THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

**"I Am Black, but Beautiful"**

Rev. Carl Haak

January 15, 2006; No. 3289

Dear radio friends,

“All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness” (II Tim. 3:16).

Among the books of Holy Scripture is the book the Song of Solomon — a love poem between Solomon and his wife — a book that at times causes Christians to blush and to wonder, “What is the meaning of this book?” This book, if you are acquainted with it (and perhaps this week you can become acquainted with it), is part of the holy and authoritative Scriptures. In the words of Jesus Christ in John 5:39, “They are they which testify of me.” This book, the Song of Solomon, is written by the Holy Spirit to make plain to us and to make most lovely to us the relationship that exists between Christ, the husband, and us the church, His bride.

The Song of Solomon, I said, is a poem of Solomon’s love for the Shulamite woman. It is a representation through marriage of that beautiful and glorious union that God has made between us (the church, the believer) and Jesus Christ the Lord (the Bridegroom).

The Song of Solomon, in the first chapter, begins with the words of the wife (or the church) as she expresses her love for Solomon her husband. She wants to express this love for him and desires to show forth her love for him. She speaks very swelling words, that she finds in him all things and that his name is as a precious box of ointment. (Whenever his name is mentioned, it is as if someone has opened a very beautiful box of ointment, and the room is filled with pleasant odors.)

She goes on in the fourth verse to say that she desires to be drawn after him, that she may run after him and be brought into his chambers. She says that she is glad and she rejoices in his love.

But then, in verses 5 and 6, the verses that I would like to consider with you, we read the following confession of the bride: “I am black, but comely, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, as the tents of Kedar, as the curtains of Solomon. Look not upon me, because I am black, because the sun hath looked upon me: my mother’s children were angry with me; they made me the keeper of the vineyards; but mine own vineyard have I not kept.”

Solomon’s wife, his bride there, is speaking to the daughters of Jerusalem. We gather that the daughters of Jerusalem, as she is speaking swelling words of love for Solomon her husband, are looking at her with a look of disapproval or cynicism. They say, “But look at you! You are sunburned. You are scarred by the sun. You are black. There are things in your past that are not pleasant.” And she acknowledges it. “Yes,” she says, “but I am beautiful. Black, but I am beautiful in the eyes of Solomon, who loves me.”

This is applicable. This is salvation. We, the church, who sing wonderful words of love to our Lord Jesus Christ, when we are looked upon in ourselves, are weak and reproachful and scarred by sin. We admit that. It burdens us. But we are beautiful. All the children of God are beautiful in the eyes of Jesus because we are righteous in His blood.

As I said, the daughters of Jerusalem have been standing by and have heard the bride’s vows of love and adoration for her husband and now are looking at her with cynicism — almost, we gather, with a sneer — at best with a questioning eye. She says to the daughters of Jerusalem, “Look not upon me, because I am black.” They have fixed their eyes upon her and looked her up and down. And in their eyes they are saying, “But you’re not what you claim to be. You don’t measure up to the love that you have just confessed for Solomon.”

The daughters of Jerusalem in this book and in our verse for today should not be taken to represent bitter-hearted enemies to the church and to godliness. But we should look at them as representing those who have little understanding, not yet fully-grown Christians. We will meet them again in this book (chapters 5 and 6), where they admit that they are ignorant of the husband Jesus Christ or, at least, where Solomon could be found. They are daughters of Jerusalem, they are true children of God, but are not yet able fully to understand all the beauties of faith in Jesus Christ. Faith is being formed in them. They have many questions and gaps in their understanding.

But they are sensitive to one thing: inconsistency. Inconsistency in the bride, inconsistency in those who confess great swelling for Jesus and do not demonstrate that in their lives. The bride did not measure up, in their eyes, to all that she was saying.

She says, “The sun hath looked upon me.” She says, “I have been a keeper of the vineyard,” that is, she is a poor, humble, maiden girl in her origins. They would gather, from the words that she is speaking, that she is a royal, wonderful queen with rings on her fingers and robed in splendor and skin that did not show any sign of wear or exposure to any of the elements. But instead, they look at her and they see that she has been in the sun. Instead of that royal gown, that startling dress, evidently she is wearing the clothes of a maiden girl. Her hair is not glamorous and made up perfectly. Perhaps she has a scarf woven around her head, for she has been in the vineyards. “You don’t look like what you say you are,” they say to her.

Is this not so? Is it not so, when we bring this to the realm of the spiritual, to the eyes of a child and to the eyes of one who is new in faith, that at times they must fight back being cynical when they hear us confessing great love for Jesus and yet know us as we appear daily in our lives? We must remember one thing about especially a new convert. A new convert to Christianity is always sensitive to inconsistencies.

Perhaps you have seen that even when your own child looks at you. Now, children, you may never look at someone with scorn. But perhaps your children have looked at you with a look that tells you that they are seeing the glaring inconsistency between the words of your confession and praise for Jesus and what you actually are at home.

Beloved, we are not yet what we say. We have not arrived. We confess in this book, Song of Solomon, that the love of Jesus is better than all things. Yet the picture of our love for Jesus is so often distorted and contradictory, is it not? And what shall we say? Shall we deny that? Shall we turn on our heels and say, “Ha! What are you talking about?” Shall the queen here (the wife of Solomon) turn on her heels before these daughters of Jerusalem and say to the royal guards of Solomon, “Have these impudent women locked up in chains. Drag them away from me!”? Shall we, in pride, say, “It is not so”? No, Solomon’s bride admits it: “I am black,” that is, sunburned. “The sun has shined upon me. My skin is wrinkled. I have been out in the vineyards. But I am comely —as the tents of Kedar, as the curtains of Solomon.” She was humble. She was grieved. She believed that in her husband’s eyes she was beautiful.

There is Hebrew poetry here. I am black (or sunburned) as the tents of Kedar; I am comely (beautiful) as the curtains of Solomon. The tents of Kedar refer to shepherds’ tents. Kedar was where the Ishmaelites and their descendants lived. They were Bedouins. They made their tents from woven goats’ hair, which under the rain and under the sun soon turned dull and black and rather beaten. She sensed it. She said, “Yes, this is true of me. I show much wear. I acknowledge it. There are many corruptions within. There are sufferings without. I know that my appearance is not consistent. And I can see, daughters of Jerusalem, that you would stumble at this. I love Solomon. His love to me is all things. I am his queen. But I know that, of myself, I don’t measure up to this.”

We acknowledge that. May God forbid that we shrug this off and say, “Well, that’s the way it is. You had better get used to it.” That is blasphemy. If you see the inconsistencies in your Christian life and just comfort yourself by saying, “Well, that’s just the way it’s got to be right now,” that is blasphemy! No, we are to grieve over our weaknesses. While we praise and honor Jesus Christ our Savior, we confess that inside we are yet sinners, we are corrupt in our flesh, and every sin lurks within the depths of our hearts. We do not measure up. We have many weaknesses. We do not serve God with the zeal as we are bound, but have daily to strive with the weaknesses of our faith.

More, there is weakness in the church as a body. There is weakness in love. There is weakness in the ardor of our worship. There is weakness in our relationships one to another. Still more, there are trials and sorrows in our lives. There is heaviness. There is depression. There is weakness.

You see, Solomon’s bride was not a love-blind, naïve woman who wore blinders from her forehead down. She knew full well what she was. She knew her past, and she knew her heart.

As you enter into the chamber of the fellowship of Jesus Christ, as His love brings you close to Himself, and then the eye of your conscience begins to look you up and down and raises its eyebrow and says, “But you are far from what you should be,” what do you say? The bride of Jesus Christ admits it. “That is true.”

The bride gave a full explanation for her present imperfections in verse 6. She did not give an excuse. She did not try to shift the blame. But she spoke in a way that the daughters of Jerusalem could understand why she appeared the way she did.

We want that. We want that for young converts. We want that for children. And we want to say these things about ourselves because we need to repent from them.

But there are some things that you must know about the bride of Jesus Christ on earth, the church. And there are some things you must know about believers.

