

JOEL 3:16 MATT 5:16

SALT SHAKERS

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The principal parts of the doctrine of holy baptism are these three:

First, That we with our children are conceived and born in sin, and therefore are children of wrath, in so much that we cannot enter into the kingdom of God, except we are born again. This, the dipping in, or sprinkling with water teaches us, whereby the impurity of our souls is signified, and we admonished to loathe, and humble ourselves before God, and seek for our purification and salvation without

ADMINISTRATION OF THE HOLY BAPTISM

ourselves. Secondly, Holy baptism witnesseth and sealeth unto us, that he doth make us eternal covenant of grace with us, and adopts us for his children and heirs, and therefore will provide us with every good thing, and avert all evil or turn it

THE HOLY ONE WHO SAVES US FROM DEATH

to our profit. And when we are baptized in the name of the Son, the Son sealeth unto us, that he doth wash us in his blood from all our sins, incorporating us into the fellowship of his death and resurrection, so that we are freed from all our sins and accounted righteous before God. In like manner, when we are baptized in the name of the Holy Ghost, the Holy Ghost assures us, by this holy sacrament, that he will dwell in us.

new obedience, cleave to this Son, and Holy trust in him, all our hearts, with all our all our forsake the old nature, new and holy

And if we through into sin, we therefore mercy, nor since baptism undoubted we have an of grace with

To infants of And although children do not these things, therefore from baptism, without their partakers of the condemnation in Adam, so are they again

AN ETERNAL COVENANT OF GRACE

received unto grace in Christ; as God speaketh unto Abraham, the Father of all the faithful, and therefore unto us and our children (Gen. 17:13), saying,

and sanctify us to be members of Christ, applying unto us, that which we have in Christ, namely, the washing away of our sins, and the daily renewing of our lives, till we shall finally be presented without spot or wrinkle among the assembly of the elect in life eternal.

Thirdly, whereas in all covenants, there are contained two parts: therefore are we by God through baptism, admonished of, and obliged unto

namely, that we one God, Father, Ghost; that we and love him with with all our souls, mind, and with strength; that we world, crucify our and walk in a life.

sometimes weakness fall must not despair of God's continue in sin, is a seal and testimony, that eternal covenant God.

believers our young understand we may not exclude them for as they are knowledge, condemnation

"I will establish my covenant between me and thee, and thy seed after thee, in their generations, for an everlasting covenant; to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee." This also the Apostle Peter testifieth, with these words (Acts 2:39), "For the promise is unto you and to your children, and to all that are afar off,

TO INFANTS OF BELIEVERS AND ADULT PERSONS

even as many as the Lord our God shall call." Therefore God formerly commanded them to be circumcised, which was a seal of the covenant, and of the righteousness of faith; and therefore Christ also embraced them, laid his hands upon them and blessed them (Mark 10).

HE THAT BELIEVETH & IS BAPTIZED SHALL BE SAVED

Since then baptism is come in the place of circumcision, therefore infants are to be baptized as heirs of the kingdom of God, and of his covenant. And parents are in duty bound, further to instruct their children herein, when they shall arrive to discretion.

That holy of God may be administered to his glory, to our comfort, and to the edification of his Church, let us call upon his holy name.

Prayer

O Almighty and eternal God, thou, who hast according to thy severe judgment punished the unbelieving unrepentant the flood, and according to mercy saved believing family: thou, drowned the...

and world with hast thy great and protected Noah and his who hast

FOLLOW HIM DAILY AND JOYFULLY BEARING OUR CROSS

Regenerated

How do we stay spiritually awake?

Letter to the church in Pergamos

Our identities in Christ, but... cliques..?

Attitude towards Office Bearers

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Chairman's Note

Dear readers,

Apparently, this issue is a little shorter. A number of our writers were unable to submit their articles in time. Not a criticism of their tardiness, but a reminder to our readers that writing articles is hard work. We remain thankful for every writer to ensure their articles are faithful explanations and applications of the Word. (Nonetheless, a smaller issue only means you can look forward to a bigger one in June, DV!)

Let me call your attention to our articles this issue. Prof. Hanko and Rev. Stewart continue their respective series on the seven churches and the motivations for the offices of the church. Brother Marcus continues his series of articles on Jonah. These articles were originally written for an exegetical assignment on the OT book. Our brother has willingly edited and submitted portions of his assignment for our reading.

While Rev. Spronk ends his series on the end times, we have two contributions by our local writers. Sister Christine brings us through her experience of physical disabilities in the lenses of the Word, while sister Lisa has written a concise, biblical article about cliques.

Let's continue to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ!

In Christ,
Yang Zhi

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Boys



Lim Yang Zhi
Salt Shakers chief editor

The third generation of Christians born in CERC is growing. Year after year, infants from that generation are brought before the congregation to be baptised, a testimony that God not only saves adults into his covenant (as was the experience of the first and second generation), but also children (as will be the experience of our third generation, Lord-willing). Each baptism is a solemn exhortation to all parents to raise their children up in the fear of God's name. A few Sundays ago, at the baptism of a few infants, Prof. Dykstra preached on Paul's exhortation in Ephesians 6:1-3. The calling to nurture our children in the training and admonition of the Lord, certainly, is a familiar tune.

So why talk about children again?

One answer: *Boys*.

Many in this third generation are boys. This ought to stand out to us, because it was quite the opposite in the previous generation. In the previous generation, girls were the majority. Now, in this third generation thus far, God has given CERC many boys.

These boys, with the girls, are to be raised up by the parents and congregation of CERC in the fear of the LORD. Yet, my focus is on the boys.

After all, God's Word specifically calls us to raise boys to be strong plants. These boys are to be strong plants, because God has given men a responsibility. To Adam, a man, God gave the calling to care for the animals and protect them. To Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the male patriarchs after the flood, God gave the calling to lead their families as pilgrims—spiritual aliens—in the land of Canaan. To Moses and Aaron, God gave the calling to lead Israel out of the bondage of Egypt, in the way of judging Egypt

through ten destructive plagues, and in the way of sojourning through the wilderness for forty years. To Joshua and the judges (all except one were men), God gave the calling to fight against the ungodly inhabitants of Canaan, as a picture of the relentless battle the church has against the wickedness of the world. To David and the kings of Judah, God gave the calling to rule Israel with a proper understanding of God's Word, and with the preservation of proper worship led by the priests. To the disciples, Jesus Christ gave the calling to preach the Word in pairs throughout Galilee. To the apostles, Christ gave the calling to establish churches and ordain deacons, elders, and ministers to lead the churches.

The spiritual responsibility God puts on the men of the church today is no different. God calls men to lead the church and the home. God calls (some) men to lead as office-bearers—and, by implication, to be men that are godly and zealous unto good works. God calls (some) men to enter the ministry and preach the gospel. God calls (some) men to establish homes and instruct children in the fear of his name. And while it is clear that only some will become ministers, elder, deacons, and fathers, the entire Word of God clearly calls *all* men to be strong in the Word, and, by their godly lives, lead others in the church.

How, then, will we raise up our boys?

Consider the words of the Apostle John to the churches of his day. In the second chapter of his first letter, he directs his attention to the men and addresses them. How does he address them? The fathers, John said, *have known him that is from the beginning*. The young men *have overcome the wicked one*. And the little children *have known the Father* (I Jn. 2:13).

That address is the identity of these believers. This identity is the sovereign work of God in these believers. God transformed the fathers, men, and children in the church to be spiritually strong in their years. Through the preaching of the apostles, God sent the gospel of Jesus Christ to these believers (1:1-3). By the Spirit of Jesus Christ, the gospel worked faith in the hearts of these believers, so that they believed in the propitiating work of Christ (1:7-2:2). That gospel also worked the fruits of faith, so that these fathers, men, and children abode in God and walked in his ways (2:3-11).

Implied in this spiritual identity is the calling to raise our boys up to be such fathers, men, and children.¹ As children, our boys must know the Father. The little children in John's day have known of the Father. That knowledge means, first of all, that the triune God is the heavenly Father of his little covenant children. Our children know Jehovah God as their God only when Jehovah God has made himself to be their Father. That God is their heavenly Father means that God has called children in their infancy to be his people. That God knows these children as his children.

