

The Stromata



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By wisdom the LORD laid the earth's foundations, by under standing He set the heavens in place.

Proverbs 3:19



Editing and Layout—Joshua S. Benton



Table of Contents

The Hollow Hammer: Nietzsche's _____ Page 4
Weapon Against Christianity

Jordan J. Ballor

Our Paedocommunion Discussion: Children _____ Page 12
and the Lord's Supper in the Christian Reformed Church

Ryan Faber

God is our Deliverer: A sermon on Daniel 6 _____ Page 18

Benny Solihin

The Problem of Evil: A poem by Daniel Bud _____ Page 22

The Christian Roadmap: A sermon on Psalm _____ Page 23
119:97-106 and 2 Timothy 3:10-17

Alfred Muema Muli

Friendship: A sermon on Romans 5:7-8 _____ Page 27

Jeffery W. Scripps

On Common Grace: A Tale Related to Romans _____ Page 32
1:18-32 and Other Such Texts

Andrew Brennan

The Hollow Hammer: Nietzsche's Weapon Against Christianity

By Jordan J. Ballor

Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye.

Matthew 7:3-5 NRSV

Friedrich Nietzsche is a self-confessed enigma. His musings often run the gamut from dripping cynicism to jubilant hope within the space of a few words. His brilliance is unmistakable, and his piercing insights into certain aspects of the human condition compel attention. Nevertheless, Nietzsche's grand vision of himself as the hammer-wielder¹ sounding out hollow idols, while noble, is misleading. Nietzsche's philosophical project is fatally flawed, as the critiques he heaps upon his main adversaries, Christians, are equally (if not more) applicable to and valid for himself. Nietzsche engages himself in a war of worldviews, a contest of cognitive consonance. Nietzsche's various critiques of Christianity, that it is cowardly, weak, and vengeful, flow from his primary difficulty with Christianity as an idealist religion. An examination of Nietzsche and his major critiques of Christianity will determine whether the hollow sound issuing forth from Nietzsche's hammer striking Christianity comes from the "false idol" or from the hammer and its wielder.

Cowardly Idealism

Nietzsche's characterization of any kind of idealism is clear in the following statements concerning Plato, "Plato is a coward in the face of reality – consequently he flees into the ideal."² In this way, any worldview with an ideal is essentially attempting to escape from reality. Nietzsche sets up a contrast between the *real*³ (existential) world and the

ideal (spiritual) world. For Christians, this ideal world becomes the real world, displacing the physical as that which is ontologically prior, or more *real*. This Christian ideal world includes such things as truth and the moral order. Nietzsche cannot abide anything that takes away value from or adds anything beyond his existential world, and he therefore labels idealist worldviews as cowardly and escapist. It is because Plato (and the Christian) cannot deal with the realities of life that he flees into the world of the Good, the True, the Beautiful.

The Christian idealist is clearly the most irksome in the tradition of idealists. The Christian has the audacity and the ignorance (a dangerous combination) to claim transcendent authority for its subversive morality. Nietzsche finds this tendency nearly ubiquitous, "I have discovered the arrogant theologian-instinct wherever anyone today feels himself to be an 'idealist' – wherever anyone assumes, by virtue of a higher origin, a right to cast strange and superior looks at actuality."⁴ Nietzsche does not hesitate, of course, to view himself as an enlightened *élite*, able to "cast strange and superior looks" at Christianity.

It is against this sort of idealist Kantian conception of a moral order that Nietzsche writes, "each one of us should devise *his own* virtue, *his own* categorical imperative."⁵ This sounds hauntingly familiar to the refrains of many in the post-(ultra) modern world. If Nietzsche is really attempting to do away with

all transcendent or objective meaning or truth, he is immediately undermining his own claims to normative authority. He consciously or unconsciously knows that this position is necessarily self-defeating, so he does not merely stop at a kind of relativist critique of Christianity. Instead, Nietzsche moves on to set up his own worldview, a system based on power and the overman.⁶

In doing so, however, Nietzsche immediately commits the same error for which he dismisses religion: Nietzsche moves from the existential world to an ideal world (of his own making rather than that created by God, but nonetheless, an ideal world). Nietzsche retreats from what he sees as the degeneration of humanity in the common world to the ideal of the overman. His positing of the overman as the proper *telos* of humankind is not based on any kind of existential justification. Nietzsche admits as much when he writes of himself, “*The disappointed man speaks*. – I sought great human beings, I never found anything but *apes* of their ideal.”⁷ In his eagerness to dismiss Christianity because of its escapist idealism, Nietzsche indicts his own worldview in the process.

As much as Nietzsche despises moralists, he does not delay in embracing that role for himself. He writes, “This new law-table do I put over you, O my brothers: Become hard!”⁸ The exact meaning of “hard” will be discussed below as Nietzsche redefines morality in terms of power. For now it is enough to observe that Nietzsche, using the language of legal and moral responsibility, implores his audience with the equivalent of a “Thou shalt (become hard).” Indeed, the appropriation of such blatantly religious genres and forms in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* further illustrate the Nietzsche is not seeking to end religion or morality, but merely the removal of theistic religion and morality in favor of humanistic (atheistic) religion and morality, for Nietzsche’s “faith is a humanism, an anthropology.”⁹ Fraser writes, “Nietzsche’s adoption of a mock-Biblical style

in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is clearly a testimony to Luther’s influence,”¹⁰ and so while he finds the price of the Christian God too much to pay to retain transcendence, he nevertheless cannot reject religion itself (albeit an atheistic religion). Nietzsche surely knows that Dostoevsky¹¹ is right, that “If God is dead, everything is permissible,” so he seeks to set up an anthropocentric religion and create (*ex nihilo!*) a new morality. That is why Nietzsche struggles so hard to construct a new god and a new religion, that of the overman. He writes, “the overman *shall* be the meaning of the earth.”¹² Without some other transcendent authority, everything, even that horrible mistake called Christianity, becomes permissible. Nietzsche’s religion must redefine reality and reappropriate it from Christianity. His idea is instead of “the sacred is life on earth. He would do away with the category ‘supernatural’ as one that opposed and destroyed this life because of its emphasis on the ‘higher’ life after death.”¹³ The riddles never seem to end with Nietzsche, as he even goes so far as to explicitly call the overman an “ideal,” when he writes that the overman is “an ‘idealistic’ type of a higher kind of human being, half ‘saint,’ half ‘genius.’”¹⁴ Finally, the idea of the “overman” is nothing but a fanciful particularization of the “supernatural” (for man belongs solely to the natural world for Nietzsche), which has its only basis in the transcendence of God.

Is it possible that in seeking to tear the clothes off of Christianity, Nietzsche overlooked his own nakedness? In forming a question such as this, it may seem that this is to “read Nietzsche in the worst possible light and to invite the suspicion that one is desperate to discredit him.”¹⁵ While it is dangerous to go as far as M. Westphal does in his appreciation of Nietzsche as a theological resource, it would be unfair and incorrect to say that Nietzsche is valueless. As M. Westphal, perhaps inadvertently, implies in his statement that there is “a dogmatic Nietzscheanism that needs to be sub-

jected to Nietzschean critique,”¹⁶ Nietzsche is at least good for disposing of Nietzsche. G. Fraser sums it up this way, “The great thing about Heidegger’s Nietzsche, as far as the Christian theologian is concerned, is that he is like a dangerous agent employed to assassinate some foe and who, instead of staying around afterwards to cause trouble, is himself killed in the very process of finishing off his opponent.”¹⁷ Nietzsche would then become a sort of philosophical equivalent to a terrorist suicide bomber, only in the understanding of this paper, the bomb goes off a little too early (or right on time) and the bomber himself is the only fatality.

Nietzsche is not really seeking to do away with morality, as it is defined as “conformity to ideals of right human conduct.”¹⁸ For if he truly were moving *beyond* good and evil, there would then he would have no basis for his negative critique of Christianity. As will be outlined in the section below, Nietzsche merely wants to replace the highest personal virtue of love with power. Of course, in nearly Hegelian arrogance, he proclaims, “one man alone has said the word that has been wanting for millennia – *Zarathustra*.”¹⁹

Weak and Sick

What is this reversal of morality, this “revaluation of all values”²⁰ that Nietzsche is seeking? *The Anti-Christ* opens with a brief statement of this new morality. Nietzsche writes, “What is good? – All that heightens the feeling of power, the will to power, power itself in man. What is bad? – All that proceeds from weakness.”²¹ He goes on further to say, “The weak and ill-constituted shall perish: first principle of *our* philanthropy. And one shall help them do so.”²² Nietzsche expresses his “philanthropy” (lit. “love” for “humankind”) in the effort to exterminate, to “help” the weak to perish. This is one of the various points at which Nietzsche’s system is extremely reminiscent of a kind of Darwinian evolution. Nietzsche seemingly endorses a sort of anthro-

political “survival of the fittest,” and the best way to ensure the next evolutionary leap is to eliminate the bottom caste of society, the “weak.” By the “weak” of course he predominantly means those “cowardly idealist” Christians. He writes elsewhere, “Humankind is a rope stretched between the animal and the overman – a rope over an abyss.”²³ In the end, however, Nietzsche’s take on evolution is a modified version of Darwin, in which, by and large, in the struggle for survival the “weak” have conquered the “strong.” Again, Nietzsche abandons what he acknowledges to be the reality of the existential situation (i.e. the dominance of the weak), to embrace a future ideal in which the fight for survival really will be won by the “fittest.”

This is the major flaw in Christianity: that it draws people away from that which is existentially real to a falsely projected ideal, making otherwise healthy humans sick. It creates sinners in order to rule them. He writes of Christians, “Believe not those who speak to you of superearthly hopes! Poisoners are they, whether they know it or not. Despisers of life are they, decaying ones and poisoned ones themselves, of whom the earth is weary: so away with them.”²⁴ In light of Nietzsche’s above statements endorsing the assisted death of the weak, this “away with them” is much more than a simple dismissal: it is a call for extinction of a degenerate model of the species.

