



salt shakers

joel 3:16 matthew 5:15

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Rooted and
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Col 2:7

Dear Readers

Welcome to the 12th issue of Salt Shakers! This issue coincides with the new year, and with that comes our new church theme which is based on Colossians 2:7, "Rooted and built up in him, and established in the faith, as ye have been taught, abounding therein with thanksgiving." May God be pleased to use this weak means of Salt Shakers to bless and comfort you with His Word.

Life, at face value, is full of ups and downs. No matter who you are, no matter what status you have, and no matter how much you possess, there will be times of happiness and sorrow, and times of fullness and emptiness (Ecclesiastes 3). And, if each person were a tree, then one's experiences in life would be the gentle morning sun, the refreshing drops of rain and the calming breeze of winds; or, the unforgiving beating sun, the vicious and mighty floods, and the destructive fury of storms. Some trees, you would notice, sway dangerously and crumble under the external forces that afflict them. Other trees may sway ever-so-slightly, but remain steadfast and strong. The difference is in the roots – some may have no roots at all, some may have roots in the wrong places, and some have roots in perfect ground.

The Christian's life remains unmoved. He does not flinch in the face of adversity. It is almost unnatural that he can be so unaffected by all the troubles around him. But, then again, it is natural and to be expected of him because he is simply a "little-Christ"; and Christ taught him with unmistakable examples (Mark 4). A Christian's roots run deep into the ground. He knows that he has been loved by God even before he existed (Jeremiah 1). He knows that he has been redeemed from the power of sin by the death of Jesus Christ. He knows that he is the property of his Saviour, Jesus Christ. The best part is that this ground is faithful and true, and it holds the roots tight, even when they grow weary and fail.

There is then a world of difference between one rooted and built up in Christ, and one who is not. One is calm and still, while the other is flailing and floundering (2 Corinthians 4). But, not only that, a Christian is humbled by his unworthiness and remains humble in all things to all men even though he stands tall above others. He is also so thankful for the much he has received that he can be content with anything that his Saviour chooses to give him now. His thankfulness springs forth into fruitfulness, whereby he abounds in goodness only so that his Father in heaven might be glorified (Matthew 5).

What does your life look like?

I have intentionally left out verse numbers so that you will read God's Word for yourself and know where it says what!

Christ regardless
paul

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COVENANT INSTRUCTION @ HOME

>> Sis Jean

Deuteronomy 6:5-9, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates."

From the text of Deuteronomy 6:5-9, God clearly explains how instruction should be given in our covenant homes. God has given this important responsibility of instructing children to the parents such that no other institutions or persons can perform this task on their behalf. Although our children today receive the knowledge of God through preaching, Sunday school classes, personal devotions and family devotions, God uses the family as a training ground for His covenant children. It is the place where they are moulded and trained to be useful for the service of the Lord. God places great emphasis on the raising up of the next generation in the fear of the Lord. The family is the basic foundation of the church. Thus, if there are no strong and godly Christian families, there will not be a continuing godly church. Our children must be trained to be spiritual soldiers with great strength and insight to defend the truth in this sinful and corrupt world. They must be equipped with a biblical Christian worldview to discern the things in the world and counter the attack of worldliness in their lives. This is what I believe is an important goal of covenant instruction at home.

God, in His mercy, willingly establishes His everlasting friendship and fellowship (covenant) with the parents and He also extends this covenant to their children. Covenant families are different from non-christian families. How are we different? First, let us remind ourselves that we are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own special people, that we may proclaim the praises of God who called us out of darkness into His marvellous light (1 Peter 2:9). We are to live our lives on earth as sojourners and pilgrims, and abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul. (1 Peter 2:11). Second, since we are the children of light, we ought to walk in the light. God has given us the Holy Scripture which has all the wisdom required to conduct covenant instruction at home (2 Tim 3:16-17).

Covenant instruction at home is to teach our children the Word of God at every opportunity and to live our lives in obedience to the Word of God so that they can see the presence of God in our lives and theirs. The goals for Christian children are obedience and living a holy life to God. We must not place excellent academic results and successful careers as the goals and hope for our children. This is because the truth is that worldly achievements and material wealth can never grant a joyful life. A truly joyful life has the comfort and peace that one can only derive from God. (Mat 6:19-21, 1 Tim 6:6-12)

Our heavenly Father has detailed the scope of covenant instruction in Deuteronomy 6. I believe that this scope comprises of our conversations with our children, our personal Christian lives as testimonies to our children, and the manner we govern our families.

But, before we can even begin to instruct our children, Deuteronomy 6:5-6 commands us as parents to love God first. This love for God must come from within our hearts and this is possible only with the Holy Spirit working in our hearts. This love causes us to willingly live our life according to His law.

Deuteronomy 6:7 teaches us that we must have constant God-centred conversations from morning to night. Our children must have sufficient time at home in order for such opportunities to arise and conversations to take place. But, today, our children spend most of their time in school rather than at home. Thus, we ought to have as many God-centered conversations with them as possible with the remaining time they have at home. A God-centred conversation is not simply

pointing out the Bible verses to correct or guide them, but it is self-disclosure and sharing of hearts between the parents and their children. Most of the time, instruction in the covenant family involves investing time in our children and having open and honest communication that helps us understand our children's inner struggles and understand how they see the world. This gives us opportunities to teach them the biblical values and principles to overcome temptations and win small battles. When they have discovered their sins, we ought to lead them to seek the unending grace and mercy that can be found in our Lord Jesus Christ. Biblical values and spiritual principles are not simply taught; they are also caught. This is only possible when, first, there are abundant interaction opportunities between parents and children. Second, it is only possible when parents see the need to guide their children to stay away from the great influence of worldliness from the media, technology and parts of secular education. And last, these values and principles can only be caught when parents place shepherding their children's hearts unto godliness above all earthly pursuits such as academic results, career advancements and luxurious lifestyles.

Deuteronomy 6:8 goes on to instruct parents to also obey God's laws in all things we do with our hands as His laws are 'signs' to direct us in all aspects of our lives. I believe this refers to our Christian living in the workplace and in church. In other words, our attitudes at the work place and in church affect how we instruct our children. The amount of time we divide between our work and serving the church tells our children where we place our treasures (Mat 6:21). In the church, do we love our fellow brothers and sisters in church and esteem their needs above ours (Gal 6:10)? Do we honour our office bearers and pastors and submit to their leadership (Rom 13)? Our children are like sensitive antennas which can easily pick up our positive or negative attitudes towards the church.

Christian living begins with having Christ-like attitudes and values in our lives (Mark 10:21). What do we use to adorn ourselves? God says His laws are to be used as frontlets between our eyes. We are not to think of adorning ourselves with outward ornaments but to show our children that true adornment for the child of God is godliness and good works. We ought to spend our time and energy in the diligent study of God's Word and doing His Word to beautify our hearts and souls. We are to always look up to God for grace to defeat our inner sins and to strive in living a new life in Christ. We are to place our hope and confidence in God's divine promises and not our earthly possessions.

Deuteronomy 6:9 dictates that we shall write the law of God on the posts of the house and on the gates. This, I believe, refers to the manner with which we govern our families. Our covenant homes are governed by the law of the Lord and this means that when family problems arise, we resolve the problems based on the counsel from the Scriptures and not from the world. A covenant home is also filled with the love of Christ which is shown in self-denial, long-suffering and godly wisdom in all interactions with one another in the family. The family is also united in one God, one Truth and one Spirit and is zealously serving together in the church for the glory of God.

Children are our next generation in the church; we must not let the world lead us in the way we instruct our children, but we must be led by God's principles only. We have to make radical changes in our covenant homes if we find ourselves guilty of not fulfilling our calling. Trust in God's precepts and statutes for they are sure and endure forever. (Matt 24:35)

Last, I would like to end my article with:

Psalm 127:2-5, "It is vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late, to eat the bread of sorrows: for so He giveth his beloved sleep. Lo, children are a heritage of the LORD: and the fruit of the womb is His reward. As arrows are in the hand of a mighty man; so are children of the youth. Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them: they shall not be ashamed, but they shall speak with the enemies in the gate."

Let us take heed to Matthew Henry's comments for this Psalm – "Observe here, Children of the youth are arrows in the hand, which, with prudence, may be directed a right to the mark, God's glory and the service of their generation; but afterwards, when they have gone abroad into the world, they are arrows out of the hand; it is too late to bend them then. But these arrows in the hand too often prove arrows in the heart, a constant grief to their godly parents, whose gray hairs they bring with sorrow to the grave."

"This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, traitors, heady, high-minded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God; Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away.

But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them; and that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus." 2 Timothy 3:1-5, 14-15

Education is the process of learning, of acquiring knowledge. I have been educated in public schools throughout my life and am thankful for the path in which God has designed for me. Before I write this article, I shall first make clear that I write as one who has never been through homeschooling, and I also understand that my experience in public schooling may not be shared. I will also limit the context of the discussion to that of secondary school level and beyond as a comparison to CK. Nevertheless, the principles remain – that as youth, we are commanded to continue in the things which we have learned and been assured of from the Holy Scriptures.

My experience with public schooling

I have been through public schooling in Singapore learning from various means, consisting but not limited to textbooks, research projects, group discussions and the occasional but most effective private tutelage from my parents. Intellectual discourse was encouraged and non-academically, public schooling saw me through weekly etiquette classes consisting of how to place cutlery in fine dining and how to walk with poise, projects about using recycled materials to illustrate the human genome, ballroom dancing lessons, learning golf and Brazilian martial arts in physical education, organization of humanitarian activities overseas, and perhaps these are regarded as top tier education in Singapore nowadays. However, these multiple activities failed in the least: none of them "made me wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus." In the final analysis, they could probably be described as much ado about nothing without any biblical instruction

PUBLIC SCHOOLING AND OUR

SPIRITUAL SEPARATION

>> Sis Julia

underlying these activities. In fact, not only was there no instruction, there was at least once or twice when the 10 commandments were put alongside the Islamic quran for a respectable debate on the positive values one could learn from each religion and the need to “understand where others are coming from”, much typical of post-modernism.

But I am blessed with godly parents who refused to let me go for school activities on Sundays and I recall, were absolutely furious with the fact that my Christian uniformed group organized a weekend camp to watch a midnight movie on Saturday night. Parents are the cornerstone in education and indeed, while I did not have my parents to teach me how every scientific fact proclaims God’s attributes, I was taught valuable principles through talking to my mother every day once I got home and application time for these principles would begin the next day as I went to school. Simple discussion topics from what I learnt in school to what I had for recess that day not complete without anecdotal sharing from my mother helped me cope with the multiple stressors in school and put into perspective what was important and would last for eternity. Every day, breakfast was prepared on the table which we would have together and we would depart to school only after a prayer and a reminder as we hurriedly ran out of the house, “Remember, Pro Rege !”

My parents also placed great emphasis on going to youth group and church meetings. To me then, going for youth group was a much coveted opportunity as it was an avenue to spend more time with the older youth, many of whom I respected and had affection for. Ridiculous as it may sound, I even threw a tantrum over not being able to

go for the youth camp when my older sister could because I felt that it was unfair I was born just 2 years late! I remember in particular each Saturday where it would be made convenient for my sister and I to go for youth group as my father would send us to church (which was 3 bus rides and 1.5 hours away from home).

How to maintain spiritual separation?

