

January to March 2022
Teenz RPG Series on

Reformed Theology

What is Reformed Theology?

Do pray for the Holy Spirit's guidance before you begin your devotional time, for unless the Spirit reveals the meaning, we cannot understand scripture (1 Corinthians 2:10). Then you must read the scripture text; please don't be tempted to read the devotional alone without reading the Bible. Memorizing the scripture text will help you meditate upon it (Psalm 1:2), even long after you have finished your devotional time. After reading the devotional, always end with self-reflection: compare yourself against the standard of God's Word, and humbly yield to the Holy Spirit to direct you towards that standard (James 1:23-25). Be ye doers of the Word, not hearers only!

At the end of this series, may you be able to say as David said,

*"O God, thou art my God; early will I seek thee: my soul thirsteth for thee,
my flesh longeth for thee in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is."*

(Psalm 63:1)

May all glory be God's alone!

Dn Milton Ang

On behalf of the Teenz RPG committee

WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THE WORD “THEOLOGY”?

The word “theology” comes from two Greek words “theos” (God) and “logos” (word, teaching or study) which combined means the study or teachings of God. God has given us His inspired, inerrant and infallible Word that we might know Him, for God is infinitely and eternally higher than we are. It is through the study of this Word that we derive all our understanding of theology. The study of theology is digging in to God’s Word to discover what He has revealed about Himself. Theology is called the highest of all sciences, for no science can categorically state the origin of man.

Do note that no man can really study theology unless he is born again. “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). The natural man cannot receive the things of the Spirit of God. But once he is born of the Spirit, he is able to understand spiritual things as He is taught and guided by the Holy Spirit.

From 2 Timothy 2:15, all born again children of God are exhorted to diligently study the Word of God. The Word of God here is described as the ‘Word of Truth’ – describing its complete perfection, truthfulness and infallibility, for no other book can have such a claim to perfection other than the very Word of God. In studying this truth, we are compared to the workman who strenuously puts in much effort. As a result, he will not be ashamed in the day his Christian work will be judged (1 Corinthians 3:11-15). In order to hear God’s “well done”, he is to study God’s precious Word daily, joyfully and even sacrificially.

God’s Word is the tender milk and the solid meat that is good for your soul. Our lives will be immeasurably enriched by the comfort and hope that it imparts. We are cruel to ourselves if we try to live in this world without being fed by His Word. If God is truly your God, you will strive to know more about Him through His Word, so that you may please Him. As a busy student, studying God’s Word may require an extra effort from you. However, compared to the time and effort wasted of going against God’s will because we do not know Him well, it’s a small price to pay. Don’t you agree?

Thought: The study of God is the apex of all knowledge.

Prayer: Lord, create in me a hunger for Your Holy Word.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE "REFORMED"?

Scripture is called the "testimonies" of God because it gives testimony of His wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament – the whole book of Scripture, are "the testimonies of the Lord". They belong to God's people, who will take them as our "heritage forever" (Psalm 119:111a), meaning that this is the inheritance or portion that God has bequeathed to every believer for their benefit. There is an emphasis here on the word "taken": God's people must willingly accept this heritage by faith, to receive it and use it for themselves, even when others do not.

The churches which faithfully follow the cause of the 16th century Reformation are described as being "reformed". The Reformation was a turning away from the unbiblical and corrupt practices of the Roman Catholic Church. It was a turning back to the heritage of true Christianity, lived out by the first disciples and the church in the book of Acts. The godly Reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin insisted that the Word of God alone was the only source of truth in matters of faith, and that all other sources of knowledge, such as church leaders or learned scholars, had to submit to this divine source. They were literally 'reformed', or formed again, for they had to go back to the very testimonies of God, the Holy Scripture, to discern what God's instructions concerning all matters of faith and practice are. As a movement, they reformed the church in rejecting all the prevailing false teachings and practices, and restoring all the true doctrines of the Bible.

Dear teen, do you know and appreciate the great heritage that God has given to you? It will show in the way you spend time reading and studying the Scripture. It will also be seen in the way you submit to it and obey all that the Bible teaches us. Value it, treasure it, for they are the testimonies of God through all ages. Do not believe those who criticise Christians for being old-fashioned. The Bible that states for example that marriage is "till death us do part", is the only antidote to the increasing number of divorces and otherwise breakdown of the marriage institution we see in our society today. The Bible indeed is timeless, not old-fashioned; it is our heritage forever!

Thought: God's Word is our heavenly treasure.

Prayer: Lord, open my eyes that I may know the glorious inheritance that You have given me.

WHAT AUTHORITY IS REFORMED THEOLOGY BASED UPON?

In Psalm 119:97, David speaks of his great love for God's Word, to the extent that he meditates upon it always. To meditate is to seek to understand the meaning of God's Word, to muse and reflect upon it, and to allow the Word to deeply convict us of what the truth is, that we may live our lives by this truth.

Though John Calvin stands tall as the foremost theologian of the Reformed tradition, he himself did not create a new "school" of theology. Calvin and other Reformed theologians like him sought to draw men back to what the Word of God teaches concerning how the church ought to function. It was such allegiance to Scripture that enabled Martin Luther to stand before the might of the Pope and his Councils and declare, "I am convinced by the testimony of Scripture... and I can and will not retract." These simple and famous words reflect the highest regard that Reformed theology has for Holy Scripture. Note though that Luther could not have made such a stand without deep meditation on the Word to allow it to convict his heart. Indeed Luther was well known for his many hours spent in meditation on God's Word.

Dear teen, do you love the Scripture enough to spend time to read and meditate upon it? As you do that you will discover new and rich insights that a quick reading will overlook. Allow the Word to convince and convict you, so that you live by it no matter what difficulties may surface, even when others ridicule you for wanting to stand up for the faith. For example, if we have meditated enough upon the commandment "Thou shalt not bear false witness", not only would our conscience prick us when we are tempted to lie, but we would be resolved to always tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, even if we had to endure punishment or be ostracised as a result of it. On the other hand, if we have never had to make such a stand, then perhaps we have never allowed ourselves to meditate upon God's Word in the first place and convict us to live by the truth of His Word.

Thought: Is the Bible the highest authority in your life?

Prayer: Our Father in heaven, grant me a greater love for Your precious Word.

WHO WERE THE FORERUNNERS OF THE REFORMATION?

As Zechariah 4:6 testifies, God does not need the might and power of man, but by His Spirit alone, He can preserve Israel. Yet He empowers men of faith with His Spirit to accomplish His purpose, like how He used Zerubbabel and Joshua during the time of Zechariah to lead Israel. Likewise God empowers men of His choosing and use them to lead and guide His church to the truth. Through it all, it is God alone who receives all glory, for it is only by His Spirit that great works are accomplished.

Throughout history, God preserved a remnant who remained faithful to Him and His Word, even before the Reformation. One such faithful group of remnants was the Waldenses who sought refuge from the cruel persecution of the Roman Catholic Church in the Piedmont Valleys of northern Italy. They stood firm on the truth for the cause of Christ and the gospel. They continuously studied the Word of God and rejected offerings and prayers for the dead, purgatory and the abomination of the mass. John Wycliffe in England also fought the good fight of faith, and was active in reforming the religious customs and practices of his day. He spoke against the Pope, sought to remove immoral clergymen and refuted their false teachings. John Huss was influenced by Wycliffe's writings and also sought to reform the Roman Catholic practices but was condemned. It was all in the providence of God that even during the Dark Ages of the church, there was always a remnant that was valiant for the truth.

Dear teen, have you ever wondered how a small remnant can be so powerful to change the known world? The answer is that the Spirit of God was moving and working in their midst. Yes, in everything that you do or say, whether witnessing, serving or studying God's Word, it is not human strength, but the Spirit of God that will preserve you and enable you to bear fruit. You find it difficult to witness to your friend who asks so many questions that you do not know the answer to. Never despair; rely on the Holy Spirit, pray, and study God's Word to find the answers. If it is God's will for your friend to be saved, His Spirit will convict him in due time. Remember that God is giving us an opportunity to serve Him faithfully, even though He Himself is able to do it all by Himself alone. Trust Him with all your heart!

Thought: Abide in Christ to bear much fruit.

Prayer: Lord, grant me to be constantly abiding in Thee.

"...the people that do know their God shall be strong, and do exploits."

WHO WERE THE REFORMERS? (I)

Matthew 16:18 is often misinterpreted by the Catholic Church to claim that Christ chose Peter as their first Pope. What Jesus meant here was a word play between the Greek words for Peter (Petros, or stone) and Rock (Petra). Jesus was telling Peter that He himself would be the rock upon which the church would be built upon. Peter too could not achieve anything unless he built upon the same foundation of Christ the solid Rock (1 Corinthians 10:4).

John Calvin was probably the greatest of all the Reformers. He published the first edition of *The Institutes of Christian Religion* at the young age of 27. This monumental treatise became the definitive statement for all time for the Reformed Faith and is still widely used today in Reformed churches, being regarded as one of the best systematic theologies ever written. He also wrote commentaries on almost every book of the Bible!

It was God who used Calvin to accomplish great works for Him. God raised him up for the mighty work of Reformation. Mere hard work could not have accomplished all that Calvin did. Not even intellectual power can produce the great spiritual depth and clarity that Calvin was able to bring in his writings. The life and works of Calvin was truly built upon the foundation that is Jesus Christ.

Dear teen, there are many in this world whose lives are ruined. They have no sure foundation to build their lives on. They refuse to hear the truth. Have you solely rested on the foundation of the Lord Jesus Christ, His death, burial, and resurrection and ascension? Or do you trust more in yourself or in other men instead? I remember a teen who, years ago, seemed to be faithful for a season, only to leave church when he was rejected by a girl in the same fellowship. This teen's faith was not built upon the foundation of Christ alone, he was here merely for the social interactions, and had ulterior motives in mind. The teen that does build upon Christ, will trust that if it is God's will to have a life partner, then in His time He will providentially bring the two together.

Thought: Only Jesus is our sure foundation.

Prayer: Lord, grant that I may be eternally grateful for saving me since Jesus came into my heart.

WHO WERE THE REFORMERS? (II)

The prophet Isaiah testifies that the work of redemption will be so marvellous that all will fear God and glorify Him, from the west all the way to the east where the sun rises. The enemy can be so numerous that it appears to “come in like a flood”, and anyone of us who have experienced floods before will know how difficult it is to withstand it. However, no matter how unstoppable the enemy seems, God will raise banners of truth that will always stand up against it!

Martin Luther was a prominent leading light of the Reformation. We remember 31st October as Reformation Sunday because on that day, in the year 1517, he nailed his 95 Theses on the door of Wittenberg Castle. These theses set forth the truth concerning the pardon of sins through faith in Jesus Christ alone and not of works. This set the fire of revival in Germany and later spread throughout Europe. In England, William Tyndale was among the foremost reformers of the 16th century. He loved the Word of God. He wanted to make it available to his countrymen in their own language, and so he dedicated his life to translate the Bible into English from the original languages, which was forbidden by the Catholic Church at that point of time. It cost him much suffering and even his death as he was hounded and finally executed. In Scotland, God raised John Knox to win a thorough and decisive victory for the Protestant Faith and delivered a whole nation from the fetters of Rome. These great men were raised to be the banner of God’s truth in a dark and evil age. To God be the glory for giving us these great Reformers.

Dear teen, God is mighty to bring down strongholds of evil. In His good time, His enemies will be defeated. Learn to be strong in the Lord. As you stand up for your faith, know that God’s grace and strength will be sufficient for you to overcome your fears and your detractors. What can possibly be mightier than God? Yet the mightier the enemy, the more glory to God for deliverance! After much prayer and reliance on God, one teen approached his teacher privately to ask that he stop attacking Christianity in his class. That teacher had a reputation of not being easy to deal with, and his verbal attacks on Christianity were particularly vehement, and the teen risked being “marked” by the teacher for daring to speak out against him. Praise God that the teacher agreed with the teen; all glory to God!

Thought: God is the true worker of the Reformation.

Prayer: Gracious heavenly Father, may I appreciate my Protestant heritage more and more.

WHAT ARE THE DISTINCTIVES OF REFORMED THEOLOGY? (I)

One chief distinctive of Reformed Theology is the sovereignty of God. He rules over His creation with absolute power and authority. He determines what is going to happen, and it does happen. God is never surprised or defeated by events, by sin or by the rebellion of His creatures. He alone is in control of all things, from the beginning to the end. All that He wills, will certainly come to pass. All the promises and prophecies that we read of in God’s Word are not just myth and empty promises, but the absolute truth of God, and will all definitely be fulfilled.

Isaiah 46:9-10 begins *“Remember the former things of old...”* God has testified of Himself both in universal works such as creation as well as through specific works for the nation of Israel such as deliverance through the parting of the Red Sea. Israel should therefore not love any other but God alone. God is able to declare the end from the beginning. This shows that He is sovereign over the events of the world and in the affairs of men – both past, present and future. He can even use evil men for His own purposes as He did when He used the king of Babylon as the *“rod of his anger”*, to punish apostate Judah (Isaiah 10:5). Thus those prophecies that have not yet been fulfilled will surely be done, for our sovereign God never fails.

Dear teen, do you know the immense practical importance of the doctrine of the sovereignty of God? It makes God the proper object of worship. He is almighty, omnipotent God, the creator and sustainer of all that exists, and we should worship no other god. There is nothing and no one more worthy of worship and honour. It also means that He can be counted on to carry us through thick and thin, and He will never forget we who are His children. For example, there may be times where we might be tempted to think nothing is going our way, but in reality God has always been there for us though we cannot see His loving Hand, and whatever happens to us is allowed by God for our good.

Thought: God keeps all His promises.

Prayer: Lord, let me praise Thee from the rising of the sun to the going down of the same.

WHAT ARE THE DISTINCTIVES OF REFORMED THEOLOGY? (II)

Another distinctive of Reformed Theology is the sole and absolute authority of the Scriptures. The Reformers asserted that the Bible alone, not the church, has authority over believers. They upheld the infallible, inerrant and inspired Word of God as the only rule of faith and practice. This was entirely foreign to the Roman Catholic who held its members captive by its traditions, anathemas, encyclicals and papal bulls.

With the "God-breathed" Word, believers have the sure knowledge of God and His Son Jesus Christ, His work in salvation as well as His second coming. Believers will also have courage to stand against error and heresies. The Bible is entirely sufficient to guide us as to what to believe and how to live. Note that it is "All Scripture", meaning all of its parts, every book, every jot and tittle. Every single word is truth from the beginning. There is not a single speck of untruth in Scripture.

Dear teen, the Bible is given to us not by man but by God Himself. It is totally reliable and useful for all of life, correcting and reproving us of our sins in order to get right with God, with others and with ourselves. What a book! Any one of the Reformers would readily say that the Bible is the book that has made the greatest impact on their lives. I wonder how many of you teens would be able to say that? So many tend to pick other books that have made a deeper impression on them, while others might claim the Bible is important to them but in reality spend more time on secular books. When you are worried about something, do you reach for your Bible? When someone counsels you to do something, do you readily accept this counsel or do you test whether this is good advice by the yardstick of God's truth? If you are not sure what you are planning to do is right or wrong, do you automatically search the scriptures? Do search your heart on why you do not allow the Bible to have authority over your life!