Fraser writes, “Christianity is, for Nietzsche, some sort of plague. The source of the disease is the cross and the carrier of the disease, or at least, one of the carriers, is called ‘metaphysics.’”²⁵ Nietzsche finds it unfitting for humans to be “sick” as they are infected by Christianity. There is certainly at least a half-truth in what Nietzsche affirms concerning Christianity. Christians are called not to seek power to dominate others, but rather, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”²⁶ If money is essentially the currency for power, Christians are warned not to seek to greedily after it, “For the love of money is a root of all

kinds of evil.”²⁷ Nietzsche understands these teachings well as antithetical to his will to power.

Nietzsche’s ideal is the will to power, the will to life, especially as manifested in sexual desire and dominance, his Dionysian virtue. The question remains however: did Christianity cause the illness or merely diagnose it and offer the cure? It may be argued that Lord Acton is basing his judgment in purely Christian moral terms when he says, “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” So there is a way to argue that the corruption is merely the lack of Christian virtue (which is in Nietzsche’s view a positive virtue). The psychological and emotional elements of sin *may* be able to be explained away as effects of the Christian Gospel, but the more empirically verifiable elements of sin are not so easily blamed on Christianity. Take, for example, the sexual component of Nietzsche’s Dionysian ideal. Promiscuous sexual activity has real corrupting consequences on the human body and there are no more graphic representations of this than sexually transmitted diseases. Did Christianity also “invent” syphilis (from which Nietzsche suffered) or is this destructive disease merely a false projection? The idealization of power of any kind, but especially sexual, is self-destructive.

Nietzsche writes, “Christianity has at its basis the *rancune* of the sick, the instinct directed against the healthy, *against* health.”²⁸ The critique of Christianity of the cause of sickness is also flawed in that it tells only half the story. Even if Christianity was to blame for making humans sick, it does offer the cure for that sickness. Jesus says, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”²⁹ Jesus came not for the healthy but for the sick. Not to make them sick, but rather to heal them, to cure them of their sickness, as in the many miracles of healing he performed. In this way, Nietzsche presents only one half of the truth of Christianity,

and he perverts that half to fit his critique, a Procrustean bed if ever there was one.

A brief aside may be fitting here concerning the things that Nietzsche predicted. One especially sticks out in light of the current difficulties within the clergy of the Roman Catholic Church. Nietzsche writes, “The time is coming – I promise it – when he [the priest] will be considered the *lowest*, as *our* Chandala, as the most mendacious, as the most indecent kind of human being.”³⁰ On first glance, it may seem that this prophetic statement has been at least partially fulfilled in the recent sexual abuse scandals within the priesthood. However, it must be noted that to the extent that it is true that clergy (of any denomination) have fallen out of favor, it is mostly to be attributed to the person’s failure not to live according to moral standards. A priest is reviled now because he is a hypocrite, not because he is a moralist. The indecency lies not in the moral teaching of the church, but in its inability to live up to its ideals. This does not undermine the reality of these ideals, but rather serves as evidence for their importance, for when they are not met, there is outrage.

Deceitfully Revengeful

Nietzsche’s third major complaint against Christianity is its origin in a thirst for revenge. Nietzsche writes, “What is *bad*? But I have already answered that question: everything that proceeds from weakness, from envy, from *revengefulness*.”³¹ Christians, and their pre-Christian counterparts in the degeneration of humankind, realized their position as the lowest of the social classes. They possessed neither remarkable intelligence, nor strength, nor talent. The only outlet for this lowest class of humankind for their will for domination was the deception, of themselves and of their betters. And so the weak one, by “secret machination, or by confederacy with others, that are in the same danger as himself,”³² seeks to work evil on those in power over him. The motiva-

tion for this deception lies in the need for revenge, as the lowest class in society is always the most oppressed, the most miserable, and the most pathetic.

Christianity is a religion that revalues the virtue of Love as the highest moral good as a means of revenge. The Christian virtue of Love is actually a manifestation of the instinct for revenge. Hobbes writes, "To have received from one, to whom we think our selves equal, greater benefits than there is hope to Requite, disposeth to counterfeit love; but really a secret hatred; and puts a man into the estate of a desperate debtor, that in declining the sight of his creditor, tactilely wishes him there, where he might never see him more."³³ Thus, out of spiteful lust for revenge, Christians have sought to deceive the noble humans into believing they were sick, and to bind them with chains of imagined sin. Fraser writes, "Nietzsche concludes that Christianity is inherently vicious; that above the gate of paradise should be written the words 'Eternal hate created me as well'. Indeed it is the terrible genius of Christianity to proclaim and celebrate as love what is basically the product of human hate."³⁴

The transcendent Christian God is a projected creation with the specific purpose of enacting this revenge. Nietzsche writes, "'The truth exists': this means, wherever it is heard, *the priest is lying*."³⁵ Here again, as in the case of the idealist, Nietzsche wants to indict transcendent truth itself, but realizes the self-stultifying result of such an attempt. What Nietzsche really means is that anywhere anyone proclaims anything that is not *his* truth, *that* person is lying. As the prophet/priest of the "true" religion of the overman, Nietzsche has the corner on the market of truth. It must be considered, however, that this statement may be a kind of backhanded admission by Nietzsche that in his attempt to destroy Christianity, he has only succeeded in destroying himself.

Such an assertion is given more weight

by the following statement, "If one considers that the philosopher is, in virtually all nations, only the further development of the priestly type, one is no longer surprised to discover this heirloom of the priest, *self-deceptive fraudulence*."³⁶ Of course, Nietzsche is explicitly talking about "other" philosophers, especially those indebted to Plato. Nevertheless, Nietzsche claims the title of philosopher on numerous occasions, and so the question is left unanswered: Is Nietzsche intentionally indicting his own truth claims? A more straightforward way of engaging in such self-stultification would be simply to write, "I'm lying" and be done with it.

In any case, Nietzsche depicts Christianity as a revolt "against 'the good and the just', against 'the saints of Israel', against the social hierarchy."³⁷ Israel was itself, of course, originally a revolt against its social hierarchy, which in turn *ad infinitum, ad nauseam*. This would seem to affirm a sort of dialectical revaluation of the antithetical values of a society with every advent of a new religion (the resentment of values). It would then follow that Nietzsche's new system is merely the latest, but not the last, in the eternal dialectical movement of human society. Why then such malice against what was merely the necessary reaction to its previous social hierarchy?

The answer to this question gives rise to the real culprit in terms of attempting to work out his revenge on his enemy. Nietzsche is, of course, the one who is consumed by the lust for revenge against Christianity, for whatever ills, real or imagined, he suffered in his life. For the third time, Nietzsche's critique has destroyed his own system even as it was asserted *contra* Christianity.

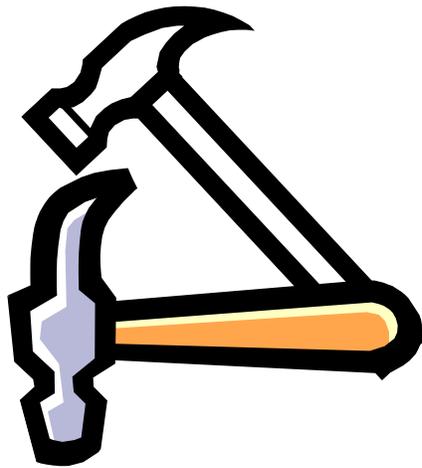
Conclusion

The real question is, therefore, who is Nietzsche really critiquing, Christ or himself? Who is really the cowardly idealist, sick and weak in spirit and body, seeking to deceitfully exact his revenge on his enemy? Is "coward"

really a fair or accurate way to describe Jesus Christ? In the case of Nietzsche, the heart of the issue is not whether the two parties recognize the same things to be true, but rather which truth is more powerful. Nietzsche's ideal of the will to power renders his truth impotent, while Christ's embodied love makes even his moment of greatest weakness, the crucifixion, of the utmost potency.³⁸ Paul writes, "God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love."³⁹ Nietzsche is right to equate cowardice with sickness and weakness, but wrong to associate cowardice with the Christian Gospel.

King Dahfu, in Saul Bellow's novel *Henderson the Rain King*, says, "I feel there is a law of human nature in which force is concerned. Man is a creature who cannot stand still under blows...man is a creature of revenges."⁴⁰ Nietzsche did get that much right. Dahfu goes on to observe, "A brave man will try to make the evil stop with him. He shall keep the blow. No man shall get it from him, and that is a sublime ambition. So, a fellow throws himself in the sea of blows saying he do not believe it is infinite. In this way many courageous people have died."⁴¹ The coward is the one who seeks to repay evil for evil,⁴² but the courageous one seeks to love her enemies.

It is true that as Nietzsche goes about "philosophizing with a hammer," the sound of hollowness echoes profoundly. The harsh light of critique that Nietzsche attempts to focus on Christianity, when focused back on himself, exposes the foundation of sand on which his system is established. The question is whether the "idol" of Christianity is hollow and false or whether the hammer that Nietzsche wields (or the wielder) is the source of the hollow echo. The Nietzschean spirit has been clanging away for over a century now, and the substance of his work remains little more than the echo of that hollow hammer. The inadequate weapon (the critique of all idealism) with which Nietzsche has equipped himself in this battle of worldviews is such that he cannot be successful, no matter how deftly it is wielded.



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End Notes

- 1 Cf. the subtitle of his *Twilight of the Idols* – “How to Philosophize with a Hammer.”
- 2 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols / The Anti-Christ*, tr. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin) 1990, p. 118.
- 3 In the sense of the Latin *res*, “thing,” “thing-ishness.”
- 4 *Anti-Christ*, 131.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 134.
- 6 Ger. *Übermensch*.
- 7 *Twilight*, 37.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 122.
- 9 William Lloyd Newell, *The Secular Magi: Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche on Religion*, (New York: Pilgrim Press) 1986, p. 187.
- 10 Giles Fraser, *Redeeming Nietzsche: on the piety of unbelief* (New York: Routledge) 2002, p. 33.
- 11 At least this quote is often attributed to Dostoevsky. This website, <http://www.kiosek.com/dostoevsky/> casts doubt on that assertion.
- 12 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, tr. Thomas Common (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books) 1993, p. 36.
- 13 Newell, 178.
- 14 Friedrich Nietzsche, “Ecce Homo,” in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Meridian Books) 1956, p. 111.
- 15 Merold Westphal, “Nietzsche as a theological resource,” *Nietzsche and the Divine*, ed. John Lippitt and Jim Urpeth (Manchester, UK: Clinamen Press) 2000, p. 19-20.
- 16 Westphal, 23.
- 17 Fraser, 17.
- 18 *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 10th ed., 2002.
- 19 *Anti-Christ*, 183.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 199.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 127.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 128.
- 23 *Zarathustra*, 38.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 36.
- 25 Fraser, 21.
- 26 Mt. 5:5 NRSV.
- 27 1 Ti. 6:10 NRSV.
- 28 *Anti-Christ*, 180.
- 29 Mk. 2:17 NRSV.
- 30 *Twilight*, 111.
- 31 *Anti-Christ*, 191.
- 32 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, (New York: Penguin) 1985, p. 183.
- 33 Hobbes, 162.
- 34 Fraser, 81.
- 35 *Anti-Christ*, 187.
- 36 *Ibid.*, 135.
- 37 *Ibid.*, 151.
- 38 2 Co. 13:4.
- 39 2 Ti. 1:7 NRSV.
- 40 Saul Bellow, *Henderson the Rain King* (New York: Penguin) 1976, p. 199-200.
- 41 *Ibid.*, 201.
- 42 1 Pe. 3:9.
- 43 Mt. 5:44.

