Spirit has been planted in us, and in all the elect of God, to make us know that we are saved in Christ. Our calling is then to show our thankfulness by living to the glory of God through a living, authentic faith. How do we show that this faith lives in us? How do we show the world around us that we are children of God, and that a "river of living water" flows out of us?

According to John 7:38, each child of God is a fountain of living water springing forth from the water of life, our Savior Jesus Christ. Christ himself teaches us in John 4:14, "But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life." The message of this verse is very powerful! Through Christ's sacrifice, we become living streams of pure, clear water proceeding from our Savior.

With this amazing picture comes an intense calling for us as believers. By our walk in life, we must show that we are witnesses of God and are springs of clear water reflecting his image. This is a weighty calling, and one that we know we fall short of every single day. How can we possibly keep ourselves pure, living streams of water, both before God's eyes and as a witness to the world around us?

The answer to this question lies in God alone. Though we fall short repeatedly, the Lord provides strength that allows us to carry on and continue working toward becoming that clear stream of living water. Only through God's work in us can we have a true, authentic faith that strives to show

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thankfulness to God in every aspect of our lives.

Knowing that our faith and strength come from God alone, we must regularly use the means he has given to strengthen us and to make us more and more like Christ's perfect example. God uses several different means to accomplish this. First, the true preaching of the gospel is prepared for us twice every Sunday. There are also many resources such as Christian books and pamphlets that we can use to remind ourselves throughout the week of our Savior and his sacrifice for us. Second, our fellow Christians are all around us, waiting to support us and provide help when we stumble, as we must also help in love toward them. Third, God has given us the wonderful gift of prayer, which is a powerful means by which our faith is strengthened and our hope is renewed every day. How blessed we are when we realize all these means God has given us to strengthen and support us throughout our pilgrimage on this earth!

Sadly, a common temptation for us is to become complacent and to allow these gifts to remain unused or taken for granted. We so easily go to church grumbling and complaining about going to the same church with the same minister who seems to be preaching a message that we have heard over and over again. Personal devotions might be forgotten one night, which can seem like a minor problem until we've forgotten about them entirely. When our devotional life suffers, the gift of prayer may also seem fruitless and unnecessary. This can also be true in our friendships. Talking about God and spiritual ideas starts to become a chore and may seem awkward. All too easily, our group of friends can lose the real value of Christian fellowship as we stop encouraging each other in the faith.

The devil works in these sneaky and powerful ways to slowly bring sin into our lives, making the spiritual waters of our lives muddy and stagnant. We are tempted to slowly, and perhaps without even realizing it, shove aside the means that God has given to bring us closer to him. Our calling is to make these means truly alive in our lives again and, through the strength that God provides, purify ourselves as living streams of water.

We have been given so many blessings, and we must not stifle them! Every day, intentional thought has to be given toward using the means of faith so that we are brought closer to God. Through the eyes of faith, we realize that the church sermons we hear every Sunday are not at all repetitive or boring but are moving messages of our salvation. By grace we can joyfully set aside time for personal devotions and pray to God with a heartfelt sincerity, never letting these gifts become unused

or dull. Our lives with each other should include regular spiritual conversation, no matter how hard this may be. These conversations bring people together in powerful Christian love! Asking for and giving spiritual advice should be a joy for us as children of God in our relationships with fellow Christians. All these gifts should be used each day as a means that God uses to bring true peace and joy into our lives as his children.

While faced with the temptation to become complacent in the use of God's good gifts, we have amazing comfort from Scripture. As John 7:38 states, "Out of his belly *shall flow* rivers of living water" (emphasis added). The way this passage is written leaves no doubt that every one of God's people will surely bring forth rivers of living water. Through the strength that God provides by his sovereign grace, an authentic, living faith will be manifested in us, causing us to be fountains of living water. What a comfort this is!

We pray that we may see the evidence of God's handiwork in our own lives, and where we have become complacent, we pray that God might work in us to strengthen our will to remain faithful so that we are brought closer to him. Through his power we can surely produce a true, authentic faith that comes forth as a spring of living water.

