



SWORD AND SHIELD

A REFORMED MONTHLY MAGAZINE

*Happy art thou, O Israel: who is like unto thee,
O people saved by the LORD, the shield of thy help,
and who is the sword of thy excellency!
and thine enemies shall be found liars unto thee;
and thou shalt tread upon their high places.*

Deuteronomy 33:29

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JEHOVAH, ISRAEL'S SWORD AND SHIELD

Happy art thou, O Israel: who is like unto thee, O people saved by the LORD, the shield of thy help, and who is the sword of thy excellency! and thine enemies shall be found liars unto thee; and thou shalt tread upon their high places. — Deuteronomy 33:29

O Israel, who is like unto thee? Who can compare with Israel in the grandness of her salvation, the richness of her blessing, and the depth of her happiness? Who can compare with Israel in the greatness of her strength and in the certainty of her victory? Who can contend with Israel and overcome her? In all things she is more than conqueror! All strength, blessing, glory, and victory are hers. So who can sing and rejoice as Israel? There is none like her among all the peoples and kingdoms of the earth.

Such is the glory of Israel because she glories in her God. Her God is Jehovah, the eternal, incomparable, unchanging God of the covenant of grace. Jehovah is the incomparable God of grace and mercy by which he lifts Israel to incomparable glory.

Glorying in man is worthless. Glorying in man's wisdom, understanding, and achievements is futile. Glorying in the arm of flesh and the sword of steel is vain. Whoever takes the sword shall perish with the sword. Jehovah breaks the arm of man, and the sword that is in his hand falls to the ground. Jehovah breaks the bow and arrow, cuts the spear in sunder, and burns the chariot. Which of the mighty kings and nations was able to stand before him? Man's strength is weakness in God's sight. Man's wisdom is foolishness to God. Man has his solutions to the problems of man and of his world. Man has his carnal goals and his plans to achieve them. But this wisdom is from beneath. It is earthly, sensual, and devilish, and the bitter end of it is envy, strife, confusion, and every evil work. The very thinking of the flesh is enmity against God. There is no blessedness, no safety, and no salvation in the strength of the flesh or in the works of the flesh.

Israel glories in Jehovah her God. In him is all her blessedness, strength, and glory.

Who is a people like thee, O Israel?

A people saved by Jehovah.

What is Israel by nature? She is not the greatest, mightiest, or most desirable of all people. She is the least of all people. Historically, Israel was a slave people held in oppressive bondage to Pharaoh. Israel was subjected to hard bondage, a target of the biting whips of the

Egyptians, oppressed by the cruel decree of Pharaoh that would cut her off from the earth. Israel lay bound in iron and in woe in the fiery furnace of slavery.

O Israel, who was so enslaved, oppressed, and miserable as you?

But Jehovah set his sovereign love on Israel eternally. She was always with him in his decree. He loved her not because she was mighty and numerous. There was nothing in Israel that was desirable or that commended her to Jehovah. In his fervent love and sovereign grace, he appointed her to salvation, and that in distinction from the people of his hatred, the people that he did not choose. Even among the nation of Israel, they are not all Israel that are of Israel. Elect Israel, loved of Jehovah.

Out of his love and according to his eternal purpose, Jehovah spoke to Israel an unconditional promise of salvation. He breathed forth a mighty word to save her from all her enemies and to make her unspeakably blessed in him, to take her from the misery of bondage and to cause her to know him as her gracious covenant God. It was a promise to be a God unto Israel and her children in her generations in an everlasting covenant of fellowship and friendship.

In his ardent desire to deliver her from misery and woe appalling, Jehovah stretched out his mighty arm to take her from the fiery furnace of bondage. He plagued Egypt and brought down that proud and mighty nation. In the midst of the plaguing of Egypt, he put a division between the Egyptians and his people so that no harm came to them. While there was darkness among all the Egyptians, Jehovah was a light unto his people. Because of the blood of the lamb upon their doors, he passed over their houses when the angel passed through Egypt to kill all the firstborn of man and beast among the Egyptians. He led them forth by the hand of his servant Moses. When Pharaoh came to avenge himself on the Israelites, Jehovah divided the sea before them and became a pillar of fire to them and a cloud of darkness to the Egyptians. He led Israel through the Red Sea. When Pharaoh dared to enter the sea in his hatred and pride against God, Jehovah overthrew Pharaoh and his host in the midst of the

sea. Jehovah guided Israel to the inheritance that he had promised to give her.

O Israel, who is a people like unto thee, a people loved by Jehovah, elected by Jehovah, and saved by Jehovah?

And all that is a picture of Jehovah the savior of elect Israel chosen and gathered from all nations. Israel is his elect church from all nations. By nature she lay guilty in her sin, worthy of death and damnation in her sin. By nature she lay in the bondage of sin and guilt, a slave of the devil, a bondage that held her so tightly that no earthly power could deliver her. Her deliverance is impossible with the arm of flesh. Israel of old lay hopelessly enslaved; so Israel always lies hopelessly enslaved by nature. No hope in the arm of flesh!

Who is like thee, O Israel, a people saved by Jehovah?

He is the absolutely sovereign God. His counsel stands and he does all his pleasure. He is the God of unfailing love and ever fervent mercy. Jehovah is the ever faithful God of an unconditional promise. Not one word of his ever falls to the ground. He saved his beloved Israel, the apple of his eye, with the precious blood of his only begotten Son, and set us free by the work of his mighty hand and outstretched arm from the deepest bondage of sin and death; out of the fear of death into the liberty of the children of God; out of the darkness of sin and death into his marvelous light; out of the ignorance of him into the knowledge of him and his Son Jesus Christ; from friendship with the world and enmity against God into friendship with God and enmity with the world. From the depths of hell he has lifted Israel to the heights of heaven and wonders of his eternal kingdom.

It was not of you. It was not because you were greater, or more desirable, or you distinguished yourself. Therefore, there is no glory to you. Jehovah will not have anyone boast in his presence.

It was all of him. It was all of his sovereign and particular grace. It was only because of his sovereign and particular grace. It was all his work. Eternal, free, powerful grace moved him to save Israel.

Therefore, all glory is to him as a people saved by Jehovah. Therefore, all blessedness is to you, O Israel, a people saved by Jehovah.

Who is like thee, O Israel? A people saved by his grace. Therefore, Jehovah alone is Israel's glory.

And Jehovah is Israel's shield and sword. He himself strengthens her for the fight and is her strength in the fight. His spear confronts the enemy. He himself fights for her and through her. He himself is a refuge in the thick of the hottest fight for all who put their trust in him. Jehovah is Israel's shield and sword. Jehovah alone is Israel's shield and sword. Jehovah is always Israel's shield and sword.

The sword of Israel's excellency. Israel has a sword and shield in her excellency.

So it is in the world. Kings and princes need an armed bodyguard. Paupers and beggars do not need a sword. They have no standing and no place to go but up. Those who have ascended to the heights of glory need a sharp sword and stout protection against those who would cut them down from their excellency.

So it is for Israel. She is the people of Jehovah. She is the beloved of Jehovah. She has been saved by him. She walks in the glorious liberty of the sons of God. She sits now in heavenly places in Christ Jesus, her life is hid with Christ in heaven, and her walk is already in heaven before the face of God. His love is in their hearts, his light in their minds, his commandments their will and delight, and his name on their lips. As the children of light, they are all prophets who speak his word and sing and boast of

his perfections, priests who offer themselves living sacrifices of thanksgiving to him, and kings who fight the good fight of faith and go forward in his victory by the power of his Spirit, the Spirit of Christ—the prophet, priest, and king.

Israel is saved by and glories in Jehovah. There is no higher and more glorious position for a people. In such a position she stands above all peoples in the world. Israel stands excellent in the earth as the people of the Lord.

Who is a people like unto thee, O Israel?

So Israel has need of a sword and shield. Israel stands in such excellence as the people of the Lord in the middle of a world of enemies. Many enemies. On all sides. At all times. She is from God and of God and stands for the cause of God in the world, so the world hates her. She stands brightly in the light as the representative of the living God in the midst of the world of sin, death, and darkness. She bears a testimony of the glory of God in the midst of a world that hates that testimony. She speaks only

Jehovah, who saved Israel, is also the shield of Israel's help and the sword of Israel's excellency. The very God of heaven and earth, who so holds devils and ungodly men in his power that they cannot so much as move without his will, is her sword and shield.

of God and the glory of God in all things in the midst of a world that speaks only of man and the glory of man in all things. She is of God in a world full of enmity against God.

Therefore, the world would cut her down and rob her of her glorious position as the people of the Lord, the people who are saved and glorified by his grace. The world tempts and persecutes, allures and savages, and beckons and threatens the church of God with the goal to destroy her.

The world is powerful in her warfare against the church. The church in herself is weak in that warfare. In that warfare she stands as helpless as the people of Israel stood on the shores of the Red Sea against the enraged army of Pharaoh bearing down on her. The church stands against the devil, the whole host of hell, sin, and death. All the while she exists as the people of God in the flesh, which is a willing ally of the devils and the world of sin and darkness.

Jehovah, who saved Israel, is also the shield of Israel's help and the sword of Israel's excellency. The very God of heaven and earth, who so holds devils and ungodly men in his power that they cannot so much as move without his will, is her sword and shield. Jehovah, who sits in the heavens and does all his pleasure, is her sword and shield. He speaks and it is. He commands and it stands fast. Before him all must bow. He is faithful. He is unchanging in himself and in his promise. He never gives up the fight. The battle is always the Lord's.

O Israel, who has such a sword and such a shield as you? Jehovah is a man of war; Jehovah mighty in battle.

Because he is Israel's shield and sword, because he fights for Israel, and because he fights his own warfare through Israel, there is no one equal to Israel in the fight. The fiery darts of the enemy may fly thickly. The enemy may rage and seek to devour the people of God. The gates of hell may open up against the church of God. But the gates of hell shall not prevail against the church. Can sword, or nakedness, or peril, or famine, or pestilence, or things present, or things to come—can anything—overcome the people of God? In all we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. She is mighty in battle and impervious to damage because Jehovah is her shield and sword.

Who is like thee, O Israel?

With Jehovah the shield of your help, Israel is safe in the midst of the hottest part of the battle.

With Jehovah the sword of your excellency, Israel is invincible against the strongest foes.

Who is like Israel in her blessedness? Blessed eternally.

Blessed now. Blessed always. Blessed in all things. Israel alone is blessed.

Who is like Israel in the glory of her salvation? Lifted up to the heights of heaven.