In verse 6, as I said, she gives three explanations for her present weaknesses. They are weariness, opposition, and downright failure. She says, “Look not upon me,” that is, do not despise me because I am black (or sunburned), “because the sun hath looked upon me.” As I said, Solomon’s wife, the Shulamite, had not lived a pampered life among nobility. She had been out under the sun. I find that figure of being out under the sun (with the marks of the sun upon you) used in Scripture as a sign of weariness and draining. The Lord spoke of those who bore the heat of the day. In the Old Testament we read that we go through a dry and thirsty land (Ps. 63:1), that we seek the shadow of a great rock in a weary land (Isa. 32:2). The Christian life is now lived under the battle of sin, weariness, and struggle. And they come to us in every aspect of our life. There are many times that we feel drained. We feel exhausted. We feel ourselves weary. The church of Jesus Christ in the world is out under the sun. We are not resting in the shade right now. So often in our weariness, our zeal for the Lord fades.

Secondly, she explains her present condition and weaknesses as due to opposition. She says, “My mother’s children were angry with me; they made me the keeper of the vineyards.” I gather that she means that her brothers and sisters were jealous with her for having received Solomon’s special love and attention, and they forced on her the worst job — servile work, hard work in their own vineyards. Because she was united to Solomon in love, she had suffered for that union. This is the life of the Christian and of the church right now on earth. Not everyone loves our Lord Jesus Christ, our King and our husband. And if you love Him, there will be opposition. The Lord said, “A man’s foes shall be they of his own household”. He said, the “daughter [shall be set at variance] against her mother” (Matt. 10:35-36). When Christ loves you, the world of sin will hate you, and you will experience opposition.

The third reason she gives for her present weakness is her failure. She says, “But mine own vineyard have I not kept.” There was failure. Yes, there were conditions of weariness and opposition. But she had a vineyard. She had something she was called to manage. And she didn’t keep it up. Her sin was neglect of her own vineyard.

As Christians, we too are given a vineyard, we are given a place that we are to dress and to prune and to weed and to grow fruit. We have our own life of devotion, our spiritual life, our prayers, our Bible readings, our cares for our family, and our spiritual life of good works. And so often we find ourselves, under our weariness, neglecting our own vineyard.

Now do you see the bride of Jesus Christ, the church, the Christian who is being drawn into the love of God? She is weary, and opposed, and characterized by failure.

Does a cynical eye say, “Well, how can that be the bride of Jesus Christ? They talk about loving Jesus, and look at them!” Is that what you say? Is that the way you look at the church? With scorn? The church of Jesus Christ admits with sorrow, “Yes, yes. We so often are weary and do not serve Him with the zeal as we are bound. We experience opposition before which, of ourselves, we quickly wilt. And we are sinfully negligent.”

Take a look at the church now on earth. Take a look at yourself. Take a look at the church, the wife of Jesus Christ, whom in this book He will kiss with the kisses of His love; the church, to whom He opens the perfumed box of His name and tells them of the great salvation that is theirs. This church, of itself, does not measure up. But it is beautiful.

She says, “I am black, but comely.” The word “comely” is “beautiful.” She knew it. She knew she was beautiful, and she was assured of it. Solomon’s bride knew she was beautiful in his love. She knew that, to him, she was lovely. And it was his love that gave her unshaken confidence. Throughout the poem Solomon tells her how he sees her. In verse 15 of the first chapter: “Behold, thou art fair, my love; behold, thou art fair.” In 4:7: “Thou art all fair, my love; there is no spot in thee.” She says, “In his eyes, I am beautiful. I am as beautiful as the curtains of Solomon...as beautiful as the tapestry of the beautiful hanging rugs in a king’s palace.” The curtains of Solomon refer to the intricate, rich tapestry, the thick, soft, woven rugs hung for their beauty and their value. She was both. She was as an old tent of bleached goat-hair. And she was also as stunning as an embroidered, woven, silk curtain in Solomon’s palace.

The church is beautiful, not of herself, but in the love that Jesus has for her. The church is attractive to Jesus Christ as she is dressed in the coverings of His righteousness. All of our corruption and our sins and our failures and our neglect — all of these things He knows and has taken to His cross and forgiven them, and in His own blood and perfect obedience He has made up a beautiful gown for His queen, the church — a beautiful, stunning dress. He has put a crown on her head and a ring on her finger and set a table of celebration and a wedding feast. This is how He sees the church, purchased in His blood, given His Word and truth, gathered in humility before Him Lord’s Day after Lord’s Day. This is how He sees you — altogether lovely, my fair one; there is no spot in thee.

Our Lord Jesus Christ is not naïve. He is not a blinded man. He is the holy Son of God. He sees in us His righteousness. He sees in us the love of His Father. He loves us so much that it makes us blush. He loves us so strongly, so amazingly, so graciously that we simply cannot understand it. Who would love the way *He* loves? Who would love *whom* He has loved? He has given Himself to hell for such filthy, vile sinners as us. I cannot understand that! I cannot get my mind around that. My heart simply cannot contain that wonder and that marvel. But I am assured of it. As much as I know that I am a sinner and that I am weak and black and show the blackness of my own heart in my own sin, I also know His love and His righteousness and the fact that, in Him, I am beautiful. The church is beautiful to Christ as she appears in His grace and love.

And then, let us, with the bride, look at the daughters of Jerusalem and say to them: “Let us go and rejoice in His love.”

Let us pray.

Father, we thank Thee for Thy Word, pure and holy. We pray that on this day it may be applied to our hearts. Deliver us from all pride — a pride that would condemn the weakness that we see in the church, forgetting that this weakness dwells in our own hearts. Give us ever to see the church as the bride of Jesus Christ, precious in His love and beautiful in His righteousness. Wilt Thou, O Lord, then revive us so that we may not become weary, that we may serve Thee with zeal, that we may not faint at the opposition that comes to us in the confession of Thy name, and that we may not be negligent of the calling given to us in this world; but rather, as the wife of Jesus Christ, may we in the power of His love do all things that are pleasing to Him, that Thy name and Thine alone might be glorified in the church, throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

**"Jesus Christ, the Apple Tree"**

Rev. Carl Haak

January 29, 2006; No. 3291

Dear radio friends,

Today we turn our attention to God’s Word in the Song of Solomon 2:3, where God has written these words: “As the apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons. I sat down under his shadow with great delight, and his fruit was sweet to my taste.”

The key to the interpretation of this unique book is to see this book as the picture of Christ and His bride, the church. The Song of Solomon is a poetic song between Solomon and his wife — between Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived, the king over Israel after David, and the Shulamite woman. While it is important to understand as best we can what they are saying to each other, we rest confident that we have in this book the relationship existing between Christ and His bride, the church — between Christ and us. For Jesus said in John 5:39 concerning the Old Testament Scriptures, and thus concerning the Song of Solomon: “They are they which testify of me.” The Song of Solomon, thus, draws out aspects of the mysterious and wonderful union between the Lord Jesus Christ and His people, the church.

In the Scripture that I called to your attention just a moment ago, Solomon’s wife is responding to a compliment that Solomon had just made about her. She often, in this book, will do that. No sooner does Solomon say something nice and flattering to her than she replies with a compliment for him. She brings the focus back to him.

So we find it that in verse 2 of chapter 2, Solomon had said, “As the lily among thorns, so is my love among the daughters.” He had paid her a high compliment. “You are to me a lily, and the rest of the daughters, in comparison to you, are to me nothing but thornbushes.”

She immediately responds with a compliment of her own. “Well, as an apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons.” Let us learn from that, first of all.

She, the wife of Jesus Christ, and Solomon’s wife, had crosses. She had burdens that she had to bear. She had many difficulties. Yet when she is in his presence she does not talk about those things, but she talks about him. Let us learn to be quick to speak well of our Lord Jesus Christ and to magnify Him, rather than to murmur constantly of the crosses that we must bear. Let us learn to stay our heart readily upon Him, our Lord and Savior, and to bring praises of what He is to us.

So in this verse, the church (the believer) is saying what Christ is to her while she is in this present world. He has said to her that as a lily among the thorns, so is His church (the believer) to Him. The church is viewed by Christ as holy. The church emits to Christ the pleasing scent of trust and faith.