Because Jehovah God is the God of little boys, as well as to men, we raise our boys to know the triune God as their Father. Daily, we read and sing the Word with our boys. Whether we use a biblical devotional, or whether we read directly from the Word, we bring the Word and tell them, "This is the word of the living God!" We read to them *daily*, because the triune God of boys is the God that lives and works in them by his Word and Spirit to become his holy children. And even if our boys are still childish, unable to grasp everything that is written, we insist that they stop their talking and playing to give ear to God (not papa or mama) speaking from his Word.

Each Lord's Day, we bring our boys to the worship of the triune God twice. By our presence and participation in the worship (whether in the near-soundproof family room or the main sanctuary),

Implied in this spiritual identity is the calling to raise our boys up to be such fathers, men, and children.

we with our boys stand before the majesty of the triune God. As we arise to receive the blessing and to sing, and sit when it is time to pray, read the law, and listen to the preaching of the Word, our boys notice our awe before their heavenly Father, and learn an important character of worship—silence (Hab. 2:20). They learn this silence also by noticing our unwavering insistence to maintain the sanctity of the worship, whether we listen quietly to the preaching with them, or take the fussy baby sibling out of the sanctuary *quietly* and remain outside *quietly*.

What happens when our boys become teens, even young adult men? The instruction does not stop, and parents are duty-bound to raise up these teens to overcome the wicked one. John's address to the young men is striking; he speaks of the fact that these young men *have* overcome the devil. These young men have experienced victory (in a small part) over the temptations of the devil. This experience is the fruit of the preaching of the gospel in these young believers. In these young believers, the gospel worked faith in Jesus Christ. In that faith, these young believers experienced the joy of the forgiveness of their sins, and the fellowship with God characterised by putting away the temptations of the devil.

The example of these young men in John's day implies the command that we raise our boys to fight and overcome the devil. No, it does not mean that we begin to talk about sin and the devil *only* when our boys become teens. Such talk already begins from the moment our boys demand their ways. Oh, we parents know all too well when boys *demand*. When they see a toy that their sibling has and wants that toy; when they see mama play with the other sibling and want her attention *now*; when they want *that* parent to sit not on *this* chair, but on

¹ What is implied in John is made explicit in the Scriptures (Deut. 6:6-9; Eph. 6:1-3).

that chair—we experience such demands daily!

It is not wrong to want a toy, parental attention, or a way of getting things done. But when our boys care about what *they* want more than what's right in God's sight, and show such selfishness in their tone, their gestures, and their responses to a "No," they sin. If they want something, it comes out in a way that hurts the other sibling—"DON'T WANT DIDI TO PLAY WITH THAT!" If they do not get what they want right away, it comes out in unbridled crying and screaming.

It is at such times that we must bring the Word of God to our boys: *Keep your tongue from evil*. Evil? It's in you. It comes out from your tongue (and your hands, feet, eyes, etc.). Stop using your tongue for evil.

We as parents know what must happen next, when the boy refuses to obey. The rod and reproof must be used. The rod shows them the severity of their disobedience, and the seriousness of God's Word in condemning that disobedience. The reproof teaches our children that they are in a war right now. It teaches them that the enemy is their flesh. It teaches them that the enemy has attacked, and they have fallen into sin. It teaches them that the only way to recover and emerge victorious is faith in Jesus Christ. It teaches them to go to God, confessing their sins and relying on Christ for strength to fight against that sin. The rod illustrates the importance of these truths, and the reproof makes these truths clear to our boys.

All this discipline, done daily continues into the teens, because the battle against sin does not stop after childish years. When our young boys begin to observe the wickedness around the world, they are tempted to follow that wickedness. When our young boys see in themselves greater strength and ability to do things on their own, they are tempted to walk in their ways rather than God's. What will strengthen them for the spiritual battle that began from the day they are born? Discipline. Discipline, that began from the rod and reproof of the earlier years, now matures into deep, spiritual fellowship

in the Word between boys and parents about what is right and wrong, good and evil, mature and immature, and wise and foolish.

Oh, we as parents do not forget the gospel of Jesus Christ in this discipline. Not only do we bring the Word to our boys in such fellowship, but we continue to sit our teenage boys under the preaching of the Word. Yet, now, in their maturing years, we do not just sit them under the preaching, but we talk about what was preached—was the exegesis clear? Where is Jesus Christ in the verse? How does the text shape our lives for the coming week?

Yet, why boys?

Why must you and I as members of CERC be so absorbed with how we instruct our boys in this young generation?

We noted John was writing to men. Did you notice *what* John wrote to these men? *Love not the world!* (I Jn. 2:15)

If we are not to love the world, then we are to love God. This is implied here, because the rest of John's epistle is abundantly explicit. Those who love God put away sin. Those who love God will love the brother. Those who love God will not deny that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. To love God is a life of thankfulness, where the Christian, by word and deed, confesses God to be the God of his salvation.

On the flipside, we are not to love the world. That means we are not to love the things of this world.

What happens when our boys become teens, even young adult men? The instruction does not stop, and parents are duty-bound to raise up these teens to overcome the wicked one.

These are things that arouse our desire for earthly things, for things that look pleasurable, and things that puff us up (v. 16). But not to love the world also means not to walk in the way of the world. The way refers to the principle behind the pursuit of earthly things. That principle is man-centered. That principle centers on what *I* want and what *I* like, and overthrows God and the neighbour. That principle, that way of the world, is sin. Whether it is that our young men are hooked to their games, or that our boys are demanding for things selfishly, or that the men of the church are reputed to be spiritually passive in the truth—that is the love of the world in their hearts. The principle of seeking God first in thankfulness is cast aside, and the principle of seeking sin is placed first.

But, *love not the world*—this command implies a great temptation for our boys to love the world. And we can be sure, if we do not instruct our boys in the Word, they will love the world. When they love and seek after the world, they will not seek to bear the responsibilities God has given them. They will not want to lead as ministers and office-bearers. They will not seek to lead by a godly example in the life of the congregation; neither will they read and study the Word on their own. And if the trend of the world is to delay covenant marriages,

parenthood, and a life devoted to the church and focus on academics, all for a life of material ease, we can only expect our boys to follow the same trend, if they love the world.

Against the work of the devil is the sovereign work of God in our boys. In God's work, we are confident. We are confident, because God's work is the work of the gospel, and that gospel is the power unto the salvation of the covenant children that believe. Against the devil, God is victorious.

Therefore, our confidence is in the gospel brought to our boys. We know that the gospel will harden the hearts of some of our children. These children will bring forth disobedience, rebellion, and (in our grief) unbelief. But the fruit of the gospel in those whom God saves will be the fruits of spiritual strength and godliness. In working those fruits in these boys, God preserves his church, raising up another generation of men who love him and his people.

Or as the Spirit writes through John: *He that doeth the will of God abideth forever.*

What great encouragement we have as parents in our calling—the calling to raise up boys!

Lessons from God's Letters to the Churches (4): Letter to the Church in Pergamos



Prof. Herman Hanko

Emeritus professor of the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA and frequent contributor to *Salt Shakers* since its inception.

The city of Pergamos was an extremely wealthy city. It was the farthest north of the seven churches of Asia Minor. It too was near the coast of the Aegean Sea and was therefore an important trading center. It was the farthest north of the seven churches mentioned in Revelation 2 & 3, about as far north from Smyrna as Smyrna was north of Ephesus.

The church was composed mainly of Gentiles and it too was probably organized by evangelists sent out from Ephesus during the time Paul was laboring there.

The Lord had some very good things to say about the church in this commercial city. In a way it is

surprising that the church was as faithful as it was, for twice the Lord calls Pergamos the city where "Satan's seat is" and "where Satan dwelleth" (Rev. 2:13). Apparently, Satan had established his headquarters in Pergamos, from which he sent out his host of demons to various assignments elsewhere. But in any case, Pergamos was a ready location for Satan to concentrate his devilish purposes. He lived "next door" to the saints. The city was a "den of iniquity." It was the Calcutta, the Los Angeles, the Bangkok, the Amsterdam of its day. The church must have had special protection from the angels to remain faithful.