Our Paedocommunion Discussion

Children and the Lord's Supper in the Christian Reformed Church

By Ryan Faber

History of the Discussion

The question of children's participation in the Lord's Supper (paedocommunion) in the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) first arose officially in 1984. In response to an overture from Classis Rocky Mountain, Synod 1984 appointed a study committee "to study the issue of covenant children partaking of the Lord's Supper."¹ One of Synod's grounds for its decision was "The issue has been under discussion for many years in the CRC, and warrants the church officially answering the questions being asked and addressing those churches where this is practiced."²

The study committee presented a majority report and two minority reports to Synod 1986. The majority and one minority report maintained that some sort of profession of faith was necessary before one partakes of Lord's Supper. The other minority report argued that children ought to be accepted at the Lord's Supper because they are part of the covenant. It stated:

Covenant children should be treated as brothers and sisters in the Lord because they are covenant children, not because of what they say or do. Covenant children, as well as adults, are to be nourished by the means of grace which the Lord has provided.³

All subsequent discussion has centred on these two positions: (1) that children ought to be admitted to the Lord's Supper only after they demonstrate a living faith and (2) that children ought to be received at the Lord's Supper because they are part of the covenant.

Upon the recommendation of its advisory committee, Synod 1986 referred the reports to the churches for study. It also augmented the committee by two members and continued its mandate for another two years.⁴ The augmented study committee presented a majority report and a minority report to Synod 1988. Both reports agreed that:

since participation in the Lord's Supper is

an act of faith on the part of those communing, the consistory should admit to the Lord's Supper those covenant children who evidence both the capacity and the desire to remember and proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.⁵

Three committee members presented an addendum to the majority report stating that children ought to be received at the Lord's Supper "as soon as the child is a participating member of the worshipping covenant community, regardless of age or capacity."⁶ The authors of the addendum accepted the majority recommendations, however, because the recommendations "are a greater improvement in the inclusion of children in the worship of the covenant community."⁷

Both reports to Synod 1988 argued that faith is necessary for participation in the Lord's Supper. The reports disagreed over whether that faith needed to be demonstrated through a public profession of faith or not. The majority said no; the minority said yes.

Synod 1988 sided with the minority report, requiring a public profession of faith before admittance to the Lord's Supper. Synod declared:

(1) The church is warranted in admitting to the Lord's Supper covenant children who give evidence of faith and are able to discern the body and remember and proclaim the death of Jesus in celebrating the Lord's Supper.

(2) The church is to assure itself of such faith through a public profession of faith on the part of covenant children.

(3) Covenant children should be encouraged to make public profession of faith as soon as they exhibit faith and are able to discern the body and remember and proclaim the death of Jesus in celebrating the Lord's Supper.

(4) The profession of faith of covenant children required for admission to the

Lord's Supper is not necessarily an acceptance of adult responsibilities within the congregation.⁸

The decision of Synod 1988 did not substantially change denominational practice. The synodical declarations reaffirmed the existent requirement of public profession of faith prior to participation in the Lord's Supper. Though public profession of faith remained the standard for admittance, Synod 1988 also explicitly encouraged younger children be encouraged to make public professions of faith.

Prior to 1988, public profession of faith had generally been a rite of passage for older adolescents and young adults. Because the CRC has confessional membership, a public profession of faith included assent to the Reformed creeds. Along with admitting one to the Lord's Supper, public profession of faith also admitted one to full adult responsibilities within the church.

Public profession of faith by younger children challenged the traditional understanding of public profession of faith. Synod 1988 recognized this challenge in its fourth declaration: "The profession of faith of covenant children required for admission to the Lord's Supper is not necessarily an acceptance of adult responsibilities within the congregation."⁹ In light of its encouragement for younger children to make public profession of faith, Synod 1988 instructed the CRC Worship Committee to study the liturgical forms for public profession of faith.¹⁰ Synod 1989 recommended the CRC Worship Committee's proposed new formulary, "Admitting to Table Fellowship,"¹¹ to the churches for use and added three new members to the committee.¹²

The CRC Worship Committee asked Synod 1991 for a year extension because it had received minimal feedback from the churches concerning the proposed formulary.¹³ Synod 1991 also received an overture from Classis Alberta North asking Synod:

to clarify the requirement for public profession of faith by covenant children by declaring, The church should provide ways for covenant children to profess their faith consistent with their individual stages of physical, intellectual, emotional, and faith development, and the church should distinguish these professions from a late-

adolescent / adult reaffirmation of faith.¹⁴

Synod 1991 did not adopt the declaration proposed by Classis Alberta North, however it appointed a new study committee "to clarify the requirement of public profession of faith for admission to the Lord's Supper on the part of younger covenant children."¹⁵ The committee first reported to Synod 1993 which recommitted the issue to the study committee for another year.¹⁶

That year extended into two and the committee returned to Synod 1995 with two reports. The study committee's Report A affirmed the requirement of public profession of faith for admittance to the Lord's Supper. Report B asked synod to recognize both individual faith and communal faith (covenant status) as equal grounds for admittance to the Lord's Supper. Making that recognition, Report B asked synod to allow room within the denomination for differing practices in admitting children to the Lord's Supper.¹⁷

Synod 1995 affirmed the declarations of Synod 1988 and adopted many of Report A's recommendations. Synod 1995 adopted a four-step procedure for the admittance of covenant children to the Lord's Supper. First, the child expresses an interest in participating in the Lord's Supper to his or her parents or another faith mentor within the church. Second, the parents discuss the meaning of the Lord's Supper with the child and assess his or her motives. Third, an elder or the pastor meets with the child to hear his or her testimony and assess his or her desire to participate in the Lord's Supper. Finally, the child makes a public profession of faith during a regular worship service.¹⁸

Synod 1995 accepted the "Admitting to Table Fellowship" formulary as a "suggested form for public profession of faith by children."¹⁹ In so doing, Synod 1995 distinguished a public profession of faith that admitted one to the Lord's Supper from assent to the Reformed confessions and the assumption of adult responsibilities within the congregation. Synod 1995 did not, however, adopt a third category of church membership, "voting members," as recommended by Report A. Synod stated that members should continue to be categorized as "baptized members" and "confessing members." "Confessing members" would include those children admitted to the Lord's Supper and those who have also assented to the Reformed confessions and assumed adult responsibilities within

the congregation.²⁰

The decision of Synod 1995 has officially concluded our paedocommunion discussion. Although our discussion has concluded, the denomination has not reached a general consensus. Each committee that studied paedocommunion was divided over the basis for admitting children to the Lord's Supper. Consistently, the case was made for admittance only after a profession of individual faith. Consistently, the case was made for admittance by virtue of covenant status. However, following the declarations of Synod 1988, the CRC has consistently maintained that admission to the Lord's Supper requires a public profession of faith.

An overture from Classis Hamilton challenged this requirement in 1999. Classis Hamilton asked Synod to allow a variant procedure for admitting children to the Lord's Supper. Rather than require a public profession of faith, the proposed variant procedure would require:

that a child who wishes to join in communion must make a credible profession of faith to the consistory by way of interview by the pastor and an elder, who then bring the request to the full consistory to grant (or deny) the child's request ... The name of the child is then announced in the church, and the child is welcomed as a participant at the table.²¹

Synod 1999 defeated the overture of Classis Hamilton, reaffirming the declaration of Synod 1988 that called for public profession of faith and the four-step model adopted by Synod 1995. Synod 1999 did not accede to the variant because:

The suggested variant is at odds with Step 4 (*Acts of Synod 1995*, Art. 69, p. 720) of our current procedure, which requires a public profession of faith during a regular worship service before admission to the Lord's Supper.²²

Synod 1999 also defeated a recommendation from its advisory committee that acceptance of full adult responsibilities within the congregation be marked by a public reaffirmation of faith. The decision of Synod 1995 allowing each congregation to devise appropriate means to secure a commitment to the creeds and acceptance of adult responsibilities was upheld.²³

Since our paedocommunion discussion began in 1984 our requirements for admission to the

Lord's Supper have not changed. A personal faith and the ability to discern the body, to remember and to proclaim the Lord's death are still required. Covenant children were only admitted to the Lord's Supper following a public profession of faith before 1988. Covenant children are only admitted to the Lord's Supper following a public profession of faith after 1988.

Though our requirements have not changed, our paedocommunion discussion has brought the CRC to encourage younger children to make public professions of faith. As a result, a new liturgical form more appropriate for public profession of faith by younger children has been adopted. Finally, with younger children professing their faith, the CRC has had to tease profession of faith apart from assent to the Reformed creeds and the acceptance of adult responsibilities within the congregation. Synodical decisions since 1988 have consistently upheld the declaration that personal faith, rather than simply covenant status, is required for admission to the Lord's Supper. The church assures itself of that faith through a public profession of faith during a worship service.²⁴

Personal Reflections

The CRC did not come to its present position regarding paedocommunion easily. The final decisions of Synod 1995 were the result of a decade of study and discussion. Numerous study committee reports wrestled with theological issues, Biblical exegesis and questions of church history. As the various study committee reports indicate, two differing theological opinions persist within the denomination. However, the Synods have consistently maintained that personal faith is required for admittance to the Lord's Supper.