Who is like Israel in the certainty of her victory and in the completeness of her triumph? Your enemies will be found liars unto thee; and you shall tread upon their high places because Jehovah is your God, your mighty sword and your impenetrable shield.

It does not appear so.

For God's sake we are killed all the day long. We are led as sheep to the slaughter and regarded as the offscouring of the earth. Those who kill us suppose that they do God a great service. So the enemy lies against the church in her fight. Frequently, the enemy impugns the motives of the church of God. The world accuses the church in her fight of being moved by the same earthly reasons and devilish wisdom with which the world is moved and for which she fights. Lying, the enemy pretends to do the Lord's work in your removal. The enemies arm themselves with a well-worn playbook of slanders and lies against you to harass and intimidate you. When the church partakes of the persecutions of the prophets, the world shouts that she has the victory. Which of the prophets did they not kill? The prophets had trials of cruel mockings and scourgings, of bonds and imprisonment. They were stoned, sawn asunder, were tempted, slain with the sword. They wandered about as fugitives and vagabonds in the world and lived in the caves and dens of the earth. And when you are so chased and harried and lose your name, position, and standing in the world, the world screams that she has the victory. But in all that, the world lies.

The battle is never over when the world triumphs. They appeared to triumph at the cross. They bruised Jesus' heel, but he crushed their head. He arose from the dead. The battle is not yours, but God's. Though the world builds lofty strongholds against the church, Israel will triumph over every one.

Who is like thee, O Israel? The Almighty God is your sword and shield. No one can be harmed among you. Your victory is absolutely certain and unspeakably glorious.

Glory in Jehovah. Never glory in the flesh or make the arm of flesh your stay. That would be certain defeat. Only in the Lord do we do valiantly. He it is that treads down our enemies.

O Israel, who is like thee?

With Jehovah your sword and shield!

—NJL

SWORD AND SHIELD

You hold in your hands the first issue of *Sword and Shield*, a new Reformed magazine from a new Reformed publishing organization. There is great excitement on the part of the organization, the board, and the writers to see this magazine come to print. We are thrilled! We are also thankful to God for bringing this first issue to pass, being deeply conscious of our dependence upon him to bless this work and to give *Sword and Shield* its place. We are thrilled and thankful, and we hope that you will be too.

It is the happy task of this editorial to introduce the magazine to you.

One's first impression of the magazine will likely come from its name, *Sword and Shield*, so let us begin there. The name *Sword and Shield* identifies the magazine with the cause of God's truth. In scripture the sword represents God's word. The sword is the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God (Eph. 6:17). The word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword (Heb. 4:12). When the risen Lord Jesus Christ speaks, his word of truth proceeds from his mouth as a sharp two-edged sword (Rev. 1:16). By his sword-word, the Lord fights the impenitent (2:16) and smites the nations (19:15, 21). By taking the name "Sword," *Sword and Shield* defines its cause as the cause of God's truth revealed in God's word.

So also in scripture, the shield represents God's truth. The truth is our shield (Ps. 91:4). God is the psalmist's hiding place and his shield through his word (119:114). Every word of God is pure, by which word God is a shield unto them that put their trust in him (Prov. 30:5). By the shield of faith, the child of God quenches all the fiery darts of the wicked (Eph. 6:16), which faith is rooted in the eternal Word and the eternal Truth (John 1:1; 14:6). By taking the name "Shield," *Sword and Shield* declares that its cause in this world is the cause of God's truth.

The cause of God's truth is the driving purpose of the organization that publishes *Sword and Shield*. That organization is Reformed Believers Publishing (RBP), which was founded on April 24, 2020, when thirty-two men adopted the organization's constitution. Article 2 of that constitution reads:

The purpose of Reformed Believers Publishing shall be:

- A. To promote, defend, and develop the Reformed faith, which is the truth revealed in the Word of

God and expressed in the Three Forms of Unity, with special emphasis on the truths of the absolute sovereignty of God in salvation, particular grace, and the unconditional covenant.

- B. To expose and condemn all lies repugnant to this truth.
- C. To give a theological and antithetical witness to the Reformed church world and beyond by broadcasting this distinctive Reformed truth to the people of God wherever they are found.

The name of the magazine and the constitution of RBP govern the content that will be published in *Sword and Shield*. The content must be the truth as it is revealed in the word of God. That truth is the revelation of God in the face of Jesus Christ crucified and risen. That truth is the Reformed faith, which is the only truth. This means that the content of *Sword and Shield* will be doctrinal and theological. Doctrinal and theological! That is a broad spectrum of content, indeed! Theology is the study of God, and the study of God encompasses every possible subject. Doctrine is the teaching of scripture, and the teaching of scripture encompasses every aspect of the faith and life of God's people. In all of its doctrinal and theological writing, the purpose of *Sword and Shield* is to bring the truth of God to bear.

The content of *Sword and Shield* will especially emphasize the truths of "the absolute sovereignty of God in salvation, particular grace, and the unconditional covenant." The fact that these truths are listed separately must not be taken to mean that they are somehow distinct from the Reformed faith or tacked onto the Reformed faith. Rather, these truths are the essence and core and meaning of the Reformed faith. Without these truths, there is no Reformed faith but only a corruption and perversion of the Reformed faith. These truths are the outstanding declaration that God is God and that God alone saves man. These are the truths that are always opposed by the devil and by fallen man from paradise until today. These are the truths that our own carnality finds offensive and distasteful and humiliating. These are the truths that must be emphasized by *Sword and Shield*, being written into the very constitution of RBP.

The fruit of these truths is the glory of God (Eph. 2:8–10) and the comfort of God's people (Rom. 5:1). What a worthy cause is that of God's truth! What blessed fruit

is God's glory and the believer's comfort! May *Sword and Shield* be faithful to that cause and proclaim it with full throat.

Sword and Shield is also a military name, a sword and a shield being deadly instruments of war. The magazine declares by its name its recognition that there is a spiritual war going on. The magazine also declares by its name that it intends to fight in this war. Of course, one who holds a sword and a shield fights! His *intention* when he takes up the sword and the shield is to fight. *Sword and Shield* has its face set toward battle and takes the field in order to fight in that battle.

The war that is currently raging and will always be raging on this earth is the age-old enmity between the Seed of the woman, who is Christ and all who are in him, and the seed of the serpent, who is the devil and all who belong to him. The war is between the truth and the lie. In this war that spans all earthly history, there are many battles. There are doctrinal battles. There are ethical and moral battles. There are battles in the heart of the individual child of God. There are battles in the church. By its name, *Sword and Shield* announces its intention, under the blessing of God, to engage in all of these battles for the cause of God's truth and the comfort of God's people.

Sword and Shield is an appropriate name for this particular magazine, for it is battle born. *Sword and Shield* comes into the world in the midst of an ongoing struggle in the Protestant Reformed Churches regarding God's grace in man's experience of salvation. This controversy has appeared in sermons, at ecclesiastical assemblies, in other magazines and publications, and in conversations among family and friends. This controversy has been between the truth and the lie, though it has not always been cast in those terms. It is especially this controversy that was the impetus for the organization of Reformed Believers Publishing and for the publication of *Sword and Shield*. It is also this controversy that explains the point of special emphasis in the RBP constitution "on the truths of the absolute sovereignty of God in salvation, particular grace, and the unconditional covenant." This does not mean *Sword and Shield* is limited to the present controversy. Not at all! This and future issues will range widely in their material. But neither does *Sword and Shield* hide the fact that it has a special interest in engaging this controversy.

The military name of the magazine will stamp itself upon the character of the magazine. It *must* stamp itself upon the character of the magazine! The magazine must be the *Sword and Shield* that it claims to be. That fighting character must be stamped on the editor. That fighting character must be stamped on the writers. That fighting character must be stamped on the readership.

This means that the content of *Sword and Shield* must be polemical. *Sword and Shield* does not exist to prevent controversies or to smooth them over when they appear. *Sword and Shield* does not exist to bemoan the fact that spiritual warfare exists and that fighting must be done. Rather, *Sword and Shield* exists to fight. It exists to expose the lie in the service of the truth. It exists to oppose the lie as the enemy of God, the enemy of God's truth, and the deadly enemy of God's people. *Sword and Shield* exists to draw blood in battle so that the enemy is killed or routed from the field. If *Sword and Shield* ever becomes timid and cowardly in battle so that the enemy finds an opening and a comfortable place from which to deceive God's people, then cursed be the editor, the writers, and the readers of *Sword and Shield*. This is God's own sobering judgment regarding those who bear a sword. "Cursed be he that doeth the work of the LORD deceitfully, and cursed be he that keepeth back his sword from blood" (Jer. 48:10).

Sword and Shield intends to be polemical, which is not the same as being nasty. In our day theological controversy and battle are viewed as nasty business. Theological controversialists are suspected or even charged with being sinful and schismatic. The attitude is that controversy is the worst thing that can happen among God's people and in God's church. Not heresy or false doctrine is the worst, but fighting against heresy and false doctrine! One who fights is regarded as a troubler of Israel. With this attitude RBP disagrees. *Sword and Shield* will fight vigorously, but it will be no troubler of Israel. It will fight honestly and honorably. *Sword and Shield* will bring the sword of the Spirit and the shield of faith to bear so that the readers can judge controversy from the word of God. And *Sword and Shield* will engage in controversy with the positive goal of defending and developing the truth, which is God's positive purpose with controversy. The polemics of *Sword and Shield* will not be fighting for fighting's sake, but fighting for the truth's sake.

Fighting for the truth's sake! Here we come to the deepest spring of polemics: love. Love! The love of God in Jesus Christ delivers the believer from darkness, from the deceiver, and from the lie. The love of God in Jesus Christ delivers the believer into his marvelous light. God makes the believer to know the truth, and the truth makes him free. The child of God, thus delivered, responds by faith with love for God and love for his truth. His God is a fighting God, who is the shield of Israel's help and the sword of Israel's excellency (Deut. 33:29). His Savior is a fighting Savior, who came not to send peace on earth, but a sword (Matt. 10:34). God's truth, which is Jesus Christ himself, draws the hatred

and opprobrium of the lie and the liars (John 8:40). In love for God, in love for Jesus Christ, and in love for God's truth, the believer contends against the lie and contends for the truth (Jude 3). A refusal to fight for God's truth reveals that love for God and his truth has cooled. God save us from that and kindle in us a fervent love for him, that we may contend.