Indeed, the church had endured persecution, not surprisingly, because target No. 1 is always the church of Christ where the devil concentrates his most skilled forces to do battle against Christ. The devil had even killed one of the prominent members, perhaps the minister, in his efforts to destroy Christ's work.

Yet the church remained mostly faithful to God's word. The church had held fast the name of Christ and had not denied Christ, who is the full revelation of the truth of God. That was extremely commendable - even when each saint faced squarely the threat of death at the hands of those driven by Satan.

That is high praise from the Lord. Severe persecution, such as the church has experienced time and again is God's means of separating the true believers from hypocrites in the church. It requires much grace from God to confess the truth when suffering the persecutions of the ungodly. Already Pergamos had shown its willingness to suffer for Christ's sake even though it was a new congregation recently delivered from paganism.

Nevertheless, the Lord found in Pergamos a serious fault. It is described in the text "the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to cast a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit fornication" (Rev 2:14).

You will recall the history. Balak summoned

Balaam from Mesopotamia to curse Israel. God refused to grant Balaam's request until Balaam clearly showed his desire to gain the riches Balak had promised him instead of bringing God's Word. And so he went, but God made Balaam say what neither he nor Balak wanted him to say: he spoke as his donkey spoke who warned Balaam of God's displeasure, and he was forced to bless Israel instead of cursing God's people.

However, Balaam assured Balak that Balak could gain Israel's destruction anyway by enticing Israel to worship Moab's idols and commit fornication, a part of heathen ritual that usually went with idolatry.

Later in the letter, the Lord reprimands Pergamos for not expelling the Nicolaitans from its fellowship. Although not much is known of these Nicolaitans, most authorities agree that they were a sect within the Christian church who advocated cooperation with paganism in certain pagan practices and claimed it was permissible to join pagans in some of their ceremonies. Sometimes these practices involved eating meat sacrificed to idols; sometimes it went so far as to permit engagement in sexual promiscuity as a part of various heathen rituals.

Whatever may be the case, it is probable that the two evils mentioned in the Lord's letter are the same moral evil.

In any case, the elders in Pergamos had failed utterly to discipline those who taught such terrible views. While discipline is the third mark of the true church, Pergamos had allowed itself to keep these people within its fellowship.

I said at the beginning of this series of the articles on the Lord's letter to the seven churches of Asia Minor that these letters are given to the New Testament church that it and every congregation within it may examine itself to see whether the strength of these churches and the evils found in them were characteristic of the church that claims to represent the cause of Christ in the

There are always those present in the church who are frightened by belonging to a church that is so distinctive in its doctrine and moral standards that it is the object of the scorn and ridicule of surrounding churches. They teach that it is permissible to be a little “broader” and not so “narrow.”

world – our church. If we are honest with ourselves we will surely find that these evils are present in us and in the churches to which we belong.

There are always those present in the church who are frightened by belonging to a church that is so distinctive in its doctrine and moral standards that it is the object of the scorn and ridicule of surrounding churches. They teach that it is permissible to be a little “broader” and not so “narrow.” “We ought not to condemn other churches for their heresies and lax morals”, so it is said; “We can cooperate with other churches similar to ours in many other matters and join them in their projects, activities and practices without forsaking our own position.” “On broader issues we are in agreement.” “Why not emphasize the areas in which we agree, rather than live alone and be so ‘picky’ about so many things”.

Such attitudes and practices lead invariably to further doctrinal departure from the truth and further moral approval of greater sins. Sometimes indeed these greater sins are approved, as when a Reformed Church may join with a church that condones the presence of “believing” homosexuals in its church, and so other forms of promiscuity are justified.

Behind all this are, as I have said, fear of being mocked and ridiculed for our exclusivity, and our

own personal attraction to evil that tugs us closer and closer to sin.

Further, people who commit such errors are not disciplined. They are tolerated within the fellowship of the congregation. Sometimes such toleration is justified because it is claimed that such evils as were present in Pergamos are condoned because it is cruel to discipline them. Sometimes they are approved because it is believed people that teach such things need counselling, not discipline. In any case, evil is tolerated within the congregation and eats like a cancer in the vitals of the church.

But the Lord disapproves. Maybe this letter is written to us? Ask yourself if it is not true. The Lord’s demand to those of us that practice such compromise is, “Repent.” And the dire warning along with the call to repentance is that if the church will not expel these people, Christ himself will come with a sword in his mouth and cut them off. (It is likely that the expression “sword in his mouth” refers to the discipline that is part of the key power given to the church, which discipline is the Lord’s sword. That the sword is in Christ’s mouth indicates that this discipline is done through the preaching of Christ’s Word and the exercise of discipline. If the church will not execute discipline, Christ himself will do it; and it is ultimately Christ that always does it: “Whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven...” The sword of discipline shall be unsheathed against the church itself. The errors present in it would, if not repented of, will ultimately destroy the church.

But the reward is great and wonderful for the faithful. Christ gives “of the hidden manna, and ... [gives] a white stone [to the faithful], and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth save he that receiveth it.”

It is not so easy to know what is meant by “the hidden manna,” but it is possible that, as a reference to the manna that sustained Israel in the wilderness and Jesus’ reference to it in John 6, the hidden manna is the spiritual sustenance we receive in heaven that gives us increasing knowledge of God



and his ways in history as he accomplished his purpose. We will see and understand why God brought upon us so many trials and afflictions and how they wondrously brought us to heaven.

A white stone with a new name on it, which is given to the faithful, is a startlingly wonderful gift. When Adam named the animals in Paradise, the names he gave them were not merely arbitrary names, but rather names that expressed the purpose how God's power and majesty were revealed in each animal.

The names we give our children are arbitrary names that, though they are Bible names, say nothing about God's purpose with us. But this

new name will express – in a language we do not now know (II Cor. 12:1-4) -- how God's great grace saved us for our own special place in glory. The name will express perfectly why God saved us, how he saved us, and why we are in our own place in heaven to reveal the great riches of the glory of almighty God. Each saint will have a new name, from a baby that died at birth to a thief on the cross, and an old doddering saint who has run his course on earth. All will be a story of how God saved each elect in his/her own unique way on earth so that each may, by his salvation and new name, reveal the infinite riches of God's grace – so that God alone may be praised.

I can hardly wait to know what my name will be!

Murmuring, Strife and Contention Against Church Office-Bearers (3)



Rev. Angus Stewart

Pastor of Covenant Protestant Reformed Church, our sister church in Northern Ireland

In what period of Bible history do we have the most narratives about the church's foolish dishonouring of those whom God has placed in authority over her? During Israel's wilderness wanderings, which are recorded especially in two Old Testament books: Exodus and Numbers.

At the end of *Belgic Confession* 31, Guido de Bres has his eye on Israel's wilderness wanderings. After outlining the scriptural teaching on church officers, the article states that we must "be at peace with them without *murmuring, strife or contention*, as much as possible."

Four Passages in Exodus

The first recorded incidence of Israel's grumbling during the wilderness wanderings occurred just west of the Red Sea. The mighty Egyptian army was fast approaching and the people were hedged in. "And they said unto Moses, Because there were no

graves in Egypt, hast thou taken us away to die in the wilderness? wherefore hast thou dealt thus with us, to carry us forth out of Egypt? Is not this the word that we did tell thee in Egypt, saying, Let us alone, that we may serve the Egyptians? For it had been better for us to serve the Egyptians, than that we should die in the wilderness" (Ex. 14:11-12). What did Almighty God do? He powerfully divided the Red Sea and Israel praised Him in the words of the song of Moses (Ex. 15)!

Later in that same chapter, the people "murmured against Moses," for they were very thirsty and the waters of Marah were bitter (15:23-24). What was God's response? He commanded Moses to cast a tree into the waters, miraculously making them sweet. Israel had failed the test (25).

In the wilderness of Sin, the hungry people (16:3) murmured (2, 7, 8, 9, 12) against Moses



and Aaron (2), Scripture's first reference to Israel's grumbling against the elder brother after leaving Egypt. Moses explained the real target of their complaints: "the LORD heareth your murmurings which ye murmur against *him*: and what are we? your murmurings are not against us, but against *the LORD*" (8). The Most High then provided manna and quails for His people.