Thought: It is the Word of God that equips God's people to do the work of God.

Prayer: Most merciful Father in heaven, helps me to spend time to read and study Your Word and thereby profit from It.

WHAT ARE THE DISTINCTIVES OF REFORMED THEOLOGY? (III)

Yet another distinctive is the focus on man's fallen estate. According to the Bible, man in this world is altogether sinful. Ever since Adam and Eve sinned, the whole human race has been corrupted and defiled. We don't have to look far to understand this, for newspaper reports show us daily the many heinous crimes that are committed everywhere in the world. Man is truly deprived, and left to ourselves, we will bring nothing but destruction and calamity to this world. Man's sin nature begins at birth. All babies are born with it. Even before they learn to talk, they will know how to get their own way by crying. As toddlers, they will start to disobey their mothers, and deliberately do things that they are told not to do. Children are also capable of telling lies even though no one taught them how to do it. Without parental guidance, they go astray easily, learning bad words, being rude and obnoxious. David in Psalm 58:3 speaks of this inherent sinfulness of man, that *“they go astray as soon as they be born, speaking lies.”*

Man in his fallen condition has no ability whatsoever to gain entrance into heaven. Romans 3:10-11 tells us, *“As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one. There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God.”* Even the most morally upright man with what seems to be the best conduct is still a sinner. He still sins because of his sinful nature. The Reformers went to great pains to remind their audience that they must realise their sinful estate and their dire need for a Saviour. They also stressed that life after salvation still involves a daily spiritual battle with sin, a battle which we will never have complete victory over while we remain in this mortal body.

Dear teen, when you accepted Christ as Saviour, did you confess you are a sinner? Do you also continue to confess your sins daily? You should examine yourself daily to see if there be any known or secret sins and make a thorough confession. This is needful so that we can serve God with clean hands and a pure heart. The heart that is weighed down with sin can hardly appear before God and wholeheartedly serve Him. Confess your sin, and God is faithful and just to forgive.

Thought: Sin is not only what we do, but also what we are.

Prayer: Our loving Father in heaven, help me to die to self and sin daily that Christ might be glorified.

WHAT ARE THE DISTINCTIVES OF REFORMED THEOLOGY? (IV)

One of the key issues the Reformers had to contend with was the sufficiency of the Scriptures. The debate then was whether the Word of God was sufficient for faith and life or whether it had to be buttressed with the traditions, dogma, creeds and decrees of the church. The Reformed Faith rejects these as extra-scriptural - their papacy, the worship of saints and relics, the sacrifice of the mass and prayers for the dead.

Psalm 19:7-9 is the most important and concise statement on the sufficiency of Scripture. They offer an excellent testimony from God Himself about the sufficiency of His Word for every situation. There are six statements here, each highlighting a characteristic of Scripture and its effect in the life of a believer. It is perfect, comprehensive, having all that is necessary for one's spiritual life – even transforming the entire person. Its testimony provides a foundation on which to build one's life and eternal destiny. It makes one wise and lays out the proper path through the difficult maze of life. It endures forever.

Dear teen, in Christendom today, the same doubt is cast upon God's Word, for many Christians claim to live by the Word, but do not show that it is indeed all sufficient for them. Instead they want to rely on special experiences, dreams and visions. They have also supplemented the Bible with Christian psychology and counselling. Such an attitude is saying that the Bible is not sufficient and we need something extra. This is the lie of the devil. One test of whether the Bible is sufficient for you or not: have you been also reading the scripture text given in these daily devotional articles, or do you only read these articles alone. Do realise that these daily articles must never replace your meditation on Scripture itself: for Scripture is sufficient for us, and these articles are not. If you have not been reaching for your Bible to meditate upon the Scripture text for yourself, you are likely to fall prey to the temptation to seek additional revelation just as the charismatics do. Do note the word 'meditate': avoid a cursory quick reading of the Scripture text. Always give first place to God's Word rather than to the words of man!

Thought: Scripture is right and altogether righteous.

Prayer: Father in heaven, may I cherish and forget not my rich Protestant heritage and history.

WHAT ARE THE DISTINCTIVES OF REFORMED THEOLOGY? (V)

The Reformed Faith does not lead men to carelessness or to be profane. This faith does not hold that one can *"sin that grace may abound"* (Romans 6:1). Instead, a good understanding of the Reformed Faith will cause one to strive towards holiness and godliness in his life. We realise that we are chosen eternally by God and Christ died for us in order that we may bring forth fruit in our lives. Many in the Roman church at that time, being in darkness, led sinful lives of avarice, debauchery and superstition. But the Spirit of God worked in the hearts of the Reformers to give them new light and principles of life through a deeper understanding of the truth of Holy Scripture. They were faithful men who sought to apply and practice what they had discovered from the Word.

When there is a genuine salvation, it involves a new creation that is entirely of God's doing. It will certainly result in a life of good works. We need to be clear that we are saved, not by good works, but for good works. Indeed God has predetermined that we should lead holy lives (Ephesians 2:10)! These good works for which we were created include works of obedience, works of love, works of faith in whatever we do at home, at work, while travelling, or anywhere at all. All that we do, we do it to the glory of God.

So you see, dear teen, the entire bent of our lives after we have been saved by God's grace should be to live with a God-ward focus, to please Him in all that we do. Have you done any good works for the Lord this week? Good for you if you have. Just remember that it is God who not only predestined our salvation but also the works that we do. This also means that He will give the grace and strength for us to do so. Thus for example if it is His will that you are called to serve Him in the tiny tots department, even though it may be difficult to handle these very young children who refuse to sit still or break into tears so easily, God will enable you to handle all these challenges by His grace. So serve Him with all your heart, for you are saved to serve.

Thought: God planned my salvation and He also planned my good works.

Prayer: Our Father in heaven, may I ever remain humble as I see Thy great goodness to me.

WHAT ARE THE DISTINCTIVES OF REFORMED THEOLOGY? (VI)

The Reformed Faith firmly believes in the calling of the church to go out into all the world to preach the gospel. The Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20 is the church's marching orders. It will have nothing to do with "hyper-Calvinism" which would neglect this great task of the church and do nothing to rescue perishing souls, thinking that God would save the elect anyway, whether they evangelise or not.

It is true that God will save His elect whom He had chosen from eternity. But God alone knows those who are His, and we do not. It is His Commission to us to go out into the world and witness for Him, and leave the Holy Spirit to convict those souls whom God has preordained will be saved. Thus we realise that evangelism is 100% effective, for God is the one who saves and not us!

Though missionary work was slow among the Protestant churches following the 16th century Reformation, it laid the foundation for greater work which followed. There was an insistent call to return to the teaching of the Bible, and the Bible taught the duty of every Christian to bring the gospel to all ends of the world. By applying themselves to the task of translating the whole Bible into the principal European languages, they also paved the way for the golden age of missions from the 17th to the early 19th century. As Matthew 28:19 tells us, the witnessing is followed by teaching and building up believers in the faith, and leading them to be baptised.

Dear teen, have you started witnessing and inviting your school friends to church? That is the way to start. Don't be discouraged if no one wants to listen or to come. Just be faithful in doing your duty to witness for Him. That is what God will reward. Are you hesitating because you think you are inadequate to witness? Remember, salvation is of the Lord. We are just His instruments; it is the Holy Spirit that will convict, so just simply speak for the Lord. Perhaps you fear being ostracised for witnessing? Do not be ashamed of this gospel, for it is tantamount to being ashamed of Christ!

Thought: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep, to gain what he cannot lose." - Jim Eliot, martyred while a missionary to Ecuador.

Prayer: Eternal God, our loving heavenly Father, help me to be more zealous in the things of God.

WHAT ARE THE DISTINCTIVES OF REFORMED THEOLOGY? (VII)

The Reformed Faith looks forward expectantly to the soon return of our Lord Jesus Christ. As the very last paragraph of the Westminster Confession of Faith reads: “As Christ would have us to be certainly persuaded that there shall be a day of judgment, both to deter all men from sin; and for the greater consolation of the godly in their adversity: so will he have that day unknown to men, that they may shake off all carnal security, and be always watchful, because they know not at what hour the Lord will come; and may be ever prepared to say, Come Lord Jesus, come quickly. Amen.”

We do not know the day or the hour of His return, but we know that it must be at hand. This ought to give us a sense of urgency in all our service for the Lord. The church must ever be mindful of its great tasks and faithfully carry them out. It must preach the Word; it must evangelise; it must teach the children so that they may be prepared for the evil days. Above all, the earnest prayer of the church and every believer is for Christ’s soon coming, *“Surely I come quickly. Amen. Even so, come Lord Jesus”* (Revelation 22:20).

Dear teen, how were you saved? Was it not that someone told you about Jesus and your need for a Saviour? It is your turn now to pass this precious truth on. Help to rescue perishing souls. You can pray, you can give and you can go if the opportunity arises. Arise and be a good and faithful servant of the Lord. Also, do not forget to live knowing His coming draws near. If you knew Jesus was coming today, would you be prepared? Or would you be wishing you had time to sort out your life? Or perhaps wishing for more time to witness to unsaved friends or loved ones you have been neglecting to do so? Be prepared, for the Lord may return any day!

Thought: Our hope and joy is the rapture, before Jesus’s Second Coming.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, may I always live in the light of the rapture of the church and the soon coming of my Lord Jesus Christ.

WHAT ARE THE FIVE SOLAS OF THE REFORMATION?

The five ‘solae’ are the pillars of the 16th Century Reformation Movement. They are phrases in Latin that encapsulate what the Reformers stood for in their fight against the Roman Catholic Church. They are: Sola Scriptura - By Scripture alone; Sola Gratia- By grace alone; Solus Christus – Christ alone; Sola Fide – By faith alone; Soli Deo Gloria – glory to God alone.

Together they form the central truths of the Reformation. The authority of the Scriptures needs to be upheld as the church is often guided by culture, marketing strategies and the persuasion of the entertainment world. God’s grace in Christ as the sole efficient cause of salvation must be clearly taught as fallen human nature often forgets. Justification is by grace alone, through faith alone because of Christ alone. As Romans 3:20-21 shows us, the law cannot bring about righteousness. The Old Testament (“the law and the prophets”) proves that one could only be justified by the law through perfect obedience, and none of us can do so. Rather, God provided for our righteousness when He gave His only begotten Son to die for us. This must be received by faith alone, so that we may be justified in His sight. Before and after the Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church has never shied away from their heresy that one must also do good works to earn a place in heaven.

Dear teen, do you know that the tide is now against the light of the Reformation? Do realise that many of your friends who attend other churches in Singapore do not know what Reformation Sunday is all about, especially if they are attending those who are actively trying to ecumenically unite the Protestants and Catholics. To these churches, the Reformation should never have happened, and the past should be forgotten! The spirit of our age rather than the Spirit of Christ is now dominating Christianity, believing that world peace can only be brought about through religious harmony, even at the expense of what the truth is. It is imperative that you not only know your Protestant Reformation heritage but treasure and hold fast to it. Let us remember Reformation Sunday and soberly recall the wonderful way in which God has guided history through the ages, such that His truth will always prevail.

Thought: The past is as important as the future.

Prayer: Lord, thank You for opening my eyes to the great heritage that I have in the Reformation and may I defend this precious faith.

WHAT IS SOLA SCRIPTURA?

Sola Scriptura emphasises that the inerrant, infallible and perfect Word of God alone is the ultimate authority in the believer's life. The believer's salvation is based upon God's truth alone and not on the traditions of man, the teachings of the church or on popular thinking. If a church teaches doctrines that are contrary to the Bible, then the church is wrong and not the Bible. If the tradition of the church is contrary to the teaching of the Bible, then that tradition should be rejected, not the Bible. Everything should be measured against the truth of the Bible, the supreme authority.

The truth and reality of the Bible were set forth by the prophets of the Old Testament, who spake and wrote under the influence and direction of the Spirit of God (2 Peter 1:21). The Holy Spirit so assisted and directed them in delivering what they had received from Him, that they clearly expressed what they had known. The Scriptures are the words of the Holy Ghost, and all the expressions with its beauty and power come from God himself. This is known as the process of inspiration, that every single word of Scripture is given by inspiration of God (2 Timothy 3:16).

Dear teen, how firm and sure the foundation of our faith is! It rests upon the very words of God, written by holy men who were told exactly what to write by the Holy Ghost. Esteem and reverence the Bible as a book sent from heaven to you. Study it well with faith. Measure every thought and action you do by its revelation which is the revelation of the mind and will of God. For example, if your Christian school has a tradition of celebrating Easter by baking hot cross buns and Easter bunnies and eggs and using them to spread the gospel, do refrain. Realise the reason for remembering Good Friday and Easter is to remember the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; hot cross buns and Easter rabbits do not point anyone to Christ. In contrast, when we think of the partaking of bread in the Lord's Supper that does point one to Christ, the Bible warns of consequences against those who take this bread without understanding. Those visitors to our church who witness the Lord's Supper will doubtless realise the great solemnity of the event, as compared to the frivolity of eating buns and chocolate.

Thought: Every believer can taste the sweetness and feel the power of the Word of God.

Prayer: Father in heaven, may I search Your Word daily, to understand the sense and meaning and live by it.

WHAT IS SOLA GRATIA?

Sola gratia is another distinguishing characteristic that separate the true biblical gospel from false gospels that cannot save. All the five solas are equally and vitally important and they are also closely knitted together. Deviation in one will lead to error in another essential doctrine and the result will always be a false gospel which is powerless to save.

Salvation is not of works. It is by grace alone that a sinner is converted into a saint. If salvation is earned by keeping the law of God, then grace is rejected and denied. If he is saved by keeping the law, then he needs to keep the whole law perfectly all the days of his life. That is impossible! We break God’s laws and commandments almost daily. This is because every man born into this world has a depraved nature. Romans 3:20 says, *“Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin.”*

Ephesians 2:8-9 makes it abundantly clear that we are saved by grace alone. Salvation is all of God’s work in us. As Spurgeon said, “If there be one stitch in the celestial garment of my righteousness, which I am to insert myself, then I am lost.” Even the faith that we place in this saving grace is God-given, for none of us sinners would seek God on our own accord, and it is only by the irresistible grace of God shown to us that our hearts are thus convicted to place such faith in Christ.

Dear teen, have you considered what amazing grace it is that God has saved us? It is by His mercy and grace alone, and not because of anything that makes us desirable to God or worthy to be saved. There is something very wrong if you assume that you are saved just because you are born into a Christian family and have been attending church all your life, or because you have been attending a Christian school, or because you have not done anything really despicable in society’s eyes. You do not realise your salvation is by grace alone. Never be complacent about your salvation. May you earnestly plead for God’s grace to be upon you today!