Something should be said about the various relationships in which *Sword and Shield* stands. First, the relationship of *Sword and Shield* to the Protestant Reformed Churches. All of the current members of RBP are Protestant Reformed. All of the members love the Protestant Reformed Churches. All of the members confess the Reformed faith as it is held by the Protestant Reformed Churches. *Sword and Shield* hopes to be read by and be useful to the members of the Protestant Reformed Churches. Nevertheless, *Sword and Shield* is not a publication of the Protestant Reformed Churches. It is non-ecclesiastical, in the sense that it is not the possession of or under the governance of any church institute. *Sword and Shield* is a publication of Reformed Believers Publishing. The word "Believers" in Reformed Believers Publishing indicates that the organization and the magazine are rooted in the office of believer. Every believer shares the anointing of Jesus Christ as a prophet, priest, and king. In that office of believer, the child of God confesses Christ's name, presents himself a living sacrifice to his Lord, and with a free and good conscience fights against sin and Satan in this life (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 32). *Sword and Shield* is thus an opportunity for believers to discharge their office of believer in sounding forth a true Reformed testimony. All of this is stated in the preamble of the constitution of RBP.

The members of Reformed Believers Publishing have organized for the express purpose of witnessing to the Reformed truth. The organization is rooted in the office of believer, by virtue of which every believer has the privilege and calling to confess the truth and contend against the lie. Reformed Believers Publishing is non-ecclesiastical, is self-governing, and is not the possession of, or under the governance of, any church institute. An invitation shall be extended to all who desire to share this opportunity to sound forth a true Reformed testimony in the discharge of the office of believer.

Sword and Shield is thus free to comment on the Protestant Reformed Churches. *Sword and Shield* may evaluate these churches and offer instruction to them. *Sword and Shield* is able to commend doctrines, attitudes, and practices within these churches that are true. It is also able

to condemn doctrines, attitudes, and practices within them that are false. This is true even regarding the ecclesiastical assemblies of the Protestant Reformed Churches. *Sword and Shield* may write about matters coming to the assemblies; it may state its position on those matters; and it may comment on the decisions that the assemblies make. *Sword and Shield* may do this because ecclesiastical assemblies are not the only arena of theological controversy. Ecclesiastical assemblies are not even the main arena of theological controversy. Ecclesiastical assemblies are certainly very important arenas of theological controversy. They are the only arenas in which the churches pronounce their official judgments on matters that come before them. No magazine can do that. Nevertheless, contending for the faith is done in arenas much broader and wider than the ecclesiastical assemblies. The dinner table is the arena of theological controversy as the family discusses the issues at hand. The coffee shop is the arena of theological controversy as friends meet to sharpen one another. The job site is the arena of theological controversy as the workers take their lunch breaks and talk things over. The telephone is the arena of theological controversy as mothers discuss the controversy and its impact on their families. The thinking that all theological controversy must be restricted to ecclesiastical assemblies, or to the ministers and elders who attend ecclesiastical assemblies, is wrong. The thinking that all such theological controversy is gossip in the mouth of the believer is wrong. Certainly, let the believer not gossip as he eats his lunch and as she talks on the phone. But the believer in his life as a believer is also called to contend earnestly for the faith that was once delivered unto the saints. *Sword and Shield*, as a magazine of believers, is set to assist the believer in this calling. In this way *Sword and Shield*, without being under the authority of the Protestant Reformed Churches, can nevertheless serve them and the believers who make up these churches.

Second, the relationship of *Sword and Shield* to the *Standard Bearer*. *Sword and Shield* owes much, in fact, owes everything in a certain sense, to the *Standard Bearer*. The very nature of *Sword and Shield* as a non-ecclesiastical and free publication is a direct copy of the nature of the *Standard Bearer*. The constitution of Reformed Believers Publishing is virtually identical to the constitution of the Reformed Free Publishing Association, which publishes the *Standard Bearer*. One could say that *Sword and Shield* learned how to be a magazine from the *Standard Bearer*, and that would probably still be an understatement. *Sword and Shield* gratefully acknowledges its debt to the *Standard Bearer*.

Beyond that, there is no relationship between *Sword and Shield* and the *Standard Bearer*. Reformed Believers

Publishing is an entirely new publishing organization that is producing its own magazine.

Third, the relationship of *Sword and Shield* to itself. As a publication of believers that arises from and is subject to the truth, *Sword and Shield* must evaluate itself. This includes being able to criticize itself. Believers may measure the editor's and writers' work, the articles, the magazine, and the organization against the standard of God's word and the Reformed confessions. To that end, *Sword and Shield* welcomes letters and contributions from its readers, especially letters for publication, even

critical letters. The truth is not afraid of being engaged! As a magazine for the cause of the truth, *Sword and Shield* is eager to engage its readers and receive their letters.

I think that is enough of an introduction for now. You will get to know us more as the subsequent issues unfold. Let us end where we began, with thanksgiving to Jehovah for giving this first issue a place. We pray that he will speed the truths written herein to your heart, and the next issue into your hands.

—AL

FROM THE EDITOR

TWO INVITATIONS AND TWO REQUESTS

An invitation is hereby extended to all Reformed believers to join Reformed Believers Publishing, which organization publishes this magazine, *Sword and Shield*. As a member of Reformed Believers Publishing, one has the opportunity to confess the Reformed Christian faith as far and as wide as this magazine can be distributed. The cause is worthy, for it is the cause of God's own truth. The platform is advantageous, for a print and digital magazine can be sent across the whole earth. Although Reformed Believers Publishing is based in West Michigan, believers from anywhere in the world may join. Applications for membership may be sent to the business office of Reformed Believers Publishing. See the masthead for contact info. Applicants will be received at the first annual meeting of Reformed Believers Publishing, scheduled to be held on October 15, 2020. Further details of the annual meeting will be published in future issues of *Sword and Shield*.

An invitation is also hereby extended to all interested readers to subscribe to *Sword and Shield*. The first three issues (June, July, and August) will be sent at no charge to introduce readers to our magazine. Beginning in September, all issues will be sent to subscribers. We are planning one issue per month. The annual subscription price is \$24 for domestic (US) subscribers and \$36 for

international subscribers—a real deal for a year's worth of solid Reformed content, if I may say so.

And now, with hat in hand, we make a request. Help us share the news about *Sword and Shield*. Under the blessing of God, we hope to keep providing sturdy Reformed reading material. Rubrics are being planned and writing assignments have been laid out. Among the writers, the board members, and the organization there is a mix of sober reflection and enthusiastic excitement as *Sword and Shield* takes the field in service of our Captain and in opposition to our foe. We think many would benefit from this publication, so we ask our readers to pass the news along.

Finally, with hat now extended, we ask for your donations. There are significant start-up costs involved in these early months of the magazine. Until the subscriptions start coming in, these costs are being defrayed entirely by donations. If you are supportive of this endeavor or have profited from this issue of *Sword and Shield*, consider making a donation to Reformed Believers Publishing. Information can be obtained from, and donations can be made to, the board treasurer, Mr. Jason Cleveland, at the business address of Reformed Believers Publishing. Please, and thank you.

—AL

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Speak thou the things which become sound doctrine.—Titus 2:1

COVENANT DOCTRINE

One of the most precious treasures of scripture given to the Protestant Reformed Churches by our faithful God is the truth that God's everlasting covenant of grace is unconditional. This doctrine he has been pleased to give us in the way of controversy and a hard-fought, costly battle. Out of that controversy our churches emerged with the doctrine not only intact but also brought to a higher state of development. Not only did it become more dear and precious to us as we strove to be faithful to his truth and suffered such loss for that faithfulness, but also we understood it to have greater depths, more glory, and more assurance. With its prominence it became a powerful source of blessings to us. So we must stand in awe of the blessings of our God to us in giving to us such a precious doctrine.

This same controversy and suffering extend into the present. We continue to stand nearly alone in our witness to this important doctrine. Conservative Presbyterian and Reformed churches continue to insist on the conditional covenant. While many of these churches claim to have no official view of the covenant, their unofficial view certainly prevails, and that unofficial view is that God's everlasting covenant of grace is conditional. This unofficial view not only casts out any notion that the covenant of grace should be unconditional, but it also brands with a hot iron the doctrine of the unconditional covenant as "hyper-Calvinism" and casts out that doctrine as a pariah.

This decisive, strong bias against the teaching that God's everlasting covenant of grace is unconditional is a curious matter. It is curious because the doctrine of the unconditional covenant is in perfect harmony with unconditional election as well as the simple truth of the absolute sovereignty of God in salvation. This bias is also curious because the truth of the unconditional covenant is in simple harmony with the gospel as the gospel. As the gospel is simply the good news of what God has done in Christ, namely accomplishing eternal salvation through the blood of Calvary's cross, so should the doctrine of the covenant have the same character. The doctrine of the covenant should be that God alone revealed it, began it, realized it, and will completely fulfill it. And, as we hope to see over the course of our treatment of this doctrine, only the teaching that the covenant is unconditional can be the comfort that it ought to be to God's people. That God has promised to be forever the God of his people

without any condition is a promise to depend upon. A promise that stands in need of man to do anything to fulfill it cannot be depended upon.

There are two points of emphasis that we want to maintain in a consideration of this precious doctrine of the covenant. In these two points we want to see the glorious strength of the covenant and that strength to be the blessed hope of God's people. The first point of emphasis is the proper place in the covenant occupied by our Lord Jesus Christ as both the head and the fullness of God's everlasting covenant of grace. Because God's covenant of grace is ultimately only with Christ, it must be unconditional. And because it is ultimately only with Christ, it must include only the elect in Christ. Because election is in the head of the church, Jesus Christ, so the covenant established with and realized in the same head must include only the elect.

The second point of emphasis is not only that the heart of the covenant is the relationship of fellowship and friendship between God and his people, but also that the distinct mode of that fellowship is *verbal* in character. We must speak of covenant language, the language of promise on God's part, and on the part of God's people the language of praise and worship and of joyful tokens of expressed dependence on God. The covenant is the life of God's people in their fellowship with him. Their great delight in their God is to hear his word to them, declaring all his love and kindness to them, and to see his faithfulness reflected in his performance toward them of all that he has promised. Their delight then is also to lift up their voices in praise and worship of their God, joyfully expressing from their hearts the love that abounds toward him who has so richly blessed them. This same delight God has in his people according to the manner of this covenant of grace. That delight is beautifully shown in Zephaniah 3:17: "The LORD thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; he will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing." The covenant is not simply the Lord God in the midst of his people. It is also his rejoicing and joy over his people.