We are called as Christians to live antithetically in the world around us, but how do you make sure you're not becoming legalistic when it comes to the decisions you make in your everyday life? How do you make sure you're not falling into the danger of traditionalism while not conforming to the world?

Antithetical living is living that is *against* the world. The prefix *anti* means "against." The world lives in wickedness and disobedience. Antithetical living refuses to follow the wicked, disobedient ways of the world and seeks a way of life that is pleasing to God.

Legalism, on the other hand, is the teaching that we are saved from sin by keeping the law of God, or it is the teaching that we may add to the requirements and prohibitions of God's law. The Pharisees were guilty of both kinds of legalism. They believed that they were saved by law keeping, and they added many rules and regulations to the law. Sometimes we are tempted to become legalistic in our attempt to live the antithesis. We insist on a certain kind of life for ourselves or for others that is not required by the Bible. When we do that, we deny Christian liberty.

Traditionalism is the teaching and practice that the beliefs and customs handed down by our ancestors are good and necessary *simply because* they have a great history. Traditionalism says, "We have always done it this way; therefore, it is the good way." Traditionalism refuses to examine whether the "good old ways" are truly biblical.

The principle for antithetical living is this: seek to conform your life to what Scripture says and do not go beyond that. Finally, a word about Christian liberty: Christian liberty concerns those things that are neither expressly commanded by God nor expressly forbidden by him. In those areas of life we must apply wisdom and we may not bind another believer's conscience.

Onderwijzer

Be ye faithful, even unto the end

Scott Van Uffelen

Recently it has been reported that the traditional news as we once knew it is dead. Not so long ago, nearly everyone received their news from broadcast TV, newspapers, or cable TV. The traditional "big three" are not gone, but they have been splintered into new forms of media that provide only a sliver—and a distorted one at that—of what is out there. There are now more than a dozen interest groups from which people get their news. The analogy we can use is that of a piece of glass now shattered into twelve pieces. Where one gets their news, the voices they trust, and even the topics and people that they follow are all related to each other.

Who are these splinter groups? To name a few, there would be the Instagrammers, the TikTok kids, the New Age Grandmas of Facebook, the Right-wing Grandpas of Fox News TV, MAGA sheep, Liberal Warriors, the Professional Elitists, Financiers (think *Wall Street Journal*), and probably the largest group, the Passive-ists.[1] Since each interest group caters to only a narrow segment of the population, this means that it is increasingly difficult for the consumer to find balanced news reports. But even more importantly, it means that it is harder and harder to make sense of the reality that is around us.

In addition to media fragmentation, there is another important fact about our current culture that we must take into consideration. A recent Gallup study from March 2024 found that church attendance has declined in almost all US religious groups.[2] Two decades ago,

1 Jim VandeHei and Mike Allen, "Shards of Glass: Inside media's 12 splintering realities," Axios, March 25, 2024, https://www.axios.com/2024/03/25/news-media-filter-bubble-different-realities.

2 Jeffrey M. Jones, "Church Attendance Has Declined in Most US Religious Groups," Gallup News, March 25, 2024,

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42 percent of US adults attended a religious service every week. A decade ago, that figure fell to 38 percent, and it is currently down to only 30 percent. This decline is attributed to those who have not only left attending services but who have left the faith altogether. In the past two decades the number of those claiming no religious affiliation has increased from 9 percent up to 21 percent.

Although it is heartening to know that the Protestant faith has only had a slight decrease over the past twenty years (down 4 percent compared to a 12 percent reduction among Catholics), the fact that the Christian faith in the US is shrinking, not growing, is a concern. This downward trend coincides with a decline in Americans' view of the importance of religion in their lives. It is not simply a matter of where Americans get their news. There is also the matter that more Americans are not interested in hearing the word of God and its perspective on what is happening around us.