Thought: Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. 🎵

Prayer: Our gracious heavenly Father, let me appreciate Your bountiful grace to me day by day.

WHAT IS SOLA FIDE?

The appropriation of this precious salvation is by grace through faith. Faith is necessary and faith is also a gift from God. Romans 3:28 clearly tells us that we are justified by faith without any works or deeds of the law. Faith is believing what God says in His Word. All that God teaches in the Scripture in the past and about the future, we believe and we live our present life in the light of these truths. To doubt God's teachings is to have no faith, for we show that we do not believe in God and His promises. The journey of our salvation is from faith to faith ie. we begin with faith, continue in faith and end in faith (Romans 1:17).

Sola fide alone is a key difference not only between Protestant theology and Catholic theology but between biblical Christianity and almost all other religions and teachings. The teaching that we are declared righteous by God (justified) on the basis of our faith in Christ alone, and not by works is a line that divides most cults from biblical Christianity. Biblical Christianity is distinct from every other religion in that it is centred on what God has accomplished through Christ's finished work at Calvary, while all other religions are based on works and human achievement.

Dear teen, can you now differentiate between a true gospel and a false one? What about the belief that mankind can unite to bring a better world and be as gods? Can you pick out their errors? First, is our hope of a better life in this world or in heaven? What other errors can you spot? Today, your friends who attend Charismatic churches may question and cause you to doubt whether your faith alone is sufficient to save, and thus persuade you that you also need the experience of tongue speaking to prove you are truly saved! These friends seem to be so spiritual because they have 'seen' or 'experienced' the power of the Holy Spirit through their 'tongue speaking experience'. Do realise that by trusting in these experiences, they are no longer walking by faith, but walking by sight instead. When God's Word tells you that salvation is by faith alone, believe it!

Thought: Faith is just believing, what God says He will do!

Prayer: Lord, help me to walk by faith and not by sight.

"... justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ"

WHAT IS SOLA CHRISTUS?

Romans 6:23 teaches us clearly that although we as sinners deserve nothing but death, we can have eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. It was our Lord Jesus Christ who paid the debt that our sin incurred, the wrath that we were under when we were yet in our sins. He alone came down from heaven's glory, took on human flesh, fulfilled all righteousness, then suffered and bled for us. He alone went all the way to Calvary to die such a cruel death when He was crucified for our sins. That He was victorious is clear when He arose from the dead and ascended to His Father in heaven. He is *"the way, the truth and the life"* (John 14:6).

We must not lose this Christocentric (Christ-centered) focus in our Sunday school lessons or in our walk with God. Faith is not mere knowledge of the doctrinal issues or a great experience or even a loving church. Jesus Christ in His Person and Work is the foundation of our Faith (Ephesians 2:20).

Dear teen, how would you answer someone who professes to be a believer but has sinned and thinks that God cannot forgive him/her for that sin? Is there a sin so heinous and unforgivable? Our problem is that we sometimes do not realise the significance of the perfection of the sacrifice of Christ. There is no sin that cannot be washed by the blood of Christ, which is able to wash away every sin committed by all men from eternity. Truly *"...the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin."* (1 John 1:7). The believer who has backslidden into sin and despair, can thus look to the Lamb and realise there is no sin that Christ cannot forgive; like Peter, this believer can have faith that genuine confession and repentance of this sin will be forgiven.

Thought: When we are united to Christ in salvation, God imputes Christ's perfect righteousness to our account.

Prayer: Lord, thank You for doing all in salvation so that my salvation is eternally secure in Thy hands.

WHAT IS SOLI DEO GLORIA?

This is a Latin term for "Glory to God alone". Since salvation is by Scripture alone, grace alone, faith alone and Christ alone, then all glory has to be to God alone, and man can take no credit at all for his salvation.

The Apostle Paul gave one of the greatest personal testimonies when he wrote these words in Galatians 6:14. He made his boast entirely in the work of our Lord Jesus Christ and nothing else. He refused to glory either in his carnal privileges as a Jew or in his gifts and attainments. He chose not to glory in anything save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. He gloried in Him crucified - in the peace, pardon, righteousness, salvation and eternal glory which comes through His death at the cross. He gave thanks for the wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption that he had in Christ (1 Corinthians 1:30). This taught him to deny the riches, honours, pleasures and applause of the world; which were to him as dross, in comparison to the riches of Christ.

Dear teen, if our lives are no different from that of the unsaved people of this world, how are we going to prove to them that Jesus has made a difference in our lives? We need to make the cross of Jesus our "boast" in life. We are crucified with Christ. We must live a new kind of life in this world - a life where "self" has been crucified and has died to the desires of this ungodly world. For example, while you are known to study hard, you are even better known for your love for God's Word. While you are known to be kind to others around you, you are even better known for your love for God and God's people. While you are known for your confident personality, you are even better known for placing your confidence in Christ alone and your doggedness in thus bringing everything to God in prayer. While you might be known to do well in exams, you are even better known for your genuine humility and how you unfailingly give God the glory. While others who have talents like yours might want to use these talents to maximise their own material wealth, the world would witness how you only want to use these talents to fulfill His Will in your life.

Thought: *"Hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?"*
(1 Corinthians 1:20)

Prayer: Lord, may I glory in the cross and be willing to suffer, if need be, to the glory of Thy name.

WHAT IS THE PREACHING LIKE IN A REFORMED CHURCH?

The book of Acts records the Apostolic age and the birth of the church, setting out, through His apostles, Christ's pattern for the church. At Pentecost, there were wonderful and amazing signs and wonders, but yet there were people who did not believe. They made fun of the believers and even accused them of being drunk! Amidst the throng of thousands, a fisherman with no formal education arose and spoke boldly and with authority. Quoting Scripture, he preached Christ and sin – their sin that had crucified Christ. It was the words of this sermon, with the mighty working of the Holy Spirit, that led to some 3000 hearts gladly accepting the charge that they were murderous sinners and repenting! It was what they heard, not saw, that caused their hearts to be “pricked” (katanusso, which means to pierce thoroughly). Peter continued with “many words” to ‘testify’ (present evidence as a witness) and ‘exhort’ (strongly encourage) them to live transformed lives. Peter and the apostles preached doctrine - objective Biblical principles. Faithful preaching of the apostles’ doctrine is as vital to the church today as it was then.

Dear Teen, do you underestimate what the preaching of sound doctrine can do in your life and in those of others, especially unbelievers? What do you desire from the weekly Sunday sermon? Have you often wished the sermon were shorter and found doctrine boring? Have you wished there were more personal stories and pop psychology to help you survive the stresses of studying and get ahead in this world? Perhaps you wish for healing sessions to convert unbelievers and strengthen your faith. Do you wish to return to the pre-reformation days when church was full of grand but empty rituals; the Word distorted and out of access to ordinary people? Or to be in many a contemporary church to be entertained and fed meager and adulterated spiritual food by fame-seeking leaders promising a health and wealth message that is only temporal? Understand the importance of godly preaching and sound doctrine!

Thought: How were you saved? (Romans 10:17)

Prayer: May I hold fast the faithful word as I have been taught, that I may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince those who do not believe. (Titus1:9)

HOW ARE SACRAMENTS OBSERVED IN A REFORMED CHURCH?

A sacrament is a holy ordinance (order) instituted by Christ. It is an outward, visible sign of inward, invisible grace where, by sensory signs, "...Christ, and the benefits of the new covenant are represented, sealed, and applied to believers." (Westminster Shorter Catechism) In this passage of Acts, the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper come after repentance and acceptance of the Word. In themselves, they do not save; they are not prerequisites of salvation. However, believers must take them seriously and value them. Christ commanded his disciples to teach all nations and baptise them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost (Matthew 28:19) and He instructed the disciples to keep the Lord's Supper in remembrance of Him (1 Corinthians 11:24-25). When we are baptised and take the Lord's Supper, it is done in obedience to Christ and is thus also a form of worship whereby we express our reverence and adoration of God. Sacraments are given to us as a means of grace, and keeping these sacraments correctly bring about wonderful spiritual benefits. Such worship is a privilege only for believers. The young believers in Acts took every opportunity to worship God by baptism, the breaking of bread and meeting together with other believers daily in the temple.

In order to take the Lord's Supper you need to be baptised or reaffirmed (if you were already baptised as an infant). If you are sure of your salvation and have not been baptised, why delay to declare publicly that you have accepted the gift of salvation that has been given to you? The believers in the early church did not, for why should they? It was the natural and logical thing to do. However, do not feel pressured to be baptised just because all your friends in your cohort are doing it. You need to first be certain about your own salvation. If you have doubts, seek counsel from the pastor or leaders in your church. If you already are baptised and do take the Lord's Supper regularly, do ensure that you do so worthily, and not approach the table with unrepented sins or a casual flippant attitude.

Thought: How many sacraments does the Catholic Church have?

Prayer: May my worship of God be pleasing to God and be reflected consistently in all aspects of my life.

"Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!"

WHAT IS FELLOWSHIP LIKE IN A REFORMED CHURCH?

It is not wrong for a group of believers to get together to exchange cupcake recipes, talk about sports or chat about what's going on at school. But this is not fellowship. Christian fellowship refers to spiritually-minded believers meeting to pursue a shared purpose: to encourage and build one another up in the faith, rebuke sin, pray, and do the work of God. Of course there is nothing wrong when Christians also talk about the best food or about current affairs, but our bond comes about through unity in faith.

Is it true that birds of a feather flock together? I believe so. Early believers came from such diverse backgrounds and from all over the Roman Empire yet had such gladness and singleness of heart. The Greek word for fellowship in Acts 2:42 is *koinonia* which means partnership or sharing. The believers became one spiritual body with no division. So strong was their unity that they voluntarily gave up ownership and control of their possessions, sharing with all and without discrimination. Their fellowship bore not just spiritual, but also practical fruit. What made this fellowship possible was doctrinal purity, the foundation and reason for being unwavering, not departing from what the apostles had taught. The fellowship they had was not just a one-off event, but a daily occurrence.

Consider the basis of your fellowship with fellow believers. Is it rooted in the teachings of Christ or worldly interests? Do you value fellowship and is it a regular and important part of your Christian life? The problem we have is that when we enter the church premises, we still see ourselves as individuals, different from others in terms of age, gender, personality etc. Rather, we should see ourselves as part of the body of Christ, bound to each other by the precious blood of Jesus Christ, a bond that ought to be even closer than familial ties. We have unity in church as all of us subscribe to the same doctrinal stands which impact all facets of our lives; we should thus cast aside our doubts about whether we fit in, and realise we already do! If you do already enjoy this bond of fellowship, then will you not do more to encourage others around you to enjoy it as well?

Thought: How can you deepen fellowship with fellow believers and share more?

Prayer: May my fellowship with my friends and family be firmly rooted in Your Word.

HOW DID THE WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH COME ABOUT?

Acts 15:6 reads *“And the apostles and elders came together for to consider of this matter.”* The early church faced its first major challenge when certain believing Jews insisted that all Christians should still keep the entire Mosaic Law, including circumcision. The most spiritual believers (ie. the apostles and elders) came together to discuss the issue biblically, and they later came to a unanimous solution that glorified Christ. Believers, both in Jerusalem and abroad, accepted and rejoiced over this decision.

In 1643, over one hundred years after the Reformation began, England was in political turmoil due to a power struggle between the English Parliament on the one hand, and King Charles I and his bishops on the other. One key issue was how far the English Reformation would progress in the Church of England; toward a Calvinistic standard or toward an Arminian and Catholic leaning one. That year, Parliament commissioned a gathering of 121 ‘divines’ or theologians to formulate the Westminster Standards (which includes the Westminster Confession of Faith, Shorter and Larger Catechisms). It was to be a document subordinate to the Bible, articulating consensus of Scripture on matters of worship, doctrine, government and discipline for the Church of England. The document that they produced was an excellent systematic exposition of Calvinist orthodoxy whose adoption and influence was widespread in many reformed churches worldwide and continues to this very day in the Bible-Presbyterian Church. (See Article 4.1 Constitution of the Calvary Pandan B-P Church, Singapore)

Today, such coming together of spiritual men to discuss issues pertaining to the doctrine and spiritual growth of the church is reflected in the Board of Elders that govern any Presbyterian church (“Presbyterian” meaning rule by elders). A true BOE will always place Christ as the head of the church, and the BOE as under-shepherds. This is the biblical way to run a local church, not by one leader’s decision or congregational vote. While you personally might desire to have a greater say in how the church should be run, you must submit to the rule of the elders who are accountable to Christ for you and the rest of the flock. Do you?

Thought: Why do I sometimes resist authority?

Prayer: May I always be ready to obey lawful authority set above me.

WHO WROTE THE WESTMINSTER CONFSSION?

Amidst a backdrop of political unrest, the English Parliament called for learned, theologians with good judgment to meet together at Westminster Abbey to write the Westminster Confession. One hundred and twenty one Puritans (Protestants who wanted to reform the Church of England from within, the majority of whom were Presbyterian, with Episcopalians and Independents also represented) called the Westminster Assembly met over 5 years and after much discussion and debate, the Westminster Confession was completed. One can imagine the discussion and debate would have often been passionate and fierce, yet despite this, these theologians produced a truly monumental document of church history, which has instructed, directed, and profoundly influenced Reformed and particularly Presbyterian churches worldwide ever since.

It can be difficult working on a project with another person, let alone 121 others and for 5 years at that! Work would be slow, tedious, perhaps frustrating, and sometimes disheartening. I can imagine that I would be tempted to quit. The learned theologians of the Westminster Assembly would not only have required much wisdom in doctrinal matters, but also a lot of love, temperance, meekness, longsuffering...(Galatians 5:22-23) In contrast, most other Reformed Confessions were written by a single author or a small group of theologians, which places in greater perspective just how amazing this document is. Behind it all is truly the sovereign hand of God. As these 121 individuals gathered to write, it was God who ultimately controlled what was written. He was the force that made it great. Men, however learned, were but tools to publish it and make it known to others.

In your church, as God so calls you and places you in committees both formal and informal with other believers to plan and carry out His work, be ever mindful whose work you are doing and the fruit of the spirit that need to be exercised to accomplish His work. If you find yourself often in conflict with others in the committee, or if you often feel impatient with the progress made, examine yourself against the fruit of the Spirit. Remember, it is all for His testimony, not yours.

Thought: When I co-labour with other believers, what aspects of the fruit of the Spirit do I lack?

Prayer: May I manifest all the fruit of the spirit in my work for You.

HOW DID THE KING JAMES BIBLE COME ABOUT?