The next grumble party took place at Rephidim (17:1), later named Massah and Meribah or Tempted and Contention (7). As at Marah, the problem was that the people were thirsty (1-3). As usual, they chided and contended with (2, 7) or murmured against (3) Moses (2, 3). This time it was so bad that they were almost ready to stone him (4)! Jehovah's solution was to bring forth water out of the rock for the people to drink (5-6).

Seven Passages in Numbers

After these four strife narratives from successive chapters in Exodus (14-17), we will now briefly consider seven passages from Numbers. As soon as Israel left Mount Sinai to journey to Canaan (Num. 10), "the people complained" (11:1). At Taberah, the Lord consumed with fire many of those on the outskirts of the camp (1, 3).

Later in Numbers 11, the issue was not hunger as such, as was the case in Exodus 16, but it was rather a despising of the manna (Num. 11:6) and an intense craving for certain foodstuffs: meat, fish and vegetables (4-5). Though no form of the word "murmurings" or its synonyms are found in the passage, this evil reality certainly was present at Kibroth-hattaavah (4-6, 13, 18, 20). God sent quails for them to eat (31-33) and a "very great plague" to slay them (33).

At Hazeroth (11:35; 12:16), the issue was Moses' choice of a wife. He had married an Ethiopian woman, not an Israelite. Aaron and especially Miriam wrongly criticised Moses for this (1), and sought to elevate themselves (2). God's response was twofold. He defended Moses with the highest accolades, as a particularly exalted and faithful prophet (6-9), and struck Miriam with leprosy,

expelling her from the camp for a week (10-15).

Next came the crisis at Kadesh (13:26), when Israel refused to enter Canaan. This was a national rebellion against Israel's highest and most faithful leaders: "all the children of Israel murmured against Moses and against Aaron" (14:2), and "all the congregation bade stone" Joshua and Caleb (10), the two good spies, who urged them to trust the Lord to give them the promised land (7-9). Jehovah appeared in the glory cloud to cow the crowd and condemned Israel to 38 more years of wilderness wanderings.

We are not told the location of the rebellion in Numbers 16. Many office-bearers in the Old Testament theocracy coveted higher positions and fell into the old sin of murmuring (11). Dathan, Abiram and On of the tribe of Reuben (1) complained against Moses (3), and Korah of the tribe of Levi grumbled against Aaron (3, 11). In His fearful judgment, Jehovah caused the earth to swallow up Dathan and Abiram and their families (31-34), whereas Korah and the other 250 who offered incense were consumed by fire from God (35). How did the people react? With more grumbings: "But on the morrow all the congregation of the children of Israel murmured against Moses and against Aaron, saying, Ye have killed the people of the LORD" (41)! Whereupon, God slew 14,700 of them with a plague (49). Next, He vindicated the Aaronic priesthood (Num. 17), as He had earlier vindicated His servant Moses (Num. 12). Aaron's rod that budded was to be brought "before [the ark of] the testimony, to be kept for a token against the rebels; and thou shalt quite take away their murmurings from me, that they die not" (17:10; cf. 5).

Like chapters 13-14, Numbers 20 begins in Kadesh. As in Exodus 15 and 17, there is a shortage of drinking water (Num. 20:2, 5). Again "the people chode with Moses" (3) and "strove with the LORD" (13). God brought forth water from the rock, as He did in Exodus 17. But Moses and Aaron were forbidden to enter the promised land, for failing to sanctify Jehovah before the children of Israel (Num. 20:10-12).



The final recorded instance of the Israelites' murmuring in the wilderness occurred when they were travelling from Mount Hor by the north east tip of the Red Sea in order to skirt Edom (21:4). The people grew impatient with the long dry journey (4), complaining about the lack of bread and shortage of water, and criticising the manna (5). In this, the last of our eleven examples, the text mentions God's name first and then Moses, as the parties criticised by the unbelieving Israelites (5). Aaron is not mentioned because he died at the end of the previous chapter. In judgment, Jehovah sent fiery serpents whose lethal venom slew many (6). God instructed Moses to make a brass or bronze serpent and put it upon a pole so that those who looked upon it would live (8-9)—an Old Testament type of Christ's crucifixion (John 3:14-15).

Thematic Analysis and Application

After our survey of eleven narratives of Israel's grumbling during its wilderness wanderings (Ex. 14-17; Num. 11-12; 14; 16; 20-21), we are now in a position to analyse these passages and apply their lessons to the church of our day, as we answer three key questions.

1. *Who was in the wrong?* Not once was it those who were criticised. In each case, Moses, Aaron, Joshua and Caleb were innocent of the charges made against them. Always the fault lay with the critics: usually the Israelites, sometimes the mixed multitude (11:4), occasionally (lower) leaders (16:1-2) and even, in one instance, Miriam and Aaron (Num. 12). Their sins were those of unbelief (14:11; Heb. 3:19), pride (Num. 12:2) and envy (Ps. 106:16). These evils can also stir up murmuring against office-bearers in a true church, perhaps especially among those at the edges of the congregation's life (Num. 11:1).

The people repeatedly failed God's testing of them, when they lacked food (Ex. 16) or the food of their choice (Num. 11:5; 21:5) or drink (Ex. 15; 17; Num. 20), or were weary (21:4), or faced military danger behind (Ex. 14) or ahead (Num. 14). The people huffed and complained, because they had to suffer

hardships and were "put out." Everything must go their way in the church or else they grumble and cause strife.

2. *What about their criticisms?* These were always marked by defeatism and negativity. They often took the form of unbelieving rhetorical questions (Ex. 14:11-12; 15:24; 17:3; Num. 14:3; 16:3; 20:4-5; 21:5) and even death wishes (Ex. 16:3; Num. 14:2; 20:3). These people were so filled with unbelief that there was no reasoning with them (16:12-14). They murmured time and time again whenever hardships arose. Sadly, there are also people like this in churches, who continually complain and never seem to learn.

The apostle Paul addressed this problem in first-century congregations. He warned the Philippians against "murmurings" (Phil. 2:14) and cited the bad example of the Israelites during the wilderness wanderings in his exhortation to the members of the church at Corinth: "Neither murmur ye, as some of them also murmured, and were destroyed of the destroyer" (I Cor. 10:10).

Israel's ungodly criticisms were very serious, leading to abominable proposals. Sometimes they planned to appoint another leader to take them back to Egypt (14:4). On two occasions, they almost stooped to stoning, first, Moses (Ex. 17:4) and, second, Joshua and Caleb (Num. 14:10). Imagine a church wishing to murder or excommunicate its faithful office-bearers!

At bottom, Israel's grumbings were not merely against Moses or Aaron or Joshua or Caleb. Their discontentment, criticisms and enmity were really against Almighty God Himself (Ex. 16:8). The spiritual descendants of these Jews murmured (John 6:41, 43, 61) against the Lord Jesus Christ, the true bread from heaven, whom the manna typified. This is what complaining church members need to understand. This is also a truth that faithful elders, deacons and pastors need to grasp when they unfairly receive flak from unhappy members.



Often ecclesiastical problems are, however, more complicated. Consider this scenario. The church's office-bearers sin or make a bad decision. Then some members react badly and not in a biblical or church orderly way, making things worse. Next the session or consistory responds foolishly and the ecclesiastical mess spirals out of control. Vexatious situations like this swiftly become very hard to sort out or resolve, for even trust itself is lost.

3. *What was the result of the children of Israel's murmurings in Exodus and Numbers?* Their grumblings did not do any (direct) good and never achieved their objectives. God was always going to give them food, drink, military defence, etc., anyway. Each time they were tried, the children of Israel failed the test! Jehovah was justly angered by their sin and slew many in the wilderness.

In New Testament congregations, there are people who bring issues to church leaders because of real biblical and confessional concerns, out of good

motives and in the proper ecclesiastical way. There may also be those who are simply grumblers. There are others who are somewhere in between these two poles, at least at some point in their lives. It is the duty of the office-bearers to deal fairly and scripturally with the issues brought to them and the people who present them, no matter how the elders may (rightly or wrongly) perceive them.