We also want to chart a particular course through the consideration of the doctrine of the covenant. We want to view the doctrine of the covenant as something that is set out in scripture in its own peculiar way. Perhaps more

than any other doctrine, the doctrine of the covenant is tied to the progressive nature of scripture's revelation. The beautiful power of this progress is that scripture delights slowly to unfold the riches of God's gracious fellowship with his people. Scripture has a twofold development: the covenant people are emptied of themselves more and more, while God's grace and mercy are more gloriously shown to enrich and exalt his people. Their death requires his gift of life, their inability his strength, their poverty his riches. In this development scripture leads to Jesus Christ and his perfect salvation to bless the covenant people of God with an everlasting, unbreakable salvation. So the covenant comes to its fulfillment in Emmanuel, God with us, where God and his people meet in the true temple of Jehovah.

In a similar way, we believe that the covenant is best considered according to the Bible's expression of it as it speaks of the relationship between Jehovah and his people. In other words, a proper understanding of all that the covenant means cannot be attained without knowing how God walks with his people, and how they walk with their God in light of his everlasting covenant of grace. If we must know how the covenant truly is the living communion and fellowship between God and his people in Christ, it must never be taken as a mere abstraction or a set of rules. It ought to be evident that, should the covenant become merely an abstraction to the church of Jesus Christ, it will necessarily become legalistic and conditional.

The fact of covenant theology and a distinct doctrine of the covenant are demanded by the appearance of the word "covenant" in scripture itself. The word in the Old Testament in the Hebrew is *berith*, and in the New Testament in the Greek is *diatheke*. Notable with the word "covenant" in the Old Testament is the word "make," which is translated from the Hebrew word that is most properly translated as "cut." Referring to the sacrificial animals cut in pieces through which the covenanting parties passed, it expressed that the parties covenanting would be similarly punished for failure to keep what they had promised. In such a case we are to understand that, as God passed through such pieces by himself while Abraham only observed, the significance demands a covenant that is unconditional (Gen. 15:8–21). In this covenant rite was also foreshadowed the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The use of *diatheke* in the New Testament has also a notable feature of its own. The Holy Spirit was pleased to use this word in distinction from another Greek word that is also capable of being translated as "covenant." That other word is *suntheke*. That word employs the preposition "with," stressing the idea of one engaging or contracting with another, or between two or more. It carries

far more the idea of an agreement or a contract based on mutuality between the two. In distinction, *diatheke* has more the character of a sovereign testament or disposition, the will of the one testifying or disposing being sovereign and the other being beneficiary. This view of *diatheke* is well explained in Hebrews 9:14–28.

It is evident, then, that the word "covenant" runs through all of scripture. As the term appears over and over in the Old Testament and into the New Testament, it gathers up more weight and significance through the course of sacred history. So strong is this sense of gathering that "covenant history" is a proper term. Following its usage in the Bible, the word "covenant" first appears in a rather mysterious way, simply spoken by God and given its own content. It moves from its concern with the individual Abraham and his seed after him, comprising a family of strangers dwelling in tents in the land of Canaan. The same word follows this family into the land of Egypt and is applied to them as they become a nation delivered by the God who promised. It is a word that brings them into the land of Canaan, driving out their enemies before them. The same word establishes them in their life in that land and also regulates their life in that land as the people of their God. It is the word that threatens them with expulsion from the land should they fall away from him. It is the same word that governs them under their kings and governs their kings over them. It is the word that drives them out of the land for their constant revolt from their God and that promises to restore them after the land enjoys its rest from the sins of its inhabitants. It is the word that will bring something newer and better, to supply what was found lacking and defective in the old. Finally, it is that word that has its ultimate fulfillment beyond the entire history of the world, in a new heavens and earth in which righteousness shall dwell forever. It is by that word believed that Abraham so long before wandered on the earth as a pilgrim. By faith he received "a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Heb. 11:10), and thus was content to dwell in the land of Canaan in a tabernacle.

Truly, here is a word that demands an entire theology. Here is a word that demands an entire theology to do justice to its wonder and glory of grace: to provide earthy, sinful men with a heavenly inheritance, Jehovah to be their God forever.

The real work of covenant theology is properly to convey not simply the truth of the covenant, but also its truth to build up the believer and the believing body of Christ in faith, hope, and love.

Given all the expressions of the word translated as "covenant" in scripture, it is related to a wide variety of its aspects. Genesis 17 is one place where the word

“covenant” appears in three different, main connections. Verse 7 speaks of two of those connections. One connection is that the word applied to the words that God spoke to Abraham. That is, when God said to Abram, “I will be a God to thee,” those words in their sound and meaning were the covenant. Abram was brought into covenant because God spoke those words to him. This first possibility excludes any kind of change and work that God would do for Abraham. The covenant is only the communication spoken by God to man. The second possibility is the relationship signified by the words. The covenant is the relationship of fellowship initiated by God with Abram. That is, with those words God gave himself to Abraham as his God and took Abraham to himself as his friend and servant. Thus the action of God’s doing as he spoke is itself the covenant.

The third connection is in Genesis 17:10: “This is my covenant, which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after thee; Every man child among you shall be circumcised.” This third connection is somewhat strengthened by the severe threat spoken about those who would refuse to circumcise: “And the uncircumcised man child whose flesh of his foreskin is not circumcised, that soul shall be cut off from his people; he hath broken my covenant” (v. 14).

A proper view of the covenant must take into its full consideration all these connections and coordinate

them. Each must be given its proper role and function. Nevertheless, only one of them can be given the dominant, controlling position. The two remaining connections must be given a subordinate position, and must be adjusted accordingly. For example, if the covenant is tied first to the rite of circumcision and not to the relationship of fellowship with God that is salvation, the scope of the covenant will be far broader. If the covenant is tied to the relationship with God that is salvation, it will be far narrower. It will make a great deal of difference if Esau and Jacob by circumcision are equally in the covenant, as well as all Israel according to the flesh, or only the remnant according to the election of grace.

That difference also becomes evident in determining the strength of the covenant. If the covenant has its first tie to the rite of the covenant, whether circumcision or baptism, it will be weaker. If the covenant has its first tie to the innermost principle of life as fellowship with God, it will be stronger. Very similar is the question of whether the covenant is going to have an earthly or material focus or a spiritual. Tied to its administrative elements first, it will be of an earthly character. If tied to its core of fellowship between God and his people, it will be of a spiritual, inner character. Is the covenant salvation itself, or is the covenant only the means to salvation?

—MVW

UNDERSTANDING THE TIMES

Men that had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do.—1 Chronicles 12:32

“WHERE IS GOD IN A PANDEMIC?”

The title above heads an enlightening article written in the *New York Times* by a Jesuit priest from New York, James Martin. The article was not enlightening because of its sound theology. That is not to be expected from a Jesuit. Rather, the article was enlightening because of its candid expression of unbelief in the sovereignty of God over evil and the evident consequences of that unbelief in the fear and despair in the face of the pandemic of COVID-19.

The world has been shaken with the coronavirus and the disease known as COVID-19. The disease has effectively shut down the world economy, brought normal human life to a virtual standstill, and caused massive disruptions at all levels of human life. Included in this are the orders from state and local governments preventing

large gatherings of people, which in fact prohibit the gathering of churches of Jesus Christ for public worship.

In large measure the reaction to the disease is driven by the fact that the specific form of the coronavirus that causes COVID-19 is scientifically unknown. This ignorance contributes to the fear. Man all his life long through fear of death is subject to bondage. Fear belongs to the bondage of unbelief and sin. Only the gospel of Jesus Christ delivers from all fear with its glorious exhortation to the believer, “Fear not!” In the world there is only fear. Fear of what might happen with this virus has led to a willing dismantling of normal life.

James Martin describes the reaction that he has encountered in the ungodly environs of the city of New York, a city particularly hard hit by the virus:

In just the past few weeks, millions have started to fear that they are moving to their appointment [with death] with terrifying speed, thanks to the Covid-19 pandemic. The sheer horror of this fast-moving infection is coupled with the almost physical shock from its sudden onset. As a priest, I've heard an avalanche of feelings in the last month: panic, fear, anger, sadness, confusion and despair.*

He writes in vivid terms of the images in “the minds of millions of believers, who quail at steadily rising death tolls, struggle with stories of physicians forced to triage patients and recoil at photos of rows of coffins.” With minds full of fear, “even the most religious people ask me: Why is this happening? And: Where is God in all of this?”

Martin’s “honest answer” to the fearful question about where God is in all this is: “We don’t know.” To the question of why this is happening, he replies, “The most honest answer to the question of why the Covid-19 virus is killing thousands of people, why infectious diseases ravage humanity and why there is suffering at all is: We don’t know.”

Banishing God from the universe, it is no wonder the people he talks to are full of fear. The idol of James Martin reminds me of the idol Baal whom Elijah mocked, saying, “Maybe he is on a hunting trip, or talking, or on a journey, or maybe he is sleeping and needs to be awakened!” The Roman Catholic James Martin does not know where God is and what he is doing when suffering comes on the world, when there is calamity, and when men die from calamities. Further, he does not know why there is suffering in the world at all! His Roman Catholic forebears were not so bold.

The Reformed faith teaches that God does not disappear in a calamity, but he sits enthroned in the heavens as the absolutely sovereign God of heaven and earth. It teaches that absolutely nothing comes to pass in the universe apart from his will and work. Shall there be evil in the city and the Lord has not done it?

Why is there suffering? The suffering of human beings in the world is not mystifying to one who believes the Reformed faith. God made man perfect and upright, as his friend in the garden and king of creation. Adam, by

the instigation of the devil and by his own willful disobedience, departed from God, who was his life, and brought upon himself and all his posterity death. Death in all its forms—physical death, spiritual death in man’s total depravity, and liability to eternal death in hell—is the just punishment of a holy God for the rebellion of Adam. “Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned” (Rom. 5:12). Adam was the federal head of the human race, and all human beings are judged guilty of Adam’s sin, and thus all are liable to suffer death as the punishment of that sin. That God is God and that sin is an offense against his most high majesty explain the terrible suffering and calamity that come on the wicked and rebellious world.

Martin suggests that to bring up God’s punishment of sin as an explanation of suffering in the world makes God out to be “a monster.” Outside of faith in Christ, however, all that man can expect in the world is suffering of every kind, because sin is terrible and God is just and he will not suffer such disobedience and rebellion to go unpunished.