During the Dark Ages of Christianity from the 10th to the 15th Century, the Bible was not made available to the common people in their common language. As a result, believers could only rely on what the leaders of the Roman Catholic Church told them and this led to rampant unchecked false teachings and practices. The onset of the Renaissance Age encouraged the study of the Scriptures in its original languages of Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic. The in-depth study of God’s Word opened the eyes of God’s people and lit the flame which started the Protestant Reformation. Many great men such as John Wycliffe and William Tyndale risked their lives to translate the Bible into the English language so that God’s Word could be accessible to the laymen. Tyndale was martyred for his work and before he was strangled to death and burnt, he prayed, “O Lord, open the King of England’s eyes.” Indeed, Tyndale’s prayer was answered and shortly after, King Henry VIII allowed the printing of the first legal English Bible. In the year 1604, King James I authorised the reformers to produce a new translation of the English Bible. It was to be the official Bible to be placed in all churches throughout England, and thus no effort was spared in ensuring that the best people and resources were given to the work. Finally, in 1611, the King James Bible was published and has stood the test of time for over 400 years.

Truly, God’s truth will always stand. Satan may do all that he can to try hide God’s Word from the people, but realise that ‘we can do nothing against the truth, but for the truth’ (2 Corinthians 13:8). Despite Satan’s best efforts to prevent God’s Word from being given to the common man, he failed, and we all have God’s Word translated into a language we can understand!

Realise that God has now made it possible for you to study His Word for yourself. Do you avail yourself of this God-given opportunity, or do you take it for granted? Are you one of those in church services who closes his Bible once the Scripture reading is done and does not refer to the Bible at all throughout the sermon? Are you one of those who prefers reading Christian books and devotionals, such as this guide, to meditation on the Word itself? Such over-reliance on the words of men is not only potentially risky; it is better to read God’s Word yourself.

Thought: Do I prefer to read Christian books or the Bible?

Prayer: Dear Lord, grant me diligence to study Thy Word for myself.

WHO WERE THE TRANSLATORS OF THE KING JAMES BIBLE?

Never in the history of the Church had there been such an enormous gathering of godly Christian scholars to do the single work of translating God’s Word from the original languages to the English language. The translation of the King James Bible was truly a work of God which has never been repeated in the history of the Church. It resulted from the 16th Century Protestant Reformation and was preceded by the good work of translation done by godly men, some of whom were even martyred for their service and dedication to God.

Fifty-four scholars translated the KJV. They were eminent scholars from Cambridge, Oxford and Westminster who were excellent in terms of their intellect and education. More importantly, not only were they well-equipped intellectually, they were also godly and devout men who loved God and His Word. They treated God’s Word with utmost respect and reverence and took special care in their translation to ensure that God’s Truth would be preserved. Just as in Acts 19:11 we see how “God wrought special miracles by the hands of Paul”, we can see how God used these men to produce the most faithful English translation of His Word that we have today.

God can use us today to do a great work for Him, just as He did with these men. However, we should not get ahead of ourselves by dreaming of great things we can do for God and neglect what He wants us to do today. We should instead submit to God’s present will for us and “*give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine*” (1 Timothy 4:13). The KJV translators did this, and they not only knew God’s Word well but also lived out His Word in their lives. They were strong in their Christian faith because of both their head and heart knowledge of God’s Word and because of this, God could use them mightily. Do you desire this for your life as well? Start by being serious in your study of God’s Word for it is the foundation of your Christian faith and ministry.

Thought: How do translators of modern English versions match up to the KJV translators? Do some background studies and see.

Prayer: Lord, may Thy Spirit daily impress upon my heart the need to study Thy Word so that Thou might use me mightily.

IS THERE A BATTLE FOR THE KING JAMES BIBLE?

At the time of writing, there is a recently published version of the Bible called "The Voice", focusing on dialogue, and formatted like a screenplay! Rather than using spiritual men alone, according to this version's website, the translators also included poets, musicians and story tellers! Such a low view of God's Word is symptomatic of so many modern versions that have sought to displace the King James Version.

Psalm 138 is a psalm written by David which is full of praise and worship of God. David says that he will praise God with his whole heart and worship toward God's holy temple. He praises God's name because of the lovingkindness God had shown him by preserving him from his enemies, especially when he was running for his life from King Saul. He also praises God for His truth. God kept His promise to protect David and gave him strength *"in the midst of trouble"* (verse 7).

Our God is a righteous and trustworthy God. He loves truth and will not suffer lies and error. What He says He will do. He values His Word, and as we see in verse 2, even more than His Name. Although the Name of God is exalted and magnified throughout the ages, God Himself magnifies His Word even more, for it is only through His Word that His name is known and magnified. Remember that God's Word is immensely powerful: with His Word, He created the heavens and the earth. His Word should thus be of immense impact to us as well.

Do we also love and magnify God's Word like He Himself does? Do we have a reverence for God's Word? If we do, we will naturally love and defend the King James Bible. It is by far the most faithful English translation we have of God's Word and all other modern Bible versions pale in comparison to it. If we truly value God's Word, we will not want to read watered down, corrupt versions of the Scriptures. We will want a Bible which truly magnifies God's Word and honours His Truth. Therefore, it is essential that we stand up for the KJV today. We should understand and be convinced about the reasons why we use the KJV and be able to defend it when questioned by others. Most of all, the basis of our defence of the KJV should be our love and reverence for God's Word; in the same way that God magnifies His Word.

Thought: How would you defend your use of the KJV if a friend asks you?

Prayer: Lord, teach me to love and protect Thy Word.

HOW DID REFORMATION PROTESTANTS FIGHT?

Romans 1:17 says *“the just shall live by faith”*. This means that it is only by faith that we can be justified and thus have eternal life. It is not by good works that we can earn our way into Heaven. There is nothing we can do to achieve salvation. It is only by the grace of God, through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. 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”* (Romans 10:9). This saving faith that allows us to accept Jesus is given to us by the grace of God.

The Roman Catholic Church greatly perverted this fundamental doctrine and basis of the Christian faith. Her leaders taught a religion of works and invented false practices, such as the sale of indulgences where people could buy “merits” to pay for their sins and speed up their journey to heaven! Essentially, this was a revenue-generating practice for the church and it was one of the main practices that the reformers preached against. The reformers called for a return to the Word of God and to the basics of the Christian faith. Their cry was *“the just shall live by faith”*.

Can this be your cry as well? Examine your heart to see if you have truly believed this. Or are you still trying to earn your way into Heaven through works? Examine your motives for going to Church and doing Christian service. Be honest with yourself for this is the greatest matter that your soul must face. If you are assured of your salvation, praise God! Now seek to emulate the spirit of the reformers - one that has its firm foundation in God’s Word and His promises, and will do everything to protect the Faith by speaking out against false teachings and practices. False doctrines attack God’s character and His Word. They replace faith in God with something else, whether it is another god, another person, an idol, oneself or one’s own works. If we truly realise how important this faith should be to us, we will speak out for our faith.

Thought: What would have happened if the reformers had kept quiet and the Reformation had never occurred? Imagine having God’s truth kept from you. How devastating that would be!

Prayer: Lord, grant me a humble spirit to obey Thy Word and a courageous heart to speak out for it.

HOW HAVE MODERN PROTESTANTS LOST?

Many Protestant churches today have forgotten the Reformation. Some even call it a mistake. They say we should never have left the Roman Catholic Church in the first place and are calling for reunion with Rome to become one big family in Christ. This is the ecumenical movement and it is aided by a departure from the fundamentals of our faith and the downplaying of the authority of God’s Word. Doctrinal differences are brushed aside for the sake of “Christian love and tolerance”. The Charismatic movement which has permeated both Protestant and Catholic churches has also helped to bring the two groups together as they both worship with contemporary music, practise signs and wonders, and speak in tongues.

How far from God’s Truth this is! God’s Word clearly states that we must not be *“unequally yoked together with unbelievers”*. A yoke is a wooden beam shared by two oxen to pull a load. How can the load be pulled if the two oxen are going in completely separate directions? The Roman Catholic Church does not believe in the truths of the Reformation (namely the five Solas). She does not believe in salvation in Christ alone, by grace, through faith. How can Evangelical Protestants who say they believe God’s Word worship together with Catholics who do not? “For what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? And what communion hath light with darkness?” Truly, modern Protestants have lost their way, and must remember the battles that were fought and won during the reformation!

God says, *“Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate”* (verse 17). We must be very careful to observe biblical separation at this point in church history. The stage is being set for the One World Church of the end times and the ecumenical wheels are actively turning. Many Christian groups in schools usually have an ecumenical spirit and we must be very wary when asked to join in their activities. Very soon, peer pressure and not wanting to be different may cause us to compromise on our faith and undermine the impact of God’s Word in our lives. Never allow your desire to be accepted by others draw you into this dilemma; instead, desire to be accepted by God, and to be declared a *“faithful servant”* by Him.

Thought: How would you reply a Catholic classmate who asks you to pray with him?

Prayer: Lord, grant me spiritual discernment and courage in all that I do.

WHY PROMOTE REFORMED THEOLOGY? (I)

The prophet Amos here writes about a vision from God about the Israelites. God likened them to “*a basket of summer fruit*”, ripe for His judgment (Amos 8:1-2). They had sinned against God in their oppression of the poor and deception in their business. They were greedy and materialistic; cheating people, especially the poor, of their money. They were worldly, covetous people who kept an appearance of false piety but actually took no delight in spiritual matters. They observed “*the new moon*” or special religious days and worshipped on “*the Sabbath*” but they secretly wished these days would be over quickly so that they could go back to their materialistic pursuits (verse 5). Though they prospered for a short while, God said that He “*will never forget any of their works*” and judgment was inevitable. The judgment was immense and much more severe than just physical famine of bread or water. It would be a spiritual famine where God would starve the people “*of hearing the words of the LORD*”. This is much more devastating than any physical punishment. Israel had the privilege of constantly receiving God’s Word through His prophets but the Israelites took them for granted and did not listen to their warnings. Indeed, after the OT period, there were 400 silent years where God did not speak directly to His people. Some people even see this judgment as being extended into the NT time where Jews rejected Christ as the Messiah.

We have God’s complete Word with us now, yet we too live in a time of spiritual famine. God reveals Himself and His Truth in His written Word but more and more Christians are tossing the Bible aside and discounting His Word. We, like the Israelites, have taken God’s Word for granted. We too have a false holiness where we look spiritual on the outside but our hearts are worldly and materialistic. That is why we must promote Reformed Theology, which is firmly rooted in the Holy Scriptures. We must turn back to God’s Word and look to it as our sole authority for faith and practice. We must study and know God’s Word more and obey it in our lives. We must have the spirit of the Reformers who were willing to hazard even their own lives for the sake of promoting God’s Truth and ensuring that no one is starved of God’s Word! Are you willing to take a stand for a 21st Century Reformation movement?

Thought: Is there spiritual famine in your life? Have you neglected God’s Word or only have very superficial understanding of His doctrines?

Prayer: Lord, in this time of spiritual famine, draw me back to Thy Word.

WHY PROMOTE REFORMED THEOLOGY? (II)

Jeremiah was called the weeping prophet as he prophesied in a time of great sin and judgment on God’s chosen people. Here he is speaking against the false prophets and priests who had told the people, *“peace, peace; when there is no peace”* (Jeremiah 6:13-14). Jeremiah tells the people how God wants them to discern if these prophets are false so that they will not blindly follow them. God says, *“Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls”*. This gives a picture of someone standing at a junction looking to see which path is the right one he should take. God says he should look back to the old paths that he has walked and follow the path that is similar to the tried and proven paths. God wants the people to judge what a prophet says against what they previously knew about God through past prophets and men of God. In other words, God wants them to search Holy Scriptures to validate what these prophets say, and judge whether they are truly speaking the Word of God.

This is exactly what the Reformers did during the Protestant Reformation. They went back to God’s Word and realised that the Roman Catholic Church was not following the right *“path”*. We too need to look at the *“old paths”* to discern the times. We need to look at God’s Word in depth. We need to look at church history to learn what is the right way and what errors we should avoid. The Reformation was truly an event orchestrated by God. The spirit and theology from that period are rich and pure. The Church at that Spirit-filled time was alive and zealous for God. Apostasy was actively being preached against; the Bible was fervently studied and expounded to the believers. Since then, there has not been a revival of such magnitude in the Church. To study Reformed Theology will indeed bring great satisfaction and *“rest for [our] souls”*. Therefore, do not look at Reformed Theology as something outdated and boring. There is much to learn from the Reformers who, like us in these end times, had to be sure of and stand up for God’s Truth in a dark period in church history. You might not like the subject of history, but realise that the old paths of church history is very much the path your church must still take if it is to be faithful.

Thought: How would studying Reformed Theology help you in your Christian walk and testimony in these last days?

Prayer: Dear Lord, teach me the *“old paths”* and help me learn from Thy Word and from Thy faithful servants in history.

WHO WAS JOHN CALVIN?

John Calvin was a prominent and influential French theologian who lived in the time of the Reformation. He is widely regarded as one of the most significant architects of the Reformation movement. Calvin was blessed with a brilliant mind, and was responsible for establishing many of the great doctrines of the Christian faith in writing and teaching. For much of his life, he also served as a pastor in Geneva, Switzerland. Calvin is famous for several things. When he was 26, he published a book named the Institutes of Christian Religion. This was revised several times, and became one of the greatest and most famous theological books ever written. In his lifetime, he also published commentaries on nearly every book of the Bible. In terms of his doctrine, Calvin is also famous for establishing from Scripture the doctrine of predestination, systematised after his death into the 5 points of Calvinism through the acronym “TULIP”. Truly, he was a one *“that the LORD hath set apart him that is godly for himself”* (Psalm 4:3).

In terms of his personality, Calvin was a quiet and introverted sort of person who desired to spend his life in quiet study and writing. However, the Lord had other plans for him. God used him despite his character and called him to do many things he might not have naturally chosen to do. During his time, many Protestants were being martyred for their faith and their reputations slandered as the Roman Catholic church tried very hard to stop the Protestant movement. Calvin could not stand to see this continue. He said *“A dog barks when his master is attacked. I would be a coward if I saw that God’s truth is attacked and yet would remain silent.”* Despite his weaknesses, he stepped forward and wrote and taught against the Vatican. Because of His love for God and His children, Calvin sacrificed his comfort and freedom to suffer for Christ’s sake. Through it all, I am sure his assurance was as the Psalmist who said *“the Lord will hear when I call unto him”* (Psalm 4:3b). Already weakened by illness, his last sermon was preached with such passion that he coughed out blood. The Lord took him home shortly after.

May we likewise be prepared to be used by God in any capacity that He calls us to. Like Calvin, we have our own human weaknesses, but may we have our confidence in God instead.

Thought: “Humility, humility, humility” – John Calvin.

Prayer: Father, may I be inspired to be faithful too.

WHAT ARE THE FIVE POINTS OF CALVINISM?

The 5 points of Calvinism is known to most by the catchy acronym TULIP. TULIP stands for Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace, and Perseverance of the Saints. What many do not know is that it was not John Calvin who coined it. The 5 points of Calvinism were derived from Calvin's doctrines by a gathering of Presbyterian ministers from around the world in 1618 at a meeting known as the Synod of Dort. The Synod was formed in response to the claims of a Professor Jakob Harmensen whose Latin name was Arminius. His followers were known as the Arminians. They made 5 claims concerning salvation that did not match what Scripture said, for they claimed that man does indeed have free will over his salvation. The Synod of Dort was then convened to answer the Arminians. From God's Word and the teachings of Calvin, the members of the Synod all agreed that the Arminian doctrine was erroneous and produced the 5 points of Calvinism to respond to each of the 5 claims of the Arminians. These points gave all glory to God, for He alone is fully responsible for man's salvation.