Since secondary school, I preferred to share my beliefs and transparently discuss my beliefs with my friends and teachers in school. I felt that it was easier that way to explain my disagreement with ideas that were taught in philosophy lessons where we learnt about Chang Tzu’s butterfly dream (which of course has direct relations to Buddhism). Many a debate with a staunch atheist taught me the truth that God needed to “open their heart” as He did for Lydia (Acts 16:14).

“I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.” – Romans 12:1, 2

My interpretation of not being “conformed to this world” included wearing the stipulated length of pinafore and wearing high socks according to the school rules which nowadays certainly would cause one to stick out like a sore thumb. I am not sure if any of you are familiar with draw strings that make blouses look very long and rolling up of the skirt’s waist margin so that they can be rolled down just before the morning dress check. Obeying the rules certainly allowed a more stress-free school life without the need to look out for prefects, discipline mistresses or go for

detention classes. It also exemplified obedience to the fifth commandment which the Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 104 explains as submission to “all in authority over me...since it pleases God to govern us by their hand”. In my secondary school days, it was also all the rage to play truant whenever a school activity was deemed not important in the light of passing examinations. While my friends were readily asking their parents to write in to the teacher complaining of inexplicable stomach aches and menstrual cramps, I was glad my mother never entertained any of such of my requests. In retrospect, I can see how microscopic a view that was!

Also, living in the last days, there was and continues to be a great temptation to be heady and high-minded, boosters and lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God. There is no secret formula but God has promised a way that we may escape the temptation and it is right there in 2 Timothy 3. It involves the study of the Holy Scripture and the humility to be reproved and corrected by it.

I shall end with a motto from my medical school “not the pride of knowledge, but the humility of wisdom” that can only be obtained by study of the Holy Scriptures.

HOW TO STUDY RIGHT IN THIS NEW YEAR

>> Bro Jonah

The year 2012 begins, and along with it comes a whole new year of studying for our covenant children. The Singapore education system today demands much more time and effort from students, as compared to that of several years ago. The syllabuses for examinations have been changing continuously. Students always have to be at the edge of their seats getting ready for any drastic change in content for the various subjects being taught in school. I can even be bold to predict that the level of intensity in education will increase almost exponentially in the coming years.

As Christian students, we are called by God to understand the knowledge about His creation. This is because Proverbs 3:19-20 says, “The LORD laid the earth’s foundations, by understanding he set the heavens in place; by his knowledge the deeps were divided, and the clouds let drop the dew”.

In this article I will attempt to provide advice for children in CERC by giving certain ideas of how to be faithful covenant children of God in their calling as students. I will be touching on three points with regards to the life as a Christian student. First, the importance of seeking God; second, the issue of procrastination; and finally, the need for diligence and motivation from the Word of God.

It is important to know that nothing can take the place of God. And so it is the same with our education. Before we start studying our books, it is necessary to pray to God to lead and guide us, to clear our minds of all distractions and temptations that motivate us to study with intentions other than to glorify God. A prayer to God will help us to be focused, and the Lord will provide us strength and wisdom as we study to glorify Him. Oftentimes, we fail to pray and talk to God before we begin to open our books, and we end up glorifying ourselves as our thoughts and desires are all directed at ourselves instead of God. We forget that God is the Father of all wisdom.

For the LORD giveth wisdom: out of his mouth cometh knowledge and understanding. He layeth up sound wisdom for the righteous: he is a buckler to them that walk uprightly (Proverbs 2:6-7).

We owe all our wisdom to God. All the sciences that we study and discover in school, the mathematical theories we prove, the languages that we use as we argue in essays, the desirable techniques to draw in art classes, all come and will continue to come from the hand of our almighty God who made the heavens and the earth. It is only right that we give all glory and honour to God alone.

Now, you would agree with me that procrastination is probably the most counterproductive habit that many people possess. Its force is so immense that it can hinder you from following your study schedule promptly. It is sad that many of us have the tendency to procrastinate. The dangers of procrastination are aplenty. One very grave danger is that it can cause you to delay studying the word of God regularly! Bringing this into the context of education, procrastination can be very destructive as it causes you to feel stressed, to be unproductive, and often times to feel guilty that you are not able to keep up with your study plan.

Boast not thyself of tomorrow; for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth. (Prov. 27:1)

This verse explicitly tells us that we should never depend on future time. It will be foolish to do so. The reason why we should not behave ourselves as though

the morrow were our own is that, indeed, it is not; we are not sure of it; we have no hold of future time; we know not whether we shall see the morrow. Hence, we ought to behave ourselves every day, as though we had no dependence on any other. If you tend to push your work a day further each day, the only reason can be that you are neglecting the responsibilities which must be done in that day, and it leads to sin against God.

We must manage our time wisely. If we do not do so, it inevitably fills up with anxiety and worry. If you have a class tomorrow on a topic which you are weak in, and you are panicky because you are not prepared, then you have to ask yourself, “Was there no ample time to study? Or was it due to plain laziness and procrastination?” It should be very clear that spiritual activities such as youth and prayer meetings must never be cited as a reason why you are not prepared for your school work. These spiritual activities are means by which you grow in God’s grace, and should never be neglected at the expense of your studies. This leads us to look into the issue of time management. Our time is a very precious resource given by God, and if we were to waste it away, then we are wasting the resources which He has given us, and we bear a bad testimony as His children.

It is thus advisable to work out a study schedule. God has given us 24 hours a day, with about 8 hours to be used for resting. For the rest of the 16 hours available, we have to seek the wisdom of God to use them for our spiritual growth and our studies. Priority goes to the church, and the remaining time can be well divided to be used for our studies. To be well disciplined, we will have to, by the grace of God, consistently adhere to our schedule. We will then be less vulnerable to the great waves of procrastination. Diligence is of great importance in your studies, just like how one should be diligent in studying the word of God. II Timothy 2:15:

Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.

It is our primary responsibility to be diligent to rightly divide the word of truth. With this similar mindset, we should also be diligent in our studies for the sole purpose of God’s kingdom. We must never be lazy. If not, we will end up like the sluggard who “gets nothing”. Proverbs 13:4:

The soul of the sluggard craves and gets nothing, while the soul of the diligent is richly supplied.

The Word of God as found in scriptures should be the sole driving force for us to study. And as we do so, we must be conscientiousness to pay proper attention to the content of the study, and not let our minds wander away thinking about the next activity lined up in our schedule. Good Christian literature can be picked up and read when we take a break from our studies.

In conclusion, studying what God has revealed in His creation must be done in the right manner. Let us continue to pray and seek guidance from God, who rules over His whole creation in His sovereignty. Let us also remember that all wisdom comes from God, and none from man. With that, may all praise and glory go to God alone!

(1) Dear Young People,

You will recall that in the last installment I talked about the weaknesses of hymn singing in the worship services. Hymns in themselves are not necessarily bad, for there are some good hymns that express Biblical truths. My wife will often play hymns on the piano, and sometimes, when we are travelling together, we will sing some of our favorite hymns. But the songs we sing for worship are preferably the Psalms.

It seems as if this is what Paul had in mind when he wrote about singing in his letters to the Ephesians and Colossians. In Ephesians he wrote: “And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit; Speaking to yourselves in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord” (Eph. 5:18, 19). To the Colossians he wrote, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord” (Col. 3:16).

I am personally convinced that Paul has reference to the Hebrews Psalter, which is the book of Psalms. It has been persuasively argued by commentators that “psalms, hymns and spiritual songs” are different kinds of Psalms that are found in the book of Psalms. Second, both texts speak of “singing to the Lord.” While we do that or at least should do that in all our singing, we are specifically doing that in corporate worship when we gather on the Lord’s Day as Christ’s church. Thirdly, the Psalms are especially written to “sing to ourselves,” for the Psalms are God’s word to us, and when we sing them we sing God’s word to ourselves.

But the Psalms are also, as Paul said,

means of teaching and admonishing one another – again, with the word of God. This is a characteristic of the Psalms. In some instances, just singing them together means that we remind each other of what God has done for us, or what he calls us to do. Psalter number 357, verse 2 is this kind of Psalm.

The Lord in greatly blessing us Before the world his power displays, Yea, great things God has done for us, And filled our hearts with joy and praise.

Psalms in which we teach and admonish each other are quite plentiful. Look, for example, at Psalter numbers 175, 372, 264, 174, 125. You will be able to find others on your own. Let me quote just one in which the saints, called the bride of Christ, remind each other of their blessedness and calling as Christ’s bride.

O Royal Bride, give heed, And to my words attend; For Christ the King forsake the world...And every former friend. Thy beauty and thy grace Shall then delight the King; He only is thy rightful Lord, To Him thy worship bring.

It is evident, of course, that one must sing with his understanding. That is, one must sing being fully aware of the meaning of the words one is singing. We become familiar with the songs, and we sort of sing them without giving any thought to what we are saying. But when we sing with the understanding, the words come alive.

The story has been told me that at a rehearsal of the oratorio, “The Messiah,” the soprano soloist was singing that soaring solo of the words of Job: “I know that my Redeemer liveth” Suddenly the director stopped the whole orchestra and the soloist; and, turning to the soloist with a sad look on his face, he said to her, “Do you really believe what you are singing?” She responded, “Yes, I do.” He answered,

“Well then, sing it that way.” And the music was started again. When she had finished there was not a dry eye in the orchestra and among the other soloists.

A Friday night a few weeks ago we were together talking about the description of Satan and the Antichrist. These were not pretty pictures that Revelation was painting for us. After the meeting, we sang 126.

God is our refuge and our strength, Our ever present aid. And therefore though the earth remove, We will not be afraid; Though hills amidst the seas be cast, Though foaming waters roar, Yes, though the mighty billows shake The mountains on the shore. The nations raged, the kingdoms moved, But when His voice was heard The troubled earth was stilled in peace Before His mighty word. The Lord of Hosts is on our side, Our safety to secure; The God of Jacob is for us A refuge strong and sure. Be still and know that I am God O'er all exalted high; The subject nations of the earth My name shall magnify. The Lord of Hosts is on our side Our safety to secure; The God of Jacob is for us A refuge strong and sure.

After the meeting one of those present said to me, “What a comfort in the words of that song!” You see: the saints sing those words to each other in singing them together. They remind each other that they are safe in their God’s keeping.

But there is more about the Psalms that makes them very precious. I and my wife often refer to them as a “spiritual biography.” By that expression we mean that the Psalms are a biography of every single child of God. But they are not a biography of what happens to each of us in our homes, school, churches and life in the world. This is something biographies do. I have read many biographies in my life, such as



McLaughlin's biography of Harry Truman or Dabney's biography of "Stonewall" Jackson, the great southern Civil War general. These tell us about the man of whom they are writing: who he was, what kind of a person he was, what he did, why he did what he did, how he lived, how he died, etc. The Psalms are, however, a spiritual biography. That is different. A spiritual biography describes the spiritual life of a child of God in the world.

(2) Dear Young People,

You will recall that last time I mentioned that the Psalms are so very useful and relevant for singing because in them one finds a "spiritual biography" of every Christian. It was only the other day when my wife and I were reading a Psalm (I do not recall which one we were reading) when at the end she said, with something like amazement in her look, "We can always find ourselves in the Psalms!" How true that is.

But we find ourselves in the Psalms as Christians. The Psalms are for the people of God, not for everyone. It reminds me of an incident in the life of a minister. He was speaking on the infallible inspiration of Scripture. During the question hour, one young and cocky university student, mockingly said to him, "How can you talk about a Bible that is word for word God's word, when the Bible is full of mistakes, contradictions and obvious falsehoods?" The minister replied, "You cannot understand because you are opening someone else's mail." He meant, of course, the Bible is God's letter to his people and you are not one of God's people.