But Jesus Christ is also the object of the church’s love and praise. To us, Jesus Christ is the apple tree among the trees of the wood.

Let us listen again to the esteem that the bride is placing upon her husband, that the church of Jesus Christ places upon Christ. “As the apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons.”

The word “apple” probably refers to a pomegranate or an orange. It is a term that refers to a round piece of fruit. We are told that the apple, as we know it now, was not known in the day of Solomon. But the apple is fruit. The apple is refreshing. The apple is sweet.

She esteems Christ as fruit, as refreshing, as sweet to her soul and to her heart. Do you? That, of course, is more than just knowledge, mere intellectual knowledge about Him. It means, as we read in Psalm 34:8, that the believer has tasted that the Lord is good, that, in our experience, as the God of grace who forgives our sins, we have found Christ to possess all that our soul needs. He is the apple tree among the trees of the wood.

Notice that our adoration of Christ and the esteem that we have for Him comes out especially in the way of comparison. That is what Christ has done in verse 2. He makes a comparison. He says, “My esteem for the church is a result of a careful comparison with the daughters of the world.” The daughters of the world, that is, those who are apart from the renewing grace of Jesus Christ, are as thorns. You go among them and you get cut. There is jealousy, hatred, cursing, stinging words, prickers that you cannot pull out and that irritate and fester. You had better watch out when you walk among thorns. “But,” Jesus said, by way of comparison, My church, because of what *I* have done, because they are bestowed with My holiness and beauty, is as a lily. It is beautiful, as I see the love of God implanted in the heart of the church.”

And it is beautiful in that the church, by grace, gives off a scent to God. A lily, of course, is a plant that is known for its distinctive scent. If you have a lily in your room, you soon will smell it. So also the church, in the midst of this world, gives off a scent to God — the scent of her praise and the scent of her prayers.

Now, by way of comparison, Jesus Christ, as we compare Him to the sons of this world, is precious. He is as an apple tree among the trees of the wood.

When it comes to providing something to eat and to refresh, the trees of the wood have nothing to offer. The ash and the elm and the oak, if you want to eat them, are bitter. They give nasty nuts. That is, the church is saying, that in the sons of this world, there is nothing that can provide refreshment and sweetness unto our souls. They are referred to as the sons of the world. The sons of this world, the world itself, would become the suitor of the church. They would come for the affection of, and woo, the bride of Jesus Christ. But the bride of Jesus Christ says, “You are as trees of the wood — gnarled roots, bitter taste — compared to Jesus Christ, the apple tree, who to us is delicious and golden. This is how we esteem Him.”

The world, in her pleasures and in her philosophies, in all of her pursuits, in everything that she could offer for the soul, we find as bitter wood. But in Christ we find that which will make our souls to thrive. We esteem, we honor, and we hold dear Jesus Christ as believers because of the fruit of grace that He works within our souls. Jesus Christ is the apple tree.

If you ask me, “Well, what is that fruit?” I say that it is an abundant fruit. When the church gets together on the Lord’s Day and comes under the preaching of the Word of God, the fruit is all arranged for the believers to eat. At those special services when after the preaching of the Word the church gathers at a table of communion called the Lord’s Supper, then the fruits of Jesus Christ are all arranged before the congregation of God. And they are precious fruits. There is the fruit of pardon for the soul. There is the fruit of spotless righteousness in Christ. There is the assurance of adoption unto eternal life. There is the work of the Spirit of peace within the heart. There is the promise of the resurrection of the body. There is the gift of the indwelling Spirit. These are the fruits of Jesus Christ. He is the apple tree. All else in this world, all the sons, all the world are as trees of the wood.

When you are hungry and you are hiking and you are weary, what do you want? A gnarled tree root? Do you want to gnaw on a branch? Do you want to chew on a toothpick? Or do you want a fresh slice of apple? So we esteem Jesus Christ as the only sweetness, the only refreshment, the only nourishment to the soul.

Are you angry today? Are you disappointed, frustrated? Are you going to turn to the trees of the wood in the world — alcohol, marijuana, friends, loud words, shouting? Bitter things will come in your life. Go to Christ, the apple tree. Think of Him. Pray to Him. You are lonely? You want to be wanted? You want to belong to another? You want to have a husband? You are ready to compromise your faith? Or perhaps you are ready to give up your purity, because you think this is the way to get love? You are ready to embrace a man who does not know Jesus Christ? You are chewing on a toothpick. Christ possesses fruit. Through faith in Him you will find contentment, strength, joy. Be faithful to Him!

You are empty today? Do you feel wretched about yourself? Are you going to turn to the roots and bark of the self-esteem gurus of the world? No, no. By faith, turn to Jesus Christ, who possesses perfect satisfaction.

You are tempted by peer pressure? You want to have the acceptance of the majority? You are ready to follow the crowd? You are afraid, perhaps, to confess Christ? You are afraid of the mockery — that others are going to mock any desire in your life to be sincere and godly? The majority, then, if you are going to follow the majority in the way of sin, are as trees of the wood. They have nothing to offer. But follow the way of the crucified One, the Lord and the Savior, the Savior of your soul.

Jesus Christ is to us the apple tree. As a hungry man prefers a solitary apple tree to the whole forest of oaks and elms, so grace brings us to esteem Jesus Christ the Redeemer above all things on this earth. He is the tree of life. He comes to us, by the grace of God, from the cross and out of the empty tomb laden with the fruits of salvation. His beauty excels all others. He alone can satisfy our soul. He alone can make us happy. His fruit makes us live.

To eat of this fruit, we must rest in Him. We read that the bride went on to say, “I sat down under his shadow with great delight, and his fruit was sweet to my taste.” So she esteems Him as the apple tree and then, changing the figure a little, she says, “I sat down under his shadow.”

From the context (if you read the first chapter of this book), we see that the spouse, the wife, had been seeking her beloved husband and, in looking for him, had asked where she would be likely to find him. The answer was given: “Go thy way forth by the footsteps of the flock,” that is, follow the trail that is left by the cattle or the sheep, and you will find him. So she went to look for him. After a while she came to another resolution: I will sit down under his shadow. The idea is that she is out under the sun, and she is weary and cannot find him completely. She needs to rest, and she rests now under the shadow of Jesus Christ, the apple tree.

Now, as the church of Jesus Christ, we also gather together on the Lord’s Day in the church of God as those who are weary. That weariness can be very great upon our souls. We can be burdened by wayward children, burdened by our sins, burdened because of the consequences that sin brings into our lives, burdened under the trials of body and soul and anxiety for tomorrow, and on and on. In this world we can find no rest. But we come to His shadow. By grace we trust in Him. We believe in His almighty power to protect and to cover us. We come under His shadow.

You who are burdened, by the grace of God, over your sin; you who believe that your way is unbearable — sit down under His shadow. By faith look upon Him who was hanged on the cross. By faith look upon Him, the living and the risen Savior, and find rest. Child of God, ask yourself the question: Did my Savior suffer in my stead? The Word of God said so — that He mounted the cross for me! Then I shall not suffer for those sins under the wrath of God. They are paid for. I have rest. Did He actually bear my sin? Yes, says the Word of God to the believer, He did! Then I do not bear that sin. Did God accept His sacrifice once given upon the cross as the substitution for all of my sins? Yes, says the Word of God. Well, then, God will not smite me for those sins. Though He deal with me in love and chasten me, He will not smite me in His wrath. Did God swear that nothing now and nothing in the future can ever remove me from His love in Christ Jesus? Then I can rest. Then I can sit down under His shade.

The Shulamite tells us that when she felt herself overshadowed by Solomon’s love as she sat down under his shadow, she sat down with great delight. Only the humble sinner, humbled by the grace of God, can find great delight in the overshadowing protection of Jesus Christ. Pride, you see, cannot find such great delight in being overshadowed by Christ. Great “I” cannot stand being overshadowed by anything of another. But weary, humble sinners have great delight in the shadow of the cross. To be under the care and the protection and the love of Jesus Christ, the One who has loved me, that is great delight!