What impact could this be having on our American culture? Newsmax recently ran an article boldly claiming that hostility to traditional Christianity is fueled by the anti-faith political climate of America. Anti-faith rhetoric, let alone outright religious bigotry, has led to increased hostility against Christians and churches in America. In 2020 there were 55 acts of hostility. In 2021 that number increased to 96 and then skyrocketed to 195 in 2022. In 2023 there were a staggering 436 acts of aggression against churches in America.[3] It appears that the highest levels of our government have condoned such actions by their refusal to investigate and hold the culprits accountable before the law.

Acts of hostility toward Christianity on our home soil have alarming parallels abroad. As they seem to have done at home, American leaders have systematically turned their backs on religious hostility in the world. For example, since 2000, 62,000 Christians have been slaughtered in Nigeria by the Islamic jihadist group Boko Haram, with 8,222 Nigerian Christians slaughtered just last year. What was our government's response? It removed Nigeria from the watch list of countries of concern. Doing so seems to permit leaders to look the other way, giving a virtual green light to terrorists to continue the killings, the abductions, and the torture of Christians.

So what are we to do? First, do not be afraid or shrink back at professing the name of Jesus Christ. Let

https://news.gallup.com/poll/642548/church-attendance-declined-religious-groups.aspx.

3 Tony Perkins, "Biden's Anti-Faith Climate Fuels Hostility to Churches," Newsmax, February 26, 2024, https://www.newsmax.com/tonyperkins/churches-biden-administration-faith/2024/02/26/id/1154952/.

us continue to worship, to witness, and to live our lives boldly according to the command of Scripture.

Second, we are to be mindful of the sources of our news, especially considering how splintered and narrow a view most sources represent. Notice how the splintered interest groups listed earlier do not include the Christian worldview. It is not impossible, but it is becoming increasingly difficult to obtain a complete and balanced report of events, especially from a Christian perspective. Let us not fall prey to an interest group's view but hold fast to a biblical view of all things.

Third, we need to pray. Pray especially for our government and its leaders to protect and uphold those who are victims of assault and oppression of any kind, as this is one of the chief reasons for the authority of a government (Rom. 13:4).

We end with this question: Where is the hope and comfort in all of this? God used the persecution of the early church for the spread of the gospel, for the witness of his grace and mercy, and for the calling of others, both Jews and Gentiles, unto saving faith. To God be the glory that he might use us in the same way, today and always!

The life of Elijah

Jake VanderKolk

When we read the stories of Elijah, nothing is more evident than God's power and love. While many facts of Elijah's life are not known, the purpose of the miracles and recorded events is to display not Elijah's glory, but God's. The entirety of the Bible exists as God's revelation of himself, not any individual man.

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Keeping this in mind, we will study the life of Elijah as depicted in 1 Kings 17–19 and 2 Kings 1–2. There are countless other references to Elijah throughout the books of Kings, Chronicles, and even the New Testament, but the main stories of Elijah are all found in these five chapters. I also left out the story of Naboth's vineyard because, although Elijah calls Ahab to repent, that story is primarily about Ahab.

In 1 Kings 17, we are introduced to Elijah as the person who tells Ahab that there will "not be dew nor rain these years." Immediately after this, God tells Elijah to go and hide at the brook Cherith, presumably for safety. There he is fed by ravens through God's gracious provision. Through many of these miracles God displays his love and care for Elijah, while many others are used to radiate his power.

God's love can be seen by his provision for Elijah. First, he is fed by the ravens at the brook Cherith, as we have seen already. But after the brook is dried up, God provides for Elijah's needs through the widow of Zarephath. God not only tests the faith of the widow, but he also provides food for Elijah. Later, after Jezebel had threatened to kill Elijah, he is fed by an angel that brings him food and water. Throughout all these examples, God's love can be seen as he provides for Elijah's physical needs. God also, out of care for his people, comforts Elijah emotionally by reassuring him that he is not alone, for there is a remnant of seven thousand in Israel who have not bowed the knee to Baal. Finally, God bestows his love on Elijah in a special honor given to him: Elijah would not die, but, like Enoch, he would be translated directly into heaven.