The Psalms are a "spiritual" biography. They describe a Christian in every part of his life. I want to show that to you presently, but first there is another point I want to make. When you stop to think about it, there are three different people who are singing these Psalms.

The first singer is David, or the other Psalmists: Moses (Psalm 90), Asaph (Psalm 73), Ethan (Psalm 89), and others. Some we do not even know. Psalm 137 was sung while Judah was in captivity in Babylon; but we do not know who wrote it. David wrote most of them. When these poets and sweet singers were writing these songs, they were writing about their own experiences and describing their own spiritual life. David

was sitting by his father's sheep when he wrote Psalm 23; and he was running away from Saul and tried to find a place of safety in Philistia when he sang Psalm 34. Most of the Psalms were composed for singing in the temple by choirs. The priests in the temple sang these songs. That is what is meant by "a Psalm for the sons of Asaph." Sometimes these priests would even sing antiphonally as, for example, Psalm 136, in which song one choir of priests would sing the first line of each verse, and another choir would respond with the words, "For his mercy endureth forever."

Some Psalms were written for special occasions. Psalm 72 was written to be sung at Solomon's coronation. Psalm 68 was sung at the time when the ark was taken from the house of Obbedom and brought to Jerusalem. Psalm 84 was sung by the people of Israel on their way to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover or some other feast day. As the crowd, which started in the northern tribes, moved southward, people from other tribes would join them and the song grew louder and more joyful the closer they got to Jerusalem. Psalm 137 was the sad and plaintive song of the captives in far-off Babylon. Their captors wanted them to sing the songs of Zion. But they could not, and they hung their harps on the willows. Why couldn't they sing the songs of Zion? Well, simply because all the songs of Zion spoke of Christ who was to come; and Christ couldn't come if the church was in Babylon. Micah had said that Christ had to be born in Bethlehem, and Bethlehem was in Palestine. And so:

O, Zion fair, God's holy hill, Wherein our God delights to dwell, Let my right hand forget her skill If I forget to love thee well. If I do not remember thee Then let my tongue from utterance cease, If any earthly joy to me Be dear as Zion's joy and peace (Psalter 379).

One more thing about the Psalms is important. Throughout the Psalms reference is made to the enemies of the Psalmist or of the nation. These were, of course, the enemies that surrounded Israel and destroyed the land and the people. Moab, Edom, Syria and Philistia were such nations. But they are also, in the typical Old Testament, the enemies of every child of God: physical and spiritual. David recognized this too and often spoke of these enemies

as threats to his soul. He calls them threats to his soul because they were spiritual threats that sometimes nearly destroyed him spiritually.

If we know these things and are acquainted with the history and culture of the Israelites then every time we sing these songs, we think of Israel and the saints in the Old Testament church, and we sing with them. But there is another One who sang these Psalms. And that is our Lord Jesus Christ. There are really three reasons for this.

The first reason is that the Psalms were infallibly inspired by the Spirit of Christ. The result is that Christ himself is speaking in the Psalms. There are certain Psalms, where Scripture itself refers to Christ. This does not mean that these Psalms do not refer to the Psalmists, but they refer to the Psalmists by referring to Christ – and reminding us that the Psalmists could speak Christ's words, because they belong to Christ. (I will come back to this later)

It is striking and important that there were two main events in Christ's life of which the Psalms especially speak of: Christ's sufferings and his glorification. The Psalms do this because Christ sufferings and glorification were the two most important events in his life. Philippians 2:6-11 tell us this in a very beautiful and powerful way. Nevertheless, other events in Christ's life are also referred to. There is even a rather oblique reference to Christ's lowly birth in Psalm 8:6: "Thou hast made him a little lower than the angels." This refers, of course, to Adam in Paradise, but Scripture tells us that it also refers to Christ. Hebrews 2 is emphatic about this. In verses 6, 7 the Scriptures say, "But one in a certain place (That is, the Psalmist in Psalm 8) testified, saying, "What is man that thou are mindful of him? Or the son of man, that thou visitest him? Thou madest him a little lower than the angels." And in verse 9 the text says, "But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death." Both in the Psalms and in Hebrews 2 these references are followed by a description of Christ's exaltation.

So, in the birth of our Lord in Bethlehem, Christ was made a little lower than the angels.

A Proper Perspective on Christian Courtship VI

>> Bro Aaron Lim

The Role of Parents

"Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it". Proverbs 22:6

The blessedness of covenant truth is that God's covenant friendship extends to believers and their seed. God purposes to save not only individuals but families in their organic lines as well. He does so by instructing covenant parents to teach their children His ways, raising them up in the fear of Jehovah. As covenant parents discharge their parental duties faithfully, covenant children grow up in the consciousness of their salvation in Christ and their membership in the Church of God. In so doing God's people are saved in the lines of their generations.

Part of covenant instruction in the home involves teaching young teenagers what covenant courtship involves. Covenant parents play a crucial role in the way their children engage in courtship. In the first place covenant parents teach their children what kind of partners they should choose. On one occasion I had a conversation with an elder of a Reformed Church. During the course of the conversation I asked him what kind of Christian he would want his children to marry. His reply was that he would be satisfied so long as their partners are godly and sincere Christians.

The Reformed believer questions: what is the measure of godliness and sincerity? I believe the answer lies in 2 parts:

1. A biblical confession of God as He reveals Himself in Scripture
2. A godly Christian walk according to his confession

These two fundamental aspects make up the Reformed believer's understanding of godliness and sincerity. It is necessary to confess God rightly. This means knowing who God is as He reveals Himself in His Word. It means confessing Him as the Sovereign One who governs and purposes all things according to His counsel. It means confessing that cardinal truths of Scripture as expressed in the 5 points of Calvinism and the Three Forms of

Unity.

When a believer confesses God rightly, then he will be able to live aright with God. He will walk in humility as he acknowledges the absolute sovereignty of God in his life. He will love God and his neighbour aright when he appreciates God's eternal and predestined love for him in Christ. The truth of God is the moral compass by which a Christian directs his life and the course of his courtship.

In the next place covenant parents are living examples for their children to follow. How covenant parents relate to each other and govern the life of the home will affect their children's way of managing their own courtships. A young man whose father rules over his wife and the home in love will likewise learn how to lead his girlfriend in love and care for her needs. A young girl whose mother obediently submits to her husband will learn the importance of submitting to her boyfriend as God's divine will for her. As covenant children learn from their parents, so they will learn how to treat and live with their partners in courtship.

Covenant parents also serve to be good counsellors for their children. As their children are engaged in courtship they will be able to supply them with a wealth of advice from their own experiences. The problems and heartaches arising from courtship are not few, neither are they all easy to solve. Sometimes breakups happen which cause great emotional turmoil to the individual. Covenant parents are placed there by God to comfort and ease the pain of their children. Godly counsel from covenant parents therefore serves to make our children wiser and better equipped to manage courtship.

The dangers for covenant parents are not insignificant. They can sometimes be indifferent to the relationships their children are involved in, preferring to let them handle things completely on their own. Such parents care little about who their children are dating, or the spiritual character of their partners. I find it very tragic that Reformed parents would allow their covenant children to

date unbelievers outside the church or Christians from vastly different denominations. We risk losing our faith when we allow our children to date flippantly. The Reformed faith insists on unity in the faith between covenant couples. Covenant parents must do all in their power to warn their young people about the consequences of dating outside the church.

Sometimes overly-concerned parents can be too stringent in managing their children who are engaged in courtship. They want to decide who their children date. They pry into every single detail of their children's relationships and sometimes intrude upon their privacy. This is inappropriate as it creates unnecessary fear and suspicions in the minds of the young people. It also restricts the proper development of a covenant couple who are learning to live independently as one flesh.

It is necessary, therefore, to establish trust between covenant parents and their children. The young people must be given sufficient, guided freedom to pursue the course courtship with their covenant partners. When trust is established they will not hesitate to share all the abundant details of their courtship with their parents, seek their godly counsel and follow after them.

In a small congregation like CERC, dating within the church can sometimes be a tricky situation. A couple who begin dating is naturally brought under the spotlight and scrutiny of the congregation. Members of the congregation can sometimes be rash to point out the flaws, incompatibility and weaknesses of the couple. Such criticism is most unwise and harmful to the couple's relationship. It is necessary that the people of God exercise love and wisdom towards the young couple, encouraging them in the way of the Lord.

Another problem arises when the parents of the couple sinfully assess each other's child. They set ridiculous standards for their child's partner according to their misconceptions on what a good married life ought to be. This is sinful and it injures the

unity amongst fellow members of the congregation. Covenant parents are to be concerned, above all else, the spiritual character of the young person their child is dating. They must insist on the spiritual element of the relationship. The person whom their child dates must be godly, one who fears God and who will fulfil his calling in the church and home. Such a person must provoke their own child to godliness and union with Christ. Covenant courtship is spiritual.

Covenant parents are ultimately responsible for who their children date. God has given them the authority to instruct and discipline them according to His ways, all in obedience to Him. Although the common excuse from many parents is that their children are already young adults with minds of their own, it nevertheless remains their sacred duty to discipline them. Covenant parents are authoritative influences for their children. In love for their souls, covenant parents must exhaust themselves and all their resources to ensure that their children engage in godly relationships.

In ensuring that their covenant children enter into godly relationships, covenant parents preserve the precious faith that God has entrusted to them and their children. Children are an heritage, says the Scriptures. This means that the children whom God entrusts to us to raise are living testimonies of God's faithfulness to us. For them we must labour and train up to the end that they will be well-equipped to carry on the faith of our fathers.

In the final sense I think covenant parents carry the sacred responsibility of envisioning what the church should be in the generations after them. Do I, as a covenant parent, want the church in my children's generations to be strong? Do I want my children to continue in the faith that the LORD has entrusted to me? This is indeed a heavy responsibility which the LORD will require our accountability in the day of His coming.

If we prize the Reformed faith, we must teach our children to marry in the unity of the Reformed faith.

The Church Our Mother

"Where there is no vision, the people perish". – Proverbs 29:18

The goal of God's covenant friendship

with us is His glory. He befriends us for His glory. He saves us for His glory. The Church is His glory. For her He gives Himself; loves, cherishes and nourishes her according to His marvellous perfection. We experience this warmth and tenderness because we are part of the Church. We are members of His covenant.

As a mother who feeds and nourishes her child, so does the faithful church feed and care for her members. The child of God is duty-bound to honour and to promote the cause of the Church in the world. For the Church he must spend and be spent. For her he must be prepared to lay down his life. His pursuits in this life must revolve around the Church as he seeks her welfare.

A covenant young person seeks courtship and marriage to promote the welfare of the church. Covenant courtship is not meant solely for his personal desires but for the Church of Jesus Christ. When godly marriages and families are established, the church is strengthened in her cause. Happy covenant families testify of the goodness of God. His truth is developed and promoted as it is passed down from one generation to the next.

If our young people love the Church, they must be concerned about her welfare as they enter into courtship. They must ask: does my relationship with my partner promote the cause of the Church? Does my courtship properly reflect God's covenant love for His Church?