Those who really are merely complainers may end up being excommunicated for impenitent evil speech and rebellion or they decide to leave the church. Sometimes they stay in a congregation until their death. However, they often lose their children, who are soured and put off by the negativity and grumbling of their father or mother or both. Even then, God in His amazingly abundant grace may sovereignly choose to graft some of their descendants back in again. Korah was the chief rebel in Numbers 16 but generations later we read of the sons of Korah praising God in song, according to the headings of eleven Psalms!

Salvation is of the LORD (2): Jonah 1:1-3



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"Jonah, Jonah, have you heard..." the young child sings, chidingly. "You should obey the LORD."

This rebuke, apt as it is towards Jonah, is equally apt to us. How many times do we take the Word of the LORD, clearly set before us in the Bible, and say, "It's not for me," and then turn and flee wilfully in the very opposite direction that God that God has commanded us to walk?

We see in Jonah's rebellious response to God's Word, our own rebellion, and therefore, direct the rebuke of God's Word, first of all, to our own selves.

God Calls Jonah to Nineveh

God commanded: "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me" (Jon. 1:2). Previously, we saw that God's call to Jonah was first of all, a call to leave the northern kingdom of Israel, as a severe judgment for her apostasy. The Word of God, the chief means of grace unto the salvation of sinners, would no longer be preached by Jonah within Israel.

But God also had a purpose for Nineveh.

Nineveh was the capital of Assyria. It was a "great

city” (v. 2). Nineveh was the capital of heathen Assyria, at that time the up-and-coming world power, which would subjugate Israel within a century. So great was Nineveh that it took a 3-day journey to canvass its length (Jon. 3:3). Its walls were impregnable, over 30 metres high, and thick enough for 3 chariots to ride side-by-side on it. Within the city lived more than 120,000 infants (Jon. 4:11), and therefore, probably about 2 million people.

Nineveh was a notoriously wicked city. God Himself said so: “for their wickedness is come up before me” (v. 2). They worshiped idol gods. The prophet Nahum describes Nineveh as “the bloody city”, “full of lies and robbery”, guilty of slavery and murder and sexual lusts (Nah. 3:1-6). Perhaps, the evil of homosexuality was found within its gates, just as it was in Sodom and Gomorrah, whose sin was so great that the cry of it came up to heaven (Gen. 18:20-21).

God commanded Jonah to cry out against Nineveh, to preach a word of judgment to them for their sins. As Jonah would later cry, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” (Jon. 3:4). Yet, God’s ultimate purpose was the repentance and salvation of the Ninevites. God would use His word of judgment to bring them to repentance.

In Jonah’s preaching to Nineveh, God also had a purpose for Israel. Jonah’s preaching to Nineveh would be a sharp rebuke to Israel for her wickedness. Jonah’s preaching would be the first fulfilling of Moses’ word in Deuteronomy 32:21: “They have moved me to jealousy with that which is not God; they have provoked me to anger with their vanities: and I will move them to jealousy with those which are not a people; I will provoke them to anger with a foolish nation.”

By sending His faithful prophet out of Israel and into Nineveh, thereby bringing Nineveh to repentance and salvation, God was provoking Israel to anger.

Israel had become spiritually complacent. She had forgotten that God’s choosing of her was entirely

gracious and wholly undeserved. She had turned her back upon God, presuming to worship Him however she pleased (in the golden calves), and turning her back upon the Lord’s anointed (the line of king David). Israel had forgotten that salvation is of the LORD.

Therefore, God’s sending of Jonah out to Nineveh, a heathen nation, would expose Israel’s unbelief. God was reminding Israel that He saved whom He willed, and that those hardened in unbelief would surely be damned. Salvation is of the LORD.

Jonah Disobeys God’s Call

Verse 3 begins: “But Jonah...” But! This little adversative word indicates Jonah’s rebellious disobedience to God’s command. Jonah never says a word in response to the clear word of the LORD, yet his actions indicate his defiance.

He arose. Just like Abraham, who arose early when God commanded him to sacrifice Isaac, Jonah responded immediately in response to God’s command. However, unlike Abraham, who arose to obey God, Jonah arose to do the very opposite.

Jonah was supposed to journey eastward to Nineveh. Instead, he hastily made his way down south to a sea port, trying to flee as far away as he could from where God was calling him. Such haste and fervor gripped Jonah, that he fled “from the presence of the LORD” (v. 3), as if God were his enemy.

Underneath Jonah’s love for Israel and hatred of Assyria was self-righteousness...[he] counted himself and his people to be more worthy of God’s grace than the heathen people.



He went down to Joppa, a non-Israelite port, where he could avoid being seen by his fellow Israelites. He found a ship heading over to Tarshish, located far west across the Mediterranean Sea on the coast of Spain. He managed to pay the fare, and went into the ship, waiting for it to set sail. Everything must have seemed to fall nicely into place for Jonah. He might even have used God's providential directing of events to justify his sin of disobedience.

Why did Jonah disobey God?

One apparent possibility was fear. Nineveh was a great city, after all, and terribly wicked. Jonah might have feared for his life, and fled away from Nineveh a bid to preserve himself.

Yet, such was not the case. For one, the Bible makes no mention of it. Furthermore, Jonah later showed no fear for his life when he asked the sailors to cast him overboard into the raging sea (Jon. 1:12), and when he begged God to take his life (Jon. 4:3).

Jonah himself gives the reason for his disobedience: "Therefore I fled before unto Tarshish: for I knew that Thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest Thee of the evil" (Jon. 4:2). Jonah fled, not out of fear for his own life, but hatred for the Ninevites. The Ninevites were the uncircumcised heathen, and accounted by the Israelites as dogs. Besides, they were Israel's accursed enemy. They were on the ascendancy and would later become the world power and take Israel captive. Jonah loved Israel, and wanted to do no favors to her bitter enemy.

Jonah knew that God intended to save the Ninevites by the preaching of His Word, and he would not have any of it. He would rather die, bringing himself to the grave and God's Word with him, than to breathe a word of the LORD to his avowed foes.

Underneath Jonah's love for Israel and hatred of Assyria was self-righteousness. Jonah had been willing to preach God's gospel of grace to apostate Israel, giving of his life for that cause. Yet, he was

O but what a reflection of ourselves is Jonah! What hatred we manifest towards our unbelieving neighbors around us!

unwilling to preach that same gospel to the heathen. Jonah counted himself and his people to be more worthy of God's grace than the heathen people. He did not want share heaven with, and be in the same church as, those filthy dogs.

Jonah's refusal to obey God indicated his sinful rejection of the truth that salvation is of the LORD. Jonah refused to acknowledge that God is sovereign and saves whom He wilt, whether an undeserving Israel or unbelieving Nineveh, which He would bring to repentance. Jonah refused to be used by God to accomplish His own salvation.

What a hateful, prideful, and resentful person Jonah was!

O but what a reflection of ourselves is Jonah! What hatred we manifest towards our unbelieving neighbors around us! Perhaps we harbor an active hatred towards those who are our bitter enemies. We would rather die than to see them saved.

Or, perhaps, we have a passive hatred for unbelievers. We intend to keep our lives neatly compartmentalized. We live one way in church and among church friends; we live another way in every other sphere of life, and never the twain shall meet. No one else need ever know that we are Christians. When we go to Chinese New Year gatherings, we put up with the meaningless small talk, or escape with the diversion of the television.

When we live that way, keeping to ourselves, aren't we living in passive hatred for our neighbors? Aren't we hiding our candle under a bushel, withholding the gospel, that power of God unto salvation? Aren't we being selfish, only concerned about ourselves, that our reputation before our unbelieving acquaintances does not suffer? Aren't



we being self-righteous, thinking that only people like us could be saved, and that there is no hope for this wicked lot? Are we not concerned that, if things stand as they are, many of our acquaintances are walking the broad way to destruction? Ought that not to move us with great urgency to speak the Word to them, and to seek their salvation?

Perhaps we even justify our passivity [i.e. passive hatred] with God's sovereignty: "God is sovereign in salvation, after all, and He will surely bring to salvation whom He wills to save. Therefore, I need not be too uptight about these unbelievers. Salvation is of the LORD."

Indeed, salvation is of the LORD! God is sovereign in man's salvation. At the same time, God has sovereignly determined, not only *who* will be saved, but *how* they will be saved. And God has determined that His elect people be saved through means, the means of the preaching of the Word of God.