God's power and might are also on display in these chapters. God's omnipotence is displayed in all miracles—like Elijah raising the widow of Zarephath's son from the dead and parting the Jordan River before his translation—but two miracles in particular from Elijah's ministry highlight this truth emphatically.

First, there is the famous story of Elijah on Mount Carmel. Elijah asks Ahab to gather all of Baal's 450 prophets, and then tells them to set up an altar and ask Baal to consume it with fire. After hours of prayer and even cutting themselves to no avail, it is clear the prophets of Baal have failed. Elijah takes his turn, fashioning the altar out of stone rather than wood and dousing it with twelve barrels of water. Then, after a very short prayer, God answers Elijah by sending fire from heaven, engulfing the altar in flames and showing that he alone is God.

Second, God's power is seen in the story recorded in 2 Kings 1. Here, Ahab's son Ahaziah is injured and becomes sick, so he sends men to ask Baal whether he will live or die. On their journey, the men

encounter Elijah, who tells the men to return to Ahaziah and tell him that he will die because he sought help from Baal. Upon hearing this, Ahaziah sends a captain with fifty men to bring Elijah to him. When they meet Elijah, he is on a mountain, and they tell him to come down. Elijah commands that fire come down from heaven and consume them, and immediately they are consumed. This happens again with the same outcome, but the third captain to meet Elijah humbles himself and even pleads for his life. Elijah listens to this captain, and after Elijah goes to Ahaziah, his prophecy is fulfilled when Ahaziah dies.

Both of these stories clearly point to God's glory and power. But while the events of the miracles are awe inspiring, they also can be quite terrifying. These stories should give us pause. God cares for his people—he sent ravens, a widow, an angel, and a chariot of fire in his love for Elijah. But God also must be reverenced in his power. This is a double-edged sword. God cuts down the rebellious and proud, the envious and the evil, but he is also willing and able to help his people when they are in need.

God's loving promises, which come to us from the words of Isaiah 43:2, were carried out in the life of Elijah: "When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee."

Date	Read	Study	Psalter
May 8	1 Kings 17:1–4	How is the obedience of Elijah seen in these verses?	108 (v. 5)
May 9	1 Kings 17:5–7	How is the provision of God seen here? Think of a time when God has provided for you in a difficult situation.	304 (v. 4)
May 10	1 Kings 17:8–12	Why do you think that God has a poor widow sustain Elijah? First ravens, then an impoverished widow—what do you think this says about God?	53
May 11	1 Kings 17:13–14	Why does God test the faith of the widow? Why does God at times test our faith?	248
May 12	1 Kings 17:15–16	Time and time again, God, by his providence, provides for his people. How is the example in these verses comforting to you?	167

May 13	1 Kings 17:17–18; Job 1:20–21	The widow loses her son through sickness. How is this similar to Job's situation?	27
May 14	1 Kings 17:19–22	God again miraculously provides for the widow. What can this teach us about God's providence?	419 (v. 5)
May 15	1 Kings 17:23–24	How is the widow's faith strengthened through this trial and the miraculous event?	329 (v. 4)
May 16	1 Kings 18:1–4	During the famine, the ungodly need to provide for themselves, but God uses Obadiah to feed his prophets. In your life, how can you see God working for your good, but not necessarily for the wicked?	171 (v. 2)
May 17	1 Kings 18:5–16	What is Obadiah fearful of? How does Elijah reassure him?	128
May 18	1 Kings 18:17–21	Applying verse 21, what are some ways that you perhaps are not living up to your calling as a Christian? How does this verse convict you?	140
May 19	1 Kings 18:22–27	How is Elijah's mocking in verse 27 justified? Usually mocking is a sinful, arrogant activity, but what is different about it here?	373 (v. 8)
May 20	1 Kings 18:28–29	In what ways are the false gods of the Israelites like the idols that we often fashion for ourselves?	308 (v. 2)
May 21	1 Kings 18:30–35	Compare and contrast the two altars. How does Elijah make the "test" much more difficult when preparing his altar?	290 (v. 11)
May 22	1 Kings 18:36–39	In what ways does Elijah's prayer to God differ from the false prophets' prayer?	149
May 23	1 Kings 18:40–46	Why does God send rain only after he proves himself to be God?	402 (v. 3)
May 24	1 Kings 19:1–4	Jezebel becomes angry when she hears what Elijah has done. What are some ways that the wicked become angry at Christians for their obedience to God?	394
May 25	1 Kings 19:5–8	How does God provide for Elijah now?	149 (v. 5)