CERC is placed in a unique position in Singapore to serve the cause of God's covenant. It is necessary for our parents and leaders to treat the covenant courtship of our young people seriously because they are the church of tomorrow. If we are lax in our preaching and instruction on covenant courtship, our young people will find partners outside the church. If parents fail to instruct their children on what covenant courtship involves, they will love pleasure more than God in their relationships. Their relationships will be carnal, worldly, pleasure-seeking and spiritually empty. This spells destruction for the church of tomorrow.

We must be prepared to sacrifice the Reformed faith if we allow our children to marry outside the church. When

they marry without being doctrinally and spiritually united, the faith of the church is weakened. The faith of the next generation grows weaker. The Reformed faith loses its distinctive power and character. It gradually grows cold, abandoned and despised. This paves the road for false doctrines to creep into the church and spirals her into apostasy.

In contrast, there is hope if we treat covenant courtship with its due biblical importance. If we teach our children to date and marry in the unity of the Reformed faith, there is hope for the next generation. Our children, being spiritually united, can then develop the faith entrusted to them. They will echo the voice of their fathers and confess the beautiful Reformed truth with all its power and sharpness.

As covenant young people, it is our most high privilege and honour to carry on the faith of our fathers. Courtship is a time where we fulfil this faithful calling to God. I know the insistence on dating in the unity of our faith places many of us in difficult positions. But if we love the church and our Reformed faith, this is necessary.

I know it seems difficult to date somebody in the church that we have known all our lives. Perhaps when we know so much of the person we are familiar with his flaws and weaknesses. This has the natural tendency to put off dating that person. I believe we ought to place our perspectives in a spiritual focus when we consider this. Is it not an advantage to me that I have known this boy or girl all my life? I am very familiar with his background, family, siblings, friends, character, personality, habits and goals in life. True; he may have his own set of flaws as much as I do. But he believes in the same faith and loves the same God that I do. He confesses the same doctrines that I have been brought up in and hold so dearly to my soul. Should not this unity in the faith thrill us enough to date within the church?

When we date and marry in the unity of the faith, we promote the cause of God's covenant. We reflect our spiritual unity with Him who is our covenant Friend. May the LORD so teach us as covenant parents and young people to approach covenant courtship to the end that we may enjoy His covenant blessings!

>> Bro Tian Loong

B . A . P . T . I . S . M

Among those born around the same age as me in the church, I must say that not many get to experience adult baptism. Rightly so, for many were born into the church by reason of their believing parents. That is their privilege, by the good pleasure of God, to be children of believing parents. However, as for me, the means of my salvation is different : I was grafted into the faith out of unbelief, out of heathendom and thus, the different privilege to be baptized as an adult.

Remembering the days of my unbelief, I am utterly ashamed. I had a wide variety of superstition and idolatrous beliefs. With a carnal mind, I heeded the advice to be "cautious" against the Christian religion. Needless to say, with a carnal mind, I myself was bitter toward the Christian religion and so I remember the days when I was violently objecting to my cousin's sharing of the "gospel"—even though it was an Arminian "gospel". However, all that is to show me more clearly the unfailing power and grace of God in Jesus Christ to save His people from their sins. Thus, I remember also, in the deep distresses and troubles in my heart, I had wanted to know God. By the sovereign power of God, I believed that there is a God (and not gods) and I had wanted to know the God of Christianity despite all the religions available. I am still amazed when I think about this. However, I had wanted to know God for all the wrong reasons – namely for my own future and my own benefits. All these testify to me that God is extremely patient in teaching His people His ways.

That was not all. By the leading hand of God, I asked my cousin if I could go to church with him, to his pleasant surprise. So I followed him to his Pentecostal church. Even there the Lord was teaching me, in spite of all the heresies of the Pentecostals. Primarily, I had access to the Bible and when reading the New Testament (of which God opened the scriptures to me), the case for God's sovereign election in Jesus Christ was unmistakable. Being a new attendee to church, I asked my cousin and he told me the Arminian position, which was the position of that church – and I trusted them. I was new; how could I have known better? I thought every church taught faithfully

the bible.

To cut the long story short, 3.5 years later, I overheard a conversation between Milton and another friend as the friend explained TULIP. And I thought, "that is what the Bible is teaching!" So one thing led to another and I got to know of the Reformed faith. And as the preaching of that church got so diluted that the only positive thing at every sermon were the few verses flashed in the power point slide, it became obvious that I had to leave, among other reasons. These were the reasons: 1) Man-centeredness 2) Diluted gospel 3) Arminianism 4) Disorderly worship contrary to 1 Cor 14:26-33 due to the abuse of "gifts" 5) Emotionally manipulating music.

All these testify, without a doubt, to the power, grace and patience of our great and omnipotent God in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Baptism is the testimony that God indeed saves me and will continue saving me.

A Necessary and Joyful Desire

Baptism is a necessary desire for all who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the only savior for their sins. As recorded in Acts 2:38, "...Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost." Therefore, all who repent of their sins and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ are also to be baptized as an act of obedience to the command of God. Furthermore, throughout the New Testament, and especially the book of Acts, it is evident that whenever people believe, they were baptized.

It ought also to be a joyful desire, just as the saints in the book of Acts were: "Then they that gladly received his word were baptized..." (Acts 2:41). And how can it not be? For baptism symbolizes the cleansing of our sins and justification before God, so it ought to be a joyous occasion. Belgic Confession article 23 (Justification) calls the remission of sins "to be the happiness of man, that God imputes righteousness to him without works," just as Psalm 32 and Romans 4 expresses the very same thing.

Since the Baptism form states that "... baptism is an ordinance of God, to seal unto us and to our seed his covenant;

therefore it must be used for that end, and not out of custom or superstition," let us examine the meaning and significance of Baptism.

The meaning of Baptism

Baptism is a sacrament, and a sign and seal of God's covenant. It symbolizes and declares the following works of God:

1) Regeneration

In John 3, we see that regeneration is the work that makes us "born-again". Regeneration has a two-fold effect on the sinner. If he is born again, he necessarily dies to his first birth – the birth by which he is utterly corrupt. Thus baptism is both life and death: the newness of life in the resurrected life of Christ and the death of our old nature as Christ himself died for our sins. Romans 6:3-4 makes this point, "Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life." Thus, by being baptized, I testify that God kills my old man which constantly hates Him and gives me a new heart whereby I now live unto Christ.

Other scriptural references: Col 2:11-13 and Gal 3:26-27

2) Cleansing away of our sins

Just as water cleanses us from bodily filth and dirt, so water symbolizes what Christ's blood accomplishes for His people – that all their sins are washed away and no more imputed unto them.

3) Entrance into the covenant of God

Baptism corresponds to circumcision (cf Col 2:11-13). Therefore as God commanded Abraham in Gen 17:10 "This is my covenant, which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after thee; Every man child among you shall be circumcised." And v14 "And the uncircumcised man child whose flesh of his foreskin is not circumcised, that soul shall be cut off from his people; he hath broken my covenant." Therefore, to everyone who believes and is saved from the kingdom of darkness, baptism is a necessary desire to express that God has entered him into the covenant.

Since the covenant is manifested in the instituted and visible church, the Baptism Form asks the following questions pertaining to the church:

“Thirdly. Dost thou believe that Christ... is given thee of God, to be thy Savior, and that thou dost receive by this faith, remission of sins in his blood, and that thou art made by the power of the Holy Ghost, a member of Jesus Christ and his Church?” & “Fourthly. Dost thou assent to all the articles of the Christian religion, as they are taught here, in this Christian Church, according to the Word of God; and purpose steadfastly to continue in the same doctrine to the end of thy life; and also dost thou reject all heresies and schisms, repugnant to this doctrine, and promise to persevere in the communion of the Christian Church, not only in the hearing of the Word, but also in the use of the Lord’s Supper?”

We see here that baptism requires me to join myself to a true church where the pure doctrines of the scripture are taught in their purity to the highest and maximum degree possible.

“Fifthly. Hast thou taken a firm resolution always to lead a Christian life; to forsake the world and its evil lusts, as is becoming the members of Christ and his Church; and to submit thyself to all Christian admonitions?”

Certain concerns

In discussions regarding the doctrine of baptism, it does seem that one question always seems to appear. “What if the one baptized is not an elect?” and along the same lines, “Haven’t there been cases of people who were baptized but left the faith totally?” Although in these discussions the subject was not on my baptism, since we are on this topic, I shall take the liberty to give an answer.

Simply put, the focal point is not where it ought to be. In placing the focal point on the human, such questions would arise. It ought not to be so much about the person baptized, as it is about God. Although I do personally believe that all the benefits of salvation are granted me for the sake of Christ alone, nevertheless, the focus ought to be on God: that God saves, regenerates and graft His people into the covenant, in Jesus Christ.

An exhortation to desire baptism, quickly; I believe this is what the Salt Shakers Committee had in mind when

asking me to write on this topic. By quickly, I do not mean rashly. However, there might be those who are believing and convicted of the truth of the scriptures as expressed in the doctrines and confessions of the church, but are delaying their baptism (or confession of faith, for that matter) perhaps for fear of not being able to live up to the vows at baptism. Therefore, let us now consider the vows and questions asked in the baptism form.

First. Dost thou believe in the only true God, distinct in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, who has made heaven and earth, and all that in them is, of nothing, and still maintains and governs them, insomuch that nothing comes to pass, either in heaven or on earth, without his divine will? Comment: If you believe that this is true, then this is your belief whether baptized or not.

Secondly. Dost thou believe that thou art conceived and born in sin, and therefore art a child of wrath by nature, wholly incapable of doing any good, and prone to all evil; and that thou hast frequently, in thought, word and deed, transgressed the commandments of the Lord: and whether thou art heartily sorry for these sins? Comment: Same as the first question.

Thirdly. Dost thou believe that Christ, who is the true and eternal God, and very man, who took his human nature on him out of the flesh and blood of the Virgin Mary, is given thee of God, to be thy Savior, and that thou dost receive by this faith, remission of sins in his blood, and that thou art made by the power of the Holy Ghost, a member of Jesus Christ and his Church? Comment: same as the first and second question

Fourthly. Dost thou assent to all the articles of the Christian religion, as they are taught here, in this Christian Church, according to the Word of God; and purpose steadfastly to continue in the same doctrine to the end of thy life; and also dost thou reject all heresies and schisms, repugnant to this doctrine, and promise to persevere in the communion of the Christian Church, not only in the hearing of the Word, but also in the use of the Lord’s Supper? Comment: This is where responsibility steps in and perhaps is scary to the believer. However, consider this: responsibility is expected of you whether you are baptized or not. Insofar as we believe

that scripture is true, responsibility is laid upon us “to steadfastly continue in the same doctrine to the end of thy life; and also dost thou reject all heresies and schisms, repugnant to this doctrine, and promise to persevere in the communion of the Christian Church, not only in the hearing of the Word, but also in the use of the Lord’s Supper [which is unavailable to the unbaptized or those who have not made their confession of faith.]”

Fifthly. Hast thou taken a firm resolution always to lead a Christian life; to forsake the world and its evil lusts, as is becoming the members of Christ and his Church; and to submit thyself to all Christian admonitions? Comment: Perhaps there are those who are hesitant by fear of Christian admonitions and have yet to have a firm resolution to lead a Christian life. A possible train of thought would be, “Perhaps if I am not baptized, the church would never discipline me.” Consider this then: that insofar as we believe in the Truth, we are commanded to “lead a Christian life; to forsake the world and its evil lusts, as is becoming the members of Christ and his Church; and to submit thyself to all Christian admonitions,” baptized or not. Simply put, the lack of being baptized does not excuse us of responsibilities. And if we think that we may escape from admonition of the church, we know that there is a loving Father in heaven who chastises whom He loves.