Do you think that faith in Jesus Christ means that we are married to gloom? Is that the way you look at the Christian life? Do you think of the Lord’s Day as a day of mourning, and you are missing out? Do you think that it is pious to serve God without cheer and as dolefully as you possibly can? Do you crawl to a place of worship in a mournful, disinterested, sad manner, as if you are going to your execution? Jesus Christ is overshadowing protection! Sit down under His shade, that wonderful shade of His grace, with great delight. He cheers the heart. He fixes our souls. He fills us with enthusiasm and great delight. Do you delight in the Lord? Do you sit at His feet with joy? Do you rejoice in His promises?

She says, “I sat down under his shadow with great delight, and his fruit was sweet to my taste.” Under the shadow of Jesus Christ, the apple tree, we may sit down and eat of the fruits of salvation. Those fruits of salvation are, first, that we are brought to trust Him, by God’s grace. Then we begin to enjoy all of His blessings. Through faith we taste the fruits of Jesus Christ, the fruits of salvation in our souls. Those fruits, again, are His pardon and redemption, His intercession, His promises, His power. We feed upon those things. Note that all of this is of grace. It is not of our work, but it is His.

She (the bride) says, “I sat down under his shadow … and his fruit was sweet to my taste.” She did not climb the tree. We are told that there is a slogan: “He who would eat the fruit must climb the tree.” No, she sat down. It was given to her. Trusting under His shadow, not in our works or ourselves, we sit down, by grace, before the cross, and we are fed.

Secondly, note that this salvation is for the entire church. The blessings of Jesus Christ extend to the entire church, that is, to the host of the redeemed, the redeemed according to the election of God’s particular grace. To all of them comes that fruit of Jesus Christ.

Marvelous fruit: peace with God, joy of the Holy Spirit, love of the brethren, regeneration, faith, calling, justification, sanctification, preservation, glorification — all of the blessings of a covenant of God’s grace. There is no fruit like this! We will feast on this fruit to eternity.

Here is the picture of Jesus Christ and the church today. The church is pictured resting under His shade. The church is at peace, knowing that in this world she abides under His overshadowing protection and love. The church is feasting upon the fruits of His suffering and death. There are baskets full — baskets of mercy — more than enough and to spare. And Christ, our husband and our Savior, is the One who feeds us. He draws near and says, “I am your all in all.”

May the Lord Himself bring forth His sweet fruit to your heart.

Let us pray.

Father, we do praise and thank Thee for Thy marvelous Word. We pray that its entrance may give light and joy to our hearts. We pray that we may daily grow in esteem for Jesus Christ and that, by comparison (the comparison that the Word and grace teach us to make), we may say, “All the world has nothing for me. But Jesus Christ — He is the One — He is the apple tree, and under His shadow, the shadow of His grace, I may sit down and rest and enjoy the sweet fruits of His salvation.” All this we now pray in His name, Amen.

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

**"His Banner of Love Is Over Us"**

Rev. Carl Haak

February 5, 2006; No. 3292

Dear radio friends,

Today we continue where we left off last week. We were talking about a verse in the Holy Scriptures, Song of Solomon 2:3, where Jesus Christ is referred to as the apple tree. We saw that the child of God views Him as the source of all strength and the source of all sweetness and refreshment in this world.

We come today to verse 4, where the bride, again speaking of her husband, says: “He brought me to the banqueting house, and his banner over me was love.” So today I speak to you on the theme “His Banner of Love Is Over Us.”

Again, it is important for us to remember that we look at the book of the Song of Solomon in the Scriptures as a book that is intended to be a picture of Christ and the church. Though it is the poetic love-song between Solomon and his wife the Shulamite, yet we believe that the Holy Spirit has shown us that this is intended to be a picture of that mystical and wonderful and mysterious union between the Lord Jesus Christ and His bride, the church.

The words that we are looking at today are these: “He brought me to the banqueting house, and his banner over me was love.” In those words Solomon’s wife is recalling the time when Solomon had brought her to his banqueting hall. At that time she was seated right next to him as he sat upon his throne in all of his regal power and glory as king over Israel. And to her amazement and delight, she looked up and saw that Solomon had arranged to have a banner hung from the rafters over where she sat. And emblazoned on the banner was the word “love.”

As I said, the Song of Solomon represents the truth of Christ and the church. So, leaving Solomon and his wife the Shulamite woman, we will look at the reality of Christ and His church today. For Jesus Christ is greater than Solomon, said Jesus (Matt. 12:42). And King Jesus has brought His church into His banqueting house, where we might rejoice in all of His blessings.

The banqueting house is His church. He has brought us into His church. And within the confines of the church (the body of Christ) we rejoice in all the blessings of Jesus Christ. Every time we enter into the church and come together for congregational worship, His banner of love is unfurled over us. His banner at that time is a banner of love. Whenever we worship and the gospel of grace is preached, whenever the glorious truth of the cross (the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ) and the truth of the Scriptures are preached, then over us is hung and unfurled the message (Gal. 2:20): “The Son of God…loved me, and gave himself for me.” Over the church, especially as the church worships Him within His house, there is hung a banner of love.

And when we look up by faith, we cry out in delight and amazement. And the wonder of His love warms our soul.

So let us look at this a bit.

The Song of Solomon is the song of King Solomon and his wife, the Shulamite woman. Solomon loved her deeply. We read in the first chapter that she had come from a lowly class of people, and she had been at one time a servant in a vineyard. And she had done much work, so that under the sun she had been blackened, sunburnt. She thus came lowly. Yet she was the object of the love of Solomon.

The banquet house that Solomon has brought her to is the house where marriage is celebrated — a wedding reception. And over her is the word “love.” Love is that ardent desire whereby God holds to us and cleaves to us and cherishes us. We read earlier (chapter 1) that Solomon looked upon his wife as fair. He says, “Behold, thou art fair, my love; behold, thou art fair” (vs. 15). And in chapter 2:2 he says, “As the lily among thorns, so is my love among the daughters.”

Christ does not love all. He loves His church, and that church, the elect body of Christ, the church that His Father has elected for Him, is as a lily to Him among the thorns. Jesus Christ has an exclusive love for His church. He rejoices in that love. He wants to display that love. As Solomon wanted to show his love to his wife, so Jesus Christ shows His love to the church. As Solomon brought his bride into the reception hall and unfurled a banner over her where she was sitting, and that banner said, “Solomon loves the Shulamite woman,” so Jesus Christ unfurls over us His church the banner: “King Jesus loves His church.”

Hear these words: Ephesians 5:25: “Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it”; Ephesians 1:4, 5: “in love: Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children”; Isaiah 43:4: “I have loved thee”; Jeremiah 31:3: “with lovingkindness have I drawn thee.”

All too soon the wonder of the love of God in Jesus Christ loses its effect upon us. Let it not lose its effect. That love is the most amazing and glorious thing that there could possibly be — glorious even unto all eternity. That love of God in Jesus Christ for His church was an eternal love. It was a deep love within His own heart. It existed with God from eternity to eternity. In love He predestinated us before the worlds were formed (Eph. 1:4, 5). That love was a sacrificial love. We read, “Christ…loved the church and gave Himself for it” (Eph. 5:25). He gave Himself to the cross, to the agony, to the suffering, to the bearing of our eternal hell. That love was a saving love. It was a love whereby He drew us to Himself. In lovingkindness, Jeremiah says, God has drawn us.

The love of God is not impotent. God does not love without an ability to bring the object of His love to Himself. Oh, the love of God is a mighty power. Everything must give way to that love. In love He brings the church to Himself. And that love is a faithful love. He will never go back on His love, for He is God. He is not as a man, who is fickle. So He has loved the church. And in that love He has washed the church from all of their sins and made them righteous and pure in the Son of His love. Through His love He has given the Holy Spirit, whereby we are brought to repentance. Do you have that repentance, that sorrow of heart before God?

And through all of these things He takes us to Himself in the covenant. Jesus Christ loves His church. He loves me. He loves every child of God brought to Him by grace. He loves repentant believers. Say that, repentant believer. “The Son of God loves me.”