Therefore, because salvation is of the LORD, we are ready to be used by our LORD to accomplish His salvation. Instead of shying away from speaking and living the gospel in front of our unbelieving acquaintances, we seek every opportunity to do so. We seek to bring them to church, where they may hear the preaching of the gospel which convicts them of their sin and points them to the Savior.

Before we do all that, we repent of our hatred, active and passive, and of our selfishness and self-righteousness. We beg God for grace and courage to do His work of evangelism. And we arise in obedience to our God, to do His will.

Because salvation is of the LORD.

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Watch and Be Sober (2)



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Staying Alert

1 Thess. 5:6 and 1 Peter 4:7 call us as Christians, "(including young people!), to know and to live in the light of the fact that Jesus Christ is coming again. This present world will end. The riches of this world will be destroyed. Our lives in this present age, if we live until Christ's coming, will also come to an end. None of this causes us fear or disappointment. As believers we see the *end* of all things here and now as the new *beginning* of eternal and glorious life in heaven with Jesus Christ! Let us live the whole of our lives "with uplifted head[s] look[ing] for the very same person who before offered Himself for [our] sake[s] to the tribunal of

God, and has removed all curse from [us], to come as judge from heaven; who shall cast all His and [our] enemies into everlasting condemnation, but shall translate me with all His chosen ones to Himself, into heavenly joys and glory" (Ans. 52 of Lord's Day 19). Since it is such a struggle for us to keep our focus on the coming of Jesus Christ, it is worthwhile to consider how we can work at staying spiritually awake (watchful).

If you want to stay awake and alert, it is helpful to think of the things that you should avoid. When you are struggling with sleep you don't want to lie down. There is a reason that a soldier is called to "stand" guard when it is his turn to keep watch



at the edge of the camp. If he stops standing and lays down, he will find it very difficult to resist sleep. Sometimes standing may not be enough to fend off sleepiness. Instead of just standing guard, the soldier may have to pace back and forth. The more he moves the more he is alert. Have you ever studied through the night? I can recall trying to hammer Hebrew vocabulary words into my head before a final examination as a seminary student. While studying flash cards, I would walk around in circles for hours to stay awake. And as soon as I stopped walking and sat down my whole body felt like it was ready to shut down. To stay awake I had to keep moving!

This is a simple but important reminder that we must avoid spiritual inactivity or laziness in order to remain alert to the coming of Jesus Christ. If you find that you are not very conscious in your daily life of the coming of the kingdom of heaven and your calling to seek it, then it may be time to examine whether you are being spiritually lazy. And if you find that you are neglecting regular spiritual exercise, then you must confess and turn from the sin of spiritual lethargy. Get active! Exercise yourself spiritually, or, unto godliness as Paul instructed young Timothy in 1 Tim. 4:8.

One of the benefits of bodily exercise is that it helps increase our energy, which is another way of saying it can help us overcome drowsiness so that we are more awake. This holds true for spiritual exercise as well. As we exercise ourselves spiritually, we experience growth in grace so that we grow in our awareness of and appreciation for the things of God and His eternal kingdom.

Is there some secret plan or program of spiritual activity that will help us stay spiritually alert? No, there is no mystery here. The spiritual activities that we are called to perform are “ordinary” spiritual activities. From a certain point of view, I do not like to describe spiritual activities as “ordinary.” How can it be right to describe the spiritual activities of Christians as ordinary, when there is something so amazing about those who are of themselves slaves to sin who live in a way that is pleasing to God? Yet,

it is possible and helpful to describe the spiritual activities of a believer as ordinary without denying the wonder of God’s transforming grace at work in the lives of His people. That these spiritual activities are normal means that every believer knows what they are and can do them.

The preaching of the gospel is the good news that Jesus Christ, who came the first time to suffer and die to pay for our sins, is coming a second time to save us completely (Heb. 7:25). Attending church and paying attention to the preaching is the chief way God brings our attention to the coming of Jesus Christ.

Frequent and daily prayer is also an important way for us to focus our attention on the coming of Jesus Christ. The Scriptures often connect watching with praying. The idea is that praying is a form of watching. A Christian who is not praying is like a soldier who is not standing up. When that soldier sits down and leans against a wall and closes his eyes, he is not staying alert and keeping his watch faithfully. The Christian who is not praying is not faithfully keeping watch for the coming of Jesus Christ.

Bible study, individually and in groups, is also a very important means for remaining alert to the second coming of our Lord. All throughout the Bible, even the OT, the testimony of God’s word to us is that this world will end, and that Jesus Christ is coming again. Make sure that you take note of this when you read the word of God. We could ask this question every time we read the Bible: what does this passage say to me about the coming of Christ’s kingdom and my calling to serve its coming?

Living an antithetical life is also a very important part of our watching for the coming of Jesus Christ. If we live in sin, we are not walking as the children of light (1 Thess. 5:5) who are looking for the coming of Jesus but as the children of darkness who know nothing about His coming. If we think we can walk in sin and keep our focus on Jesus, we are only fooling ourselves. Sin calls our attention to the things of this world and away from the kingdom of



heaven. Sin clouds our minds—has an intoxicating power so that our judgment is impaired, and we are not able to watch as we should. This is to say that to watch for Christ's coming we must stay sober!

Staying Sober

Spiritual sobriety means that we look at all of life from the point of view of God's Word. God's Word tells us what is real and what is false. God's word exposes as false the idea that there is no God, that there is no standard for right and wrong, that men can live how they want and that there is no judgment. The truth is just the opposite: there is a God, there is going to be a judgment day, and only those who believe in Jesus Christ will be saved. To be sober is to grasp the truth and to live according to it and to avoid all that is evil.

Peter helps us to see the two sides of sober living in 1 Peter 4. One side of sober living is to cease from sin (verse 1). By nature we are sinners, but as those who have been saved through the suffering of Jesus Christ we should "no longer live the rest of [our] time in the flesh to the lusts of men." (verse 2). In verse 4 he speaks of unbelievers thinking it strange that we do not "run" with them in "lasciviousness, lusts, excess of wine, revellings, banquetings, and abominable idolatries." To the world avoiding such sins is strange, an indication that something is wrong with the way one is thinking. The world thinks we are out of our right minds when we avoid sin. But the message of the Bible is that this only indicates that the people of the world are intoxicated with sin; they are unable to think clearly or make sound judgments. The Christian shows that he is of sound mind when he is careful to avoid sin. He shows he understands the seriousness of sin and that those who continue in sin will be judged (verse 5). He also shows that he understands that as one who has been saved from sin by the suffering of Christ (verse 1), he is now called to live "to the will of God" (verse 2).

Living according to the will of God is the second side of sober living. And Peter helpfully points out some specifics about what it means to live unto God. All that we said about watching/staying alert

also applies here. If we will remain sober in our thinking and not be intoxicated by sin, we need to hear the preaching of the gospel, to pray, to meditate on God's word. But Peter emphasizes the need to live in close communion with fellow saints (while avoiding fellowship with people of the world). After he has called us to be "sober and watch unto prayer," he instructs us to have "fervent" love for each other in the church in which we "cover" or forgive each other's sins (verse 8). Then he calls us to "use hospitality one to another without grudging" (verse 9) and to use the gifts he has given us to serve each other (verse 10). The goal of all that we do is "that God in all things may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom be praise and dominion forever. Amen" (verse 11).

Living our lives in and for the church is the way to watch and be sober in these last days. In the church we hear the preaching that not only calls us to watch for Jesus' return, but is also the means God gives us the grace we need to keep watching. In the church we walk with fellow pilgrims who are looking for the same coming of Christ, who help us to understand and avoid the dangers of this world and its sins. In serving the church we are serving the kingdom of Jesus Christ, a kingdom that will not end but last forever. In the church we have the privilege to do now what we will be doing forever when Christ returns—give all glory to our God through Jesus Christ.

The end is near. Jesus is coming to save His church. All who remain in the world outside His church shall be cast away. Be sober, that is, think this through and be in the church, live for the church, and watch and pray with the church for the Savior's coming.



Walking by Faith, Not By Sight (Or Hearing)



Christine Ong
Member of CERC

God has given me bilateral moderate-severe hearing loss since I was young. What does that mean? In both ears, I don't hear well. When people hear a roll of thunder, I only hear a low rumble.