Since being baptized or the lack thereof does not alter the responsibilities of a believer, why then should he desire baptism? Simply, because he denies himself of the means of grace available to strengthen him in his earthly walk. He denies himself of the physical partaking of the Lord’s Supper instituted to strengthen his faith and remembrance of the Lord. More importantly he denies the opportunity to give God the glory of saving him. Also, by delaying baptism, he refuses to express confidence that God’s faithfulness will preserve him in the faith.

What about those who are doubtful of their salvation or the truth of the scriptures as expressed in the confessions of the church? I encourage you to “make your calling and election sure” (2 Pet 1:10) as well as to spend all energy possible to study the scriptures and to see if what is taught in this church is true.

Much has been written about the life of John Calvin, especially in the last year or two with the celebration of the Genevan reformer's 500th birthday.

John Calvin: TOO YOUNG?

>> Bro Joshua Engelsma

This article is not intended to be an exhaustive examination of his entire life. There is already a wealth of material which does that. I would suggest that the interested young reader pick up Thea Van Halsema's easily accessible book, *This Was John Calvin*, or reread Prof. H. Hanko's *Portrait of Faithful Saints on Calvin*. The focus of this article is the astounding work of God in John Calvin when he was just a young man. Like his spiritual brothers Timothy and Athanasius, Calvin was used by God to perform astounding works at a very young age.

Calvin was born in the town of Noyon in northern France on July 10, 1509. (Martin Luther was already a young man of twenty-five at the time.) Calvin's mother died when he was just a young boy. His father Gerard, legal and financial advisor to the Catholic clergy in Noyon, later remarried. Thanks to his father's many connections, young John spent quite a bit of time with the sons of rich families in the area. Together they received the finest of educations. With these bourgeoisie boys, Calvin left Noyon and went to study in Paris sometime between the years 1521 and 1523. Calvin would have only been between the ages of twelve and fourteen at the time.

Calvin initial desire was to study to be a priest in the Catholic Church. Holding a church office could be a very lucrative

position in those days. His father, the church lawyer and accountant, could attest to that. But it was his father who told John to abandon the idea of studying for church office. Maybe Gerard saw the corruption and deceit that festered among the Catholic clergy. Or maybe he felt that his son could make more money as a lawyer. Either way, Calvin was soon on his way to a degree in law.

However, like most typical college students, Calvin's "major" changed once again. This time it was back to theology and the pursuit of church office. Calvin's father had died in 1531, so Calvin was no longer obligated to study law. He could freely pursue his first love: theology.

In 1531, Calvin was only twenty-two years old. The Protestant Reformation, at fourteen years of age, was even younger. Calvin no doubt knew about the Reformation and had heard the name Luther kicked around, but he had always seen himself as a loyal member of the Roman Catholic Church. But God changed all this. Listen to Calvin:

To this pursuit [the study of law—JDE] I endeavoured faithfully to apply myself, in obedience to the will of my father; but God, by the secret guidance of his providence, at length gave different direction to my course. And first, since I was too obstinately devoted to the superstitions of Popery to be easily

extricated from so profound an abyss of mire, God by a sudden conversion subdued and brought my mind to a teachable frame, which was more hardened in such matters than might have been expected from one at my early period of life.

God so worked in the heart of Calvin, that he forsook the cold, poisonous errors of Rome and grasped the heart-warming doctrines of the Reformation.

Calvin's new faith was not popular in his native France, a fact which he soon came to realize. Under the threat of persecution, Calvin was forced to flee France in 1533. He traveled throughout Europe for the next few years, studying and growing in his knowledge of the Word of God.

But Calvin was not just studying. He was writing too, writing what would become one of the greatest works of all time, a work that would shape the Reformed faith: the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Calvin wrote this statement of the true Christian faith in order to persuade the ungodly rulers of France to call a halt to the persecution. He wanted to make it clear to them that those whom they were persecuting and driving out of the country were not a political threat. He wanted to set forth in clear language what these Reformed men and women truly believed.

The first edition of the *Institutes*

John Calvin was a great man, a great man used by God to lead his beloved sheep out of the ravaging mouths of wolves and prepared by him for this work at a young age.

appeared in 1536, but Calvin probably had it finished already in 1535. Calvin wrote this bold, clear explanation of the truth when he was only twenty-six years old! Twenty-six! What makes this even more astounding, if that is possible, is the fact that Calvin had only been converted to the Reformed faith a few years before.

Was Calvin too young? Was he too inexperienced for such a task? From an earthly point of view it certainly seems like it. Of all people, a twenty-something-year-old man does not seem very qualified to write such a confession. Add to that the fact that he was only recently converted and it all seems quite preposterous. But Calvin was not too young, nor was he too inexperienced. God guided and directed the course of his entire life, thus preparing him to do this work when he was still just a young man.

After the publication of the immensely popular Institutes, Calvin became fairly well-known throughout Europe. This notoriety was at complete odds with Calvin's personality. By nature he was an introvert, a thinker, a scholar. He preferred the quiet study of the ivory tower as opposed to the glare of the limelight. He did not want to take up a public position of leadership against Rome. He hoped to remain hidden in the shadows.

This was not, however, God's plan for John Calvin. God had ordained him to be a mighty leader, and he used a fiery man by the name of William Farel to impress this upon young John. During 1536, Calvin ended up, in the good providence of God, spending the night in the city of Geneva, Switzerland. After a night's rest he intended to leave this city far behind. But Farel, well aware of Calvin's great abilities and his presence in the city, paid him a visit during the night. He asked Calvin to stay and help him reform Geneva. Calvin politely declined. Farel insisted. Calvin refused. Unwavering, Farel "strained every nerve to detain me" and "proceeded to utter an imprecation that God would curse my retirement, and the tranquillity of the studies which I sought, if I should withdraw and refuse to give assistance, when the necessity was so urgent." Calvin finally gave in and submitted to the request of Farel. He came to realize that God had much work for him to do

on behalf of the church.

After a few months of teaching in Geneva, young Calvin was ordained into the ministry there. He worked tirelessly alongside Farel trying to reform the Genevans in both doctrine and in life. Although the city had rejected Rome and declared herself for the Reformation, the people were not receptive to the reforms of Calvin and Farel. Tensions between the citizens and the pastors soon boiled over, and the two men were forced to leave Geneva. That was in April of 1538. Calvin was only twenty-eight.

We highlight the rest of Calvin's life only briefly. From Geneva Calvin eventually settled in the German city of Strasburg. He lived and labored there in peace for three years. There he met and married a God-fearing woman named Idelette de Bure. Those three years were the happiest times of Calvin's life. But God still had work for him to do in the city of Geneva. With a heavy heart, Calvin left Strasburg in 1541 and headed back to the pulpit in Geneva. He spent the rest of his life there preaching and teaching and reforming the church until his death on May 27, 1564.

John Calvin was a great man, a great man used by God to lead his beloved sheep out of the ravaging mouths of wolves and prepared by him for this work at a young age. Calvin was young. He was inexperienced. He was naturally bashful and repulsed by the spotlight. To all appearances, he was not cut out for this line of work. But in the eyes of God, Calvin was perfectly prepared for reformation. Sure, Calvin was young when he first took up his labors as a reformer. But, by God's grace, that did not hinder him. Calvin came to realize this later in life. Commenting on I Timothy 4:12 ("Let no man despise thy youth; but be thou an example of the believers..."), Calvin wrote these words: "Hence we learn that Timothy was still young, though he held a place of distinguished excellence among many pastors; and that it is a grievous mistake to estimate by the number of years how much is due to a person."

That was true of Timothy. It was true of Calvin, too. And it is true of us young people as well.

Believe it, young people!

"Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear: For our God is a consuming fire." Hebrews 12:28, 29.

let us have grace >> Paul Goh

Dear young people,

This epistle to the Hebrews was written with the purpose of calling the backsliding Hebrew Christians to return to God. They were in a very dangerous position for they were on the verge of rejecting Christ and returning to their former religion. And so the writer to the Hebrews (we are not certain who wrote this epistle) through his deep knowledge and experience of the Jewish religion of the Old Testament (its priesthood, its sacrifices, and the temple sacrifice) makes the urgent call for the Hebrew Christians to return to God.

You might be in the same position as these Hebrew Christians. You might be tempted by this sinful world with its promise of freedom from any constraints and enjoyment without any restraint. It is a serious matter for a covenant youth to return to the world. Like the Jews, you have been brought up in a covenant home, frequented the house of God all your life, heard the preaching of God's Word and seen the testimony of the Lord's goodness to the church. Having tasted and experienced all these wonderful blessings, it is a serious matter to turn your back on Christ. By this, you are rejecting Christ whom you have known. Therefore, the writer urgently calls upon the Hebrew Christians, "let us have grace", which is the main emphasis of these two verses. This exhortation is based upon the unshakable truth that we have received a kingdom which is unmoveable. And thus by this grace, we may serve God acceptably with the twin attitude of reverence and godly fear. And he adds a reason: for our God is a consuming fire. This reason serves as a warning for those who choose to ignore this exhortation.

The text begins with "wherefore". This is a conclusion that goes back to verse 25. With all seriousness, the writer exhorts the Hebrew Christians not to reject the one who spoke to them. And he cites an example in the history of Israel where the Jews did not take heed to the words of one who spoke on earth; how shall they escape if they reject the words of one who spoke from heaven? It is clear that the one who spoke to them was Moses, who called them not to make any graven images of God. But they refused and God judged the children of Israel for making a golden calf at the foot of Mount Sinai. The things of the kingdom of heaven cannot be shaken, and because we have received such an unmoveable kingdom, let us have grace.

The Exhortation

The exhortation is "let us have grace". This was the greatest need of the Hebrew Christians: to hold fast to their profession. Holding fast is greatly needed because they are at the point of returning to their former religion and rejecting what they have held on in the past. As such, the exhortation to these Hebrew Christians is "Let us have grace to hold fast to our profession". To have grace in this regard is to possess God's power to hold fast to our profession. We know grace as beauty, and

grace as God’s unmerited favour as we have received it through Christ; but more relevantly in this passage, we see that grace is also power. It is by the power of the Holy Spirit that the seed of God’s heavenly life was implanted in our hearts so that we are regenerated and we are given faith as a gift of God. By faith, we believe in Christ and receive all the salvation benefits that proceed from the death of Christ on the cross. Not only are we saved by the Holy Spirit’s power, we also need the divine power to live our Christian life. We need God’s enabling power to hold fast to our profession. Profession is the truths that we hold in godliness. To profess is to say the same thing; to say the same thing as what Scripture and the church teaches. You hold fast to your profession when you believe and continue to believe in the truths that have been summarised in the Three Forms of Unity. To hold fast to your profession is not only to believe but also to live out that truth with all conviction.

The Basis

The basis of this exhortation is founded upon the truth of the unmoveable kingdom. In this kingdom, God is the only supreme and sovereign ruler and we are his subjects. He rules over the nations of this world, all the events that take place in this world and even over the devil, sin and all evil. God is the sovereign king. And because God is the Ruler of this kingdom, it will not come today and be gone tomorrow. The mighty nations of the world have come and gone and are no more: the Babylonians, the Medes, the Persians, the Romans; but not the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is an everlasting kingdom. In verses 26 and 27, God will once again shake the heaven and earth, where this present world will pass away with a great noise and the elements shall melt with a great heat and the works will be burned up (2 Pet. 3:10).