May 26	1 Kings 19:9–14	Elijah is discouraged to think that he is the only one of the elect left in Israel. Have you ever felt alone, only to be reassured later that in Christ, you are a part of a body so much bigger than yourself?	150
May 27	1 Kings 19:15–18	God tells Elijah that there are still things that God needs him to do. He also has a purpose for you. What is God calling you to do here and now?	114
May 28	1 Kings 19:19–21	Do you think that it is significant that when Elisha is called, he is busy working? Why?	360
May 29	2 Kings 1:1–4	Why does Ahaziah seek to ask a false god whether he is going to die (v. 3)?	391 (v. 3)
May 30	2 Kings 1:5–6	Is the punishment of Ahaziah's death because he asked for the prophecy of Baal? Why or why not?	141
May 31	2 Kings 1:7–9	Why does Ahaziah want Elijah to come to him so badly?	29 (v. 3)
June 1	2 Kings 1:10–12	How is Ahaziah's stubbornness seen here? How is it clearly not effective?	366
June 2	2 Kings 1:13–15	How is the humility of the third captain rewarded? Why?	406 (v. 3)
June 3	2 Kings 1:16–18	What does Elijah say to Ahaziah? What is Elijah's reasoning for what he says (v. 16)?	391 (v. 6)
June 4	2 Kings 2:1–8	Why do you think that Elisha chooses not to depart from Elijah, even though Elijah asked him three times?	203
June 5	2 Kings 2:9–11	Why do you think God chose to take Elijah up into heaven without death?	71
June 6	2 Kings 2:12–14	What are two indications in these verses that Elisha is taking Elijah's place?	100
June 7	2 Kings 2:15–18	Why does Elisha finally let the sons of the prophets search for Elijah's body?	52 (v. 4)

Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531)

Prof. Doug Kuiper

The Protestant Reformation began in two different places, independently of each other, about the same time. Martin Luther nailed his ninety-five theses to the church door in Wittenberg, Germany, on October 31, 1517. Four hundred miles away, in German-speaking Switzerland, Ulrich Zwingli also was becoming convinced that Scripture is our only authority for doctrine and worship.

Luther was the first *Lutheran* reformer, but Zwingli was the first *Reformed* reformer. I'll explain.

Zwingli's life

Zwingli was born on January 1, 1484, (seven weeks after Martin Luther) in Wildhaus, Switzerland. After his formal education, he became a Roman Catholic priest in Glarus (1506–16) and Einsiedeln (1516–18), both small towns in the northeast of Switzerland. In Einsiedeln he came to understand that Scripture has ultimate authority in the Christian life. He started preaching sermons on Bible texts, picking up the next sermon where his previous left off. He also started proclaiming the true gospel. At the time, he did not know of Martin Luther.

In 1518 the position of "people's priest" at the Grossmunster (Large Church) in Zurich, a larger city in northern Switzerland, became vacant. The people's priest was as close to a modern-day preacher as we can imagine. Zwingli filled this position from 1519 until his death in 1531.

Zwingli and Luther met only once, in 1529. They met in Marburg, Germany, to discuss their similarities and differences. They agreed on much—almost everything. But they disagreed on the meaning of the words "This is my body" with regard to the Lord's supper. Because

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of this disagreement, Luther left Marburg disgusted at Zwingli.