This is the great good. The great good is the love of God in Christ for me. And with Solomon’s wife we stand in amazement and delight. For we are utterly undeserving. Nothing else really matters except that Christ loves the church. Nothing else really matters except that Christ loves me. We can come again to church on this day with many burdens. We examine ourselves and we see how often in the past week we have failed our Lord and how quickly we have sinned and how we have turned to anger and jealousy and hatred and bitterness and resentment and lust. Then we come to church and, perhaps, we feel all alone, or we are wrestling with a great anxiety, or we are filled with fear over the future. Or we may have been going through sickness and great pain of body. Or we have great pain in our hearts over our children. We have many struggles and many burdens. Yes, that is all true. But this is what matters: Christ loves me. Christ loves His church.

I may say that that is the only thing that matters. That is the thing that is the most important, because Jesus Christ is the Son of God. And having His love, I am assured of all things, through Him, with God.

What is the anchor of the soul that is given to us as we look to the Scriptures? We ask the Scriptures: What is that place where we might stand, that great good that is surpassing all else and that is greater than all evils that could ever come to me? Where is that place? I must have that. If I have that place, then all is well. That place is this: the love of Jesus for me. Who shall separate us, asks the apostle, from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus? That great chapter (Rom. 8) tells us the pinnacle of our security and confidence: Christ hath loved me.

Jesus Christ, to assure the church of His love, places a banner over His church. And the whole point of the passage from the Song of Solomon today is that the love of Jesus Christ is made visible to His people. His people come to know about it. Solomon placed a banner over his wife. It was very conspicuous. She blushed. He brought her into a banqueting house and raised up a great banner over her. Everything is very visible.

She sits beside him as his wife. And amid all the laughter and merriment of the wedding reception, she gazes up and sees the testimony of his love for her in that beautiful banner. Solomon loves his wife.

So also we know the love of Jesus for us. We know that. How often in the Scriptures do we not find the words, especially as they are inspired through the Apostle Paul, “For we *know”* — not we guess, not we hope, not maybe, but by the Holy Spirit we *know!*

Still more. That word comes to us in the gospel. In the preaching of the Word of God the Holy Spirit brings that word to the heart of the believer. And that word, made powerful by the Holy Spirit, is a word of assurance. When you sit under the preaching of the gospel you begin to feel, as a child of God, that God is speaking to *you.* This is the living Word of God. Why do you feel that way? Because the Holy Spirit is working in you, because God has loved you.

Then, within the church, we come to a table. It is called the table of the Lord’s Supper. At that table again a banner is lifted up over the church, whereby the church is given to rejoice and to see the evidences of the love of Christ for her. The church is given at that time bread, which is broken, and wine, which is poured out. And with the breaking of the bread and the pouring out of the wine comes an oath, an oath from the Lord, an oath from the King, an oath from Christ: I have loved you and have given Myself for you, that you might live. And I, now, live in you.

Christ raises over His church a banner of love. This is of grace. He brought me to His banqueting house. He did that. The love of Jesus Christ is the seeking power. The love of Jesus Christ goes forth always to conquer. It is irresistible. All those who are given to Him the Son shall bring to Himself.

That banner of love is unfurled over the believer. The believer is given to know the love of Jesus Christ for her, for him, for the church. Does not a husband who is living in the love of God want his wife to be certain of his love for her? Does he not understand that she needs to know this? Do you not understand that a woman, a wife, needs to know that you love her?

Jesus Christ is not a careless husband. He does not say, “Well, she ought to know. Of course I love her. She ought to know that!” No, Jesus Christ makes very sure, by the Holy Spirit, that the child of God does know the love of Jesus. It is not the will of Jesus Christ that you go through your life doubting. Doubting, piously worked in the heart, is not piety. It is shameful. To foster doubts is not piety. That is shame. We must not question His love. But, by grace, we must be humbled under that love.

That love of Jesus Christ comforts us. If you read again the first chapter of the Song of Solomon, you will discover that Solomon’s bride had enemies. They came from her own household. She had critics. And she had people who would persecute her. Being a king’s wife did not shield her from the abuse of those who hated her husband. And she had her own defects. She admits them in the first chapter. So also the church on earth today has many critics, many enemies, and many shortcomings. We have the guilt of our sin. We are sinful. We need protection. We need comfort. Here is our comfort: Jesus Christ, God’s eternal Son, has loved us.

But this not only comforts us. This honors us. How tremendously honored Solomon’s wife felt. She sat next to the king, and everyone knew that the king loved her. Think about that. Think about it this way, as a girl. What might it be like to be brought to the right hand of a king who sits upon a throne, in all of his royal power? And then, in a beautiful garment, to be told to sit next to him. Then, over your head is unfurled a great banner on which are written the words that he loves you.

But all of that is nothing. That is, the earthly story of that is nothing. There is One who sits upon the throne. There is One who is surrounded by the angels. There is One who is radiant in power. There is One by whose power all things happen, both in heaven and on earth. The stars in their courses and the movement of nations, and all men, do that which He decrees. Sin and evil flee from His presence. He is the Lord Jesus Christ, enthroned in glory. There is a young lady sitting by His side — the church. And His glory is not only over Himself, but over her. We share in the honor of the King of kings and Lord of lords. And He, unashamedly, says, “I love my church.”

This moves us. This moves us to love Him. The deep, mighty love of Christ moves us, it works in us, it controls us so that we love Him. It works in us so that we are devoted to Him. It works in us so that we delight in Him. It moves us not only to love Him, but to love one another as children of God. It moves us to lay down our lives for each other. It moves us to forgive each other. It makes us compassionate. It makes us tenderhearted. We reason this way (I John 4:11): If Jesus Christ has so loved us, we ought also to love one another. It makes us reason this way (II Cor. 5:14): The love of Christ constrains us. It gets a grip on us. It gets a hold of us. Read what the apostle says in II Corinthians 5:14, 15 — that we should no longer live unto ourselves, but unto Him who has loved us, who has died for us and is risen again. We love Him, by His grace. We will obey Him, by His grace. We will follow Him. We will serve Him. He loves the church. And, by His grace, the church loves Him.

This is amazing. This is wonderful. This is comforting. He has brought us into His banqueting house. And His banner over us is love.

May this Word of God be your comfort, your strength, your light in this week.

Let us pray.

Father, we do thank Thee again for Thy holy Word, a Word that is sure, a Word that is amazing. We praise Thee, for it is all of Thy grace. Ever work within us that consciousness of the eternal and wonderful love of Christ for us, His people, His church. In Jesus’ name do we pray, Amen.

 THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

**"Spiritual Lethargy"**

Rev. Carl Haak

September 22, 2013; No. 3690

Dear radio friends,

Our program today issues the warning of the Lord Jesus Christ against the shameful and all too common sin of spiritual lethargy, spiritual dullness, sluggishness, complacency, apathy, a lackadaisical attitude toward the spiritual things of the Lord Jesus Christ, a lethargy not so much seen in the outward aspects of the Christian’s life, although they can be seen there, but a lethargy that proceeds from the inward decay of the heart toward the Lord Jesus Christ.

Make no mistake. We will guard and confess the precious truth of the indestructible nature of the true grace of God. When God’s grace has been imparted by the Holy Spirit into the soul, that grace can never die, it cannot fall away. “Who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation” (I Pet. 1:5). “Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down: for the LORD upholdeth him with his hand” (Ps. 37:24). The faithfulness of God keeps us as His children. The covenant of grace secures us. The finished work of Jesus Christ preserves us. And the indwelling of the Holy Spirit seals us to eternal glory.

But, due to our own sin and weakness as we are surrounded by a wicked world, and due to our own folly, that life of grace that is imparted to our hearts may experience a decline in our own soul—a painful process of spiritual disease, which may advance slowly, imperceptibly, silently, and unobserved. Suddenly we awake to the realization that there is in our life as Christians no power of holiness, no revulsion to sin; that there is a loss of the experience of the joy of the Lord; and that there is an actual playing with sin and a lukewarm attitude toward the church. Maybe, even further, we find ourselves withdrawing from spiritual things and from the church; we experience bitterness in our heart; and we have no felt presence of Jesus’ walking with us in our life.