What is it like?

Just like people who cannot see well wear spectacles to help them see better, I wear hearing aids in my ears to help me hear better. Hearing aids are little battery-operated machines that make sounds louder. Each is connected by a tube to a mould which is custom made to my outer ear (the part of the ear which is visible), and sounds that are picked up by the machine are made louder as they pass through the tube to my inner ear and ear drum. **Wearing hearing aids does not mean having normal hearing.** For example, people with normal hearing tell me they are able to tune out noise, but hearing aids don't. They also don't catch the silent consonants like 's', 't', and 'k'. That's where lip-reading comes in, so I can combine the lip movements of the speaker and the sounds I hear to make sense of what I'm hearing.

As hearing is one half of any verbal communication, feeling left out / isolated / helpless is a familiar emotion: for example, not catching a joke the first time it's said, not understanding the lyrics of a song being sung over the radio, or having to remove my hearing aids to avoid them getting wet during any activity involving water. Someone has to convey information to me directly or visually. Prayer meetings where people are generally facing down and eyes are closed, and big group discussions are tough. I strain to hear what is said so that I don't inadvertently say something that someone else has already said. I also don't want to misunderstand what is said. In the COVID-19 pandemic, where wearing masks outside of the house and safe distancing are compulsory, it is hard to catch what

people say, as sounds are muffled and the visual aspect of my hearing is taken away.

I also have difficulty hearing people who have very high- or low-pitched voices. Their mouths can be moving, but I cannot make out anything. Sometimes I make intelligent guesses; other times I fade out of the conversation. I usually cannot make out the direction a sound is coming from, so people who call my name without me realising may think I'm ignoring them. It can also be embarrassing as I may unwittingly speak much louder / softer than others in a conversation.

Why me?

A natural question is 'why me?' – how do I make sense of this?

My head knows that God is in control of everything, and he loves his people. The love that sent Jesus to the cross for my sins is the same love that gave me hearing loss. My heart is sometimes angry and frustrated at this seeming contradiction and the difficulties that I face. I wonder why I was not born in Jesus' time and could go to him or his apostles for healing, or why medicine has yet to advance sufficiently to provide a cure.

Sometimes people may speculate, 'Maybe it was something wrong that her mom did while pregnant' or 'She didn't take care of her hearing'. In John 9, Jesus passed by a blind man, and his disciples asked him who had sinned, the man or his parents, resulting in him being born blind. Such judgments,

The love that sent Jesus to the cross for my sins is the same love that gave me hearing loss.

which seek to pin down a seeming misfortune to something that someone did, are not helpful. If there is genuine concern for the person involved in discerning the cause, it is better to approach the person / family members directly to find out more. If that information is not available, consider it God's providence, and know that it is part of "all things [which] work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28). Jesus' response was that the blindness was not the result of a specific sin by the man or his parents, but that the works of God should be revealed in him. Subsequently, Jesus healed him.

Implied in the question "why me" is a comparison with others. "Why do I have hearing loss which makes me different from others?" **Such a comparison discounts the crosses that God has given others to bear, which differ from mine, whether known or unknown to me. These crosses may well be heavier than the one I bear.** It also clouds out Christ's command to "Come to me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls" (Matt. 11:28-29).

It is easy to get caught up in my identity as a person with hearing loss, to wallow in self-pity, at the expense of other identities I have. I am a daughter, a sister, a grandchild, an aunt, a cousin. I am a sinner saved by grace, an adopted child of God with Christ as an elder brother, part of the bride of Christ, a member of Christ's body, a sojourner on earth, a citizen of heaven, a sheep with a shepherd. Instead of bemoaning what I don't have, I can remember all that I have undeservedly received.

So how?

I thank God for his providence. Without my parents bringing me for speech therapy as a child, I might not have learned to speak properly. If I was born decades earlier, or in a rural area, technology such as vibrating alarm clocks / hearing aids wouldn't be so accessible. Hearing aids come with their difficulties, and I have had tougher-than-expected experiences

transiting from one pair to another (such as from analogue to digital ones as the analogue parts were being phased out of production). It makes me appreciate that God is unchanging – imagine if God kept changing and we had to keep adjusting to him! It would have far weightier consequences than merely adjusting one's hearing: one's eternal destiny and assurance would be at stake!

I also appreciate that hearing aids act as ear plugs when switched off; thus I can tune out noise when taking public transport or when I need to focus on something. When I sleep, I am undisturbed by noises, including thunder.

Amid the pandemic, with a switch to working from home, I adapted well to headphones, which was surprising given my reliance on lip-reading. It helped that in a virtual call, it's impossible for people with normal hearing to make out what is said when there is more than one conversation at a time (this happens more often than we expect in a physical group discussion). I have renewed appreciation for fellowship over a meal, as everyone is unmasked then.

With my hearing as a weak member of my body, other parts of the body have learned to complement it. My sense of touch in my fingers works together with my ears to tell me when I play something wrongly on the piano. My sense of sight is heightened, and I am very aware of visual cues in the environment. I don't tell my residual hearing that I have no need of it, ignore any audio input, and live in silence; instead I care for it and do not expose myself to loud sounds unnecessarily, so that I can preserve what I have. 1 Corinthians 12:12-27 becomes more real to me. **"God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him...much more those members of the body, which seem to be more feeble, are necessary...the members should have the same care one for another. And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it."**



I thank God for providing me with empathetic and supportive friends. We can communicate in ways other than verbally. We wrote letters to each other before substituting with SMS and now WhatsApp. They don't mind repeating what they've said. Some friends also tell me that I'm a good listener, which seems ironic. Then again, when communicating verbally, I must pay attention and look at the speaker in order to lip-read. That helps me pick up non-verbal cues, which also convey meaning. I am also slower to speak, as I take time to process what I've heard.

God also provided friends who helped reassure my mum after I was diagnosed with hearing loss at 1+ years old. Don't underestimate how much comfort friends can bring by being present, lending a listening ear, or bringing the Word.

Wearing hearing aids since I was a toddler has also taught me much about stewardship. Hearing aids aren't cheap, and unlike spectacles, they require batteries to operate. When I was still getting used to wearing a foreign object in my ears, my mum would attach string to each hearing aid and safety pin the other end of the two strings to the back of my shirt, so that if I pulled the hearing aids out, they wouldn't drop to the ground and get damaged, nor would they get lost. To this day, I need to bring hearing aid batteries everywhere so that I can

change any battery that goes flat. Looking back, I realise that this **principle of being responsible and taking care of my things has also translated to other aspects of my life.**

God opened a door for me to work in the special needs sector for three years, dealing with policies and programmes for adults with special needs (*broadly defined as persons with (i) sensory impairment including visual and hearing impairment, (ii) physical disability, (iii) intellectual disability, and (iv) autism spectrum disorder*). Having hearing loss myself has allowed me to make a more convincing case to boost the employment of persons with special needs in the sector, helps me relate to other colleagues with special needs, and them to me as well. Gaining a broader societal perspective beyond my own has helped me cope with my experience better. This is one tangible way God's purpose for hearing loss is worked out in my life.

Ultimately, I am humbled by my weak flesh and cannot glory in it. That's all right, because I am not created for my own glory, but God's. I don't know what life with natural/normal hearing is like, but God gives grace to live with impaired hearing. It is an added reason to look forward to life in heaven with God, when the thorn in my flesh will be removed.

Cliques



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Cliques. We all have been in one, hoped to be in one, or have a loved one who is included or excluded from one. Due to the dividing nature of cliques, it is apparent that cliques are unhealthy for the life of the church. This article intends to examine cliques in church and how we can guard against them.

A clique is a group of friends that gives a perception of exclusivity to those outside of the clique. The key words are "perception of exclusivity". How this exclusivity is achieved is twofold: stickiness of those within the group and repulsion of those without. When week after week in church you hang out

only with a select few, it is evident that there is a closeness that the group shares that others cannot attain. The clique is preoccupied with its interests, and the members have little interest in reaching out to others outside of their comfort zone. As a result, outsiders perceive much difficulty in breaking into the fellowship. They might try to but will often feel like second-class members, being consistently excluded from certain information or activities of the clique. Soon these outsiders will break away feeling hurt.