Not minimizing man’s guilt in his sin, the Reformed faith also teaches a more profound answer to the question of sin and suffering. God decreed in his counsel sin, evil, suffering, and calamity. He decreed them as that for which he has a good purpose. From the fall of Adam into sin and death and the curse that followed from it, to the evil of wicked men at the cross, to all the suffering in the world, to the persecution of his people—God decreed it all and carries it out as that for which he has a good purpose. That purpose is the revelation of himself as the righteous, holy, and gracious God and the perfection of his covenant and kingdom in a new heaven and earth in Jesus Christ. This world in its present form is not the goal, just as Eden the first was not the goal. God will make all things heavenly by a wonder of grace.

Having denied God, James Martin has the temerity to suggest that while we do not know where God is or why there is suffering in the world, nevertheless, we can turn to Jesus: “in these frightening times, Christians may find comfort in knowing that when they pray to Jesus, they are praying to someone who understands them not only because he is divine and knows all things, but because he is human and experienced all things.”

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* <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/22/opinion/coronavirus-religion.html>. All quotations of James Martin are taken from his March 22, 2020, article in the *New York Times*.

For Martin, if you are not a Christian, you can still turn to Jesus “as a model for care of the sick.”

I do not think that James Martin is out of the mainstream in nominally religious America; he was published in the *New York Times*. To make God an unknowable and absent deity from the world and to divorce the knowledge of Jesus from the knowledge of God and the knowledge of the reason for suffering in the world is unbelief not only in God but also in Jesus. Such unbelief can only have the judgment of the kind of despair, fear, and anxiety about which Martin writes.

Jesus Christ is the revelation of God. His whole purpose in coming into this world was the revelation of God and to accomplish God’s purpose in the world and with the world. In a world that lies in sin and death and under the curse, Jesus Christ is the gospel of God concerning his wonderful purpose and grace to redeem the world that lies under the curse and to lift it to the heights of heaven, to make this earth one with the heaven and recreate it by the wonder of grace as the everlasting dwelling place of Christ and his elect people—the perfection of his covenant.

The gospel proclaims that in order that his people escape the punishment of sin God sent Jesus Christ into the world to suffer for them and in their place on the cross and to earn and merit their complete righteousness and salvation. God did that according to his sovereign

counsel of election and reprobation. It is the suffering of Jesus Christ that provides the most astounding example of God’s sovereignty over suffering and evil. According to the scripture, all the wickedness of men at the cross was included in the counsel of God: “For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together, for to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done” (Acts 4:27–28).

God decreed that, carried that out, and used that to accomplish salvation for his people whom he loved. The amazing truth of the cross is that God bruised Jesus Christ and put him to grief in order that God in Christ might reconcile his elect people unto himself. Involved in that—decreed and controlled and carried out by God—was the most monstrous wickedness of men that can ever be contemplated. At the cross there was the demonstration of the wickedness of man, because of which the world lies under the curse of sin and death and suffers the judgments of God.

The cross of Christ, and the Christ of the cross, is also the secret to understand suffering in the world. Apart from him and faith in him there is only—and justly—suffering to men because of their sin. In him—only in him by faith—all the suffering in this world is turned to the advantage and salvation of God’s people. He works by it their eternal profit.

COVID-19 AND THE RUNNING OF THE PALE HORSE

There is more that can and must be said about epidemics like COVID-19. The world is a world of sin, spiritual darkness, and enmity against God. That world develops in its sin. The development of Adam’s original sin will culminate in the worldwide kingdom of antichrist, to whom the great red dragon will give his seat, power, and authority. The coming of this kingdom, too, is under the sovereign control of God as he reveals the wickedness of man’s sin and ripens the world for final judgment.

The coronavirus is the hand of God, and the fears that accompany it and multiply its effect are the Lord’s sword against the ungodly world for the purpose of bringing his kingdom. That must be the Reformed believer’s response regarding the coming of the pandemic to the world. The

pandemic belongs to the phenomenon of the precursory signs that are created by the promised coming of Christ our savior. Jesus Christ foretold that such things would come on the world as part of his coming. He revealed to the apostle John in Revelation 6:1–8 that such events would happen throughout world history in the running of the four horsemen. All of these proceed from the sealed book in the hand of Jesus Christ, which represents the counsel of God for the perfection of God’s kingdom. The pandemic is not only God’s work, but also Christ comes in fulfillment of God’s promise.

Specifically, the coming of coronavirus is the running of the pale horse of Revelation 6:8: “And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given

unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth.”

The pale horse is green like the grass. Grass is the scriptural symbol of man’s fleeting life. Psalm 90 says that man flourishes like the grass for a time and then he quickly fades away. Isaiah 40 says that all flesh is as grass; the grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our God shall stand forever! God’s word over man is, “Return to dust, ye sons of men.”

The pale horse’s rider is Death and his attendant is Hell, or more properly the Grave, which is ready to receive the victims of this dreadful horse and its rider. His weapon is death by many means. His mandate from God is to kill one quarter of the earth’s population. As he rides throughout history, he cuts down the inhabitants of the earth like grass by death in all its ugly forms. The monstrous rider stalks about and slays by war, violence, murder, suicide, and drug overdose. He kills by death in old age, in tender age, in middle age, by heart attack and stroke, by accidents at work, on the road, at home, on vacation, and by storm and flood, wind and fire, and pestilence. He gallops by plagues and mows down millions by famines and disasters.

He kills by beasts—big beasts and little beasts. How he kills by little beasts! He terrifies man by little, unseen beasts that stalk the creation and travel the globe. With a stroke he mows down millions by AIDS, flu, malaria, Ebola, SARS, COVID-19, and a hundred other diseases old and new.

The one who directs everything is Christ, according to God’s decree. Christ is the one who opens the seals. He holds the reins of history and controls all the events of history. He sends forth the white horse of his kingdom conquering and to conquer. He unleashes the red and the black and green horses. He controls the rise and fall of nations, the price of bread and the wages to buy it. He maintains the contrast between rich and poor. He sends death in all its forms on the earth to kill.

What Christ is directing is a warfare in which his kingdom is victorious. As the consummate general he wages his war perfectly, directing every event and all creatures as so many soldiers in his army. Christ controls the gospel, whether it saves or hardens. He controls the

markets, economies, beasts great and small, little viruses, great pandemics, pestilence, famine, war and rumor of war. The life and death of billions of men are in his hand. In all, his kingdom comes.

When we see these things, we ought to believe, repent, and worship this grand and lordly Christ. We ought to refresh ourselves with the thought, “Ah, Christ is waging war. He is active in history for the coming of his kingdom.” History is not about the victorious progress of democracy, capitalism, socialism, or any other force or movement in history. All history is about the victorious progress of the kingdom of God. Why is all this necessary? Why the running of the white horse in the preaching of the gospel? Why all the strife, warfare, and murder in the world? Why the tremendous contrast between riches and poverty? Why does the terrible last horse mow down millions? The answer is that the kingdom of God must come in this way, according to God’s sovereign and determinate counsel, for the judgment of the reprobate ungodly and the salvation of God’s elect, to the glory of God.

The elect suffer these things as well. These things cause them to hold fast what they have, to look and pray for the coming of Jesus Christ, and to lift up their heads in hope that their redemption is near. These things serve to harden the reprobate, to ripen the world for judgment, and to hasten the coming of the antichrist, whom Christ will consume with the spirit of his mouth and will destroy with the brightness of his coming.

When the church sees warfare, pestilence, and famine in the world, she ought not be surprised or fearful. All things—war, famine, pestilence, nakedness, riches, and poverty—work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to his purpose.

So I will wash my hands and watch out for the health of myself and my neighbor, but not fear or be perplexed. Indeed, I will come and see, as I was instructed to do. Come and see by faith the mighty hand of God and the execution of his perfect counsel. Come and see the coming of Jesus Christ.

And pray. Pray still more fervently, “Come, Lord Jesus, come in every event and calamity of history, come quickly!”

—NJL

The coronavirus is the hand of God, and the fears that accompany it and multiply its effect are the Lord’s sword against the ungodly world for the purpose of bringing his kingdom.

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.—Romans 12:1

ETHICS AND THE GOSPEL

Ethics in the broadest sense is a science of distinction in conduct and behavior, distinguishing between behavior that is ethical and that is unethical. Ethics is part of the vocabulary of any society and culture. Ethics is an essential ingredient in society. The very notion of a society demands a shared set of behaviors and practices that are considered to be normal to the members of the society. According to this consideration, behaviors and practices that fall short of this norm are judged wrong by the society. The more flagrant and constant the falling short, the more likely the violator is to be cast out of that society altogether. Especially societies of professionals, such as doctors, lawyers, and scientists, are careful to maintain and enforce their own systems of ethics. Even corporations have boards and consultants that specialize in ethics. Ethical violations are often grounds for dismissal from practice and for revocation of licenses to practice. Secular colleges and universities have professors of ethics and courses in ethics, and award degrees in the subject of ethics. Most people know that ethical behavior is good, while unethical behavior is bad.

In the secular realm there are many who are fascinated with the source of ethics. To a worldview that is strictly atheistic and materialistic, ethics is a very strange phenomenon. How does a society come to have such a strong sense of ethics? How is this ethical sense so strong that members who before held such a firm place in a society so suddenly become outcasts because of scandal? How is it that a society can so readily agree together on distinctions between good and bad? Some answer that ethics arises out of a group identity that uses patterns of behavior to distinguish between those within and without, to distinguish the friends of a society from those who are its enemies. Others answer that it arises out of the understanding that some behaviors are beneficial to the group, that is, “good,” while other behaviors are detrimental, that is, “bad.” Still others of a more radical sort will answer that all ethics are remnants of religious elements of primitive man. Those remains inhibit the development of man to greater heights of progress. They keep him from advancing in his evolutionary progress. Therefore, the sooner all ethical notions are cast off, the better off the human race will be.

It may be helpful to give examples of the latter. Ethics involves approved notions of love, mercy, and compassion.

Ethics determines faithful commitment in marriage and family. Proper ethics approves helping unreservedly the poor, needy, and handicapped. But these ethics are criticized. They are declared detrimental to true progress. The human race and human society are better off without the weak. They are a waste of significant resources. Their presence threatens the progressive purification of the gene pool. The aged and infirm should be euthanized. The depressed should have access to assisted suicide. Especially the impoverished ghettos should have both access to abortion and abortion promoted there. Though Adolf Hitler’s eugenic program was thoroughly reviled in Europe and America, it has been revived and welcomed through the labor of Margaret Sanger, that labor bearing its abominable fruit in the government-sponsored Planned Parenthood with its euphemistic “family planning.”

In the above abomination there is a glaring weakness that demands attention, a weakness that must greatly assist us in understanding what must be an essential element of Reformed ethics. This weakness, which is found in every secular notion of ethics, is that it is man-centered. Ethics is the study of man, and it can therefore rise no higher than man and human society.