The sceptre of this kingdom is righteousness and those who would belong to this kingdom must be righteous. But man is unrighteous because Adam and Eve disobeyed and rebelled against God’s commandment by eating of the forbidden fruit. Because Adam is the head of the whole human race, the whole human race also inherited the sin of Adam and therefore, all have sinned and are unrighteous. The fallen human race paved the way for the entrance of the Messiah, our Lord Jesus Christ. He came to fulfil God’s righteousness by His perfect obedience on the cross. We receive this kingdom through the exercise of our God-given faith in Jesus Christ. He was our substitute, our surety and our sacrifice for our sin.

If we receive a kingdom that cannot be shaken, we have even more reason to hold fast to our profession. It is pointless to hold fast the profession of a temporal kingdom. But, when the kingdom is everlasting, we ought by the power of grace, to hold on and persevere unto the end.

The Purpose

We have this means of this grace which enables us to hold fast to our profession so that we may serve God acceptably. Here the word “serve” is used in the context of worship. It describes the attitude of the believer who comes to God with the spirit of reverence and adoration to God. We do not offer bloody lambs and goats, but the sacrifice of thankful hearts and lips of praise to God. Our aim must be to serve God acceptably. The only way in which God will accept our worship is that our eyes of faith are turned toward the shed blood of the Lamb of God. This was how God accepted the sacrifice of Abel. He brought a bloody sacrifice of the lamb; for by it, he confessed that he was a sinner and he looked to the fulfilment of the Lamb to take away his sins. In this way, his sacrifice was accepted. But Cain’s sacrifice was rejected because he brought the fruit of the ground, declaring his works with pride and thinking that it would be acceptable in God’s sight. God will accept our service to Him when we offer it in the name of Christ, who died and redeemed us from our sins. Our service is not offered in our own name or in our own works but by the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.

Serving God acceptably is accompanied by a twin virtue of reverence and godly fear. You cannot serve God acceptably without reverence and godly fear. You are not serving God if you are mechanically following the order of worship in the church bulletin; singing, praying and hearing the preaching without the heart. You are not serving God acceptably if you regard the worship of God as a bore or chore and feel you have other better things to do; you are not serving God with reverence and godly fear. To serve God with reverence and godly fear means, in the first place, that you are filled with the sense of how awesome God is when you come to worship Him. You cannot help it that you are in awe of God for He will shake the heavens and earth one more time and you will receive the kingdom that God has reserved for you. In the second place, you will be filled with the sense of awe, when you realise that this awesome God comes down in the person of the only begotten Son of God to save you. Who am I that God wants to save me? And finally, in awe of this God, you come to worship Him not with thoughts that He is a consuming fire or that He will punish you and send you to hell but rather with tender thoughts of Him for loving and saving you by His grace.

Young people, this is what you greatly need: to learn to serve God. Begin by serving God in worship. I am not referring to playing the piano, or preparing the communion cups, but to the worshipping of God, who is the object of our adoration. By first serving God in worship, we will then know how we ought to serve Him: having a sense of conviction that we do not serve ourselves to get a name for ourselves, but we serve the true and living God and therefore, we serve with reverence and awe. Second, we will know that we are insufficient of ourselves to serve God (for how can puny men like us serve him?). And so we are taught that God’s grace is sufficient for us and our strength is made perfect in weakness (2 Cor. 12:8). Third, we learn to labour more abundantly than others but yet it is not us, but the grace of God in us (1 Cor. 15.10). Therefore, we attribute our labours completely to the grace of God.

Young people, pray for God’s enabling grace so that you will hold fast to your profession and worship God and serve Him with reverence and fear. Amen.

Our God-Centred Confession (Belgic Confession 1a)

>> Pastor Angus Stewart

Belgic Confession 1: There Is One Only God

We all believe with the heart, and confess with the mouth, that there is one only simple and spiritual Being, which we call God; and that he is eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, immutable, infinite, almighty, perfectly wise, just, good, and the overflowing fountain of all good.

“We All Believe With the Heart, and Confess With the Mouth ...”

The very first article of our Belgic Confession begins with its the longest “we believe” statement: “We all believe with the heart, and confess with the mouth ...” These words introduce not only article 1; in a sense, they introduce the whole confession.

The Belgic Confession's opening line also makes it clear that it is indeed a confession: “We all believe with the heart and confess ...” At the start of his introductory letter appended to the Belgic Confession, Guido de Brès quotes I Peter 3:15 which calls all believers to “be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you.” At the very end of his letter, de Brès cites five texts on the New Testament duty to confess the truth:

Matthew 10: Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven. But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven.

Mark 8 and Luke 9: Whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation; of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.

I Peter 3: Be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear.

Romans 10: With the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.

II Timothy 2: If we deny him, he also will deny us.

This creed is not called a “catechism” or “canons” (as are the other two documents in our Three Forms of Unity: the Heidelberg Catechism and the Canons of Dordt) but a “confession,” the Belgic Confession. It is emphatically a confession of faith, because it begins, “We all believe with the heart and confess with the mouth ...” This opening line suggests Romans 10:9-10, “If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.” Thus the full title of the Belgic Confession is the Belgic Confession of Faith.

This confession of faith is a communal or ecclesiastical confession of faith. It is not “I believe with the heart ...” although this is included. It is “We all believe with the heart ...” It is called the Belgic Confession because it is the confession of all the Reformed believers in the Lowlands. In his introductory letter, de Brès affirms that the confession is that of “more than one hundred thousand men maintaining and following the [Reformed] religion.” If this refers to men as opposed to women, you can double that number and add more (namely, children) to it.

It is also worth pointing out that our Belgic Confession (1561), in the decades succeeding its publication, was approved by various provincial and national synods as the confession of the Dutch Reformed churches. The Synod of Dordt (1618-1619) adopted the Belgic Confession, as well as a specific text for the document itself. Moreover, the Belgic Confession was approved by not only the Dutch theologians but also the British, German and Swiss delegates. The French Reformed would, no doubt, also have endorsed it (especially since the Belgic Confession was based on the French Confession), but the Roman Catholic Louis XIII refused to allow them to send a delegation to the great synod. Today, the Belgic Confession is the ecclesiastical confession of faith not only of churches in the Netherlands; it is the confession of churches in Singapore, the Philippines, N. Ireland, New Zealand, S. Africa and many more around the world.

True saints and true churches today still joyfully affirm, “We all believe with the heart and confess with the mouth ...

Part of our answer to the attack on creeds by the Anabaptists is that our confession is heart-felt or hearty: “We all believe with the heart ...” Believing with the heart includes, as de Brès states in his introductory letter, that we, Reformed Christians, are willing to die for the truth which is summed in this confession. De Brès also writes of our being persecuted for the truth's sake in the very last article of the Belgic Confession, article 37.

We do not practice, advocate or defend dead orthodoxy. We practice, promote and defend living orthodoxy. The truth makes us free, free to live unto God and serve Him (John 8:36). The words that Christ gives us—in the four gospel accounts and in the whole Bible, and which are summed in our Belgic Confession—are “spirit” and “life” (John 6:63). So the opening line of our Confession, “We all believe with the heart and confess with the mouth,” is our profession of living, saving faith in the true God revealed in Jesus Christ. For our God and for His truth, summarized in our Belgic Confession, we are willing to die.

The office-bearers in a Reformed church subscribe publicly to the Belgic Confession, using the “Formula of Subscription.” The members of a Reformed church affirm the Belgic Confession in the words of the “Form for Public Confession of Faith:” “Do you acknowledge the doctrines contained in the Old and New Testaments and in the Articles of the Christian faith [i.e., the Apostles' Creed as developed in the Three Forms of Unity, including the Belgic Confession] and taught here in this Christian church to be the true and complete doctrine of salvation?” This is the same “spirit of faith” that declares in the opening words of the Belgic Confession: “We all believe with the heart and confess with the mouth ...”

In publicly affirming our Belgic Confession, we are saying two things. First, we believe that this confession is true, that is, we have read it, compared it with Scripture and believe that this is indeed what the Bible teaches. Second, we promise that we will be true to this confession. The church's fellowship, peace and joy depends on an honest confession of the truth by her office-bearers and members. Heretical and dishonest office-bearers and members, in forsaking the truth and undermining the church's faithful confession (all the while seeking to cover up their departure), make shipwreck of the faith and selfishly inflict misery upon the whole congregation and denomination.

Different Views on the Centre of the Faith

The subject of the Belgic Confession's first article is God. This is significant and deliberate, for the Reformed faith is God-centred. The two main groups that the Belgic Confession opposes, the Romanists and the Anabaptists, were not, and are not, God-centred.

What is the centre of Roman Catholicism? The church is central for Rome. The Pope is at the top of that church's hierarchy. Through its seven sacraments—not two!—that false church claims to save its devotees so that they do not have to spend too long in purgatory. Roman Catholics are taught to believe Rome's doctrines not because they are in the Bible, but because the Roman church says so. In short, Rome is church-centred, in a false and destructive way, for the church essentially takes the place of God in their system.

What would you say is the central, key, distinctive feature of Anabaptism? Individualism and church independency are definitely traits of the Anabaptists. They, typically, oppose written, doctrinal creeds. In my studies on sixteenth-century Anabaptism, I have yet to find a single Anabaptist who believes in sovereign grace. They are all ardent free-willers. Calvin, at the end of the introduction to his Brief Instruction for Arming All the Good Faithful Against the Errors of the Common Sect of the Anabaptists, says that the Anabaptists “agree closely with the papists, holding a view directly repugnant to all the holy Scripture” on “several principle points of Christianity,” namely, “free will, predestination, and the cause of our salvation.”

Ironically, the Anabaptists saw themselves as the true Reformers. They reckoned that Luther, Zwingli and Calvin were only half-baked Reformers. Our Reformation worthies, according to Anabaptist historiography, only started to reform the church but then pulled back; it was the Anabaptists who really recovered the truth!

I believe that a good case can be made for practical and moralistic issues being central in the Anabaptist movement.

Contrary to the claims of some, the Anabaptists were without great theologians and lacked deep works of theology. Nor did the Anabaptists practice expository preaching or produce solid biblical commentaries. Anabaptism had its own distinctive ideas, but it was not a doctrinal movement and you could even say it was impatient with doctrine. It was characterized by world-flight; its strain was moralistic and legalistic.

The Schleithem Confession adopted by some Swiss Anabaptists near the German border in 1527, is a good example. The first article is on baptism, for the individualistic rejection of covenant or family baptism was a key tenet for them. Hence their name, Anabaptists or rebaptizers. The rest of the Schleithem Confession's seven articles are on the ban, the Lord's Supper, separation from the abomination (which is both the Roman Catholics and the Protestants!), pastors, the sword and the oath. The Anabaptists would say, “Yes, we believe in the Trinity and we believe in Jesus Christ and that salvation is in Him,” and so on, but the articles in this confession are revealing. They are all practical and moral issues: the subjects of baptism, the Lord's Supper, excommunication, separation from the abomination, the support of pastors, the sword (never to be used by Anabaptists) and the oath (no Anabaptist is to take any vows).