Synod 1988 and Synod 1995 demonstrated considerable wisdom in their decisions. It is important to encourage younger children to come to the Lord's Supper. The Lord gave the Supper as a means of grace to nourish the faith of all believers, including children. Yet, it is equally important to require personal faith before admitting one to the Lord's Supper. The study committee of 1995's Report A noted the CRC's credal commitment to requiring personal faith before admittance to the Lord's Supper.

According to the Belgic Confession Article 35 and the Heidelberg Catechism Question 77, the Lord's

Supper was instituted to nourish the faith of believers. Furthermore, the Catechism says that:

those who are displeased with themselves because of their sins but who nevertheless trust that their sins are pardoned and that their continuing weaknesses are covered by the suffering and death of Christ, and who desire more and more to strengthen their faith and to lead a better life²⁵ are to come to the Lord's Supper. Clearly, the confessions consider personal faith a necessary prerequisite for admittance to the Lord's Supper.

The same committee's Report B, arguing that covenant status was the sole requirement for admission to the Lord's Supper, conceded that that position lacked creedal support. It states: "The creeds of the Reformed churches reflect our traditional understanding that an individual personal profession of faith is required for attendance at the Lord's table."²⁶ A synodical decision allowing paedocommunion on the basis of their covenant status alone would require changing the creedal standards. Without such a change, Synod 1988 and Synod 1995 wisely maintained the traditional practice of admitting children to the Lord's Supper only after a public profession of faith.

Yet, as a Reformed and ever-reforming church, the CRC is willing to change its creedal standards when further reflection reveals that they misunderstand or misrepresent Scriptural truths. Proponents of paedocommunion on the basis of covenant status alone look for Scriptural evidence in Jewish practices relating to the Passover. The minority report of the 1988 study committee correctly notes, however, that: "It is neither hermeneutically sound nor exegetically possible to determine the answer to problems of New Testament practice solely on the basis of Old Testament regulation."²⁷ Furthermore, the minority report of 1988 and Report A of 1995 both note that Lord's Supper is not simply a replacement of the Passover. Report A states: "the New Testament sacraments are not exactly parallel to the Old Testament rites of circumcision and Passover; instead, they fulfill the Old Testament rites."²⁸

Proponents of personal faith as a necessary prerequisite for admittance to the Lord's Supper argue that Scripture explicitly teaches this requirement. They appeal primarily to 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 which requires that a communicant be able to proclaim the death of Jesus, discern the body, and examine him- or herself. This passage has been problematic for those who argue for paedocommunion on the basis of covenant status alone.

Report B of 1995 offers an intriguing, but unconvincing, "covenantal hearing of 1 Corinthians 11."²⁹ The report argues that the community proclaims, dis-

cerns and examines on the part of those unable to do so. Report B maintains that faith is a necessary prerequisite for admittance to the Lord's Supper, but argues that communal faith can substitute for personal faith. Because communal faith substitutes for personal faith, the covenant child can be received at the Lord's Supper without a personal faith.

Communal faith substitutes for the faith of a child at baptism; why can it not do the same at the Lord's Supper? According to the minority report of 1988, "It is not presumptuous to suggest that Christ established two sacraments instead of one because the two sacraments have different purposes and different applications within the believer's life."³⁰ Baptism initiates one into the covenant while the Lord's Supper nourishes the faith of those who have appropriated the promises of God sealed in their baptism. Report A of 1995 correctly notes: "The purpose of the sacrament [Lord's Supper] is not to nourish *to* faith, 'but to nourish and sustain those who are already born again'."³¹

The Lord's Supper is clearly a sacrament intended for those who possess a personal faith. It is reasonable to require that this faith be publicly professed before one is admitted to the Lord's Supper. This profession of faith is an appropriation of the baptismal promises. As an extension of baptism, public profession of faith ought to take place in a public worship service as the sacrament of baptism does.

While personal faith is required, a complete knowledge of the Reformed creeds is not necessary. Neither is acceptance of adult responsibilities within the congregation. Synod 1995 acted wisely when it distinguished a public profession of faith admitting one to the Lord's Supper from assent to the Reformed creeds and acceptance of adult responsibilities within the congregation.

This distinction is critical for admitting children to the Lord's Supper. The differing degrees of mental, emotional and spiritual development among children must be respected. The faith understanding and maturity required of a 16 year-old cannot be required of an 8 year-old. The adoption of the formulary for "Admitting to Table Fellowship" by Synod 1995 shows a respect for differing levels of maturity.

While the CRC has properly maintained the requirement of personal faith for admittance to the Lord's Supper, it also acknowledges that: "the simplest expression of faith by a younger child should be adequate for admission to the Lord's table."³² The Lord's Supper is a means of grace given to nourish the faith of all believers. Children who demonstrate faith should not be deprived of this means of grace that their Lord has given them.



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God is our Deliverer

A sermon on Daniel 6:1-28

By Benny Solihin

Introduction

Addressing the congressional Republicans at a policy conference, on Sunday February 9, 2003, President Bush said: "The terrorist acts of September 11 changed America and the world. Before the attacks, Bush said, "We were confident that two oceans could protect us from harm. ... But, we are now a battleground. We are vulnerable." The President is right. Many of us now live with unsecured feeling. We know that the terrorists weren't just attacking major icons of American economic and military might - and, potentially, the seat of US government as well. The attack was against humanity. We grieve not only for loss of lives but also for the loss of our sense of security. Unfortunately, in this situation we tend to forget that God is able to deliver them from the power of their enemy.

Almost two thousand and five hundred years ago, the Israelites, as chosen people, experienced the similar situation. Facing many pressures from wicked people, sometimes they lacked of confidence that God is able to deliver them from the power of their enemy. In that situation, the story of Daniel in the lions' den became a source of strength and assurance for the Israelites. I pray and hope that the message of this story also will become a source of strength and assurance for us today.

Setting positions in the new kingdom (vv 1-3)

The golden head, Nebuchadnezzar, and his empire are now things of the past. The second world empire, the Medo-Persian, with a new ruler has now commenced. The ruler's name is Darius. Darius wastes no time in organizing a government for the newly acquired empire, and he appoints 120 satraps to rule throughout the kingdom. Over the 120 satraps are three administrators, one of whom is Daniel. He is no longer a young man. At the age of about eighty, all of his hairs are gray, and his body is not as strong as it was. But the Bible says (v.2), "An excellent spirit is in him." He is so smart, wise, and trustworthy. It reminds us of

what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:16, "Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day." That is why Daniel distinguishes himself above all the other presidents and satraps, and Darius wants to give him the highest power under him.

The conspiracy against Daniel (vv 4-9)

It is not a strange thing that a righteous and trusted man becomes a target of wicked people. Since man fell into sin, enmity of the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent happens at all the times in the life of humans. The king's intention provokes a reaction of jealousy against Daniel among his fellow officials. They are aware that they are not going to be able to damage his reputation in the king's eyes on the basis of his fulfillment of his official duties. Instead, they look for some way to get at him through his faithfulness to his religion. Daniel is a strict monotheist; therefore, they plan to ensnare him by forcing him to refuse to worship other gods. How do they do it? They manipulate the king into approving a royal decree saying (v. 6), "Anyone who prays to any god or man during the next thirty days, except to you, O king, shall be thrown into the lions' den." "It's a good idea! Excellent!" Says the king. Darius does not see through their sly hypocrisy. His only thought is that they are seeking his exaltation and lifting up the splendor and unity of his monarchy, but their object is to oust Daniel and get his position. The foolish king dreams of being the mighty one in the world, and at the same time, he is not aware that he has been a "tool" of wicked people. I think before establishing the decree, the king should have had the courage and sense to say: "Wait a minute, what does Daniel have to say about this?" because Daniel is not there.

When Daniel knows that the decree has been proclaimed, he goes home. He usually prays three times daily with his God in his little upper room with the windows open toward Jerusalem.

Jerusalem is the visible symbol of the kingdom of God that ultimately would never be destroyed. It is the city to which God would once again bring His people. Through the prophet Isaiah (Isa 40:1-2), God has promised a new exodus, “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins.”

Now he is faced with a major decision: obey the law of the Medes and Persians, or obey God’s law. He is aware that many wicked people have been waiting for him to fall in to their trap. The choice could not have been easy. If you were Daniel, what would you do? Perhaps, some of us may think, “Why doesn’t he pray in secret? Why doesn’t he close the shutters before he prays? It’s not a big deal! Doesn’t Christ say in Matthew 10 verse 16 that we have to be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves?” Yes, I think such thoughts must have moved through Daniel’s mind. But have you ever thought what would be the effect if he does that? His integrity as a faithful man of God will collapse. And finally, they won’t respect his God whom he has served continually since he was young. For Daniel, the existence of a continued testimony is more important than the existence of his life! Goldingay (1989: 131) says, “When prayer is fashionable, it is time to pray in secret (Matt. 6:5-6), but when prayer is under pressure, to pray in secret is to give the appearance of fearing the king more than God.” Finally, Daniel decides to obey God’s law. Daniel knows that God’s law requires that he pray to the ultimate authority of the universe, not to a human king. He won’t compromise even in the face of punishment or death.

Daniel’s life illustrates how Israel as the seed of the woman, by remaining faithful to its God, will always prosper on earth. But at the same time, other nations as the seed of the serpent always threaten their existence. The light of the righteous people becomes a horrible x-ray for the wicked people who live in darkness. Therefore, the wicked usually want to destroy the righteous ones. The stories of Abel, Elijah, David, and Jesus teach us about that. Consequently, don’t be surprised if many people hate us because we live righteously before God.

Daniel’s custom of praying before the window facing Jerusalem makes it very easy for them. They

don’t have to break down doors, but they can see him, with hands spread out and lips moving, from the outside. The evidence is clear enough. Daniel has broken the law. They can unanimously indict him before the king! They waste no time.

In great haste they march off to the palace to request an audience with the king. The conspirators craftily present news of Daniel’s actions. They know where the king’s sympathies lie, so before they accuse Daniel, they remind the king, “Did you not publish a decree that during the next thirty days anyone who prays to any god or man except to you, O king, would be thrown into the lions’ den?” Indeed, they are very cagey like their father, the Devil. Their question reminds us of the serpent’s question to Eve in the Garden, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’” It is a sneaky question. And the boastful king answers firmly (v. 12), “Of course! The decree stands – in accordance with the laws of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be repealed.”