Then we ask the question: How came it so? What is the root and origin of these things? The answer of the Word of God is: the sin of spiritual lethargy.

The passage that I want to use to bring this sin out, and the Lord’s words of rebuke against it, is found in an Old Testament book called the Song of Solomon. Please open your Bible to the fifth chapter of that book. The Song of Solomon is a picture of Christ and His bride, the church, a picture taken from the life of Solomon as he was married to his wife. In this book, chapter 4:16, we read this: “Awake, O north wind; and come, thou south; blow upon my garden, that the spices thereof may flow out.” There, the Lord Jesus Christ, speaking through His Spirit, calls for His Spirit to blow upon the church in order that out of the church, the gathering of His people, spices (that is, sweet smells of praise) may flow up to the nostrils of God. In response, the wife of Solomon, the church, says, “Let my beloved come into his garden, and eat his pleasant fruits.” The church, you and I, long for the Lord to come among us in His felt presence and to be with us as His people.

The church, then, is the garden of the Lord—a garden in which He desires and is pleased to live and enjoy Himself; a garden that He has planted to give off pleasing fragrances of praise to Him. You plant a garden in your back yard; you landscape your yard. Why do you do that? You do that to enjoy it, to relax, to find rest and wonderment in it. You plant a herb garden that is peaceful. There are delicate fragrances to be smelled. There is the bee balm. Then you put your mouth down to the sage and you taste the thyme and rosemary and cilantro.

So, the Word of God says, is the church. It is the garden that God has planted in order that it might emit rare and delicate and pleasing fragrances of trust and love and joy and worship before the living God. The church is not a dump. The world of sin, from which we were taken, is like a landfill. It emits an odour, a stench, of hatred and greed and covetousness and lust and envy. But in that present world, and indeed out of those who were once of that world, out of the desolate weed bed of the world, God has planted for Himself a garden. And His grace has germinated every seed. The Holy Spirit waters the Word upon the seed in order that we in the church might bring forth that which is pleasing to God.

So, we could well ask the question: “What does the Lord smell in His garden today? What does He smell in your church? What does He smell in your life? Is it the pleasing fragrances of trust, love, joy, and worship?”

In response to the church, we read the words from chapter 5:1ff., “I am come into my garden, my sister, my spouse.” And the Lord Jesus Christ comes into His garden in such a way that He reveals all His beauty and sufficiency. First of all, the husband (therefore, really, Christ) comes to His wife in the garden in all of His eternal love. He says, “I am come, my sister, my spouse, my love, my dove, my undefiled.” Is that not wonderful? The Lord calls us as the church “my sister.” That tells us that He was made one with us, that He is not ashamed to call us His brothers and sisters, that He took upon Himself our flesh so that we might be made the family of God. The church is not only the Lord’s wife and bride. We are His sister, His brethren. We have fellowship in Him.

He says the church is “my spouse.” “I am married to you, I am covenanted to take care of you as my church and to love you. You are my love,” He says, “my dove, my undefiled!” (Song 5:2). He comes in all of His love.

But He comes also as the Lord, and as the crucified and risen Saviour. If you are reading the passage with me, you will see in verse 2 that the husband, as he comes to his garden, says, “my head is filled with dew, and my locks with the drops of the night.” That is, he appears before the garden as one who has undergone privation. The coldness of the night has fallen upon him; he bears the signs of suffering. Christ has gone through the eternal night of our darkness. All that was out there to condemn us, all the frightening things of judgment and the wrath of a holy God, He has suffered.

Then if you read further, in verses 4 and 5, the wife says that “My beloved put in his hand by the hole of the door.” And, when she does finally arise to open to her beloved, her “hands dropped with myrrh, and my fingers with sweet smelling myrrh, upon the handles of the lock.” When the Lord comes He is covered with myrrh. Myrrh is a spice of embalming, of death, to cover the odours of death. Christ comes to His church in all the wonder of His atoning grace. So to speak, when you touch the handle of the church, it is covered with myrrh. When you think of the church, you must think of the death of Jesus Christ. The church is covered in the atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Then, further, He comes in all the blessings of salvation. He comes in His love, He comes as the crucified Saviour, and He comes with the blessings of salvation (v. 1). He comes with all the rich blessings of the forgiveness of sins, peace with God, divine grace to strengthen our spiritual lives, the wine of joy to lift our souls, treasures, bounties, riches. Not earthly things. The Lord does not come to you as His child with the promise of money and French food and dresses and human beauty. All of these things perish in a moment. These are the things that those who live in the desert and in the weeds of sin think are great things. But Christ comes to His garden with true spiritual riches of His salvation.

And the response of the bride, of the church, is (v. 2): “I sleep, but my heart waketh.” Then the cry of Christ is expressed again, “Open to me, my sister, my dove.” Then in verse 3 she says this: “I have put off my coat; how shall I put it on? I have washed my feet; how shall I defile them?” She is too sleepy. Her husband has come to the garden, but she cannot get up to greet him. She cannot get herself going. Oh, she has excuses. “It’s not convenient, it’s too much bother, it will upset my plans. I’ve gone to bed; I don’t want to get up and get my feet dirty again. I don’t want to have to get dressed again.” But the point is that her own spiritual indifference, her own lethargy, prevents the enjoyment of the blessings of the visit of her lord, of her husband, into her life.

Note here the existence of divine grace that was still in her (“I sleep, but my heart waketh”). Christ preserves the life of grace within us by grace alone. The point is this: the church, the believer, has fallen into carelessness. The wife knew she fell into carelessness. She knew she should get up. She knew what she should be doing with her spiritual life. But she did not feel like it. And the awful feature is that she was content that it be so. She gives in and accepts her state. She is too sleepy. She is not going to get up. Her love had grown cold.

How much is this true of you and of me with regard to spiritual things, with regard to Christ, to dedication to His church and to His Word? Are you and I characterized by a sickly, spiritual feebleness? Is ours, young people, the spiritual life that constantly says, “Oh, yeah, I know”? Are we the kind of Christian who forever is saying, “I’ll get around to that spiritual activity and that spiritual virtue someday,” but never does?

Is it too far for you to go to church? Is it too much for you to go twice? Do you say on Sunday evening, “I’ve taken off my coat, my shoes; I’ve made my plans”? Is it too much for you to go to the Bible study of your church? You say, “I’ve made my plans. I’ve been busy all day. I’m staying home. I’m too tired.” Are you alert for the pleasures of the world? Do the attractions and pleasures of the world dominate you? Then, do you sleep with regard to your spiritual life? Do you greet the spiritual things with half a heart and the world with all your heart? Where is the world in your life? Be honest! Where is the Word of God in your life? Do you read the Word of God? Do you thirst after the Word of God? What captures your heart? For what do you watch? What will you get up to see and stay awake to see? For what will you experience inconvenience? A movie? The things of this earth? Earthly friends? For Christ and His Word and His truth and His church?

Are we content that this be so, when we fall into spiritual indifference? Do we think that spiritual indifference is just the way that it goes, that young Christians and new converts are the ones who are enthused, but the people who have been Christians for twenty or thirty years—well, it is just the way it is? Is that the way you think? It is no little thing, you know. For indifference to the Lord Jesus Christ wounds love. What wounds, what hurts your heart as a parent? Probably more than anything else, indifference to your love from your child—the “I don’t care” attitude, the statement: “Yes, Dad, I know. Go ahead, say what you want, but I’m not going to listen. I don’t care.”

Do you and I mourn over the sin of indifference, spiritual indifference to the Lord and to the things of the kingdom, to our husband, the Lord Jesus Christ? This is often something that begins inwardly. This deals with the secret walk of your heart with the Saviour. Do not fool yourself here. Our outward walk can be without fault. In fact, we can be bristling and bursting with activity—while all the time our hearts beat faintly before God. Does sin run roughshod over you? Do you find yourself yielding to it? Is there sloth and worldliness and pride and unforgiveness and carnality ruling in your heart? Do you perceive the loveliness of the truth of Jesus Christ and of His holy Word? Do the truths of divine grace occupy the supreme position in your heart, and are they of greater value and beauty than anything else in your heart?