You might shun the study of doctrines, thinking that it is too difficult and only meant for theologians. Remember that doctrines are written by men whose intentions are to explain or summarise what Scripture says about certain biblical topics. For example, the doctrine of the Trinity explains the 3 Persons of God as found in Scripture. God uses godly men to develop doctrines for our benefit so that we can better understand difficult ideas in the Bible. However, as with all man-made endeavours, not all doctrines are good. Good doctrines are those that are based on the Bible in its entirety. Bad doctrines are those that contain error. If we accept and practice good doctrines, they will draw us nearer to God. If we follow wrong doctrines, they will lead us to sin. Hence, it is very important that we test and ensure that doctrines are truly of God before we accept them. (1 John 4:1). This is done by comparing what the doctrines say with Scripture and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is also important to remember that man-made doctrines are not to be considered as equal to God's Word. Always be prepared to reject any man-made doctrine if you find they are not consistent with Scripture. God's Word is supreme.

Thought: Best defense against False Doctrine: God's Word and the Holy Spirit.

Prayer: Father, help me to be a diligent student of Your Word.

WHAT IS TOTAL DEPRAVITY?

The first of the 5 points of Calvinism teaches that every person born into this world is enslaved to of sin. “Total” means that there is no good in us whatsoever. Every aspect of us is depraved and sinful. All of mankind is unwilling and incapable of any spiritual good, for he is spiritually dead (Romans 3:23). Every thought and action is tainted with sin. Man continually seeks only to satisfy his selfish ends and not to acknowledge God. Although man is made in the image of God, he does not seek after God and instead rebels against Him continually. But wait a minute, aren’t there at least some good people in the world? What about the philanthropist who dedicates his time and resources to help the poor? Or the kind person who willingly gives up his seat for the elderly? Are they not good? Scripture teaches that no, not even those acts are good. God’s Word says that every intention and thought is evil continually (Genesis 6:5). We are sinners from the moment we come into this world. (Psalm 51:5). None are righteous, none seek God. (Romans 3:10-11). Behind what appears to be a kind act is a heart that *harbors* a selfish purpose and thought, and if the person is not a believer, he is not doing it for the glory of God. Although we cannot read the hearts of man, God can, and He reveals the truth in Scripture. The doctrine of Total Depravity is biblical; this is what Scripture teaches.

Do you consider yourself a bad person? Or do you feel that you are not all that bad. The reality is that we are all bad; we are all sinners. We may not be murderers, but when we are angry, we despise others and lash out at them with hatred and vengeance. If you search your heart honestly, do you find purity? The answer is a resounding “No”. We are all tainted with sin. However, there is a difference between believers and unbelievers. Because of what Christ did for believers, we are completely washed clean of our sins (Isaiah 1:18). We can become pure. Furthermore, with the help of the Holy Spirit, we now have power over sin. We are not only able to overcome sin in our lives, we are also truly able to do what is spiritually pure and good. We are no longer totally depraved. However, we are still capable of sinning. This happens when we are weak and succumb to temptation. When that happens, we must repent and seek the Lord’s forgiveness, for He is always just and able to forgive us of our sins.

Thought: Believers sinning are like the dog returning to its vomit.

Prayer: Father, thank You for saving me. Keep me pure always.

WHAT IS UNCONDITIONAL ELECTION?

To correctly understand Unconditional Election one must first start at the correct place. That place is humility. We must be humble to understand what is presented to us from God's Word. Unconditional Election follows logically from the “T” of “TULIP”. Firstly, man is Totally Depraved. He has no ability to save himself apart from the grace of God. If that is the case, then logically we need someone else to save us. Scripture tells us that given a choice, everyone will choose to reject God. Presented with the saving gospel, the man who is dead in sin will not only reject it, he will even scorn and hate it. If God thus condemns all of us to hell, it would be completely just and correct. We deserve it. We have to first accept the truth that all man without exception deserve condemnation and will choose to reject the gospel and God. Yet despite man's sin and rejection of God, God, by His grace, has elected some to be saved. As a result, the hearts of those elected change and they are willing to come to the saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. God made this choice even before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4), and as such, there are absolutely no conditions attached to this election. Scripture does not tell us who are chosen and why they are chosen, but we do know that it is unconditional (2 Timothy 1:9), and it was simply done in accordance to the good pleasure of His sovereign will. Knowing all this, no man can boast that he was saved based on some merit of his own, because in the first place, he has no merit to speak of at all!

Are you saved, reader? If not, you may think, I am not the chosen. But will you rest at that? Can you be so certain you are not? Will you simply accept that and be ready for eternal condemnation? If you believe that there is a judgment hereafter and eternal hell fire awaits all unsaved sinners, would you not then come before God to ask for salvation? Would you not come in desperation to the God who can forgive your sins and save you whether you think you are chosen or not? Christ promised in John 6:37 that all that come to Him, He will not cast away. Whilst God has certainly elected all whom He has chosen, we do not know the mind of God, and never know who is elect or not. It is not a doctrine for us to despair at and think that God is unfair to not choose some. Instead this is a doctrine to give us confidence and assurance to know God would choose me despite my sin and complete depravity! By God's grace you have been given the opportunity to hear His gospel. Will you not pray for the faith to believe?

Thought: The good pleasure of God's will is always the best!

Prayer: God, save me!

WHAT IS LIMITED ATONEMENT?

Limited Atonement is represented by "L" in "TULIP". A phrase that is commonly used to describe this doctrine with reference to the effect of Christ's atonement, is that it is "...sufficient for all, efficient for the elect...". The value of Christ's death on the cross is sufficient to save all, but not all will be saved because not all will ultimately come to trust in Him. Many have and will continue to reject Christ. Christ's atonement on the cross cannot be applied to those who reject Him. In His work of atonement, Christ paid the penalty for our sins with His blood. God accepted what Christ did, and this is how we are able to obtain forgiveness for our sins. If the sinner does not accept Christ's work, it is impossible for the atonement work of Christ to be applied to him. Atonement is a free gift, but the sinner may reject this gift. Hence, atonement cannot apply to all mankind, but is limited only to believers. The doctrine of Limited Atonement is found in many parts of Scripture. For instance, in Christ's priestly prayer in John 17:9, Christ prayed; "I pray for them: I pray not for the world, but for them which thou hast given me; for they are thine." We can see here that Christ did not pray for the whole world but only for believers, who are described as those whom God has entrusted to Christ's care. Evidently, what this means is that the atonement is limited in its effect to only those whom God has elected, and not to the whole world. Admittedly, this is a difficult doctrine to fully understand. Remember what is said in yesterday's reading regarding humility and understanding doctrines from the correct perspective. We must be able to differentiate between what God's Word says and what our own minds tell us.

If you are a believer, you must count it an absolutely great privilege to be chosen by God because of His bountiful mercies. Matthew 7:13-14 tell us that the gate that leads to destruction is broad and many will take that path. On the other hand, the gate for believers is a narrow and small one. God's chosen are few and you are one of these few; not because of any good in you, but simply because God is gracious and merciful. This is so great a blessing that we will be praising God for all eternity. May we never take our salvation lightly nor forget how great a work of atonement Christ has wrought for us.

Thought: Can I repay Christ for what He has done for me?

Prayer: Father, thank You for choosing and saving me.

WHAT IS IRRESISTIBLE GRACE?

Irresistible Grace is represented by “I” in “TULIP”. In this doctrine, those who are called will surely accept the salvation message (John 6:37) because of the grace of God. The Holy Spirit works in them and causes them to be persuaded of their need for Jesus Christ as their personal Saviour. This conversion is neither forceful nor violent in nature. God does not drag the unbeliever unwilling into heaven. Instead, it is a transformation of the soul such that the believer comes willingly with great joy accepting what God offers. It is gentle yet powerful. It is irresistible but yet it is given by the grace and love of God. We have to recall that in our state of sinfulness and total depravity, we would never choose to accept the salvation message. Man who is told that after he dies he will face judgment for his sins, will mock in disbelief. Instead, in the vanity of their sinful minds, some dream up fictitious ideas about hell and God or just flippantly deny the existence of both. If you told them that Christ is the only way to redemption, you would likely be rudely told off. No man in his own free will would ever want to accept God’s Gift. In his depraved heart is hatred for the one, true, living God. Instead of doing what is pure and truthful, man seeks to do what is selfish and lustful. If left to himself, no man will enter heaven and all man will justly enter hell for all eternity. Believers will only come to God by His transforming grace alone. It is only by the grace of God, that when He lovingly calls us to Him, then we who are His sheep will hear His voice, and willingly come to Him (John 10:27).

We have so much to thank God for. If God had never transformed our hearts, we would never have been saved. Oh, how great are His mercies towards His children. There was nothing good in us, yet, He reached out and brought us unto Himself. Reader, are you thankful? One day when we stand before Christ’s throne, side by side with all who are similarly redeemed, we will be able to fully understand the significance of what Christ has done for us. Before you, there lies an eternity with our wonderful God. You have been plucked out as a brand from the fire, among many who have not come to trust in Christ, you are the few who have been rescued. How grateful we should be! Are you?

Thought: The darkened sinful heart is created by man, not God.

Prayer: Father, please help me to understand Your grace more and more each day.

WHAT IS PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS?

Perseverance of the Saints forms the final “P” in “TULIP”. This doctrine states that once a person is saved, he remains saved forever. Neither life or death, angels, things present or to come, height nor depth nor any creature shall be able to change that, for none of those things can ever separate us from the love of God (Romans 8:39), for the believer will certainly persevere in the Lord till the very end. Let us consider TULIP in total. Man is totally depraved (T). He is sinful and there is nothing spiritually good in him. Left to himself he will never turn to God. However, God in His mercies, has elected some before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4) not because there is any good in us that deserves salvation, but simply according to His good will and pleasure (U). Christ’s sacrifice, although sufficient to save all mankind, is efficacious only for His elect (L). Those who are chosen, will receive salvation without fail (I). Thus, following on from that, is it not logical to believe that all whom God has already chosen and called by His grace will certainly persevere till the very end? God alone is the one who has begun this good work of salvation in you, and He will certainly preserve and keep you to the day of Christ! (Philippians 1:6).

Dear reader, now that you are a believer, do you sometimes fear that your God may somehow reclaim your salvation, perhaps, because of a certain sin that you have committed? Well, you are not alone in thinking this way. The Arminians believed that salvation could be lost if one sinned and only with repentance is salvation restored. Hence, if a believer dies in sin, without repentance, he will be lost to hell forever. However, this is not what Scripture teaches. Christ in John 10:28-29 tells us very clearly that our salvation is secure. Whoever Christ has given eternal life to, will never perish. No man can pluck believers out of the hands of Christ or that of the Father’s and the Father is greater than all. If you have truly come to the saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, you are forever safe and you have eternal life promised to you in God’s Word. There is no doubt about the certainty of salvation as taught in many parts of Scripture. There may be times when we will sin and backslide from the Lord, but the promise is that He will always be the one to bring us back, for the believer may fall, but he will never be utterly cast down, for the Lord upholds him with His hand (Psalm 37:24).

Thought: What a wonderful Shepherd is Jesus my Lord!

Prayer: Father, help me to trust in You completely.

HOW IS CALVINISM DIFFERENT FROM ARMINISM?

The basic premise of Arminianism is that man is the one in control of his own destiny, and not God. They emphasise the free will of man to such an extent as to call into question the sovereignty of God. To them, it is man who takes the first step to choose God, and it is also man who must live a holy victorious life in order to ensure that his salvation is complete. Some have described Arminianism as being more “acceptable” to the human heart and mind, in that it seems easier and more reasonable. Man can choose to believe or not believe in God; Man is not totally depraved as in being unable to exercise faith in God, for there is some good in him, and so on. God in Arminianism does not seem as harsh as what Calvinism portrays God to be, in that God does not predestine any man to hell. However, is it biblical? Does it match what God’s Word says?

Through the verses we have read in the past few days and the accompanying explanations, I hope that you have come to the firm belief that Arminianism is not biblically sound. Their teachings contradict God’s Word and we should reject it. God’s Word is very clear about the total depravity of man in his total inability to come to Christ unless God causes Him to. There are numerous Scriptural passages to support the Calvinist view and contradict the Arminian view. We should come to appreciate how wonderful our God of grace is, that despite our sin, He has taken upon Himself the whole work of salvation. In this grand story of redemption, God alone is the one who does everything, and we are but the appreciative audience who stands in awe, and can only give our thankful praise and rapturous applause. As believers, we must follow the principle that in all things, Christ must increase, and we must decrease. Any doctrine that emphasises the glory of God and diminishes the glory of man is a true doctrine; in contrast, doctrine that teaches the opposite must be rejected.

There may be times when we would question God, and feel that it is unfair that He would chose to save some and not the rest. We may wonder why He did not just save the whole world. However, these questions are not for us to ask, for our mortal minds can never fathom the will of God. His will is always the best. He has predestinated us ‘according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will’, and we must simply acknowledge that His counsel is perfect.

Thought: Can my will be better than God’s will?

Prayer: Father, send Thy Holy Spirit to help us discern Your Word.

WHAT ARE THE TWO MAJOR THEOLOGICAL SYSTEMS? (I)

Hebrews 8:6-7 states that there were deficiencies with the first covenant under the Mosaic Law. The main problem was not with God, but with man, for because of his sin, he was unable to keep the covenant perfectly. Through Jesus Christ, we have a second covenant, which was better in that this covenant rests solely on God's ability to keep the promises of the covenant. We see in these two verses two different epochs in history mentioned. How theologians subdivide history into various epochs has given rise to different theological systems.

Over several centuries after the Reformation, true believers became divided into two groups; those who hold to Covenant Theology and those who hold to Dispensational Theology. These are the two major theological systems held by the body of true believers today. Of course not every church and Christian can be neatly slotted into these two categories, and there will be variations within both, but by and large, these are the two main prevailing systems that theologians would subscribe to. Covenant theology has been around since the time of Augustine in the 4th century and was further developed and systematised by John Calvin and the other Reformers in the 17th century. Dispensational theology was set forth through the teachings of John Darby in the 19th century, and was made popular by the C. I. Scofield Reference Bible. Why do God's people hold to different beliefs? Mind you, these two groups still hold to the basic fundamental doctrines that makes one a Christian. However, when it comes to the harder doctrines, they differ. Why does this happen? Shouldn't all true believers believe the same thing?

The fact is God leaves some of His doctrines harder to be understood. Finding the truth about these doctrines requires humility, prayer and hard work dividing God's Word with the help of the Holy Spirit. Naturally, some will come to the Word incorrectly, in the wrong spirit, with man's wisdom, with pride or some other deficiencies and hence resulting in error. However, God never leaves His Word without witness. There is always a correct doctrine given among men. We have to study these doctrines and compare them against God's Word and if they are found to be true, we can adopt them for our own.