The accusation and condemnation of Daniel (vv 13-18)

Like Adam and Eve who never realized that the serpent was deceiving them until they fell into sin, so king Darius. When they mention that the transgressor is Daniel, he realized that they have trapped him. Is Darius angry with himself for having let himself be maneuvered into causing Daniel’s downfall? Truly he has every reason to be angry. Perhaps, he asks himself, “Why am I so stupid? Why did they deceive me so easily? Have I not allowed myself to be taken in by my vanity and put myself in the place of the highest?”

So, what is he to do now? Stand courageously up to them and save Daniel? He would if he could, but he is not able to do that. The bill has been unanimously presented and has been ratified and made into a law of the Medes and Persians by himself. If he changes it, the people will lose all their respect for the recently established government. Moreover, he has to think of Cyrus too! Whatever the exact reasons, it is clear that he is not able to deliver Daniel from his death. Here is irony indeed. He has a great power in his kingdom, but he cannot deliver his beloved assistant from the threat of wicked people.

The night hastens on, as the edict is carried out. They take Daniel roughly and throw him into the

mouth of the lion's den. They close it with a big stone and seal it with their signet rings. Inside the den, hungry wild lions are waiting for their victim. They roar ferociously. They are ready to devour Daniel, an old man. There will be no escape from the pit. There is no way in or out. Daniel has to face this ferocious foe alone in the dark of night. It seems that Daniel's fate will end here.

Can you imagine what Daniel's enemies are doing that night? It would not be exaggerating if we guess that they have a big party to celebrate their victory. "Hurrah! Hurrah" they shout. "Let's drink, eat, sing and dance!" The wicked in all their hatred against the righteous seem victorious one for a moment. They despise God in all their evil. They ignore God as if He is an old man who has no power anymore. Truly, they are too bold.

The deliverance of Daniel and punishment for the accusers (vv 19-22)

At daybreak the king gets up and hastens on his way to the den of lions. Fear and hope run together with his steps. Fear that soon he will see the crushed bones of Daniel; hope that Daniel's God has delivered him from the wild lions! Having come to the den, he sees it still sealed. There is no change. There is no voice. What has happened inside? In a trembling voice, the king calls out, "O Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to deliver you from the lions?" Darius uses the phrase "servant of the living God," to express what hope he has. He really hopes that Daniel's God is a living God, so that He is able to deliver Daniel from the death.

And what is the answer? Roaring of the wild lions? No! But the voice of an old man that says softly (v. 21), "O king, live forever!" It is Daniel's voice. He is still alive! He is still alive! Incredibly! It's wonderful! Many people there wonder how Daniel can still be alive? He says again to the king (v. 22), "My God sent his angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions. They have not hurt me, because I was found innocent in his sight. Nor have I ever done any wrong before you, O king." Though the king cannot prevent the malicious putting to death of an innocent person, God can, and has done so. God alone delivers Daniel from a horrible death. He can still shut the mouth of the roaring lion from hell, the Devil, so that he

cannot harm his people. The king shouts joyfully. It is not impossible that he says to the people around him excitedly, "I am right, aren't I? Daniel's God is the living God!" And then he commands some men to pull Daniel out of the den.

The deliverance of Daniel proves that he is innocent both in God's sight, and in the king's sight. Now, justice appears. The king commands his troops to arrest all the accusers along with their wives and children and throw them into the lions' den. In the enmity between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent, the deliverance of God's people has a dark side for the wicked ones. The deliverance of Eve's seed is always accompanied by the bruising of the head of the serpent (Gen. 3:15). The deliverance of Daniel causes the punishment of his enemies.

Ending of the story (vv 25-27)

Now, the king Darius recognizes that he is not the Almighty. He is not worthy to be worshiped. By bitter experience he has learned a vital lesson about the character and action of Daniel's God. He is the "living God." He commands all people, nations, and men of every language throughout the land must fear and revere the God of Daniel, because his kingdom will not be destroyed, his dominion will never end. He delivers and rescues, he works signs and wonders in heaven and on earth, he who has delivered Daniel from the power of the lions. The story ends with a happy ending. After deliverance, God not only restores Daniel's position, but also prospers him during the reign of Darius and in the reign of Cyrus the Persian.

Christocentric preaching

This wonderful story has been a source of strength and assurance for the Israelites, especially in the midst of crisis. They will never give up when facing hard situations. Although it is only for a time, God's people seems helpless under the pressure of the wicked, but they are never hopeless, since the living God will neither slumber nor sleep. He works and controls the history of humans. He is able to deliver his people in times of horrible crisis.

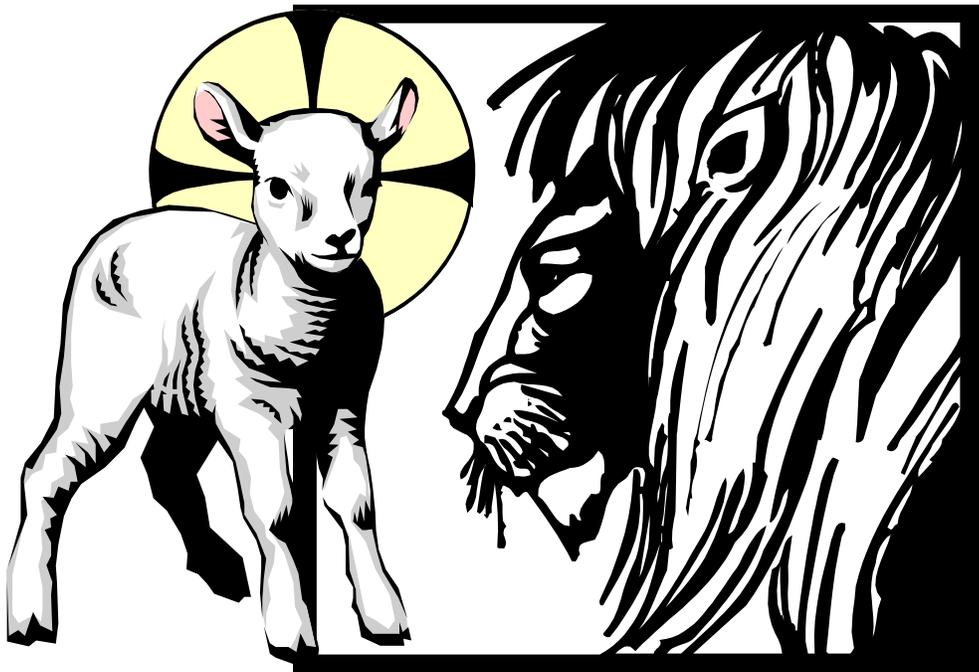
When we read carefully our Bible, we will find this theme throughout the Old Testament. Do you remember how God deliver his people from

the dark power of Egypt, from the Philistines, from Moab, from Persia? And in the NT, God sends his Son, Jesus Christ, as the seed of the woman, comes into the sinful world to deliver his people from the horrible power of Satan. Jesus has not only gone into the lions' den and emerged unscathed, but he has died and been raised again. Through his resurrection, He has proven that He has defeated the ultimate enemy of his people, that is the power of death. Listen what Paul says to Corinthians (1Co 15: 54b-56), "Death has been swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

What these verses express is the truth that God does grant the victory of life over death, hope over fear, justice over injustice, and good over evil. Even though that victory does not mean always that miraculous physical deliverance happens in his people's lives as happened in Daniel, even so in Christ, we have the most important victory, namely, spiritual victory! If we believe that Christ has defeated the power of our ultimate enemy, if we are not afraid anymore of the power of death, we can still live calmly as his people in the midst of the threat of our enemies. Our faith gives us the courage to risk all, even death. And what the bible says about the ending of our enemy? Revelation 20:9-10 says that at his Second Coming, "Christ will deliver his people completely and will throw Satan into "the lake of burning sulfur"

Conclusion

Psychologists say that they have heard more frustration, fear, and sadness from many Americans than before the events of September 11. Moreover, after the Iraq War. We cannot deny that many of us are worried and we live in our worrying. Anti-terrorism scholar Steven Block of Stanford University said, "It would be the ultimate victory for the terrorists if they succeed in transforming our society from free and open to closed and paranoid." He is absolutely right, and this is also the ultimate goal of the Satan, our real enemy. He wants us to doubt God's capability. But this the Bible's story this morning remind us that God is able to deliver us from the power of our enemies. Believe that!



The problem of evil

by Daniel Bud

Minds tell me isn't right!
Who can believe at all?
The pain the world has seen is much
Ivan was right to say it such
and not believe at all!

While many can't explain
why unborn millions die,
they are offended when people die
in chamber gases!
yet don't cry when children die like flies
in poverty that's death's disguise
in 'democratic' countries' lies.

My mind cannot be reconciled when Power tells my people: die!
Embrace the nation's suicide and let the people slowly die!

Mind can't imagine silent faith when death need not to be.
Why fifty million of deaths in this huge reddened camp?
For 55 years covered underneath this mega Iron Curtain.

Minds can't explain the God of love, of power or good will
But neither can they understand the power of free will.
Have faith in God! He can resolve
the problem of evil!

The Christian Road Map

A sermon on Psalm 119:97-106 and 2 Timothy 3:10-17

By Alfred Muema Muli

Introduction

On Tuesday, December 24 the eve of Christmas, I had the first experience driving out of Michigan State. My family, Nancy, Sandy, Keith, Mark, Mike and I were heading to the city of Zion in Illinois to visit with our Kenyan friends for Christmas.

I had mixed feelings about the journey. I was afraid of getting lost with my family. In terms of long distant driving I was only familiar with the Kenyan roads, which are simple and easy to follow without read maps. With this in mind, I knew right at the outset that it was not going to be an easy task. I really wanted to make sure that I had all the necessary information about driving directions in the US I got the directions from the internet-www.mapquest.com. However, I noted a caution that this information is only meant to be a guide that is not necessarily accurate and that the web site is not responsible for any loss of direction. That scared me! Since I really wanted to be sure about the directions I decided to purchase the North America Road Atlas 2003 Edition. On Monday evening my wife and I sat down to plan the trip and to attempt to resolve any anticipated driving difficulties. The trip began at 9.30am. You can imagine the intensity of concentration on the map all way through. At some point it was confusing where Interstate 94 is also 80.