Beloved, beware of spiritual lethargy.

When the bride did at last arise, she discovered that her husband had withdrawn himself (v. 6). “I opened to my beloved [so finally she did get up]; but my beloved had withdrawn himself, and was gone: my soul failed when he spake: I sought him, but I could not find him; I called him, but he gave me no answer.” That he withdrew himself does not mean that he abandoned, divorced her. But it means this: the cost of her lethargy was the felt presence of her lord and her husband. If you read on in the Song of Solomon, you discover that she does indeed find him again; he comes to her and comforts her. But for a time, for a very painful time, she could not find him. And he did not appear to her to answer her.

The Lord does not do this without reason. For He delights in us His people and church. He rejoices to walk many a mile, experientially, with us. But He is righteous, and the intimacy of His presence is experienced only in the way of repentance and love. The Lord will not give us to experience in our hearts the joy of His presence if we greet Him with lukewarmness and complacency, if we try duplicity with Him, cherishing our sin and still trying to have Him. In His love He withdraws Himself in our experience to correct us and to make us confess and acknowledge our sin. This is painful. There is nothing so painful. It is painful because of the work of grace in our hearts. We have been made to love Him. The wife loved her husband. And when he was not at the door, it pained her: “I opened to my love, and he was not there.” The pain of lost fellowship is rooted in love. If someone departs from you and you do not love him, you are not pained by his departure. But if you love that person and you know that it was your folly, your meanness, your simple lack of caring about him that drove him from you, then you are pained in your heart.

That pain produced tears of repentance. “Oh, what a fool I’ve been. How cursed be my sloth. Why did I surrender to indifference?” Do you know that type of spiritual pain and repentance? Do you feel horrible when Christ gives you to see the lethargy with which you greet Him? Does it bother you, does it upset you? Do you cry out, “Why?” Heed the warning! Is this what it must take in the righteousness of God and in God’s providence for us to understand the wonder of His presence? Does it take this: that we must first be made to experience the lack of His presence due to our own sin and lethargy? Does the truth of the gospel of the Reformed faith first have to be taken away before we understand its wonder and preciousness? Do opportunities for you to know the truth in your church first have to cease before you understand the brilliance and the wonder of such opportunities? Does the peace of the church have to be removed before you know its wonder? Does indifference first have to drag us to spiritual bankruptcy before we understand the riches of Jesus Christ?

Address spiritual lethargy now! I do not want that pain of feeling that He is not present. I do not want the pain of thinking that He does not hear me when I call. I do not want to learn that way! Search out your heart.

Is there spiritual lethargy in your heart? Is church attendance, Bible reading, and prayer an experience of strength and joy and spiritual sweetness? Do you experience the joy of your God in your religious duties? If you do not, then do not criticize the church or the preacher or the Bible version or how you were taught about how to pray right. Do not do that! If there is no life in your spiritual activities, look at yourself! Are you lifeless? Are the world and the things of this world more important to you than your Saviour? Do you love the Scriptures with a holy relish? Do you read the Scriptures with deep and solemn conviction that God is speaking to you? Do you treasure them up in your heart? Do you pray? Do you have dealings with Jesus Christ personally in your life? If the answer to any of these is “No,” do not look anywhere else, but look to yourself and repent.

What is the state of your soul today toward the things of the Lord Jesus Christ? Are you lethargic? Repent! Are you enamoured with the world? Are you unwilling to part with your pet sin? Are you bitter against God? Search out the reason. Repent.

For He is our only Lord, our only husband. He is our only good. And His church and the things of His salvation are the treasures of life eternal. Oh, may we never greet them with indifference!

Let us pray.

Father, we thank Thee for the Word. We pray for its blessing today upon our hearts through Jesus Christ, Amen.

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

**"He Is Altogether Lovely to Me"**

Rev. Carl Haak

January 16, 2005; No. 3237

 Dear radio friends,

"His mouth is most sweet: yea, he is altogether lovely. This is my beloved, and this is my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem."

You have just heard the church’s adoration of Jesus Christ. It was taken from the book of Song of Solomon, chapter 5:16. It was part of the conversation between Solomon and his wife. In fact, it was his wife’s tribute to him, her husband. And ultimately it is the expression of the church’s tribute to Jesus Christ. This is what we think of Him as believers and as a church. His words are most sweet; yea, He is altogether lovely!

Solomon’s wife, the bride, is speaking this of her husband in response to an inquiry made by the daughters of Jerusalem. They had asked her: "What is so special about your beloved, your husband?" In the chapter we learn that Solomon’s bride had become lethargic and indifferent to him. He had come to his garden and had called upon her to open to him, but she responded that she was too tired; she had put off her garments and bathed her feet and did not want to get up or stir herself to open the door to him. She was guilty of the sin of apathy, or sickly indifference to him.

When at last she did get up, he was gone. The cost of her indifference was the felt presence of her husband. So also the cost of our indifference to Jesus Christ as children of God is often the felt presence of Jesus Christ.

We read in the chapter that frantically she rushed out of the garden to find him. She called him. She sought him. She ran into the sentinels of the city, the watchmen, who were making their rounds of the city. These men beat her up and shamed her. Then, frantic, almost near hysteria, she encounters the daughters of Jerusalem. She puts them under an oath that if they know where her beloved is, they would tell him that she faints with desire for him. Sensing that she does indeed long for her husband and cannot bear separation from him, the daughters of Jerusalem put this question to her (v. 9): "What is thy beloved more than another beloved, O thou fairest among women? what is thy beloved more than another beloved, that thou dost so charge us?" The bride answers in verses 10-16. A very wonderful tribute she renders to her husband. And it is summed in these words, "He is altogether lovely" to me. Is Jesus Christ altogether lovely to you?

Solomon’s bride is answering the question as a repentant sinner. She is answering the question, "What is so special about your beloved?" as one who had foolishly squandered the experience of his fellowship by her own indifference. She sees that she had so requited, so paid back his love, as to be indifferent and interested only in herself and in her own pleasures. It is only a repentant sinner who sees anything lovely in Jesus Christ. The grace of repentance is as eyeglasses given us to see Him. Jesus’ beauty can be known only through the tears of repentance. A complacent, proud, lustful, bitter sinner, a sinner duped in sin, does not see in Christ anything different from another beloved. Such a sinner is tempted to say, and does say, "Oh, yes, the church loves Jesus, and we love booze and sex and money and art and sports." But to one repentant sinner, Jesus is altogether lovely. You can have all this world. Give me Jesus. To a repentant sinner, everything about Jesus Christ is lovely. He is altogether lovely.

As I was saying, in verses 10-16 of chapter 5 of Song of Solomon, the bride is giving ten points of description of her beloved husband, and thus the church of Christ. I will not attempt to explain all of those but simply point out that the design of the Holy Spirit in such a passage is to show that Jesus Christ is in every way qualified for His undertaking to be the husband of the church, to be the Savior of the body. We read in Colossians 1:19 that it "pleased the Father that in him [that is, in Christ] should all fulness dwell." Further, we read in verse 18 that He has the preeminence in all things. And we sing in a versification of Psalm 89 that He is a mighty leader, true and brave; ordained, exalted, strong to save. He is altogether lovely! He is altogether desirable. Everything about Jesus Christ, to a repentant sinner, is desirable. In Him is everything worthy of our esteem, our love, and our confidence. There are no shortcomings in Him.

When she says that he is altogether lovely to her, she means that her description of her beloved husband comes far short of the dignity and the worth that he possesses. Everything you could want, everything you could need, is to be found in Jesus Christ. Everything a repentant sinner, who now stares at the leprosy of his own being and is blinded by the brilliance of the knowledge of a holy God, everything that such a sinner could possibly need is found in Jesus Christ.

Consider the Lord Jesus Christ from even a physical point of view, and you see the beauty and the loveliness of the Lord. He is the One who assumed our flesh and blood, came under the wrath of God for us, bore in His own body our sins, and died upon a cross and was laid in a grave. But He is risen. He is now glorified in His body. And out of Him, out of His face and out of that glorified body, now shines forth the glory of the eternal God. He is the sovereign one, appointed to be our leader and ruler. He is perfected. Upon Him is a golden crown. Strength and honor fall down before Him. He is, in His appearance, altogether lovely.