This weakness is that ultimately all study of ethics is always relative and always shifting and changing. Think of an ethical study of England during the Victorian Era. There is plenty of literature written during that time from which one might derive a pattern of behavior and conduct, approved and disapproved, to come to an accurate ethical study of that time. We might think of all the ethical questions treated in the works of Charles Dickens. Compare such a study on ethics with a study of ethics done among the counter-culture movements of the 1960s and 1970s. What a difference between the two! In the present culture one might well decide that a secular study of ethics is nearly impossible, drawing the conclusion that ethics is all but dead.

The glaring weakness is that ethics must be descriptive. It can only analyze. It can never demand. It might try to give guidance or offer advice. But every secular system is ironically at the mercy of the society that practices it. Another great fault of such ethical understanding is that it is always relative and fluctuating. Ultimately it leaves man alone, entirely in charge of his own ethics. Good and

evil is simply up to him. If he likes, he is free to call evil good and good evil, and change back if he so likes. Thus any ethical framework of man must collapse upon itself, simply because man is a creature of change.

At the same time there is something notable about secular ethics that serves the cause of Reformed ethics. The Canons of Dort mention secular ethics in heads 3 and 4, article 4: “There remain, however, in man since the fall the glimmerings of natural light, whereby he retains some knowledge of God, of natural things, and of the differences between good and evil, and discovers some regard for virtue, good order in society, and for maintaining an orderly external deportment.” This sentence from the Canons is a further explanation of the same truth confessed in the Belgic Confession, article 14, which speaks of “a few remains” of “[man’s] excellent gifts which he had received from God.” We also note that these remains are declared by both confessions to leave man without excuse.

Worthy of note in this connection is that the same “few remains,” declared by the Reformed confessions to leave man without excuse, are extolled and celebrated as a ground for common grace by those claiming allegiance to the same Reformed confessions.

The fact of secular ethics is in the light of scripture a demonstration of the creation and fall of man. That unregenerate man is both without excuse and under the wrath of God is because he is an ethical creature and knows that he is an ethical creature. His use of ethics is in the service of sin. He uses the label good to pervert evil, to twist and turn it into his so-called good. He uses ethics as a means to cohere and maintain his society in its antichristian revolt against God and his Christ, as identified by Psalm 2. Fallen man uses his ethics to be “Good without God,” a slogan developed by atheists for propaganda during a Christmas season not long ago.

There are reasons that we have spent this much space laying out in detail secular ethics and secular ethics under the wrath of God. The first reason is that a proper fear of God must give a strong warning against the notion that having an ethical system or thinking ethically is itself a virtue. It is not. We might think of the first three chapters of the book of James. There is no value in being merely a hearer of the law. Neither is there any value in being merely a judge or a speaker of judgment. As it is observed in Romans 2:14–15 of the Gentiles under God’s wrath, their approval or disapproval of others’ behavior only shows the work of the law written on their hearts. It does

not justify them before God but only condemns them.

The second reason is that Reformed ethics must be on its constant guard against being merely descriptive, and being merely descriptive of behavior and judgment in the church. Reformed ethics cannot be determined by survey or analysis of the members of the church, even the holiest members of the church. Reformed ethics must be based entirely on scripture and scripture alone. The “*sola scriptura*” of the Protestant Reformation must carry its blessed force to Reformed ethics. Here the church of Christ faces two fronts. Worldliness is always seeping into the church. We can think especially of entertainment, especially drama, which at present has moved far beyond situational ethics to introduce and preach a constantly conflicted ethics. But there is another front that is just as dangerous and requires perhaps even more vigilance. A church with high walls and gates barred against the world can develop its own ethical system to justify itself. The danger

is that the church becomes lax in its walk rather than pursuing perfection in the hope of eternal life. An even greater danger is that the church uses its own ethical system to justify itself both over against the world and over against the righteousness of God in Christ, and thus loses the heart of the gospel.

The study of Reformed ethics has two additional benefits.

The first great benefit is that at the same time Reformed ethics will talk about the law of God, it must have proper respect to its boundary. The law of God, the source of Reformed ethics, will be kept within its proper boundaries as a teacher or a guide. To be sure, in the language of the Heidelberg Catechism in its third section, the law will require, and the Christian is required to obey. But it cannot become a requirement to fulfill one’s righteousness before God, or its observance a ground or way of obtaining anything from God. Neither can it become any kind of power for obedience. The approach of Reformed ethics must always be first through the gospel of Jesus Christ, who is the end of the law for everyone who believes. He is the one who “renews us by his Holy Spirit after his own image; that so we may testify by the whole of our conduct our gratitude to God for his blessings” (Lord’s Day 32). Justification by faith alone without works, one of the principles of the Reformation, maintains the law as the proper guide for the Christian’s walk of gratitude.

The second great benefit of Reformed ethics is along the same lines. We are able through the gospel to come to the law as “the perfect law of liberty.” We are able to look

Across nationalities and languages, believers and their seed walk the same walk in the service of the same God of their salvation.

at the perfection of the law, to see the proper keeping of that perfect law of liberty. This is the entire key to looking properly at Psalm 119 as glorious praise of the law of God. Anything short of the gospel of complete salvation in Christ must make the law into its very opposite: a burdensome, impossible system that can only bring about bleak despair or shameless rebellion.

This truth we must observe through our entire study of Reformed ethics, but it is especially important at the very beginning. It is also an important safeguard against a merit-based system of legalism that is rooted in pride. There is also the pride of our flesh that desires such a legalistic system, in rebellion against the righteousness of Christ. A merit-based, legalistic approach to ethics will ultimately prevent us from seeing and appreciating the perfection of God's law as an ethical standard. A legalistic approach must ultimately wage war against the biblical ethic, just as the Pharisees taught for doctrines the commandments of men (Mark 7:7).

Keeping the above in mind, we consider then the biblical and thus Reformed doctrine of ethics.

Scripture uses the word "ethics." The same Greek word that is used to form the word ethics, *ethos*, has its closest reference to ethics in the apostolic warning of 1 Corinthians 15:33: "Be not deceived: evil communications corrupt good manners." "Manners" is the proper translation here of the word *ethos*. In most of the places where the Bible uses it, the word is translated according to the context as "customs," as in Acts 6:14 and 26:3.

Although the appearance of this Greek word is not at all frequent in the New Testament, the thought cannot be entertained that scripture is so little concerned with ethics. To the contrary, the Bible speaks frequently of ethics. Ethics is an important and prominent part of scripture, as well as of the believer's life based on it. Three words found throughout scripture address the same topic. Very graphic, descriptive, and active words that comprehend ethics are "way" and "walk," found in both the Old and New Testaments. "Conversation" is another word that is often used in the New Testament, not referring to dialogue between two, but to manner of behavior.

It is helpful to our understanding to see various scriptural passages that indicate the importance of ethics according to the above words as they appear in the Bible. Surveying these passages will also make clear several points of relationship between ethics and other aspects of the believer's salvation and life in the world.

"Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? by taking heed thereto according to thy word" (Ps. 119:9). "Having your conversation honest among the Gentiles: that, whereas they speak against you as evildoers, they may by your good works, which they shall behold, glorify God

in the day of visitation" (1 Pet. 2:12). "Only let your conversation be as it becometh the gospel of Christ...that ye stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel" (Phil. 1:27). "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path" (Ps. 119:105). "Cause me to know the way wherein I should walk; for I lift up my soul unto thee" (143:8). "That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit" (Rom. 8:4).

The above passages teach a number of truths about biblical, Reformed ethics. First, ethics is the knowledge of God's holy law applied to all aspects of the lives of the redeemed people of God. The source of true ethics is God's revelation of his law. Ethics also implies the deliberate, conscious effort of the believer to take his heart and his mind, as well as his lips, his eyes, his hands, and his feet, and direct them so that they conform to God's revelation. This involves such a struggle against the flesh that God's grace is necessary at every point.

Second, biblical ethics is thoroughly comprehensive. It comprehends the believer's inner life and outer life. It comprehends him as an individual with his own thoughts and desires. It comprehends him as a member of his nation and society, as a member of his church and of his family. It applies to him in his eating and drinking, his labor and rest, his recreation and his entertainment. It applies to him as a little child and as an aged saint. His walk is to be one—one according to the law of God and one in the love of God.

Third, biblical ethics is transcendent, standing above all the changes of earthly history. Kingdoms rise and fall. Trends come and go. Fashions and designs become obsolete. Approval turns to disapproval and back to approval. But scripture provides an ethical standard for God's people in all ages, a standard by which parents might raise their children, with the desire that their children will raise their children to walk in the same way and to carry on in the same conversation, all to the glory of their covenant God. In this same ethical pattern the whole church of Jesus Christ is able to walk together, old and young. Across nationalities and languages, believers and their seed walk the same walk in the service of the same God of their salvation.

Fourth, because biblical, Reformed ethics is from the revelation of God's word, it is a pattern of conduct and behavior by which God is pleased to bring honor and glory to his name in the holiness that he works in his people through the Spirit of his Son. As believers strive to walk in this way, then, they can be conscious that in and through their efforts they are showing the glorious grace of their God, who both justifies and sanctifies them by faith alone through grace alone.

—MVW

INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF ESTHER

Introduction

The book of Esther is grand. Its setting is the sumptuous palace and court of the ancient Persian Empire. Its characters include the most powerful man in the world, the most beautiful maiden in the world, and the most devious scoundrel in the world. Its events include a high-profile scandal involving the king and queen, a world wide beauty search, a foiled assassination plot, intrigue and defiance and revenge within the king's court, a national program of genocide, a secret identity, and a last-minute deliverance. There are plots within plots. Life or death, victory or defeat, weal or woe hang in the balance with every turn of the page. Oh yes, the book of Esther is grand.

What makes the book of Esther so grand is its theme and message. But we must take our time. We will come to the theme bit by bit. After all, this is how the book of Esther itself reveals its theme: not all at once in the first verse or even the first chapter, but in the unfolding of the events of the whole book. In this article, then, let us note the setting and the main characters of the book. This will set us up well to come to the theme in the next article.

Let us make our way now to ancient Persia, the center of the world in its day, and hear what God has to say to us there.

Setting

The history of Esther takes place in Persia after the Jews had returned to Jerusalem from their Babylonian captivity. God had raised the Median-Persian King Cyrus the Great as his servant to overthrow the Babylonians and to send the Jews back to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. Under the leadership of the Jewish prince Zerubbabel and the high priest Jeshua, a small remnant of the Jews returned. Most of the Jews remained behind, widely dispersed throughout the Persian Empire. The Jews who returned to Jerusalem were finally able to finish rebuilding the temple after twenty years of opposition from their enemies. Under the direction of God through the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, God's house was built. All of this is recorded in Ezra 1–6.