There are several reasons why cliques form. As human beings, we have our personalities, preferences, interests, and varying backgrounds. As social beings, we are attracted to people who are similar to us and echo our thoughts, and we feel secure being accepted for who we are. We dread being the odd one out or the ugly duckling who faces countless rejections. Worse, we dislike if differences become the source of envy, insecurities, and strife. Over time, we get comfortable with the familiar company of the “social singles”, “mummies and daddies network”, or “kopi uncles”, and do not overcome the inertia to be friendly to others and mix around.

The problem with cliques

The nature of cliques violates the royal law of scripture, “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself”, and having “respect to persons” is a sin (James 2:8-9). At the heart of cliques is selfishness and pride. We make ourselves judges of who is acceptable and who is not, and we place ourselves at the forefront when deciding who is worthy to be our friend. In this regard, it is a form of self-idolatry in elevating oneself above God’s command to love the neighbour.

You might say, “Well, I did not want to be in a clique, but it so happened”. Precisely because it is so easy, it is a real danger. That reminds us that what is comfortable might not be the right thing to do, as we have to fight our natural inclinations, deny ourselves, and do what God wants us to do (Matt. 16:24).

By excluding others, cliques can cause immense hurt. I once found out that I was excluded from several activities of a group, and when I found out, I was told that the group was thinking for me, that I had certain limitations and hence they hoped not to put me in a fix over them. Unfortunately, their “considerateness” made me feel even worse, as it didn’t come across as sincere and it was a cloak for their exclusion. It stung, but it made me aware of the problems of a clique.

Cliques draw lines of disharmony instead of celebrating the differences that God has blessed the church with. The clique members bond over their similar personalities and common interests, having little regard for others in the body of Christ. It is akin to members of the heart muscle thinking they could pump on their own without the rest of the body. Worse, after a while, cliques become stale and run out of conversational ideas, so it is easy to lapse into gossip, breeding disunity. If we could embrace the differences in gifts and personalities, we could sharpen each other, and there would be a lot more refreshing and edifying interactions (Eph. 4:16).

There is nothing wrong with having good friends for mutual intimacy and support. We recognise that there are different types of relationships with varying levels of closeness. We cannot spend all our moments serving others, and there are times when we take comfort with close friends who can readily share our cares and help us carry the burden of serving. However, if your close friends are the **only** friends you have and your group is unwelcoming of others, it is a problem. Jesus sets an example for us: while he had his closer friends and disciples (Mark 9:2-3), he did not only interact with them, but he spent his life selflessly blessing and serving those in his path (Matt. 4:23).

Borrowing an illustration from nature, we should not exist as isolated individuals or groups, but instead should support each other in the church like a network on a spider’s web, where each of us are at an intersection and branching out to



several others. While making its web, the spider has to make several threads to reinforce each line. Our interactions with our friends should likewise be an intentional and continual process. Also, it is helpful that our interest is in the individual person rather than a clique identity, where the uniqueness of an individual might be downplayed. Further, it is a good sign if our close friends have other close friends and interest groups that we might not be involved in, as this is part of accepting that we are all made beautifully different.

Interestingly, cliques do not only pose a threat in the church, but also in secular organisations - offices, schools, sports clubs, etc. We know how hurtful cliques can be at the playground and at the canteen, or how dangerous cliques can fuel office politics. Let us be on our guard against cliques outside of church. Even the church at large has to be careful of coming across as aloof and being a Christians-only clique, but we Christians should instead look out and be friendly to those whom God puts in our paths, even in the secular world.

Guarding against cliques

Cliques thrive on apathy and lack of action. How then do we guard against cliques? Our first response must always be prayer for God to change

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our self-centered hearts to ones of “all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:2-3).

After praying for a serving and loving heart, we need to take action. Notice the number of verbs in continuous tense that the Apostle Paul uses in the above two verses: “longsuffering, forbearing, endeavouring”. It is going to be hard work! But God will give us the grace and peace to do so. How do we make friends with others with whom we are not so familiar? Joanna Chua wrote an excellent article on “Reaching Out” in the *Salt Shakers* December 2020 issue. Do read what it means to reach out and many practical ways to do so. Let us reflect: do we hear Jesus saying, “Ye have done it unto me”, as he did in Matthew 25:40, for being friendly and hospitable to those with whom we are unfamiliar? Indeed, looking out for others is a fruit of a believer’s faith. Chillingly, not doing so makes one fit for damnation (Matt. 25:45-46).

Other practical ways to refrain from forming cliques would be to serve in committees, attend Bible studies, and get involved in various interest groups where you could interact with people outside your usual circle. This is also an encouragement to those who may be feeling lonely or desiring stronger friendships in church to proactively seek areas that you could serve or be involved in, rather than waiting for others to make the first move. Every person has the responsibility of reaching out.

May God give us the grace to see our identities in Christ to serve Him and not ourselves, and that there is no place for cliques in the church.

NEWS FROM THE CHURCHES



Singapore

As with other parts of the world, the COVID-19 situation in Singapore continues to evolve. We rejoiced when we were finally allowed to resume congregational singing in early April. Alas, in God's will, due to new rising community cases, restrictions were tightened once more and we are currently once again prohibited from congregational singing. The new restrictions also mean that the church is unable to worship in person altogether for the next 4 weeks - at least. This news might cause us to be disheartened - yet let us be reminded that all things happen in God's marvellous plan and there are still many things to be thankful for.

We are especially thankful for the safe arrival and the approval for the employment and dependent passes (completed before the government froze new applications on May 7) of Rev and Mrs J. Smidstra. They are currently serving their Stay Home Notice and we look forward to fellowshiping with them. We are also thankful that we will continue to have pulpit supply for another 4 months after the departure of Prof and Mrs Dykstra. Indeed the Lord is faithful in providing for us! We would also like to thank Prof and Mrs Dykstra once again for their time with us and we will miss them fondly.

America

The main Federation Board young people convention has been cancelled for the second year in a row but there are a couple of regional young people "conventions" being planned and prepared for. This will be a great opportunity for the young people across different congregations to continue to meet and fellowship with one another.

For many years, the PRC has been experiencing a deep need of ministers of the Word, both for the established congregations and for the mission field. This is especially so due to the number of vacant congregations and the number of current ministers retiring because of increasing weariness of age. Do continue to pray for the provision of suitable young men to pursue the calling to serve as ministers of the gospel.

India

Pray for our missionary pastor, Rev Emmanuel as he has been diagnosed with CSR (Central Serous Retinopathy) in both his eyes which has been affecting his vision. He is currently receiving treatment from an eye doctor and may need to go for laser treatment should the condition worsen. Pray that the Lord will grant him healing and recovery.

Pray for the health and safety of all our brethren in Kolkata as well with the dire COVID-19 situation they are facing. The church has gone back to live streaming services and we pray that the members will be able to get access to these services.

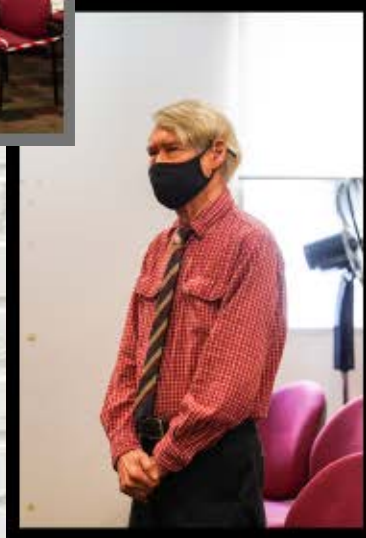
Ireland/ Northern Ireland

Rev McGeown continues to minister the Word in Limerick until he is able to go to the U.S. to serve Providence PRC. The Irish government recently announced some changes to COVID-19 restrictions such that travel within the country is now allowed and people from different households are able to meet outdoors (but not in private gardens). The government will review the current ban on in-person religious services on 4 May. Let us pray that our brethren in Ireland will be able to worship physically once more, God willing.

COVENANT LIFE IN PICTURES



Recent baptisms of one adult and six infants,
and one Confession of Faith



New additions to CERC,
from Singapore
AND Kolkata, India!