But His loveliness is found especially in that spiritual loveliness that eyes see when they are opened by grace and look upon Him through a repentant heart. He possesses what I need: the forgiveness of sins, peace with God. His body was broken and His blood was shed in order that I might be reconciled to a holy God. He possesses resurrection life. He possesses that life that can never die, a life that He also by His power works within me by His Spirit. He is the One who has sworn to keep me, and to keep me alive forever more, to be with me, to live in me, so that I might go on living through Him. He is altogether lovely.

Look on Him, and you must agree with Solomon’s bride that the descriptions that we offer of Jesus Christ are altogether inadequate. And love, at last, simply gives up trying to describe His brilliance and His beauty. He is altogether lovely to me! Is that what you say?

There is especially one thing about Jesus Christ that makes Him so lovely to the church, to a repentant sinner. Notice the last thing that she says in verse 16 about Him: "His mouth is most sweet" (as we read in the King James or, better translated, His speech is most sweet, His words are most sweet). It was especially this, more than anything else, about her husband that impressed her of his loveliness. In verse 6 she confessed that "my soul failed when he spake." The deepest effect upon her was produced by the way that he spoke to her. It was his voice that was the power to arouse her finally out of her dullness and get her moving.

Let me tell you the doctrine, then, that is being revealed here in this passage. It is the doctrine of the efficacious call. That is the most beautiful thing about Jesus Christ to the sinner. No man ever spake as this man. The efficacious call refers to the power, the mighty power, of the Lord Jesus through His own Word to call His own to Himself. It is Christ’s voice, His living voice, a voice penetrating, touching the soul of the believer, so that the soul melts and is softened and is comforted and is drawn to her husband. No man speaks as He. His words are most sweet.

(I might make an application here, if I may pause only for a moment, to us as husbands, for the Scriptures declare that as Christ is to His church, so husbands must be to their wives. If it is the Word of Christ that so soothes and so fills the church with a love for Him, then also must not our words, as husbands, be the source of our wives’ comfort? The voice of Christ soothes, comforts, assures, and calls the church to Himself. Then, husband, your words are to be your wife’s comfort and guidance and hope. How do you speak to your wife? You call yourself a Christian. How do you speak to your wife?)

What makes Jesus altogether lovely? Have you heard Him speak? Have you heard Him speak to you through His Word? Not simply reading the Bible out loud. No, no. Do you hear Him? His efficacious call is this: that I hear Him, and His words are true. They ring down to my soul, and I hear Him speak to me. I hear Him say, concerning sin: "Son, your sins are forgiven you. Go and sin no more." I hear Him in the hour of death. There are many who pass through the line to greet the grieving family. Those who are passing through the line are asking the question, "What do I say?" The answer is always, "Bring Jesus’ words." Those are the words that cut through grief and that bring those who are overcome with sorrow to a sure place of comfort and give them to stand upon a rock. What is able to do that? The Word of Jesus Christ. What did Jesus say to Mary Magdalene, who was overwhelmed and distraught at His death outside the tomb, beyond any words of comfort, almost desperate? What comforted her? He said, "Mary."

Oh, His words to a repentant sinner are most sweet. They are most sweet in the storms of life. You say, "My son will not talk to me. My daughter is gone." You say, "Oh, the difficulties I have to face today." Listen to the voice of the beloved: "Peace, be still. It is I. Be not afraid." He is altogether lovely. His speech is most sweet.
But for Jesus Christ to be altogether lovely to us, we must be brought into a real relationship to Him. Her husband was so lovely to her because her husband was her beloved and her friend. She responds: "This is my beloved, and this is my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem." Without that relationship of grace, Jesus Christ is not lovely. Jesus Christ is not lovely to anyone apart from the grace of God that brings Him to us as our beloved friend.

There are two things, then, that describe that relationship that is established between the believer and Christ by God. That relationship is, first of all, that Jesus Christ is my beloved. The bride loved him. We love Him. And the emphasis now in this passage is not His love of us but of ours for Him — a love that is given to us from Him. We read in I John 4:19, "We love him, because he first loved us." We love Him. That love is the implanting of His love in our heart, which returns to Him. It returns to the source from which it came. And it returns through a renewed will and heart so that we say, "My beloved. My beloved." An exclusive love, the love of a wife for her husband and not for another. He is our rightful Lord.

Note that we are confessing concerning Jesus Christ not simply that we know Him and about Him. It is not simply to say, "I know what Jesus taught. I went to catechism class as a child, and I know the story of His life." It is not simply to say, as a teenager, "Oh, I know what Jesus wants of me. I know all about that. I could tell others about it, too." But it is to say, "I love Him."

Children, did you know that your love, by grace, for Jesus is expressed in a way that angels cannot do? Oh, the angels right now adore Jesus Christ. They rejoice in Him, they marvel over Him, they talk all about Him. But did you know that repentant sinners love Jesus today in a way that angels cannot? We love Him as forgiven sinners. We love Him as the woman who washed His feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. So John says, "In you, in the child of God, the love of God is perfected" (1 John 4:12). I know that our love for Jesus is so pitifully weak. Nevertheless, in the song of our love is found a chord that is not heard sung even by the angels in heaven. It is the love of a repentant sinner for Him who is now everything to us. This is my beloved, and this is my friend.

And those words, "this is my friend," emphasize that covenant relationship, that bond of living fellowship that Jesus establishes with us by His grace. He not only forgives our sin, but He comes close, and He reveals to us the secrets of the living God. He said in John 15:15, “I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends; for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you.” As a friend, He reveals to us the secret counsel and the will of God concerning our redemption. As a friend, He tells us wonderful things. He says, "Did you know that My death on the cross was planned in the eternal heart of My Father?" He says, "Did you know that all those sins, those sins going on in your mind, that God knows them and that I paid their full price? Did you know," He says, "that last week when you were distraught and you could not go on, I kept you then, I sustained you then? And I sustained you through the treasures that I obtained for you on the cross."

This is our confession. This is our tribute. This is our adoration. He is altogether lovely to us. Oh, yes, the church in glory says, "He is altogether lovely." The church in China, where men are wasting away in bamboo cells because of their confession of the name of Jesus Christ —those men and women say in those cells, "Jesus is altogether lovely to us." But we say it, too. Right now. Do you want to know why?

Are you a repentant sinner? Do you know what a fool you are in taking Christ for granted? Do your sins burden you? When Jesus speaks those sweet words, "I have given My body to be broken and My blood to be shed; I am your Savior, I am your Lord, your husband," do you hear Him? That is why He is altogether lovely. The guilt of our sin (adultery, murder, stinking pride against the throne of God) is forgiven. The agony of our soul in seeing a wayward son or daughter is soothed. The sorrows of death, which, as waves, would overwhelm me and drown me, He does not allow to overcome me. He makes them to be at peace.

So, it is a legitimate question: You who are Christians, what is there more about your beloved, Jesus Christ, than another beloved, O thou fairest among women? That is a legitimate question. What is there about Jesus Christ that makes Him altogether lovely to you? Give an answer. The world says, "We have husbands, we have beloveds; we are married to them: booze, sex, money, self, possessions, and friends." Now, Christian, they ask you, "You say No to our beloveds. The ones we are married to, you say No to. In fact, you run away from their embrace, and you say that you want only the embrace of your beloved friend, Jesus. Well, will you tell us, then, what is there about Him that is more than another beloved?" Ah, for a thousand lifetimes to tell you! Oh, for ten thousand angels to sing to you of Him! Why, what is there so lovely about Him? If you have eyes given of God to see your sin, and eyes given to look into the gospel, you have the answer: He laid down His life for me; He burned in my hell; He lay in my grave; He paid my debt; He set me free; He forgave my sins; He loved me. He is altogether lovely to me.

Let us pray.

Father, thanks for Thy word. Now write it on our hearts and in our lives today, that we be not those who speak and do not. But may it be seen so that others ask of our beloved. May it be seen that to us Jesus Christ is altogether lovely. Amen.