The book of Esther records events some fifty years after Zerubbabel's return and some fifteen years before Ezra's return, recorded in Ezra 7–10. The book of Esther

fits chronologically between Ezra 6 and 7. Whereas Ezra records events in Jerusalem, the book of Esther describes events far away from Jerusalem in a distant city of Persia. The whole of the book of Esther takes place in the royal Persian city of Shushan, also known as Susa, between the years 483 and 473 BC. Although no mention is made of Jerusalem in the book of Esther, everything that happened in Shushan had enormous implications for that small remnant in Jerusalem and, indeed, was for the sake of that small remnant.

The Persian Empire in those days was a wonder to the whole world. Its rise to become the dominant world power was rapid and unprecedented. Persia's empire was vast, from India to Ethiopia. The list of conquered peoples was impressive, including Babylon and Egypt. Persia administered its empire with efficiency. Royal decrees were translated into the many languages of the empire and were sped by mules, camels, and dromedaries along a system of post stations to be disseminated throughout the empire. Persia was also wealthy, as the lavish luxuries in the palace city of Shushan attested. The book of Esther unfolds in the midst of this power and wealth, in the very court of the king who presided over it all.

Main Characters

The first main character introduced in the book of Esther is the great King Ahasuerus, also known to history as Xerxes I. "Now it came to pass in the days of Ahasuerus, (this is Ahasuerus which reigned, from India even unto Ethiopia, over an hundred and seven and twenty provinces:) that in those days, when the king Ahasuerus sat on the throne of his kingdom, which was in Shushan the palace..." (Esther 1:1–2).

Ahasuerus was the embodiment of royal power. With a word, he could wipe out an entire people throughout his kingdom. With another word, he could restore them. His title was *King of kings*. The wonders of Persia were his wonders, so that all of the glories of his vast domain redounded to him. Still today, the remnants of Ahasuerus' construction projects stand in Persepolis in modern-day Iran. Secular historians recognize Ahasuerus as one of the most powerful kings in the history of the world. His military campaigns and his architecture are the subject of much modern study.

For all of that, Ahasuerus was a servant. Ahasuerus was not the true King of kings, but a servant of the King of kings, Jehovah. Though Ahasuerus was utterly unaware of Jehovah's rule over him, the Lord sovereignly directed him to the accomplishment of his own eternal purposes. Ahasuerus stands in history alongside his grandfather Cyrus the Great as an outstanding example of Proverbs 21:1: "The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will."

The next main character introduced in the book of Esther is Mordecai the Jew. "Now in Shushan the palace there was a certain Jew, whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, a Benjamite" (Esther 2:5). Mordecai had lived his entire life in Persia. His great-grandfather had been carried captive by Nebuchadnezzar in the days of King Jehoiachin of Judah.

The one and only important fact about Mordecai is that he was a Jew. He was a descendent of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob through Benjamin. From the moment of his introduction as "a certain Jew" (2:5) to the very last verse of the book, Mordecai is "Mordecai the Jew" (10:3). In 3:4 Mordecai tells the other government officials "that he was a Jew." In 3:6 the Jews are "the people of Mordecai." In 6:10 he is "Mordecai the Jew." In 6:13 Mordecai is "of the seed of the Jews." In 9:29 he is "Mordecai the Jew." In 9:31 he is "Mordecai the Jew." Mordecai the Jew! Mordecai the Jew! Mordecai the Jew! This is the one thing that we must know about Mordecai: Mordecai was a Jew.

The book of Esther is determinedly silent about the other fact that we would very much like to know—whether Mordecai was a child of God or not. Was he of the elect seed of the woman, or was he of the reprobate seed of the serpent? We are curious, and as the book unfolds, our curiosity grows. How should we interpret all of his words and deeds, which are so critical to the story? Was his refusal to bow to Haman an act of faith, or was it insubordination? Was his speech to Esther that she was come to the kingdom for such a time as this a confession of God's providence or merely philosophical optimism? Was his law that the Jews may kill and destroy their Persian enemies the cause of God or carnal revenge? Was Mordecai a child of God living by faith in a heathen court, or was he a wicked and rebellious enemy of the living God?

Our own Protestant Reformed literature says, quite decidedly, that Mordecai was wicked. For example, the *Old Testament History for Seniors* catechism book: "Was it sinful for Jews like Mordecai and Esther to remain in the land of the captivity? Yes, for they showed no interest in the temple and in God's covenant promises" (lesson 23, Q&A 9). This position is representative of our catechism material and our Bible story books.

This position is understandable. Perhaps it is even defensible. Perhaps it is even true. The fact remains, though, that the book of Esther never answers the question of Mordecai's faith or unbelief. Our curiosity may find that question important, but the book of Esther does not. In fact, the book of Esther resolutely ignores it. For the book of Esther, Mordecai's faith or unbelief is beside the point. The one and only fact about Mordecai that the book of Esther finds important and presses upon us again and again is this: Mordecai was a Jew!

The next main character to whom we are introduced is Esther. "And [Mordecai] brought up Hadassah, that is, Esther, his uncle's daughter: for she had neither father nor mother, and the maid was fair and beautiful; whom Mordecai, when her father and mother were dead, took for his own daughter" (2:7).

Esther's Hebrew name was *Hadassah*, which means myrtle, and her Persian name was *Esther*, which means star, or perhaps was a reference to the Persian goddess Ishtar. Her change of name is consistent with the Babylonian and Persian policies of assimilating conquered peoples into the conquering kingdom by giving them new names. Often these names would celebrate a Babylonian or Persian deity, as in the case of Daniel—Belteshazzar—and his three friends. Beyond this, the book of Esther has nothing to say about the significance of her Hebrew or Persian name.

Esther was Mordecai's younger cousin, the daughter of a deceased Benjamite named Abihail (9:29). Apparently, Esther's parents died when she was very young, for Mordecai raised his orphaned cousin as his own daughter. Their father-daughter relationship is evident throughout the book. Esther heeded Mordecai's instruction in all things, including the hiding of her Jewish identity. Esther deferred to Mordecai's judgment and advice, even after she had been crowned queen, and even when Mordecai's judgment put her own life in jeopardy.

Esther was renowned for her physical beauty. It is one of the first details we are told when she is introduced: "the maid was fair and beautiful" (2:7). From an earthly point of view, Esther's demeanor was as lovely as her face and her form. She carried herself with grace in her dealings with Ahasuerus and his servants. Esther's beauty plays an important role in the unfolding of events in the book of Esther, for the carnal king loved Esther above all the women and chose her as queen. And Esther's deft and light touch with Ahasuerus in the deadly conflict with wicked Haman led to Haman's overthrow.

As with Mordecai, the book of Esther does not tell us whether Esther was a child of God. As with Mordecai, the one important fact about Esther is that she was a Jewess. Her Jewishness is prominent in the book. It was

her secret identity. No one in the kingdom, including her royal husband, knew her people. One of the most dramatic scenes in the book is when Esther, at the banquet of wine with her husband and her enemy, reveals to Ahasuerus that she is a Jewess and that Haman has conspired to kill her and her people. More than her beauty, more than her position as queen, and more than speculation about her faith, the main truth about Esther is that she was a Jewess.

Esther is prominent in the book. The book bears her name. It is the book of Esther. Esther plays a prominent role in the book as Ahasuerus' chosen queen. The events of the book unfold around her Jewish identity being hidden and then revealed. Esther's importance to the story is undeniable. Nevertheless, Esther is not the principal character of the book of Esther. That honor belongs to another, whom we shall meet shortly.

The next main character, though not yet the principal character, is Haman. "After these things did king Ahasuerus promote Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, and advanced him, and set his seat above all the princes that were with him" (3:1).

Haman is the villain in the book of Esther. He was a wicked rascal, filled with vain pride. Haman's single goal was his own empty honor. Ahasuerus had promoted him to his right hand, so that Haman's authority was second only to Ahasuerus himself. Haman basked in the reverence of men that attended his position and was goaded by Mordecai's refusal to bow to him. In a breathtaking display of small-minded, petty vindictiveness, Haman bent the king and the entire kingdom to the project of eradicating Mordecai and every last Jew for Mordecai's slight on Haman's meaningless honor.

The one important fact about Haman is that he was the enemy of the Jews. This is explicitly mentioned and repeated throughout the book of Esther, so that it becomes as much Haman's identity that he was the enemy of the Jews as it is Mordecai's identity that he was a Jew. In 3:10 Haman is "the Jews' enemy." In 7:6 Haman is "the adversary and enemy." In 8:1 he is "Haman the Jews' enemy." In 9:10 he is "the enemy of the Jews." In 9:24 Haman is "the enemy of all the Jews." Haman the Jews' enemy! Haman the Jews' enemy! Haman the Jews' enemy! This is the one thing that we must know about Haman: Haman was the enemy of the Jews.

Haman's enmity against the Jews is further emphasized in the book of Esther by Haman's race. Haman was an Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, the Agagite (3:1, 10; 8:3, 5; 9:24). *Agagite* is another term for an Amalekite. *Agag* was the title of the kings of Amalek (I Sam. 15:8), so that an Agagite is an Amalekite. Haman the Agagite was

an Amalekite, and the Amalekites were inveterate enemies of the Jews. The Amalekites were the first to attack Israel in the wilderness after Israel had come through the Red Sea (Ex. 17). God himself had declared perpetual war with Amalek (v. 16). Israel and Amalek were mortal enemies. And now here in Persia, there is an Amalekite—Haman—and an Israelite—Mordecai. And Haman was the enemy of the Jews.

The last main character in the book of Esther is really the first and principal one: Jehovah God. It is well-known that the book of Esther never mentions the name of God. The book of Esther in the King James Version has 5,633 words. Not one of those 5,633 words is *God*, *Jehovah*, *Lord*, or any other such reference. And yet, the child of God reading the book of Esther cannot help but see God everywhere in the book! God's will and God's work are so obvious to faith that the book of Esther shouts God's name without ever mentioning it.

The book of Esther has been compared to an unsigned painting by a master artist. The artist has many other masterpieces that are signed with his own name, and there are many students who study these great works. When these students, who are experts in recognizing the master's work, come to his unsigned masterpiece, they instantly recognize it as his. The brush strokes, the use of color, the composition, and a multitude of other details all proclaim it to be the work of the master artist. The students don't need his signature to know his handiwork, for the painting itself is his signature.