We almost lost our way. One of the kids asked, "Dadi are you sure we are not gonna get lost?" But thank God we arrived safely and only in four hours.

On our way back, at some point, there was a complication on finding the ramp into Interstate 94 South from Illinois 173. We missed the way. The kids got rather disturbed asking us all sorts of questions. Are we lost? Are we gonna find our way back...? But thanks to God that we eventually found our way and arrived home safely. The Christian life is like a long journey in which while you know the destination you do not have all

the details of the journey. But thanks to God for He has graciously given us the road map. The Christian Road Map is the Bible, the Living Word of God.

The proposal of this message is that in order to succeed in our Christian journey for the year 2003 and beyond we must take seriously the Word of God. There are 4 reasons for this proposal

First, We Must Take Seriously the Word of God Because it Teaches Us (v.16).

It provides us with the details of the Christian road map. The Bible is a wonderful guide in our Christian journey. King David knew this very well when he said "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path" (Ps. 119:105). The Holy Scripture provides us with the right doctrine. It teaches us what we need to know about our Christian pilgrimage. It teaches us about the will of God in our Christian life.

The world in which we live presents us with many competing teachings in form of different ideologies, ideas, philosophies and myths. In Africa today there is a call to return to the African Traditional Religion (ATR). ATR has interesting teachings made through oral stories, myths and legends. For example, the cause of evil and pain in the world is explained by belief in mystical powers. Sicknesses, death, accidents and other forms of bad luck are attributed to sorcery. To find therapy to the problem, the victim gets protective charms from the Witchdoctor. It is unfortunately not uncommon for Christians in Africa to visit Witchdoctors in the night.

While belief in mystical powers is a major problem facing Christianity in Africa. The next question is what about Christianity in North America? There are many challenging voices that offer alternative and seemingly attractive teachings. Postmodernism is probably the number one enemy of Christianity in the North America today.

Postmodernism teaches that there is no objective truth, and instead all truth is relative. You cannot be certain about anything. It questions any and everything that claims to be the truth. It does not hesitate to question the validity of the Christian truth claims such as the historicity of Jesus Christ. Postmodernism is a secular ideology that is being endorsed in many institutions of higher learning particularly in America.

Democracy is great and thanks to God that America is probably the world's best example of democracy. However, democracy can be abused. One of the ways in which American democracy has been abused is through postmodernism.

Someone said in a democratic society you are free to choose to go to hell and that is the sure place where postmodernist spirit is leading its followers

American Christians, and especially the youth, must deliberately reject the current spirit of Postmodernism. Postmodern spirit leads obviously to Atheism-the belief that there is no God. And, without apologizing, the Bible calls the person with such a spirit a fool. We read in Psalm. 14:1 that "The fool says in his heart that there is no God."

We Christians believe in the Bible as the source of the right doctrine because it is the inspired Word of God. The Bible is not just a collection of wise ideas or ideals of some great Christians of ages past as alleged by postmodernism. Instead, the Scripture is the inspired word of God. Our text, 2 Timothy 3:16a, reads "All scripture is God breathed or God inspired. Listen to the more elaborated words of the Apostle Peter. He writes; "Above all you must understand that no prophecy of scripture came about by the prophets own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet 1:20-21).

Therefore, the Bible is the inspired word of God. In other words the word of God as we have it came from God the Holy Spirit by means of the human authors so that what we have, as the Holy Scripture, is the exact revelation of what God intended for us. The doctrine of Inspiration gives the Bible the authority that it requires. It is the authoritative word of God that is without error and it does not mislead. It is our final authority. The Bible is our rule in matters of our Christian faith and practice.

We cannot emphasize this point enough but it is a phenomenal beginning point for our Christian belief and practice. If we are to be successful in our Christian pilgrimage we have to be clear about our position in regard to the Bible. We must not let ourselves be moved here and there by every wind of doctrine. Instead, we must take seriously the word of God because it teaches us.

Secondly, We Must Take Seriously the Word of God Because it Rebukes Us (v.16). The Word of God points out when we miss the road. In other words, the word of God points it out to us when we go wrong in our Christian journey. It does not spare us when we sin. One may say oh! If it will rebuke me and point out my sin I won't read it. Unfortunately, it has almost become a taboo to use the term sin even within some Christian circles. The word is said not to be politically incorrect. To be politically correct, it has been said, we have to find a less offensive terminology in our preaching, writing, and discussions.

But my friends are we going to dilute the gospel for the sake of political correctness? Indeed, to throw away the term sin from the Christian vocabulary is to throw away a major part of the Christian faith. Without acknowledgement of sin there is no acknowledgement or appreciation of the grace of God especially as demonstrated in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Imagine an experience in your life when you lost your driving directions.

It would not have been much fun just to keep going, up to a point where you ran out of gas, without even realizing that you were lost. That is the role of rebuke in the Christian journey.

Rebuke is the gracious means that God uses to point to us when and where we have gone wrong in our Christian journey. To the Church in Laodicia, Jesus said, "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent" (Rev. 3:19). Friends, we must take seriously the word of God because it rebukes us.

Thirdly, We Must Take Seriously the Word of God Because it Corrects Us (v.16). As our road map, the Bible helps us to find out how we can get back to the road. When we break our fellowship with God because of sin the Word of God shows us how we can have our fellowship re-

stored. God makes a gracious promise of forgiveness that, “If we confession our sins, He is faithful and just, and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1Jn. 1:9 cf. Rev. 2:5,16,21: 3:3). Praise the Lord friends that He never gives up on us. We must, therefore, take seriously the word of God because it corrects us.

Finally, we must take seriously the Word of God because it trains us (v. 16). The word of God trains us in righteousness. In other words, the word of God shows us how to stay on the path. The word of God came to the Israelites through the mouth of the prophet saying, “Whether you turn to the right or to the left you will hear a voice behind you saying ‘This is the way walk in it’” (Is. 30:21).

The Word of God trains us to conform, not to the world but to God. We read in Romans 12:1-2 “Therefore, I urge you brothers, in view of God’s mercy to offer your bodies as living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God-This is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is-his good, pleasing, and perfect will.”

In this text the point is not one of world flight in which the world is considered absolutely evil. The warning is against extreme conformity to the non-Christian lifestyle so that there is no difference between the Christian and non-Christians. Christians are a chosen nation and are called to a life of holiness.

The Apostle Paul puts it in clear terms when he writes, “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God said, I will live with them and walk among them, and will be their God and they will be my people” (2Cor. 6:14-16).

So we must take seriously the word of God because it trains us.

By way of Application the question is what then should we do about the Bible?

We propose the following:

1. Study it. Ezra of the old sets a great example of diligent study of the scriptures for our

emulation. Regarding him the Word of God says, “For Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the law of the Lord, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel.” (Ezra 7:10).

In one of his sermons, the renowned American minister, by the name Pastor Denis White of the Nairobi Pentecostal Church, Kenya, said, “Show me a dirty Bible and I will show you a clean Christian, but show me a clean Bible and I will show you a dirty Christian.”

2. Meditate Upon It. Think about it deeply and prayerfully seeking its spiritual application to your life. King David had a special strength in this area of meditation

He said, “Oh! How I love your law! I meditate on it all day long.” (Ps. 119:15)

3. Memorize It. Commit verses to memory. A good example once again is from King David. He said, “Thy word have I hidden in my heart that I may not sin against thee.” (Ps. 119:11).

Memorization is particularly useful during the time of Christian trial and temptation. Jesus set for us an expert example. When he was faced with the temptations from the devil he was able to quote the scriptures from memory three times saying, “It is written....” (Mt. 4:1-11). The Ethiopian minister, by the name Neggusse Nagwaffi, who served 11 years imprisonment for being a Christian, testified at Scott Theological College chapel in Kenya, how he used his New Memorized Bible Version to witness to many fellow prisoners. Many of us may not know what to do if we found ourselves in Neggusse’s situation.

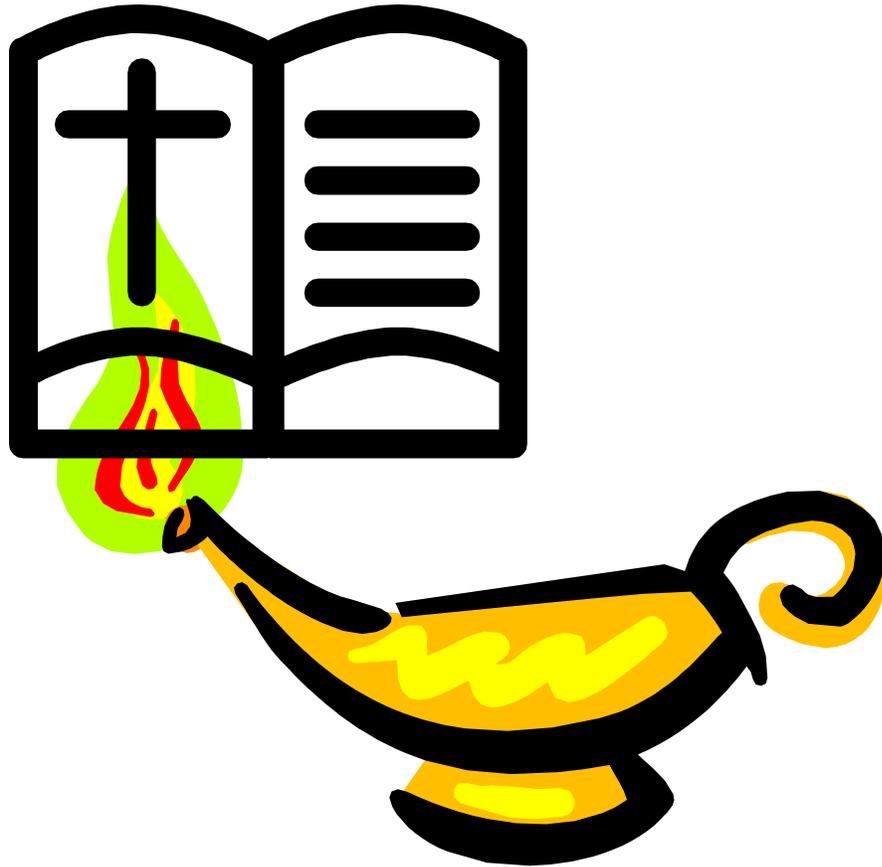
4. Obey it. Obedience to the Word shows that you believe and love it as the true Word of God. David the king had a striking commitment to the obedience of the Word of God. He said, “I have taken an oath and confirm it, that I will follow your righteous laws.” (Ps. 119:106). In the NT the Apostle James reminds us, “Do not merely listen to the word. Do what it says” (Jm 1:22).