If Rome is church-centred and the greatest concern of the Anabaptists are practical, moralistic issues, what about other groups? Some groups are Christocentric, but in an unhealthy and incomplete way, such as much of Lutheranism (though not Luther!). The emphasis of Fundamentalism is on Christ and man's salvation in Him, but largely to the exclusion of the Triune God, in whose perfections and Persons they have little interest. In Fundamentalism, the preaching is largely about man's need. It starts with man and man's salvation and leads to Christ as the way of man's deliverance and that is where it usually ends—often with a long appeal playing on emotions and pressurizing people for a “decision for Jesus.” In this milieu, Sunday-evening gospel services and messages in song are the order of the day. Such practices typically arise out of, and lead ever more deeply into, Arminianism.

What about even more obviously man-centred “forms” of Christianity? Liberalism is thoroughly man-centred, devoted to (usually, left-wing) socio-political action and running with the latest fad of the world in a vain effort to appear relevant. After all, liberalism needs some sort of a message, for it has lost the gospel of Christ revealed in infallible holy Scripture, being deceived by “higher criticism” of God's Word. Evolutionism is embraced in such churches for their wisdom does not come from the crucified and exalted Son of God but from men who believe they are evolved apes. Those who supposedly developed out of invertebrates over millions of years have lost their theological spine bowing down to rationalistic scientism. The world is now clamouring about environmentalism so the liberal churches jump on the band wagon. Homosexuality is increasingly promoted as normal and virtuous, a lifestyle and behaviour that is to be cherished by all and vigorously defended and promoted by corrupt Western governments and civil law, so the liberal churches deny the Word of God against sodomy and lesbianism (Rom. 1:26-27) and “call evil good, and good evil” (Isa. 5:20). The new sin of “homophobia” is dreamt up—one of the few “sins” such false churches take seriously—in an attempt to silence those who believe Scripture's teaching on marriage and human sexuality. The agenda in liberal churches (which blend in with the radical world around them) is an amalgam of various colours, especially red (socialism), green (environmentalism) and pink (LGBT).

Man-centred religion in the last several decades has become increasingly woman-centred. Worldly churchmen, lacking the fear of God, have permitted women office-bearers contrary to the Word of Christ (I Tim. 2:11-15; I Cor. 14:34). Effeminate worship, with sentimental hymnody, shallow preaching and spurious emotionalism, softened the church up and aggressive feminism did the rest. Man-centred religion has increasingly jettisoned the Word of God for the words of higher-critical, evolutionist, environmentalist, pro-homosexual, feminist men and women. “The fear of man [and woman] bringeth a snare” (Prov. 29:25).

What the secularist state says goes, what the ungodly media says goes, what political correctness says goes, but what God says goes out the window. Those liberal churches may in their history have held a Reformation creed concerned with God and His glory, but it is not a functioning creed. It is just a paper record of what that church once believed ... in the past.

Pentecostalism and Charismaticism claim that they make the Holy Spirit central. To those who are grounded in the Scriptures, this is a give-away, for, even if it were true, it would still be a grievous error since the Holy Spirit speaks of Christ and glorifies Christ (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:7-15) and Christ glorifies the Father, the Triune God (John 17:1-8).

Their Pentecostal or Charismatic “spirit” is disinterested in the (spiritual) health-giving teaching of the Bible (I Tim. 1:10; 4:6; II Tim. 1:13; 4:3). This spirit gives spurious “gifts,” such as speaking gibberish (wrongly identified with “tongues” or languages in the Bible), and makes people seek their own emotional gratification. The worship they claim as very spiritual is more and more evident as an imitation of worldly pop music. The “health and wealth gospel” is merely baptized covetousness, which reckons “gain is godliness;” from such, Christians are commanded to “withdraw” (I Tim. 6:5). In its quest for “experiences,” its focus on self, its love of entertainment, its pandering to the young people and its gimmickry, Pentecostalism reveals itself as man-centred and so governed by “another spirit” (II Cor. 11:4). Generally, the Pentecostal or Charismatic churches that supposedly are “most filled with the Spirit” are most off-the-wall (contra I Cor. 14:33, 40; II Tim. 1:7) and have the most in attendance!

(“The Reformed Faith is God-centered” will be continued in the next issue.)

Before I start writing, I will probably need to give a brief introduction into army life, as most of you will not have much clue about it. In the approximate 2 years that fit Singapore males are required to serve, there are 2 phases of our life: the first as a cadet and the second as a fully trained soldier, be it a private/coporal, sergeant or officer. I am in the last part of my cadet training, and am about to pass out as a sergeant.

I am only able to share my experiences of National Service (NS) from a cadet's point of view, which is the toughest phase one has to go through. Personally, NS was tough, more so mentally than anything else. From someone who was totally free and in control of my own life (under God's sovereignty, of course), I was literally owned by the army the moment I enlisted. Every single rule had to be followed. There was no nice, cosy home to retire to every day. The exact moments I woke up and slept, and had my meals, were dictated for me. There was little or no free time. The very thought of staying in camp for days on end was mentally draining and oftentimes I found myself longing for my old life back, wishing for ridiculous things that could excuse me from serving NS. If only the overhead drone of a fighter plane was one carrying bombs that was about to be released. If only the distant crack of guns was that of another country declaring war on Singapore. There was also the rollercoaster of emotions that occurred within me every book in and book out of camp, which I would feel immensely depressed or happy. The people I came into contact with were drastically different from those I had mixed with my whole life.

Unlike civilian life, where one is able to come into minimal contact with unpleasant people, in NS, one sees such people literally 5 full days a week, and sometimes more.

This was during my Basic Military Training (BMT), a period of 2 months. It was during that time when I learnt how to draw strength and comfort from God's Word and not from the people around me. It was always comforting to be able to flip through the verses of a devotion book given me by Mrs. Nancy

LESSONS FROM ARMY

>> Marcus Wee

Hanko, or to be able to recite to myself some Psalms or Hymns which I was able to memorise. I can also thank God for friends in church who would occasionally text me a Bible verse or word of encouragement, which greatly heartened me when I saw it at the end of a long day or at the start of one. I was also able to witness to my army friends about God's Word, more so in army than at any other time in my life.

After BMT, life started to get better for me. As "future commanders", we were given more privileges than before. There was more freedom and free time as well. This was when I realised a whole new set of challenges were before me. In BMT, there was a constant lack of time for me to read God's Word in camp. After that, the issue was having too much free time, as ridiculous as it sounds. There always seemed to be many more interesting things to spend time on rather than God's Word. I could have 2 hours of free time, only to find

“ Every single rule had to be followed. There was no nice, cosy home to retire to every day. The exact moments I woke up and slept, and had my meals, were dictated for me. ”

myself left with 15 minutes of trying to read the Bible at the end of a day.

From this, I realise that one's Christian walk on this earth is really a matter of one's heart. Circumstances can only affect so much of how close one walks with the Lord. If our heart is not zealous in seeking after God, then no matter how favourable the circumstances for us to meditate on God's Word and draw close to Him, we will never do so. Our heart is where our treasure is (Matt 6:21), and though the vices of the world may seem

so alluring at times, it is really God's Word which is the only treasure worth obtaining and setting our hearts after. Even now I am struggling to do so, by God's grace.

Through my short time in army, I realise how weak I am spiritually, falling far short of the standards a Christian ought to have as set by the Bible. I often find my emotions rather dependent on earthly circumstances. Feelings of frustration, boredom, sadness, happiness and excitement are often heavily dependent on what I am going through, and this ought not to be the case. As Christians, our joy and contentment should come from the knowledge that our salvation is purchased for us in heaven, and that all things we go through on this earth are for our good. This is something easier said than done, and I have failed often, especially in my thoughts.

I also learnt what it truly means to be a soldier for Christ. We are all called to be that, which is much harder than it seems. Being a soldier requires full dedication to a cause which we will willingly suffer and die for (so unlike NS). Even the small details cause much misery to the soldier. Just as how the helmet, body armour and field pack can be so heavy and stifling to the untrained soldier, so too will the whole armour of God be to the unrefined Christian in this life. The long hours of practising

required to be proficient in handling a rifle is not unlike the training we will need to effectively wield the sword of the Spirit. It is the weakness of our flesh that will hinder us from using the full armour of God properly. Just as a military soldier requires much conditioning and tough training, so too

the Soldier of the Cross will need to undergo much refining in this life to be a better one.

In our various lives, we all face our own struggles to be a Christian soldier. We will often fail and falter at times because of our own weaknesses. However, we know that as God's children we will never totally fall away from Him (Psalm 37:23, 24). Let us then constantly seek to mortify our old man as we know that our victory is assured, though at present it might seem otherwise.

CERC Church Theme 2012

> > Yang Zhi

“Rooted and built up in him, and established in the faith, as ye have been taught, abounding therein with thanksgiving.” Colossians 2:7

As members of CERC, we are rather familiar with the verse mentioned above. It is our church theme for this year! So, to follow up on the release of our new church theme, I was requested by Salt Shakers to write an article on it. The article would be broken up into these parts: The Context, The Encouragement, The Application, and The Conclusion.

The Context

Col 2:1-2 For I would that ye knew what great conflict I have for you, and for them at Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh; that their hearts might be comforted, being knit together in love, and unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the acknowledgement of the mystery of God, and of the Father, and of Christ;

In the 2nd chapter of Paul's epistle to the Christians of Colosse, Paul starts by stating the 'great conflict' he has for the Colossians. This 'great conflict' is referring to the agony he has in his heart as he has not met them face-to-face. But Paul is not left clueless as to what the circumstances of the Colossians are. If you read through the book of Colossians, you will notice that Paul has been receiving good reports from the minister Epaphras of the Colossians (See Col. 1:7 and 4:12) However, through the reports of Epaphras, Paul was also aware of the fact that the Colossians were struggling against the enemies of the church. This is implied in a number of passages in Colossians, for example, chapter 2:4, which says: 'And this I say, lest any man should beguile you with enticing words.' The phrase 'beguile you with enticing words' points to the presence of false teachers. Thus, Paul has the intention to encourage the Colossian Christians.

The Encouragement

Col 2:6-7 As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him: rooted and built up in him, and established in the faith, as ye have been taught, abounding therein with thanksgiving.

So how does Paul go about to encourage the Colossians? He exhorts them to be steadfast in the faith that they have in Christ in verses 6 and 7. Paul reminds them to continue to walk in Christ, as they have already received Him. He even goes on to explain how they are

to do this: to be rooted and built up in Christ.

What does it first mean to be ‘rooted?’ To understand this, we go to the illustration of a tree. A tree needs to be deeply rooted into the ground for two reasons: one, to withstand the raging storms; two, to draw as much nutrients as possible from the soil. So similar is this picture to a Christian! As a tree needs to be deeply rooted into the ground, so must a Christian be deeply rooted in his faith, because, like the tree, he needs to withstand the raging storms and attacks from the world, and he needs to draw as much nutrients as possible from the Bible.

But, we must notice here that we are rooted in Christ already, as we are saved, not by our works, but by grace through faith! What a comfort that is to us! We are already saved by Christ and are brought into an unbreakable Union. So now, the question is not whether we are rooted in Christ, but it is how deeply we are rooted in Him.

Secondly, what does it mean to be ‘built up in Christ?’ We once again look to an illustration, this time to a building. For a building to stand strong it must have a strong and sure foundation. Paul also makes mention of a building in 1 Corinthians 3:11. He says, ‘For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ.’ As a building needs a sure foundation, so must we need Christ as our sure and strong foundation to build our faith! Once again, it’s not whether we have been built on Christ, but it is, if I may put it in the context of buildings, how high our faith has been built.