Thought: The complete Word of God is the only way to determine the correctness of doctrines.

Prayer: Father, give me wisdom to discern true from false wisdom.

WHAT ARE THE TWO MAJOR THEOLOGICAL SYSTEMS? (II)

As we are Reformed in our Doctrine, the Bible Presbyterian Church holds to Covenant Theology. Covenant Theology and Dispensational Theology differ in several areas, and we will discuss only some of them. Covenant theologians believe that some of the parts of the Bible are symbolic in nature while the Dispensationalist believes every portion is to be taken literally. This has affected how each has understood the Bible. For instance, Covenant theologians believe that in many portions of Scripture, “Israel” refers to the spiritual Israel, namely the church. The Dispensationalist believes that Israel always refers literally to the nation of Israel. These different interpretation styles have resulted in 2 different beliefs on how God deals with mankind over history. Covenant theologians see continuity through Scripture, in that God deals with mankind in only two covenants, the Covenants of Works in the time of Adam and the Covenant of Grace after Adam’s fall. Dispensationalists on the other hand see a discontinuity in how God deals with mankind, and segment history into 7 “dispensations”, one for each epoch in history. In each dispensation, God deals differently with His people. They use verses like Ephesians 1:10 to support their argument. In this verse the word ‘dispensation’ means plan, and thus the verse means that when the time has come according to God’s plan, Christ will rule over all heaven and earth. However the dispensationalists take it further to mean that there will be an epoch of time, or dispensation, in the future and therefore there must be more than just the two epochs as the Covenant theologians believe.

Until Christ returns, believers will remain imperfect. We will continue to struggle with sin and our understanding of God’s Word, particularly with the more difficult doctrines. As a result, different people will come to different understandings of certain portions of Scripture. Some feel that this is evidence of an imperfect God. But this is not true. God is perfect, it is man who is imperfect. God has given us His perfect inerrant Word; however, it is man who is unable to perceive it correctly because of sin. But God is gracious. He has granted us the Holy Spirit to guide us into all truth! With the right principles of interpretation, and with diligent study of God’s Word, we can come to the right understanding of His truth. Will you put in the effort?

Thought: Only God can help us possess correct doctrines.

Prayer: Father, give us the wisdom so that we will not be in error.

WHAT IS COVENANT THEOLOGY? (I)

God equipped John Calvin with a brilliant mind and a deep love for God. Through a brilliant and exhaustive study of the Bible, and also the writings of the Church Fathers like Irenaeus and Augustine, he established many doctrines for our benefit today. One of them is Covenant Theology. In this doctrine, we learn that God set up two covenants with mankind. The first covenant is known as the Covenant of Works. This covenant was made between God and Adam. If Adam kept God's commandments, then the promise was eternal life with God. Romans 10:5 describes it simply, that the man that can keep the law perfectly will be deemed righteous, and thus by the justification of the law, he can live. In other words, Adam, being made sinless, had a chance to gain salvation through good works, which is why this is called a covenant of works. However, as we know, Adam failed and in the process so did the whole of mankind (Romans 5:12-21). He failed to keep his end of the “deal”, and in so doing broke the covenant of works. However, his failure was not just his own to bear. Adam was unique in that God placed him as the representative of all mankind. His failure condemned all man into an eternity of judgment. If, however, had he been obedient, through him would all mankind also enjoy the benefits of the Covenant of Works. In other words, if Adam had kept the deal, all of mankind would have received salvation and become only capable of good as compared to now where mankind is capable only of evil. Hence, if God will judge mankind based on the covenant of works, we are condemned. There is no hope left for us all because none of us can keep the law perfectly and because sin is so heinous, it takes only one sin to alienate us from a holy God. Do we have hope? Are we hopeless? Enter the Covenant of Grace. More in tomorrow's reading!

We should recall that the ideas that we share here are not invented by the imaginations of John Calvin. Instead, Calvin studied God's Word and with the help of the Holy Spirit discerned all from the Word of God. It is somewhat like piecing the puzzles together and in the process we have a view of the big picture from his efforts. We can learn from this. God's Word is living and infinite, ready for us to discover great truths from out of it. How sad when we neglect the study of His Word.

Thought: Why does God make covenants with man?

Prayer: Father, remind me of the great immeasurable beauty of Your Word.

WHAT IS COVENANT THEOLOGY? (II)

When Adam sinned against God, he broke the first covenant that God made with man which was the Covenant of Works. Because of that, mankind was condemned to eternal judgment in hell. All Adam had to do was not to take the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil, but instead he chose to disobey. We have to remember that it was mankind that failed, not God. God's covenant was reasonable, right and achievable, but Adam broke it. However, God did not leave man in this state of condemnation, but devised another way to rescue man and give man another opportunity towards eternal life. This He did through His Son the Lord Jesus Christ. Through His obedience, Christ fulfilled the covenant of works on behalf of man (Romans 5:15). Through his death, Christ paid the price for the sins of mankind (1 John 2:2). Because of how Christ had fulfilled the law and paid the price of the sins of mankind, God forgives and gives eternal life to those who will receive it. This is the Covenant of Grace. In this covenant, man does not have to fulfill any requirements of works for salvation because Christ has already done so. Hence the word “grace” is used, describing the undeserved merit we are bestowed. Salvation is given not because we fulfilled the law, but because Christ fulfilled it for us. Hebrews 7:22 thus tells us that Christ is the guarantor of this better covenant; He paid what we could not pay.

God in His great mercy gave mankind a second chance. This time, it is a free gift. We only need to receive it. We do not contribute to it. It is a covenant that does not have two equal partners; instead it is a covenant in which God alone fulfills both sides of the agreement. Man simply receives it. How wonderful, isn't it, how God condescends to save man? But the greatest tragedy of mankind is that, even with such a great gift offered to us freely, man in his wickedness still chooses to reject Christ. If only man will understand what God has done for him and how great a travesty he has committed by rebelling against this great love. Brethren, if you are saved, be grateful for what God has done for you. If, however, you have not come to trust in Him, please consider what God has done to enable this offer of salvation. Will you reject His love for you? Come to Him today.

Thought: How great is the love of Christ?

Prayer: Father, thank You for loving me enough to send Your Son to die for me.

WHY IS REPLACEMENT THEOLOGY WRONG?

Replacement theology comes by another name; “supersessionism”. A big word! What Replacement theologians believe is that as a result of the covenant of grace, the nation of Israel has been completely replaced by the Church. The nation of Israel is relegated to become just like any other nation and no longer factors in God’s plan. This is a teaching that is incorrect and unscriptural. God made a promise to Abraham concerning his descendants ie. the nation of Israel and the Promised Land, (Exodus 6:2-8, Deuteronomy 1:6-8, Joshua 1:1-6) that God will preserve them forever. This promise still holds. One of the evidences is the restoration of Israel as a nation in 1948 after nearly two thousand years of diaspora. This is certainly miraculous because any other nation would have vanished from existence given the circumstances. When we study Scripture, we see God’s plan for the church and the nation of Israel. Israel was first established as God’s witness to the earth. However, they failed this task miserably. God took this privilege away and gave it to the church during the time of the Acts of the Apostles. We continue to be part of this plan today. However, this does not mean that God has cast Israel aside. During the Great Tribulation, it will be when the “fullness of the Gentiles be come in” (Romans 11:25). Blindness will be removed from Israel, and all will become believers and acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah (Romans 11:26).

In the past, prior to the establishment of Israel as a nation in 1948, theologians had a hard time envisioning Israel returning as a people and nation once again. When they read of Israel in the New Testament, they straightaway dismissed it as a reference to the Church. Whilst most Reformed Theologians in the past also believed in Replacement Theology, we in this generation are privileged to see the evidence of God’s prophecies being fulfilled before our very eyes! Although Israel at present continues to be a secular nation that does not acknowledge Jesus as Christ, the Bible promises that one day “all Israel shall be saved” (Romans 11:26). This is to us a wonderful affirmation that our God is a covenant keeping God, and He will never break His promises! In the Bible, there are many other wonderful promises that He has given us, in blessing us in this present life, and also for all eternity in Heaven. As you meditate upon God’s promises may you fully be assured that the same God who preserves Israel is also the God who has saved us and will always watch over us as the apple of His eye!

Thought: God’s promise to Israel will never be broken!

Prayer: Father, help me understand Your Word correctly.

WHAT IS PREMILLENNIALISM?

The Millennial Kingdom as taught to us in Revelation 20:1-6 is the literal 1,000 years reign of Christ on earth after the 7 year period of the Great Tribulation. Satan will be bound during this time and his influence on earth will be totally absent. However, among believers today, there are different interpretations regarding the occurrence and nature of this period. Some believe that there is no literal millennium, but that it is a symbolic description of the present church age (Amillennialism) or that Christ will only return after a ‘golden age’ period of a millennium on Earth (Postmillennialism). True B-P churches believe in Premillennialism which has already been described above where Christ will reign only after the 7 years of the Great tribulation. At the end of the 7 years, Christ will descend upon the Earth with His angels and saints from heaven in the event known as the 2nd Coming of Christ. (Acts 1:11, Jude 14, 15). Christ will destroy the armies of the world, cast the Beast and False Prophet into the Lake of Fire (Revelation 19:19-21) and Satan into the Bottomless pit for 1,000 years (Revelation 20:1-3). Christ will then cleanse the earth for 75 days in preparation for the Millennium (Daniel 12:11, 12, Matthew 25:31-46). Christ will set up His kingdom on earth and will reign from Jerusalem (Isaiah 65:17-25, Revelation 20:1-7, 5:10).

During the Millennium, Christ will be the one Perfect and Holy Judge and King of the entire Earth. All must answer to His perfect law and just judgments. This period of 1,000 years will be the greatest period the earth has ever seen. Today, the rulers of countries are imperfect men, many of which have evil motives and intentions, and that explains why there is so much suffering today. During the Millennium, the world will be under the perfect rule of Christ. There will be true peace on Earth. Jeremiah 31:12-14 gives us a glimpse. Can you imagine what that will be like? As believers, we will reign with Christ (Revelation 20:6). What a great privilege! Will you be there to reign alongside Christ? This world we live in is temporal, but the one to come is eternal. Would you rather enjoy the temporal and vain comforts of this life and forgo the glorious and eternal one that is to come? Which do you think is more worth it?

Thought: What prepares us for the life with Christ and what does not?

Prayer: Father, thank You for giving me salvation.

“...received the word with all readiness of mind, and received the Scriptures daily...”

WHAT IS AMILLENIALISM?

One of the main ideas of Amillennialism is the belief that the ‘thousand years’ as described in Revelation 20 is a symbolic description of the present Church Age. According to this interpretation, we are presently in the midst of this period. This is different from those who hold to the Premillennial belief that the 1,000 years reign of Christ has not begun and will only happen after the 2nd Coming of Christ. The Amillennial position is held by most Lutheran, Anglican and Methodist churches, as well as the Roman Catholic Church. One may ask that if the Amillennialists believe that the 1,000 year kingdom began from the Ascension of Christ which occurred more than 2,000 years ago, then shouldn’t this period be over already? Why then do the Amillennialists believe that the Millennial kingdom will only end at the 2nd Coming of Christ? This is due to the interpretation method that Amillennialists use to understand the Bible, known as the allegorical method. Here, Scripture is often made out to be very symbolic. Amillennialists believe that the 1,000 years should not be taken literally, but that it symbolically denotes a long period of time! The allegorical method is dangerous because it adds meaning to God’s Word beyond what is plainly said in Scripture. It is very easy to end in error with this method. This is also the method used by the Roman Catholics to interpret Scripture, and we all know how far gone the RC church has become in their wrong understanding of God’s Word. The allegorical method is wrong and we reject it.

In order to rightly interpret Scripture, we must come from a position that simply takes God at His Word. When the simple and clear meaning makes good sense, then we should seek no other sense. When there are portions of Scripture that we find difficult to interpret or understand, we must seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit to open our eyes that we may behold the wondrous things out of the law (Psalm 119:18). The Bible clearly speaks of a thousand-year period in the future, and it is mentioned no less than 6 times in Revelation 20:1-7. This is a wonderful promise that God has given to both us and the Jews, that we can all look forward to. Dear teen, are you looking forward to the soon return of our Lord Jesus Christ?

Thought: Have you ever tried interpreting Scripture on your own?

Prayer: Father, how love I Thy law. Please help me to understand it correctly.

WHY ARE BIBLE-PRESBYTERIANS PRE-MILL?

There can be some confusion over whether true Bible-Presbyterian (B-P) churches hold to the Premillennial or Amillennial position. This is because, in general, the Premillennial position is normally held by the Dispensationalists which the B-P church is not. As we recall, the B-P church holds to Covenant Theology. Yet the B-P church believes in the Premillennial position. In short, the B-P church stand seems inconsistent. Most who hold to Covenant theology believe in the Amillennial position. John Calvin himself was an Amillennialist. However, it is interesting to note that Calvin did not write a commentary on the Book of Revelation. His inability to do so was most likely because he could not reconcile his Amillennial beliefs with the plain word of God in that book. His correct method of interpreting the Bible must have made him doubt the Amillennial stand, but unfortunately, he did not correct this position before his death.

So is the B-P stand inconsistent? It is not. In establishing the stand of any church, the founding fathers must remember that these systems of doctrines are ultimately written by man and as such are always subject to the possibility of error. The B-P fathers did not follow Calvin blindly. They evaluated his doctrines carefully and where they agreed they adopted, where they disagreed they rejected, all with God's Word as their basis. The true B-P churches take the stand of being Covenantal yet Premillennial.

This is putting into practice 1 John 4:1 where we are commanded to “... *believe not every spirit, but try the spirits...*”. In our study of doctrines, we must remember one important thing, man's doctrines are not to be taken as equivalent or equal to God's Word. God's Word is infallible but man's doctrines are not. However, the study of doctrines is still important and beneficial because there are many doctrines written by man that remain correct and therefore very helpful for us. Often, God's Word contains many difficult to understand ideas. What these men have done is to make these hard to understand ideas easier to understand. Good doctrines help us understand God's Word and God better. Continue to study doctrines, but always check and test them against God's Word.

Thought: God has chosen some men to write doctrines for our benefit.

Prayer: Lord, help me always to treat Your Word most highly.

WHAT IS THE GOLDEN RULE OF INTERPRETATION?

As the verse above tells us, there is a difference between how man's wisdom might interpret Scripture, and the truths that the Holy Ghost would teach believers. Spiritual things are spiritually discerned. Because the Bible is spiritual in nature, no-one can discern its teachings correctly without the Holy Spirit's help. The unbeliever might read a passage and try to make sense of it according to his own wisdom. The believer who is filled with the Spirit will take Scripture as truth; he can be taught how to compare the spiritual truth taught in one passage with the spiritual truth taught in other passages in order to discern the truth. The scary thing is that there are many so-called Christian scholars who interpret the Bible to fit man's wisdom! For example, there are many bible commentaries that argue that 2 Samuel 6:19 is a mistake, as 50,070 men from the town of Beth Shemesh could not have died since most scholars agree that this was only a small town!