So it is with the book of Esther. The child of God knows his God. He is familiar with the ways and works of Jehovah, having learned those ways and works from the whole of the Bible. By faith he sees the unseen things, being united to the Creator and Savior through Jesus Christ his Lord. We might say that the child of God is an expert in recognizing the Master's work, for he is not only a student of Jehovah, but also a child of his heavenly Father. When such a child comes to the book of Esther, he sees his God very plainly. He hardly even realizes that God's name never appears in the book, because God certainly appears in the book. An unknown orphan raised to be queen at just the right time? Of course, that is the Master's stroke. A king's sleepless night leading to his learning the exact fact he needed to know? Why yes, this is looking familiar. God's people victorious on the very day they were to be destroyed? Undeniably, this is the work of Israel's God. God has done all these things!

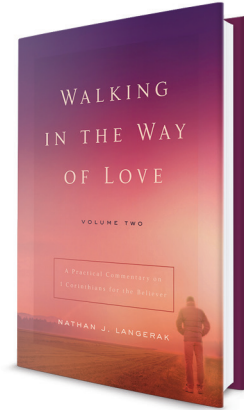
Yes, the book of Esther is grand. Next time, we shall see what especially makes it so grand as we discover the theme and message of the book of Esther.

—AL

WALKING IN THE WAY OF LOVE

Reviewed by Rev. Andrew Lanning

Walking in the Way of Love: A Practical Commentary on 1 Corinthians for the Believer, volume 2. Nathan J. Langerak. Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2019. 543 pages, hardcover, \$39.95.



With this second volume, covering 1 Corinthians 10–16, Rev. Nathan J. Langerak has completed his commentary on 1 Corinthians. As did the first volume, the second volume expounds almost every verse of Paul’s epistle. Those verses that are not expounded at length are at least mentioned and their thoughts summarized. The result is a comprehensive commentary on 1 Corinthians that will greatly aid the believer who desires to study and understand the Spirit’s message in this epistle.

The highlight of the commentary is its emphasis on true, biblical love. We live in an age that speaks much of love, but that is ignorant of true love and is in reality hateful in its practice of love. Godless men speak of love even as they hate and put away their wives. Society speaks of love even as it shamefully redefines marriage to cater to sodomite lust. Churches speak of love even as they compromise and discard the truth in pursuit of their unholy alliances. The antidote to this ignorant, wicked, and false love is the true love revealed in 1 Corinthians. “Briefly, the theme of the epistle is walking in the way of love. That way of love as the believer is called to confess it and walk in it in his whole life is antithetical to man’s supposed love and his call to other men to walk in the way of false love. So the epistle calls the believer to reject man’s corruption of love, to refuse his call to walk in the way of his corrupt love, and to confess the Spirit’s word about love and heed his admonitions to walk in that way” (ix).

Volume 2 is notable regarding the theme of love because it explains Paul’s doctrine of love from 1 Corinthians 13. Although all of the apostle’s instruction in 1 Corinthians has love at its heart, the apostle treats his theme specifically and at length in 1 Corinthians 13. The commentary captures the apostle’s mind in this chapter not only in the title of the commentary—*Walking in the Way of Love*—but also in four chapters of the commentary on the excellence, practice, permanence, and greatness of

love. “The apostle does not introduce love here as a principle in contrast to what he has written previously, but love is the main subject of the whole epistle. If the church follows the apostle’s instruction regarding all the different subjects addressed in the epistle, the church walks in the excellent way of love. If the church ignores the apostle’s instruction, the church departs from the excellent way of love” (230).

In the course of explaining this theme of love, the commentary gives a powerful and even moving definition of love. If the church of Jesus Christ desires to live in love, let her take this definition of love to heart, which is drawn from the apostle’s instruction in his epistle. “First, love is a virtue of the will. It is a spiritual determination to do good and not evil to the beloved. This determination to do good is the result of the great esteem and affection that one has for the beloved. Second, love is the power to hold the beloved as precious, dear, and valuable, a point of no insignificance, especially if the object of that love is by itself undesirable. Third, this love, which holds the beloved as precious and dear and determines to do good to that beloved one, seeks to establish fellowship and friendship with the beloved. Lovers desire to be together. Love and fellowship are related as cause and effect. They belong together as hand and glove” (232).

Several features of this commentary will make it especially appealing to the Reformed believer. First and foremost, the commentary is faithful to Paul’s epistle. It expounds the apostle’s thought, giving careful attention to the words and phrases of each text. Where appropriate, the original language of the text is noted and explained. One of the chapter titles is even in Greek, using a word that features prominently in that particular text (457). This careful and deliberate exposition of the actual text, including the original language, does not make the commentary inaccessible to the Reformed man, woman, or young person. Quite the contrary. The believer who reads

Walking in the Way of Love will find himself confronted at every turn with the Spirit's clear, understandable, and even exciting message.

This method of dealing with God's word makes *Walking in the Way of Love* doubly profitable for God's people. Not only is the *content* of the commentary edifying, but the commentary's *approach* to scripture is edifying. The commentary models the truest humility of subjecting all of one's thinking and understanding to the word of God, letting the word of God speak for itself through its words and phrases, without arrogantly imposing one's own thinking on the scriptures. The believer who desires to learn how to study the Bible will profit from this commentary's approach, which is the only appropriate approach for the Reformed child of God.

Second, the commentary is thoroughly doctrinal. It not only uses the language of Reformed theology, such as election, reprobation, resurrection, and the like, but it soundly explains and develops these doctrines in harmony with the Reformed faith. The reason that a commentary on scripture can explain Reformed doctrine is that Reformed doctrine arises from and stands squarely upon the word of God. *Walking in the Way of Love* demonstrates this. The Reformed believer will find that his theology and his confessions, which are regularly cited in the commentary, have their foundation in God's own instruction in 1 Corinthians.

Third, the commentary is thoroughly practical. The doctrine of *Walking in the Way of Love* is not dry. How could it be, since it is the doctrine of God's word? On the contrary, the doctrine is refreshing and soul-stirring. Apparently, it was a special goal of the author to write a commentary that is practical, as evidenced by the subtitle: *A Practical Commentary on 1 Corinthians for the Believer*. Today, being practical is often contrasted with being doctrinal, as if doctrine and practice were opposed to each other, or as if sound doctrine were dry and impersonal while practical teaching is warm and personal. The result of this false contrast is practicality that is superficial. Over against such a false contrast, *Walking in the Way of Love* grounds its copious practical applications in the exegesis and doctrine of the apostle Paul. The result is practical instruction for the life of the believer that is warm and

deep. For example, take the commentary's treatment of 1 Corinthians 16:13—quit you like men. “Quit you like men’ is a phrase that refers to courage. Courage is the spiritual virtue to do what is right according to the word of God regardless of how it is attacked, how men criticize it, or what the personal cost involved in doing that will be. Courage is necessary for a soldier to enter the fight where the bullets are flying left and right and past his head and every fiber of his being is telling him to run. So courage is necessary for the believer to do all his things in love. When he is resolved to do all things in love then he enters a great contest with the devil, the forces of darkness, vain and light men in the church, the world, and his own flesh” (514).

Fourth, the commentary is bold. The author does not shy away from topics that may be considered controversial in the Reformed church world. At appropriate times and in harmony with the text under consideration, the commentary exposes error in the service of maintaining the truth. For example, *Walking in the Way of Love* sharply criticizes the ecumenical movement known as NAPARC, the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council. The commentary identifies NAPARC as part of the “almost continual effort to destroy the truth through unholy alliances that are built in the name of truth and unity but are undertaken at the expense of the truth” (102). As the reader will see, the boldness of the commentary on such issues is fresh and clarifying. The applications arise from and are in harmony with the instruction of the text being exegeted. Such boldness in the truth, which is humility to the word of God, is good for the church.

The Reformed Free Publishing Association is to be commended for publishing this second volume of *Walking in the Way of Love*. Even the book's appearance is attractive, and its layout is pleasing. The publisher has provided God's people with a commentary that is useful for dipping into occasionally as they prepare for Bible studies, but that is also profitable and edifying to read cover to cover. I highly recommend it to God's people, who will find as they begin reading it that the commentary recommends itself.

—AL

Walking in the Way of Love is a comprehensive commentary on 1 Corinthians that will greatly aid the believer who desires to study and understand the Spirit's message in this epistle.



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FINALLY, BRETHREN, FAREWELL!

Finally, brethren, farewell. Be perfect, be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you.—2 Corinthians 13:11

With the content of this new magazine, *Sword and Shield*, we hope you have been edified. Now we leave you until the next issue with a cordial farewell as brethren, in the words of the apostle Paul inspired by the Spirit of Jesus Christ. It is an exhortation that is brief, but it includes all aspects of the Christian life and contains its chief principles.

Paul's farewell calls the believer to rejoice. The believer has every reason to rejoice. Jehovah is his God by sovereign grace. Jehovah his God reigns. God has set his king, Jesus Christ, upon his throne over all creation. Who is the recipient of so great a salvation as the brethren, the people of the Lord? Rejoice, brethren.

When the apostle says, "Be perfect," he means be refreshed and fitted for your calling. The magazine that you have in your hand aims to give joy to Reformed believers in its edifying and spiritually informative content for the refreshing and strengthening of their souls, in order that they might carry on in their serious calling to be God's friends and servants in the world and to stand as God's representatives over against the sin and darkness of the world. Be perfect, brethren.

The magazine intends to refresh and strengthen believers by giving them the good comfort of the gospel truth of Jesus Christ, the gospel of sovereign and particular grace and the unconditional covenant of God. In that gospel alone there is comfort. Be of good comfort, brethren.

The magazine aims by that gospel to contribute to the single-mindedness of Reformed believers in the truth. Being of one mind in the truth is the unity of believers in Christ. There is only unity in the truth. Be of one mind, brethren.

In the unity of the truth, there is the blessedness of peace among brethren who live at peace with one another because they are at peace with their God through Jesus Christ their Lord, through faith in the gospel of grace. Live in peace, brethren.

All such will have the blessed experience of the God of love and peace dwelling with them. He is the God of love and peace in himself. He is the author of all the blessedness of love and peace with God in Jesus Christ. He is the author of the truth of the gospel, of the comfort it gives, of the unity of mind among the brethren in that truth, and of the blessed peace among the brethren that is its work. All glory to the God of love and peace. To all who are so minded, the God of love and peace shall be with you.

So as fellow believers and lovers of the truth, we bid you, farewell, brethren.

—NJL