In conclusion we need to underscore the fact that, this discipline of studying the word is not easy especially in the modern era of Microwave. The word instant is a highly valued advertisement terminology. Things ought to get done quickly and instantly.

This leaves no option for diligent study and meditation upon the word of God. It, therefore, calls for a deliberate commitment.

This commitment can easily be abused by a legalistic thinking in which one studies the Bible to fulfill a duty. That is wrong and does not last. However, if we believe and are convinced and convicted that the Word of God is the Road Map in which there lies the divine secret of success for our Christian journey then I believe we would make a reasonable commitment and be resolved to take the Word of God seriously. In this there lies the sure pathway to success in our Christian journey for the year 2002 and beyond.

AMEN



Friendship

A sermon on Romans 5:7-8

By Jeffery W. Scrips

“Friends are the lifeblood of junior high”. I don’t remember where I heard that quote. As one who has survived junior high I can say that statement bears a lot of truth. Friends are important at any age. But especially in junior high friends have incredible power to shape the life of a young man or woman. With many families unable or unwilling to give our kids the strong home they need, friends are sometimes all that they have. In fact, sociologists claim that when teens enter gangs, what they are looking for is a sort of family connection. I would submit to you that the biological family is giving way and being replaced by friends. It is not only our young people that are relying on friends more than ever. Our adult population is becoming more dependent on friends. *Seinfeld* anybody? And to this age where friendship takes over some of what the family used to have, the Church must speak the Word of God. **What we need is a biblical and Christian understanding of what friendship is.**

St. Augustine was probably the first significant Christian writer to write about friendship. Augustine was a rhetorician of the late Roman Empire who converted to Christianity and became bishop of Hippo, a city in North Africa. Augustine’s life was surrounded by friends, both before and after conversion. Augustine’s insights are particularly helpful for us today as we grapple with the idea of Christian friendship¹. So I will appeal to him as we consider our text for this morning/evening.

There are a number of places where the Bible uses the word “friend”. But few are the passages that address friendship. But here we have one where Jesus is addressing his disciples and calling them friends. We are Jesus’ friends if we do what he commands. To be Jesus’ friend is to love him. This passage has the command at the beginning for the disciples (and us) to remain in His Love. The passage has the command at the end that we “Love each other”. In the middle, as sort of

a centerpiece, we have Jesus declaring to his disciples that they are no longer servants, but friends. Remaining in God’s love and loving each other form the basis for real friendship.

“Remain in my love...that your joy may be complete”

Jesus commanded the disciples to remain in his love so that “your joy may be complete”. Friendships are wonderful. When God blesses them, they reach their full potential. But if we seek our friendships apart from God, they never will bring complete joy. It is the same as seeking completeness outside of God. Jesus or John might have had in mind a scenario much like ours today. Today our friendships tend to be so treasured that they even take the place of family sometimes. But we can’t love friends more than or even as much as God. Jesus commanded quite specifically that they must remain in him for complete joy.

In his *Confessions*, St. Augustine wrote about his experience with very close friend. Augustine loved his friend deeply. But then the friend died. And Augustine was so distraught that he had to leave his hometown and go to Carthage because he couldn’t bear looking at all of their old haunts only to remember that he was gone. The grief Augustine experienced at the loss of the friend was so severe that it dominated his life! And that, wrote Augustine later, is the wrong way to look at friends. Friends cannot supply your every need, and sometimes they fail, or die. Augustine recognized later that kind of love should be reserved for God².

It might be strange to think of God as a friend. Often such language turns God into some sort of pal or chum. However, friendship with God is more about a fundamental loyalty to God instead of transient things. It is about responding to God’s call. Such friendship, writes Augustine, is his gift to us³. Because we love God in Jesus Christ, we are able to love others more completely.

“Love one another...I have called you friends.”

You are probably familiar with verse 13 “greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.” That verse is incredibly memorable. It’s a simple but profound concept that seems to almost sum up the Christian faith. Raymond Brown points out that the command to lay down one’s life for one’s friends is unique to Christianity. St. Augustine thought that friendship was unique to Christianity. What? That sounds very strange in our day. Don’t we talk about our “non-Christian friends”? We certainly refer often to people who aren’t Christians as having friends. So how can St. Augustine say that only Christians experience friendship? In Augustine’s day, the dominant theory of friendship was Cicero’s “friendship is agreement on all things human and divine”. That sounds like a recipe for peace but not friendship. Christian friendship involves sacrifice—even the sacrifice of your own life for your friends. But do Christians have the monopoly on this kind of sacrifice?

Perhaps some analogy of Scripture can be useful here. The Apostle Paul writes in Romans 5 that rarely would anyone die for a righteous man, though someone might possibly dare to die for a good man. However, you can probably complete the verse to say, “but God showed his own love for us in this: while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us⁴” That is Christian love. Remember that the source of Love is God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Through the Holy Spirit we become the branches to the vine that is Christ (earlier in the chapter). The kind of love that God has is then transmitted to us through the Son. So that while among the non-Christians once in a while we might find a sacrificial death, nowhere will we find such a willing sacrifice for obvious sinners. And if the greatest measure of love is that one can die for one’s friend in spite of the friend’s imperfections—that is the truest love. So then Augustine can be right when he says that only in God can people have true friendship.

Do you describe the Christian life as one of joy and peace? Raymond Brown notes in his commentary on this passage how often joy and peace is associated with salvation⁵. Joy and peace can often be associated with friends⁶. You rejoice to see them. You are at peace to know that they are with

you. And if they are good friends, they reciprocate. Joy and peace come in their most perfect form in Jesus Christ. Because when we are united with him, when we become friends with God, then that joy and peace will be ours as well!

“But I chose you...to bear fruit”

In our Heidelberg Catechism (Lord’s Day 21), we confess that Christ gathers his Church. The canons of Dort say that God has elected his people to salvation. Jesus is talking about salvation in terms of remaining in him and being branches of his vine. Election, predestination, whatever you want to call it, it’s not a very popular doctrine. The idea that we don’t choose God, but he chooses us seems counterintuitive. This passage does not dwell on God’s election or Christ’s. It does however state that Jesus chose his disciples. And if we read this passage as though we are in the disciple’s place—as I think we are, then Jesus chose us too. Remember that this supreme friendship is a gift.

In fact, all of our friendships are gifts. St. Augustine wrote that Christian friends have a bond that is given by the Holy Spirit⁷. Augustine spoke of some people being ordained to be his friends⁸. Remember that we are all to the same vine (Jesus) and we will all remain in him. So God gives us such friends as those in him. What about friends who are not Christian? The passage does not directly address that issue. However, the assumption seems to be that we must all remain in Jesus’ love to be his friends and thus make our joy complete. So probably friendship with non-believers is at best a poor imitation of what can be there when God rules in the lives of both friends.

Friendship is a powerful and worthy thing. It’s one of the greatest of God’s gifts. But just as our love of friends/friendship must be rightly directed (an Augustinian theme), so our use of friendship must be rightly directed as well. We are chosen to bear fruit. Friends are not just a neutral power. They can help you or hurt you in your calling to bear fruit. To you who are young people especially, we are (or should be) concerned about the friends you hang out with. When St. Augustine was sixteen, he and his friends stole some pears from a neighbor’s yard and ate some and threw the rest away. In his Confessions, he laments it. Let me read just a portion of his reflection on it:

“The fruit was beautiful, but was

not that which my miserable soul coveted. I had a quantity of better pears. But those I picked solely with the motive of stealing. I threw away what I had picked. My feasting was only on the wickedness which I took pleasure in enjoying.⁹”

That’s quite a statement. I don’t know that any of us would be so hard on ourselves if we stole some fruit or vegetables out of someone’s garden. Actually I had an experience like Augustine’s. The only difference was that it was onions I stole. But I stole them along with a girl that I had a crush on. The solidarity, the act done with a friend made it appealing to me. Perhaps some of you have had experiences like Augustine’s. Have any of you “Tepeed¹⁰” a classmate’s house? How about a teacher’s? In high school a number of kids in my class got in trouble for Tepeeing a teacher’s house. I wasn’t one of the cool people so I didn’t go along. Does anybody ever Tepee a house alone? Isn’t it usually a group effort?

The prevailing wisdom of the world makes friendship to be that kind of tight alliance—doing good and bad things together. I believe that we are all created for life in a community (Genesis 2:18). Our culture, marred as it is by Sin, still clings to the hope for community. Despite an increased individualism, our lifestyles and entertainment speak to the fact that we still long for friends. However, our culture tries to put friendship on too high a pedestal or too low a one. Sometimes our culture tells us that friends are to supercede family and even marital relationships. Other times our culture tries to portray friends as transient or expendable.

But Jesus commands us to run against the grain of the culture. Jesus tells us to remain in his love. This love is not an option. He commands us to love one another. He commands us to bear fruit, not steal it! We are only able to do this by our union with Jesus Christ. We are to be Jesus’ friends. We know our master’s business and we are a part of it. We are a part of the love of God to the world—agents of redemption. The work is of course Christ’s, but we are blessed to take part in that and bear such fruit. The state of this friendship is love—remaining in God’s love and loving each

other. That is how we are friends of God. Love doesn’t steal. Love doesn’t harm. Love does the opposite. And the community of love that Jesus is gathering today is a force that goes against the vandals and the slanderers.

That is why it is such a joy when each of us, but especially our young people, finds friends in the Lord. When the power of friendship and long for belonging is perverted it can bring great pain. But friendships in the Lord are not only permanent but they abound with real love. St. Augustine’s friends after his conversion were very instrumental in his spiritual growth.