David Cooper's golden rule of interpretation can be summarised thus: "when the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense." Since the Bible literally says 50,070 men, then we should take it literally. There is no contradiction in taking such an interpretation with the rest of the passage and with Scripture elsewhere. How can one claim that the Bible has a mistake just because it does not tally with the secular science of archeology? Indeed, a careful reading of the passage shows 50,070 "of the people" died (the Bible did not say 50,070 died specifically only from Bethshemesh), and this could perhaps have included Jews from the other towns harvesting in the same valley (v13).

Dear Teen, the Bible is not like any other book whereby we simply pick it up and read it. It must be approached in a reverential manner. This means the Bible must be read with much faith and with an attitude of humility so that we do not question God when we encounter passages that may seem contradictory or incorrect or are difficult to understand. This is why we must always pray for the Holy Spirit's help before we begin to study the Bible. Commentaries and Bible teachers can help us better understand the Bible but we must seek the Holy Spirit' guidance to grant us understanding.

Thought: Even the faith to believe in the Lord Jesus and His Word is a gift from God Himself.

Prayer: I praise You, Father, for not just my salvation but also for the joys of knowing Your Word more deeply.

WHAT ARE THE RULES OF LITERAL INTERPRETATION? (II)

2 Peter 1:20 tells us that proper interpretation of the Bible requires that the interpreter does not project any of his own thoughts or ideas into any part of Scripture. He is to faithfully convey God’s Word without changing any of its meaning. God only meant one meaning when He gave His Word, and we must not interpret His Word any way we want. This implies that often the literal interpretation is the correct one.

2 Peter 1:21 tells us God used human authors to write the books of the Bible through inspiration by the Holy Spirit. Even though the individual authors had their own styles, personalities and characteristics and were from different backgrounds, yet they were enabled by the Holy Spirit to faithfully pen down God’s messages without making any errors, while preserving their individual identities. In fact, God made use of their unique abilities and experiences to write down exactly what He wanted. The different writing styles that we see in the various books of the Bible, does not change the fact that every word in the Bible is the very Word of God. Because the Holy Spirit is the real Author of the Bible, it follows that the Holy Spirit’s help is needed for sinful man to correctly interpret it.

Dear Teen, the Genesis account of creation has become one of the most misinterpreted parts of the Bible due to devilish teachings in secular schools and sadly even some churches and Bible colleges. Bible scholars who want to be “scientific” try to force evolutionary principles into Scripture and say that the six days of creation are not literal days but simply a metaphor for very long periods of time. The literal sense of the Genesis account tells us that it was indeed six literal days just as keeping the Sabbath day holy means one literal day and not millions of years (Exodus 20:9-10). Don’t seek any other interpretation just to fit what scientists today are claiming to be the truth, for to do so would be to make a ‘private interpretation’ that is not found in the Bible!

Thought: We should take the original meaning of God’s Word and apply it to our situation, not the other way round.

Prayer: Thank You Lord for giving us the mind of Christ to correctly understand the wonderful truths in Your Word.

WHAT ARE THE RULES OF LITERAL INTERPRETATION? (II)

The Bible is God's wonderful gift to man. Sadly, like many other things which God gives us, this can be misused and cause harm to ourselves and even others. 2 Peter 3:16 tells us that this is just what would happen if we do not correctly study God's Word and apply the rules of correct interpretation of the Bible. One who is *"unlearned"* is one who has not been taught the truth of God and His Word, whereas one who is *"unstable"* is one who is not steadfast on the truth, but easily tossed to and fro with every wind of doctrine. Together, they refer to the person who is thoroughly unprepared and unqualified to interpret God's Word, for he cares not to properly learn the right methods of interpretation, and is always curious to seek out new and heretical teachings. The result of this is that he 'wrests' (literally to torture or pervert) Scriptures, such that he twists God's Word to say something which it in fact does not, especially those parts of the Bible which are more difficult to understand. Such a person would be a teacher of false doctrine, which is why Peter tells us to beware of such teachers and not be led astray by the wicked into destruction (v17).

Dear Teen, this stern warning serves to alert us to the growing problem which we are already witnessing, where present-day false teachers use God's Word for the promotion of their own selfish interests. We hear of many "TV evangelists" who live in multi-million dollar mansions, own expensive cars and enjoy lavish lifestyles. These are the people who have *"profited"* from God's Word by using parts of Scripture to coerce people to give to God but use the money for themselves instead. It is unscriptural when a pastor applies Psalm 133 to vindicate his call to his flock to enrich him so that God can enrich them in turn, when the literal sense of the psalm is to extol the blessings of unity in the church. We may be fooled by such people if we too are unfamiliar with God's Word and do not take care to check everything with the Bible and apply the rules of proper Bible interpretation. Peter says that these false teachers do this to their own destruction as they will ultimately be held accountable for their deeds to God Himself.

Thought: The abuse of God's Word can result in promoting Satan's objectives rather than God's.

Prayer: Help me, O Lord, to hide Thy Word in my heart that I may never be led astray.

DO YOU SEE CONTINUITY OR DISCONTINUITY IN THE BIBLE?

The word “*testament*” or “*covenant*” simply means “contract” or “agreement”. It may seem like God dealt with Old Testament (OT) saints in ways that were entirely different from the way He deals with believers in the New Testament (NT) and today. After all, during the Old Testament times, Jesus had not yet gone to the cross to die for the sins of man. How, then, were OT people saved, and is there discontinuity in the Bible since there are 2 testaments, the old and the new?

The Bible teaches that during the OT times, which is the period before Christ, the many symbols and rituals practiced by the priests at the time were merely indicators which pointed towards Jesus’ sacrificial death on the cross. In NT times, every person who receives Jesus by faith enters into a spiritual relationship with Him and accepts Jesus’ death on the cross as His perfectly completed work of salvation for repentant sinners. In other words, OT saints looked forward in time to the cross of Jesus for their salvation while NT saints looked back in time to the cross of Jesus for theirs. The OT signs which predicted Christ’s birth, life, work and death became reality in every detail in the NT. This is Covenant Theology, which sees the entire Bible as one continuous account of God’s plan of salvation for man. There is therefore no discontinuity in the Bible.

Dear Teen, if we’re not careful, we may have the wrong idea that people in the OT had to perform rituals and sacrifices just to “earn” their salvation. This would mean that OT saints were saved by works while NT saints were saved by faith instead. However, Romans 4:3 tells us that the OT saint, Abraham, was saved (“counted unto him for righteousness”) not by works but by faith, because he believed that God would send a Saviour to redeem him sometime in the future. This is the very same faith that saves every believer even today. Both OT and NT saints are saved by grace through faith.

Thought: The NT is in the OT concealed. The OT is in the NT revealed.

Prayer: How wonderful, O Lord, that every sinner may be saved by faith through Christ’s perfect sacrifice on the cross.

ARE THERE 2 COVENANTS AND 2 TESTS? (I)

The first covenant that God made with man is the Covenant of Works. In simple terms, the Covenant of Works functions in this manner: man shall continue to live and be blessed provided he obeys the commandments God has given him. There was only one commandment given to Adam in Genesis 2:16-17 in which God forbade Adam to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Of course, we know that Adam failed to keep his end of the covenant and sinned by eating the forbidden fruit against God's command. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil was placed in the Garden of Eden for the purpose of testing Adam as the representative head of all of mankind. Thus this was the first covenant that God made with man, and the first test was one of obedience to God's Word.

Tragically, Adam failed this test and sinned, but in so doing, he also plunged the entire human race into sin and caused God to curse the earth because of his sin. Note here that Adam was in a most blessed situation where he had everything he needed. He did not have to do anything to improve his situation and had no reason at all to eat the forbidden fruit, for there were so many other different fruits in the garden that he could have eaten. However, he succumbed to the temptation of pride and vanity when Satan enticed him to doubt God's Word in favour of becoming "like God".

Dear Teen, it is easy to put the blame on Adam and hold him responsible for the sin nature which we all inherited because of what he did. However, Adam was the representative of the entire human race. When he sinned, so did we in him (Romans 5:12). This is known as the Representative Principle. Furthermore, the Bible says that no one can make any excuses for his own sins (Romans 1:20) When we do wrong, we are culpable for the transgressions we commit. It is our weakness that caused us to give in to the temptation and break God's law. Therefore, we all individually need to repent and believe in Jesus, our second Adam, in order to have our sins forgiven. Do not blame Adam when you sin!

Thought: We can condemn the Jews and Romans for crucifying Jesus, but we are just as guilty on account of our own sins.

Prayer: Thank You, Lord, for working all things out for our good. Even the death of our Saviour resulted in life everlasting for us sinners.

ARE THERE 2 COVENANTS AND 2 TESTS? (II)

After the fall of Adam, God instituted a new covenant with man. God promised that in spite of man's sin, there was yet a way to be saved. He promised to send a Saviour to redeem the lost. This is the “good news” or Gospel. The very first instance of the Gospel being given to man is found in Genesis 3:15, whereby God promised that He would send the seed of the woman (Jesus) to bruise the head of the serpent. Because of sin, man was now no longer capable of perfect obedience to God. As he could no longer be saved by obeying the law, God made a new covenant with man, whereby anyone who accepted Jesus as Saviour by faith would be saved. God did not have to do this, but chose to because of His grace and His love for man. Therefore, this covenant is known as the Covenant of Grace.

In order for the Covenant of Grace to be effective, Jesus had to live a life of perfect obedience on man's behalf and die on the cross for sins - not of His own but for the sin of the world. Jesus, being God Himself, came to earth in human form and subjected Himself to the same trials and temptations that the rest of the human race experienced in order to be their Representative. This He did without once sinning. Once again we see the Representative Principle at work. Though we did not contribute in any way to our own salvation, Christ, being our perfect Representative, fulfilled all that was required to earn our salvation on our behalf.

Dear Teen, while the first Adam failed his test and fell into sin, the rest of the human race together with him, Jesus the second Adam passed His test with flying colours so that we can all claim that we fulfilled God's condition for salvation through Him (1 Corinthians 15:22). Because of what Jesus did as our Representative, we do not need to worry if we have done enough good works to be saved, or if we will be condemned the next time we commit a sin. Thus in this second covenant, Jesus alone passes the test for us, and fulfills all the conditions in the covenant. We can now confidently approach God in prayer to make our requests known to Him, serve Him and live our lives for His glory, all in the name of Jesus, for He has paid it all!

Thought: Indeed, God has dealt with us unfairly in our favour, paying the price of our sin Himself.

Prayer: Thank You Lord for loving us and for our unspeakable gift in the Lord Jesus Christ.

WAS CHRIST TESTED?

We may discount the trials and temptations that Jesus went through, thinking that He is God and therefore could easily overcome everything anyway. However, the Bible tells us a different story. In Matthew 4, we read that Jesus in human form had to endure hardship and the Devil's temptations in the wilderness. Hebrews 4:15 echoes this by speaking of Him having the same struggles as us due to human frailty, for he *“was in all points tempted like as we are”*.

The Jesus that came to us in the form of a man was not some invincible superhero who was impervious to pain, suffering and emotional turmoil. Jesus was every bit as human as any of us. He was not some superhuman who was immune to any and all kinds of physical and mental affliction, breezing through every situation without being affected in any way. He bled and felt pain when He was wounded. When His friends died, He cried. In the Garden of Gethsemane, He suffered such agony and sorrows that His sweat was as it were great drops of blood. These and many other accounts of Jesus' earthly ministry tell us the same thing about Jesus' humanity.

Dear Teen, there are some people who wonder if Jesus was ever truly tested. By this, they mean to ask: could it be true that there was never a possibility that Jesus could have failed since He is divine? If this were true, then whatever He went through was not really a test at all and this might somehow “invalidate” His work of salvation for us as our Representative. What is clear from Romans 5:15-21 is that God was satisfied with Jesus' work of salvation for us and considered it valid. The Bible certainly does give us the sense that Jesus was severely tested and yet He persevered and passed. Indeed, we need not doubt our salvation as long we have Jesus as our Saviour.

Thought: “Are there trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere? Jesus knows our every weakness. Take it to the Lord in prayer.”

Prayer: Thank You Jesus for passing a test for us that we never could.

WHAT IS THE REFORMED VIEW OF SAVING FAITH?

Today's reading tells us that a person who receives the Lord Jesus as Saviour in faith not only agrees with the gospel but also believes it in his heart such that he becomes a changed person. He will therefore “confess with his mouth” and “believe in his heart”. What this means is that he will manifest both outward and inward signs of his salvation and of his relationship with Jesus because of what he believes.

In contrast to many other religions and belief systems which prescribe participation in rituals and doing good works to earn salvation, the reformed view of saving faith as taught by the Bible shows us that salvation is by God's grace through faith according to Scripture, and is only possible through the finished work of Christ (*Sola gratia, sola fide, solus Christus* and *sola scriptura* in Latin). This means that salvation is a free gift of God given to undeserving sinners who put their faith in Jesus alone as Saviour, just as it is written in the Bible (1 Corinthians 15:3-4).

Dear Teen, some people may have trouble accepting that every sin that he or she has ever committed or will commit in future can be forgiven so “easily” just by confessing Jesus as his or her Lord and Saviour. We have often heard it said that salvation is free but not cheap, but that it cost God the life of Jesus His only begotten Son. If we really think about it, earning our salvation through doing good works cannot be right as we would never know how much good works is enough. Instead, we would quickly realise that no amount of ‘good’ that we do can ever reach the mark of our perfect God! The Bible clearly tells us that God's standard for being “good enough” for heaven is perfection. That means no sin, no error, no mistakes and no shortcomings 100% of the time from birth to death. Since this is impossible, God has given us a way out through the work of Jesus who fulfilled all of God's requirements for salvation on our behalf. The only condition is we must believe it with all our heart. Have you accepted the Lord Jesus as your Saviour?

Thought: No wonder the Bible says in Romans 5:6 that while we were yet without strength, Christ died for the ungodly.

Prayer: O Lord, thank You for having mercy on me and sending Jesus to save me even though I deserve only condemnation.

WHAT IS THE COVENANT OF WORKS?

Although we have examined covenant theology before, it is good to refresh our minds with this crucial doctrine. Before the fall of Adam, God had an agreement with him. In this agreement, God said that as long as Adam obeyed God, he would continue to enjoy life and blessings. However, if he failed to do so, there would be death and suffering for him (Genesis 2:16-17). Because this agreement, or covenant, requires Adam to actually conduct himself in exactly the manner which God had commanded him, it is considered a “work” on Adam’s part. Hence, it is known as the Covenant of Works.