The first *Reformed* reformer

Luther was a *Lutheran* reformer. He never understood some key distinctives of the Reformed faith later taught by men such as John Calvin. In this, Zwingli was Luther's contrast.

Zwingli is the first man we know who used the doctrine of the covenant to defend infant baptism. The Anabaptist movement began in Zurich in 1525. The name *Anabaptists* means "baptized again." They taught that one could be baptized only after he or she believed, so they were rebaptized.

As Zwingli studied the doctrine of baptism, he saw that infant baptism followed from a right view of the doctrines of the covenant and of unconditional election. He wrote a book defending infant baptism with appeal to these two other doctrines. It is called *Refutation of the Tricks of the Catabaptists*. *Catabaptists* means "against baptism." Zwingli, and later Calvin, saw that the Anabaptists opposed the true biblical doctrine of baptism, which includes covenant children along with confessing adults.

Second, Zwingli taught the regulative principle of worship. This principle teaches that in worship, we may do only what God commanded. If we have a worship practice that is not supported in Scripture, we must abandon it. We have Christian liberty in our daily life to do things that Scripture neither commands nor forbids, but in worship we may do only what God requires. Luther, by contrast, permitted in worship anything that Scripture did not forbid.

Third, Zwingli's view of the Lord's supper was closer to the Reformed view than Luther's. It is commonly thought that Zwingli viewed the Lord's supper as being only a memorial feast; this certainly is not the Reformed view. While Zwingli certainly made statements that can be understood this way, he also made statements later in his life that are closer to the Reformed view. But other reformers who came after Zwingli would have to develop the Reformed view more explicitly.

Evaluation

Zwingli had notable faults. His personal sins were well-known; as a priest, he had a "wife" and children. Later, as a Reformed man, he openly married his wife. He also had doctrinal weaknesses. But we should not expect the first *Reformed* reformer to be correct on everything; he was himself just coming out of Roman Catholicism! Much doctrinal development was still needed.

Zwingli also had a wrong view of the relation between church and civil government. He taught that civil government was called to

take a stand for and promote the Reformation. But then, of course, most reformers in Europe thought the same way.

In 1531, the Protestant and Catholic cantons (provinces) of Switzerland fought against each other. As a good citizen and military chaplain, Zwingli went to battle. And in that battle, he died. Consistories may call ministers to be chaplains in the armed forces of their country. But even then, ministers should use spiritual swords, not earthly weapons, to do their work.

Zwingli reminds us that God uses different men in different ways for the good of his church and for true reformation. God used Luther *and* Zwingli. And even Zwingli, the first *Reformed* reformer, only laid a small foundation. Many others, including Bullinger and Calvin, would build on that foundation.

Church news

Ruth Baas

Baptisms

Darryl Hensley Calvary, IA

Hannah Kate, daughter of Dewey & Erin VanDerNoord Cornerstone, IN

Charles Lawrence, son of Glen & Janelle VanderSchaaf First GR, MI

Dallas Hayes, son of Shane & Courtney Cammenga Georgetown, MI

Sawyer Marie, daughter of Andrew & Tonya Holwerda Georgetown, MI

Paxton Malakai, son of Jared & Amanda Verduin Georgetown, MI

Helaina Elise, daughter of Peter & Megan Cnossen Holland, MI

Lena Mae, daughter of Jaden & Georgia Poortinga Loveland, CO

Everett James, son of Carter & Josie Dykstra Loveland, CO

Mark Gary, son of David & Bri Ophoff Southeast, MI

Sadie Kate, daughter of Dan & Annie Ophoff Southeast, MI

Lena Rose, daughter of Jared & Lisa Langerak Southeast, MI

Myles Owen, son of Jason & Deanna Langerak Southeast, MI

Millie Lou, daughter of Mitchell & Anna Miedema Southwest, MI

Saelah Joy, daughter of Evan & Lydia Kikkert Wingham, CAN

Addison Mckenzie, daughter of Nolan & Derica Crich Wingham, CAN

Confessions of faith

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