Remember Jesus’ command to love each other. Love is of course a prominent theme in John and the New Testament (not to say that the Old Testament is devoid of love). This love binds us all together. This love connects us. It makes us friends. Jesus’ disciples (the Church today) cannot spiritually live in isolation. Our modern age has a LOT of individualist spiritual language, making God a personal pal to the point where it’s only “God/Jesus and me”. How often have you heard people speak in terms like “God spoke to me today and said...” or “My spiritual life is affecting *me* and God is dealing with *me* on a *personal* basis”? It’s true that the love brings us closer to God through Jesus. But the context of this passage speaks of a unified body of believers. It speaks of “we” and “us”, not “I” and “me” exclusively. The “you” is plural.

That is not to say that the Bible or Christian Tradition flatly rule out the close, personal work of God through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Augustine’s testimony was full of deeply personal work. However, that work that God was doing inside Augustine’s heart always took place in the context of community. The community of saints always affirmed Augustine’s spiritual life. Augustine spoke of other people’s words to him as though sometimes they were the words of God being spoken through his instruments. Wouldn’t it be more affirming if the Church was involved in God’s messages to you? Doesn’t the picture of remaining in Jesus and thus loving each other speak to closeness in the Church that often gets ignored today?

God gathers one people to himself. During a time of crisis, St. Augustine wrote *The City of God*. In the book Augustine defines the city of

God as those who have come to God and chosen him. The city of God (not the book) is marked by love for the Creator as well as for heaven. The people in the city of God have a blessed eternity, an eternal rest to set their eyes on. The only other city is the city of the World. The city of the World is marked by rejection of God, selfish pursuit, and lack of love.

Jesus invites us into the city of God. Jesus invites us to be his friends. Jesus commands us to love each other and remain in his love. Other loves and friends are out there in force in our culture. But they do not offer the kind of love Jesus does; nor do they last forever like Jesus' love does. To be united with Jesus is the only way to have life. It is the only way to truly experience love. It is the only place where we can begin to find true friendship—the kind of friendship we are made for with God and each other. Jesus himself has demonstrated his love by laying down his life for us—his friends. Not only that, but he did it while we were detestable sinners. Jesus' love is amazing. And all of us here in God's Church implore you (if you haven't already) to accept Jesus Christ's invitation and his commands to love each other, remain in his love, and thus be friends with Him. The Christian understanding of friendship is that one must first be friends with God and then the friendships will be real and reach their full potential. The Bible, in our passage, affirms that we must be united with God in love through Jesus Christ and from there we receive our motivation to love each other.



End Notes

1 Because Augustine dwells on friendship more than most other figures in Church History, I would like to cite him more often than I would any other figure in any other sermon.

2 Augustine, *Confessions*, Book IV, 7/12. Henry Chadwick, translator, Oxford University Press, 1998

3 Leinhard, Joseph T. Friendship, Friends, in *Augustine through the Ages*, Allan D. Fitzgerald, editor, Eerdmans, 1999

4 Romans 5:7-8, NIV

5 Brown, Raymond E. *The Gospel According To John*, Doubleday, 1970, p. 681

6 And perhaps not coincidentally the Romans 5:1-11 has "Peace and Joy" as the heading in the NIV!

7 Leinhard, Joseph T. Friendship, Friends, in *Augustine through the Ages*, Allan D. Fitzgerald, editor, Eerdmans, 1999

8 Augustine, *Confessions*, Book VII, 6/8, Chadwick

9 Augustine, *Confessions*, Book II, 6/12, Chadwick

10 I'm trying to convey the act of vandalism wherein youths (or those with mindsets of youths) cover a house or car or yard in streams of Toilet Paper.

On Common Grace: A Tale Related to Romans 1:18-32 and Other Such Texts By Andrew Brennan

I

His are the waking and the fading times, those surreal interludes into the borderlands of consciousness and sleep and back again. In those fleeting moments, he encounters a love so sweet; yet so subtle it passes readily by the unsuspecting soul. There he glimpses the transcendent, that reality beyond which gives meaning to the present. In this middle ground he tastes of goodness foreign to the land of his lived experience. But oh, the fragility of that moment! Through any exercise of cognition it terminates within the rushing thoughts of daily business. When fully yielded to the occurrence, the result is likewise dissatisfactory—complete absorption into the void of meaningless images. He grasps at the instant seeking greater satisfaction, but the vision comes—and goes—of its own accord.

II

One seldom dreams of this tedious future, the grinding cycle of repetitions – the processing, the filing, organizing, reorganizing – but alas, the system demands such support. The pain in the back and the forearms, the eyestrain, give way to numbness and that numbness permeates the stuff of life. But he's not one to complain. "Layoffs, layoffs, layoffs—now there's the true brutality. One ought be very grateful..." Behind his desk, he finds pause for daydreaming, "If only *she*... well... never mind." The clock slowly works its way to a happier hour.

III

The drive home—how familiar and how awkwardly comforting. Any departure from the standard route would require an iron act of will but such strength is neither available nor necessary. The course is set, emblazoned in the memory of both nerve and muscle.

On the road between work and home stands a stop sign, marking the intersection of two rather insignificant streets. Here, he stops twice daily, once coming and once going. Now, he pauses, waiting for the occasional pedestrian. An image catches his eye, a face, no, her face. Shaking off the intruding nap, he regains control of his senses. The pedestrian passes from his sight and just as quickly passes from conscious thought. "Perhaps I'll visit that sleep clinic after all."

Parking, he shuffles unnoticed into the seclusion of his second floor apartment to dine and to spend an evening in the company of his media—the automaton now nearly complete.

In the recesses of his mind, however, lingers anticipation. He awaits the twilight, that sweet embrace.

VI

That night his mind races uncontrollably—appointments, bills, due dates, the usual fare. The hours creep on, but at last, the drift. Ah, tranquility.

He rouses suddenly. "Blasted sirens!" Seems low rent and firehouses make for natural neighbors. With the clock's alarm now a mere hour away, the effort to sleep seems wasted.

Opening a neglected journal, he begins:

This day from work
away from work
true beauty I did greet

Was fate's relentless chase
that brought her to that street
A passing glimpse crossed worlds adrift
and bore a strangest art
If only she'd been real
This day
I'd give away my...

It never occurred to him to consider what might happen should he ever truly meet her. Sure there are those momentary daytime office fantasies, but in life everything has its proper place and to that place he now promptly turns. And so the routine comes back in motion: the brushing, starching, grooming, breakfast—Coffee? one lump, maybe two—and the daily news to boot.

VII

An uneventful day passes in an rather uneventful life. Though, at least once, the sleepless night demands remembrance. Gazing into the loathsome serene light of his desktop monitor, he looks absent, about to venture to a fonder place. The slightest of smiles takes its form on his lips. And were his head just an ounce or two lighter, thus prevented that awakening neck-jerk, perhaps he'd find, temporarily, some irresponsible respite. Instead, now fully alert, he quickly deletes a screen full of unintentionally produced z's. "Let's not let that happen again." He pops a cup of joe and the accompanying yellow pills and sets about business as usual. One only need ignore the jitters. "Not long now." Soon, he'll be home again to crash, to cope—unwind.

VIII

If indeed he cared to remember, he hadn't thought of her that day. Still, she seems to lurk, a looming presence that threatens intrusion at any time. As is usual, his car comes to halt at the intersection. Today, a pedestrian strolls leisurely through the crosswalk, sponge-like in the pleasure of an early summer's evening. Yielding to this perambulator, he too observes this evening's brilliance. As his window descends, the inflowing fresh air exchanges with the outgoing sound of his driving tunes. He is now fully alive, alert, and fully awake. But he is not the only one touched in this moment. She recognizes the song, an old favorite. Smiling, she turns to acknowledge its liberator. A rush of emotions that surpasses even the effect of the air, causes him to choke momentarily.

IX

In the energy of a moment seemingly trapped in time – perhaps taken by confusion, perhaps thinking more clearly than ever – two polarized courses of action dance in his head. "Flight? Pursuit? Flight? Pursuit?" In this eternity each is given its turn. The discourse quiets, and before another breath enters his lungs, the car bolts toward its evening abode. Now faced by the continual nagging, the question – why? – he finds silence in the hum and glow of digital bliss, and as that world spins madly about he again feels somewhat centered. Finally the absurdity of it all merges with the weight of his eyelids and with a sigh, he opts to retire – "this day deserves an extra drink."

X

The mixing of the spirits with his reemerging rationale for the day's behavior produces a torrent of logic and emotion culminating in a night of troubled half-sleep. There would be no twilight visit, no affirming presence. She'd breached his worlds, and in the process became accessible and yet, strangely threatening – and now, noticeably absent.

The events of the intersection again flash within his mind. A simple nod, a “Hi, how are ya?” Were these not options? To flee her – surely that choice was his own – and it was for the best. After all, one can scarcely imagine the peril related to his acknowledging her existence. No, this is more likely a sick twist a fate. Or, a ploy meant to undermine the reality of his world, to weave together the unraveled realms of the fantastic with the actual. But should this cosmic joke carry only the significance of that casual glance. Surely hers was an act of full intentionality. A pause, and then, the response – “This simply will not do!” With complete conviction, his verdict falls – avoidance at any cost. Any interaction will further the dislocation – a spoiled transcendence, a tainted beauty.

XI

A third day – despite this resolve, the intersection again provides excessive dissonance. Here, his phony ignorance cannot restrain his scanning eyes. She will not be ignored – another sleepless night and mounting anxiety. Yet another day – resorting to desperation, he makes a mid-day retreat toward home. This last-ditch attempt at avoidance fails. She appears again, ambling through the crosswalk, haunting him.

XII

Friday comes without its usual fanfare. All distinctions between waking and sleeping have disappeared into formlessness. His passion finds its only expression in the angry pace of mechanized labor. On the road home, the sign still reads “STOP” and, as fully expected, she’s again there, already three steps into the intersection. His body remains fully relaxed as his car makes its approach. Either his well-trained muscles miss their cue or his nerves simply fail to fire. Today, the car will not halt. And today, as his dilemma finds its violent resolution, in that split-second they are closer than he ever imagined.

XIII

His life, again, makes sense – two distinct worlds remain. And in that fading time, as a distant whirr approaches with a company of flashing reds and blues, his countenance reveals contentment. This night a voice awaits, a welcome sound, a warm embrace that pulls him toward a darkened shore of sleep. Despite the knocking sound outside, its depths yield not a wink. In this moment, three words, “Upon up, police!” fall into the night, unanswered.