However, then comes another question, how must they walk in Christ, much more to be ‘rooted and built up in Him?’ The answer lies in the 2nd part of verse 7, which says, ‘and stablished in the faith, as ye have been taught, abounding therein with thanksgiving.’ The word stablished points to being ‘firm’ and ‘fixed firmly,’ and that is what we must exactly be! We are to be fixed firmly in the faith, as we have been taught by the Scriptures. Furthermore, Paul continues to explain that we must be stablished in the faith to the point that we are overflowing with it. That is what Paul is trying to tell the Colossians when he says, ‘...abounding therein...’ But Paul at the last part reminds them that they

are to do all of this with thankfulness to God! Paul does not just end at the phrase ‘abounding therein;’ rather he continues by saying ‘with thanksgiving.’ It is God who has given them the grace and power to grow and be nurtured in the faith! As said before, it is not their or man’s works that saves them; so is it not man’s works that helps them grow in the faith. It is all of God, NONE of man.

The Application

After breaking down what Paul was trying to get across to the Colossians, the question for us is, how does this apply to us and to our lives? Before we get into the question, we must note here that Paul is NOT just talking to the Colossians; he is, in fact, speaking to US as well! God works in the heart of Paul, not only to write all the epistles to the churches at that time, but to also talk to us as the present-day Christians in this world. Thus, whatever that is applicable to the Colossians is most certainly applicable to us!

With that in mind, we must now see how God’s word spoken through Paul is applicable to us. God is telling us that we must grow in the faith and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ daily. This faith must not be static or stagnant, worse still, dead (if I may put it that way); but rather, it must be a living faith, one that is dynamic and is growing through the process of sanctification! 1 Corinthians 14:20 says, ‘Brethren, be not children in understanding...but in understanding be men.’ But, how do we get such understanding? Paul already states that in Colossians 2:7 with the phrase, ‘as ye have been taught.’ We grow through the preaching of the Gospel, which is, as the Heidelberg Catechism puts it, the chief means of grace. But also, on a more practical side, the instruction Paul tells us be stablished in are also from all the classes we have and all the books we read! It extends to every instance of learning – the Catechism Instruction classes, the books and creeds we read concerning the doctrines of the church, the commentaries that expound and break down on the Word of God, etc.

However, how does such instruction become effective in our lives? 1 Peter 2:2 answers this, saying, ‘as newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby.’ We are to be like newborn babes! As a baby

desperately wants to drink his mother’s milk, so must WE desperately want to be fed by the word of God. We are so blessed to have the Word of God preached to us every Lord’s Day and to have the Sunday School and Catechism Instruction classes held weekly among many other things. Often times it is not whether we have the resources to gain knowledge of the Word of God; it is whether we earnestly desire for it to be applied to our lives. Our lives must have the Word of God implanted in it to the extent that every time our heart pumps blood into our whole body, the Word of God flows with our blood throughout our entire body, from head to toe. That is how much the Word of God must live in our hearts. We are to be intoxicated with God’s word, literally. Truly, this cannot be emphasized enough.

Finally, we must not forget God for His infinite mercy that He has shown to us in our salvation! We are to praise Him for all His glory, and also thank Him for the love He has shown to us by sending His only begotten Son to die on the cross for US. Only by Christ’s death on the cross can we be able to grow in the faith. The regeneration of the heart must occur first before the sanctification of hearts can begin; the faith must be in us before we can grow in it.

Conclusion

The application aspect of this text is definitely a difficult thing to do. I am sure all of us, including myself, have time and time again not sought for the Word of God as earnestly as we should, or worse still, rejected the Word and not want to seek it. Thus, we must always remember the fact that it is only GOD who can help us desire His Word; we can never do it by ourselves. So, may we never forget to pray for this, to ask the almighty God to grant us this desire to seek His word and to grow in it. Yes, it is a high calling. We have many temptations and distractions ahead of us to turn our sight away from the Word and to the things of the world. But this must never stop us from desiring the Word. So, as the year starts and continues for another 11 months, may we remember the words of Paul, to ‘be rooted and built up in the faith, and stablished in the faith, as ye have been taught, abounding therein with thanksgiving.’

>> Jemima

Why I LOVE SINGING THE PSALMS – Psalm 32 (Psalter 83): Sin & Forgiveness

I like singing this Psalter as it talks about the nature of true blessedness and the way that leads to it. We are taught in this Psalm that our happiness comes from the favour of God, through spiritual blessings and not earthly pleasures.

How blest is he whose trespass hath freely been forgiv’n,

Whose sin is wholly covered before the sight of heav’n.

Blest he to whom Jehovah imputeth not his sin,

Who hath a guileless spirit, whose heart is true within

This stanza talks about how blessed a man is when his sins have been forgiven by God. This is the fundamental privilege that God has given us through which all other blessings flow from. When we are pardoned from our sins and regenerated, we are then able to walk uprightly with Him. Sin is like a heavy burden on our back that makes us so weary, tired and sick; or like a burden on our spirits that makes us sink. Therefore, the remission of sins gives rest and relief to ‘those that are weary and heavy-laden’ (Matt 11:28). Sin makes us utterly unworthy to be in communion with God and we will also loathe ourselves when our conscience is pricked. However, once sin is pardoned, we are clothed with Christ’s robe of righteousness and we are once again reconciled with God. As David puts it in this Psalm, our ‘sin is wholly covered before the sight of heav’n’. None of us can taste the forgiveness of sin unless our hearts are rid of the guile that Satan tries to put in us.

*While I kept guilty silence my strength was spent with grief,
Thy hand was heavy on me, my soul found no relief;
But when I owned my trespass, my sin hid not from Thee,
When I confessed transgression, then Thou forgavest me.*

How sorrowful it is then when we as sinners do not see the wickedness of our sins and try to divert our minds elsewhere. If we do not come to God for repentance, our lives will be riddled with misery and our souls will not have peace. Although we are so accustomed to asking God for forgiveness of our sins, we still sin every day. This shows how totally depraved we are and how slow we are to obey God. Let us therefore be wary not to have our conscience seared by our repeated tolerance of sins lest God's hand of wrath be heavy upon us. The greatest of all afflictions is to be so heavily pressed with the hand of God. The whole strength of man is drained from him when God appears as a judge, shows his utter displeasure and humbles the wretched sinner that man is. We are therefore taught in the Psalm that the only way to be at peace is to confess our sins that we may be forgiven and be justified before God. God is merciful and pardons the sins of those who are truly repentant.

*So let the godly seek Thee in times when Thou art near;
No whelming floods shall reach them, nor cause their hearts to fear.
In thee, O Lord, I hide me, thou savest me from ill,
And songs of Thy salvation my heart with rapture thrill.*

In this stanza, the psalmist urges sinners to seek forgiveness from God not through the mere act of confession but through faith and prayer. We must come earnestly to prayer and come boldly to the throne of grace in the hope that we can obtain mercy from God. Everyone stands in need of His mercy. Those that are sincere and abundant in prayer will find the benefit of it especially in times of trouble. As the psalter says, 'no whelming floods reach them, nor cause their hearts to fear'. No great waters or floods will be able to touch them as God is their fortress and their strength. The wicked will not be able to touch His people (1 John 5:18) and neither can the troubles of this evil world. There is no other haven of safety other than God Himself. We can be assured that God will be our faithful keeper and deliver us from whatever evils that may encompass about us. When God has pardoned our sins and we have received the comfort of remission, we must flee to the grace of God to be preserved from returning to the folly of our sins and have our hearts hardened by the wickedness of our sins again.

Finally, we can take comfort from this psalter that if we come to the cross, sincerely sorry for our sins, and are fervent in our prayer, God will be faithful and just to save us from our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).

Sin makes us utterly unworthy to be in communion with God and we will also loathe ourselves when our conscience is pricked.

Prayer & Thanksgiving

At the start of year 2012, we thank God through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ for:

- Seeing CERC through the many events in 2011
- Every day in 2012, knowing that every day exists for the salvation of the elect till the appointed number is complete. (2 Pet 3:9)
- Successful Prayer and Praise 2012
 - Faithful office bearers – through whom Christ rules the church
 - The covenant instruction of the members throughout the past year
- Everyone who became communicant members in the past year by way of Confession of Faith or Adult Baptism.
 - Covenant children added into the church
- Successful study of Ecclesiastes by Covenant Keepers (CK).
 - The ongoing study of Romans by Covenant Keepers Senior (CKS).
- For parents' diligence in instructing their children in the ways of the Lord
- For the various Protestant Reformed ministers that ministered to us from the past year till now. (Rev van Overloop, Rev. Lanning, Rev. Koole, Prof Hanko and Prof Dykstra).
 - Lord-willing, the soon-to-be realized sister relationship with the Protestant Reformed Churches in America.
- For afflictions; they draw us nearer to God and strengthen our faith
 - For diligent members who exercise their gifts for the welfare of the church.
 - For our Advocate, Mediator and faithful High Priest Jesus Christ through whom we may enter boldly into the throne of grace (Heb 4:16).

With that, we move on to prayer items.

Prayer Items

- Jerusalem's peace; that there may be peace and unity in the church despite recent events.
- That God will continue to sustain the office-bearers that they may continue to rule the church in all wisdom, truth, love and grace.
 - That God would supply a man of His choosing to be our minister and to proclaim the word of God to us; in the mean time, may the Word continue to be proclaimed on the pulpit.
- That we will continue to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.
 - Repentance for all who have been negligent of the church and with the means of grace.
- An ever-increasing love for the Word of God and Reformed Confessions; also, guarding against indifference towards the Word of God and Reformed Confessions.
 - That the youth remember their bible studies through the years as well as the messages in the recent CK camp: that the Kingdom of God is the pearl of great price and it is worth sacrificing everything they have for it.
 - For the CK and CKS: that the bible studies and activities planned for the year would give all glory to God and that the young people will grow spiritually through such means.
 - For the tertiary CI: Studying Prof Hanko's book "The Mysteries of the Kingdom"
 - That we have an understanding of the reason and principle for Psalm-singing, as well as have the passion and love for it.
 - That we understand deeper the doctrine of the covenant of God and its implications.
- That we may have our own Reformed Christian school in time to come that is rooted upon the principle of the covenant.
 - That parents be ever so diligent in teaching their children in the ways of the Lord. May the parents be granted with an extra measure of grace seeing that the future of the church is in their care.
 - That the Lord cut us not off in our generations and that the cause of Christ may be continued in the line of our generations.
 - For Brother Paul and Sister Suet Yin: that they may have peace in their hearts knowing that the Lord works all things for their good.
 - For all who are afflicted with diseases and sicknesses that the Lord will grant them peace, joy and strength in their hearts such that even in their afflictions they will praise God with all their being.
 - Pray for the young men who are currently doing their national service, that they will not be influenced by the false doctrine of the world and that they will uphold the cause of Christ wherever their station may be.
 - That the singles be granted grace to walk in this life.
 - That we may have an appreciation for the antithesis and that we walk wisely in the world.
 - For strength to wrestle against our three-fold enemies: the devil, the world and our old man.
 - For the welfare of God's people throughout the world.



Covenant Evangelical Reformed Church

We are a Reformed Church that holds to the doctrines of the Reformation as they are expressed in the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism and the Canons of Dort.

Place of Worship
11, Jalan Mesin #04-00
Standard Industrial Building
Singapore 368813

Time of Worship
Morning Service:
9:30am to 11:00am
Afternoon Service:
2:00pm to 3:00pm

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