This covenant is found in Genesis 2:16-17, God made his requirements clearly known to Adam and Eve. God gave Adam and Eve a prohibition, that they must not eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Continued obedience on Adam’s part would mean continued blessings. Disobedience would however bring death and suffering. The Covenant of Works required Adam to fulfill his part of the agreement. Adam broke this covenant by eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil in an act of rebellion against God. Hosea 6:7 confirms that in Adam all have sinned, meaning all of us have also sinned against God because Adam represented the entire human race. Romans 5:14 also says that death continued to reign beyond Adam’s earthly lifetime to affect all his descendants. However, believers who put their faith and trust in Jesus, the Second Adam are only affected by death in this life but not beyond as death has been defeated by Jesus (1 Corinthians 15:26).

Dear Teen, sometimes it may seem like God’s dealings with Adam and Eve were confined to the Covenant of Works, and that their interactions with each other were mechanical and business-like. This could not be further from the truth. Love was the reason God created Adam and Eve. Everything else He made, He did so for the benefit of man. God was gracious and loving then even as He is and always will be for God is love (1 John 4:8).

Thought: Even today we can look at all of God’s creation and wonder *“what is man that thou art mindful of him?”*

Prayer: O Lord, thank You for being an unchanging and gracious God of love.

WHAT IS THE COVENANT OF GRACE? (I)

When Adam disobeyed God, he and the rest of the human race were plunged into sin. Death and disease affected man, animals and plants alike. Conditions on earth became hostile and difficult. In short, God created everything and made them perfect, but man sinned and His creation was cursed. God could have simply left everything as it was and not bothered to do anything. He had all of eternity to wait for everything to slowly decay and die but instead, He already had a plan from eternity past to not only redeem man from the curse of sin which is death but also restore His creation to perfection.

After Adam sinned, God announced without hesitation that He would send Christ as a Saviour for sinful man to die on the cross in man's place so that those who confessed faith in Jesus would be saved (Genesis 3:15), after which He clothed both Adam and Eve with animal skins. This act required God to sacrifice the lives and shed the blood of the animals from which the skins came to cover their nakedness, just as Jesus had to be the sacrificial lamb so that the sins of those who look to Him in faith would forever be forgiven. Man had lost his ability to be saved through works, so God, being gracious and merciful, gave the gospel to man so that sinners could be saved by simply looking to Jesus in faith without the need for any good works. This is the Covenant of Grace.

Dear Teen, it seems “counterintuitive” that a plan so simple could be effective for a problem so serious. Sometimes we may unknowingly try to “be good” as much as we can so that we feel we are worth saving. This is not what the Bible teaches. We are not worth saving anyway regardless of what we do. We must first be saved through faith, only then can we please God with good works, otherwise they are considered filthy rags.

Thought: If we could do something to become worthy of salvation, then salvation would still be of works and not of grace.

Prayer: How marvellous, Lord, is Your plan of salvation. Only You could have planned and executed it to perfection even though You did not have to.

WHAT IS THE COVENANT OF GRACE? (II)

Scripture was taught to Timothy by his grandmother and mother from a tender age. Because he had a right understanding of God’s Word and believed it, he was made *“wise unto salvation through faith which is in Jesus Christ”* (2 Timothy 3:15). Here once again we see the Covenant of Grace reflected in the passage. Timothy was saved because he believed what God had said about salvation by grace through faith in Christ and not by anything that he did or did not do.

The next verse (v16) supports the previous verse by proclaiming the authority of God’s Word. Christians have always held God’s Word in the highest regard as the supreme authority governing every aspect of life. God’s Word was given to us by authors who wrote the Bible under inspiration of the Holy Spirit, which is why we consider every word in the Bible the actual Word of God Himself. Whatever we read from the Bible, it is as if we are hearing it straight from the lips of God so that we can have no doubt that every word is true. We can therefore be confident that through it we can have a proper understanding of God and His teachings, to expose errors in the way we live or in what we believe and teach us how to correct these errors. Believing the gospel in accordance to the Bible saves us from eternal condemnation and indeed makes us suitable for serving God (v17).

Dear Teen, some of us may have been brought up in Christian families and have received a “Christian education” in church or from Sunday school just as Timothy received his spiritual education from his grandmother and mother. However, simply going through the motions of attending various services and classes does not save. Each and every one of us has to honestly repent of our sins and confess them to God, acknowledging that only Jesus can save us. This was how Timothy was saved, and so it is for us also.

Thought: God loves us so much that He made the Bible available in many languages that anyone can be made wise unto salvation.

Prayer: Almighty Heavenly Father, it is truly by Thy grace that we can so freely receive everlasting life through Thy Son, Jesus.

WHAT IS THE REFORMED VIEW OF MISSIONS?

In today's age of relativism and compromise, the stand of biblical separation is one which draws much criticism and disdain from many segments of our society. There are churches and missionary groups who believe that doctrinal differences can be ignored for the sake of the practical advantages of sharing resources, enabling these groups to operate more effectively and efficiently. If this is for the cause of Christ, is it not a good thing?

However, we must understand that the Bible does not support such a position. While it is true that the Apostle Paul said that he would be all things to all men that he might by all means save some, to interpret this as doing whatever it takes and at all costs to bring the gospel to the lost is taking this passage out of context. God never intended for His Word to be corrupted or diluted just for the sake of clocking further miles, more time and greater numbers of listeners and "converts". To deny doctrinal fundamentals would actually be counterproductive as we would then be sharing "*another gospel*" as described by Paul in Galatians 1:6-7. Are the converts true believers? In short, we must accommodate the differences of others and try to work together with them as far as possible, but never to the extent of compromising the gospel and our witness for Christ.

Dear Teen, the Bible also teaches us not to be unequally yoked. This means we must have no fellowship with unbelievers and so-called believers who have strayed from fundamental biblical truths. This is not to say that we do not work together with Christians from other denominations. They may have different distinctives, but these must not alter their stand on the important doctrines. An example is how Baptists immerse and not sprinkle for baptism. Other denominations and churches may participate in the Lord's Supper once a year instead of every month, or have different forms of church government. The deciding factor in collaborating with others for anything including missions should be their stand on the fundamental doctrines, from which we must never deviate from or compromise on.

Thought: Exchanging the truth for practical advantages, we deny the power and sovereignty of the very God we are witnessing for.

Prayer: Almighty God and Sovereign over all, I thank You that we can glorify You in all things great or small, as long as we are faithful.

HOW ABOUT THE NON-ELECT?

The Bible is very clear regarding the predestination of the elect. What this means is that from eternity past even before God had created the world, He had already chosen certain to be saved. Being omniscient, He knew that man would rebel and sin grievously against Him. He also knew that it would cost Him dearly to redeem sinners from condemnation. Yet, in spite of this, He created man. Romans 8:29-30 declares the doctrine of predestination to be true. Here, God says that He “foreknew” those He had chosen to be saved. God did not choose certain people to be saved because of any goodness in them, for if that was the case, then no one at all could be chosen. Neither did He do so based on His knowledge about how they would respond to the gospel, for there is no one who would naturally want to choose Christ (Romans 3:11).

However, knowing about the doctrine of election, some people would then ask, how about those whom God did not elect? Does that mean that God chose to condemn the rest? Does that mean that they are predestinated to be condemned? What we must realise is that by right, we are all supposed to be headed to hell, not because God chose to condemn us, but because of our wretched depravity. It is only by His mercy that God chose to prolong our days so that we might hear the gospel to be saved. Knowing that all of us are totally incapable of doing anything to save ourselves, God again in His mercy chose to give some of us the gift of faith to believe in Jesus. Salvation is a free gift that God has given to some, all in His good pleasure and will.

Dear Teen, God cannot be blamed for not choosing to save everyone just as beggars have no right to be angry at you for giving money to only some but not all of them. It is up to His divine sovereign choosing that He chooses to save some, and it is really not for us sinful beings to question. Of course, we can ask why God did not choose to save everyone. Only God knows the answer to that and we should not speculate. Neither do we have the right to expect Him to do so. We ought to simply trust that He is good and He knows best.

Thought: The question we should really ask is why God even bothered to save anybody at all?

Prayer: O Lord, Thou alone art worthy to decide who to let into Thy kingdom for the awful price of salvation paid by You through Jesus.

IS THERE ALSO A MARRIAGE COVENANT?

In Malachi 2:14-16 God teaches us many things about marriage. In spite of what gay rights activists think or say, God's original institution of marriage as per Genesis 2:23-24 stands, that marriage is a covenant between one man and one woman. A union of two people of the same gender is a perversion of what God had intended in a marriage and a sin. As we had earlier learnt, a covenant is an agreement between two or more parties. God made one woman for one man and He intended for marriage to be a monogamous relationship, just as He intended for our relationship with Him to be one of faithfulness and commitment. He hates divorce and wants every married person to be committed, faithful and loving to his/her spouse until death. Again, this is contrary to our attitude of consumerism and disposability where possessions and gadgets are outdated in months and we are encouraged by the world to replace our things or upgrade them ever so often. Furthermore, doing anything that harms one's marriage, in God's eyes, is as if an act of violence has been committed.

Understand that the marriage covenant is based on a concept known as "chesed" (the Hebrew word to express love, faithfulness and mercy). Chesed love, or agape love as the Greeks call it. It is not only an altruistic and selfless love for another person, but it also springs from a strong desire to do whatever is beneficial for the other person even if it is at great expense to oneself. Therefore, a couple in a marriage enters into a vow to regard each other in the above manner, that is, to show chesed.

Dear Teen, the way a man should love his wife is patterned after the way Jesus loves believers. Just as Jesus willingly sacrificed Himself for the sake of sinners, so too should a man do so for his wife. Just as Jesus' love for us never grows weaker and is permanent, so too should marriage be a permanent loving union between a man and a woman. In accordance to the Bible, there is no room for "alternative" lifestyles like homosexual or polygamous relationships. Just as Jesus is always faithful to us, so too should spouses be faithful to each other and not have any extramarital affairs.

Thought: Marriage was ordained by God. No-one has the authority to dictate the terms and conditions of marriage except God Himself.

Prayer: O Lord, thank You for showing us a perfect example of what chesed means through Christ Jesus.

WHAT DOES THE FAMILY COVENANT MEAN?

God in His graciousness desires to bless not only those who have believed in the Lord Jesus Christ. His blessings also extend to the members of a believer’s family, whether they are saved or not. Therefore, God pays special attention to the members of a believer’s family and, through the believing person as Christ’s witness, desires that the other unbelieving members come to know the Lord.

Oftentimes, a couple may have been unbelievers when they married. However, one spouse may come to know the Lord sometime later on. This can even happen after they have started a family and have children. This is why believers who have unbelieving spouses, siblings, children or parents are commanded to love them regardless of their spiritual condition. Having an unsaved spouse does not allow the believing spouse to disrespect the other spouse, or to dishonour their marriage in any way. Likewise, a believer who has unbelieving siblings, children or parents must show forth the love of Christ in their lives to them and pray for their salvation. God wants believers to be a blessing to their families, whether they are saved or unsaved. This is what it means in 1 Corinthians 7:14 when the unbelieving spouse is described as being ‘*sanctified*’ by the other, or for the child to be holy. It does not mean that they are saved just because of the family relationship, but that they are blessed through the sanctifying presence of the believer in the family.

Dear Teen, persecution for our faith can come in different guises and from different people. Sadly, sometimes these people are members of our own family, even parents. It can and is often heart-wrenching to stand for your faith in spite of opposition or in some cases, even threats of being disowned. In some cultures, renouncing one’s religion in faithfulness to Jesus can even result in punishment and death at the hands of family members. If you are such a one, do ask for help from your church family and always remember that through it all, God is always with you to strengthen and comfort you. Persevere in your faith, pray for their salvation and maintain your testimony, for if you do so, you can and will be a blessing to your family!

Thought: If God sees it fit to save my family through my witnessing to them, then even death can never separate us for all eternity.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank You for You have defeated death, the last enemy, for us through Christ Jesus.

“...Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the LORD”

WHY IS BIBLICAL WORSHIP IMPORTANT?

Read Genesis 4:1-8, and you'll find the first murder in history! It's also the first "fratricide" (murder of one's own sibling). Why did God have "respect unto Abel and his offering but unto Cain and to his offering he had not respect" (Genesis 4:4-5)? Isn't God unfair? Hebrews 11:4 clarifies: *"By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts: and by it he being dead yet speaketh".*

Abel's sacrifice was *"more excellent"*. God must have given both Cain and Abel instructions on how to worship Him. Abel had faith in God, and followed the instructions – that shows the importance of sound doctrine in biblical worship. We must have faith, and worship God only in the manner in which He dictates. We cannot just try to come to God on our own terms, and worship any way that we like. Cain thought he could worship God in his own way, and so his sacrifice was rejected. Remember that God alone is the object of our worship, and all that we do must be for Him, and not for ourselves.

Dear teens, remember this when you come for Sunday worship. We cannot worship God anyway we desire, but worship must be based on sound doctrine. As we will see over the coming few days, there are many who think that man should worship in the way that he wants, and fail to give God the due respect or regard He deserves. For example some go for Saturday evening worship services, so that their entire Sundays can be free to do what they want to do! Some church leaders try to make the worship service as enjoyable as possible, and thus minimise the sermon time since it is "boring"! They forget that the term worship obviously is directed towards God, not towards man. We need to worship God on His terms, not ours, for He is God, and He has stated in His Word how He wants to be worshipped. To worship God on our own terms is really not to worship Him at all.

Thought: *"God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth."* (John 4:24)

Prayer: Lord, teach me Thy ways. Teach me how to worship You, according to Your own will.

HOW SHOULD THE CHURCH REGARD THE WORLD?

Faced with dwindling church attendees, there are many churches in this world that have tried to use worldly methods to try to attract more people to come. Enter into such churches, and one cannot tell if the music is spiritual or secular. See the dancing in the church aisles, and one cannot tell if this is a church or a disco. Witness the pastor performing magic tricks and the psychedelic lights, and soon the offering bag is treated as the concert entrance fee. I remember in my youth one non-Christian friend of mine remarked he likes to listen to contemporary Christian music because it is very soothing to him!

2 Corinthians 6:14-18 clearly states that the church and the world are two totally different entities. Therefore we need to separate the church from the world, rather than merge the two. Note that this does not mean we cannot use modern technology; there is nothing wrong with using the LCD projector to make certain church announcements, for example. What we must not do is to bring worldly methods into worship to attract the world into the church. The church must be different from the world, not similar. The unbeliever that comes to church should realise that the focus of the entire worship service is on the Lord God Almighty, and be thus prompted to examine his sinful self against the holiness of God. The unbeliever that goes to the church which employs worldly methods of worship may end up being lulled into enjoying the service so much that he comes to be entertained instead. The believer that comes to worship must understand why it is called the Lord's Day: it is the day set apart for the Lord from the secular activities of the past six days, rather than to see no discernible difference between all seven days of the week.

Now you'll understand why our church is so “strict”, why we are “notorious” as a “separatist” church. We are pretty unpopular with people from other churches who wonder why we speak against their worldly methods - but we are simply following God rather than man.

Thought: *“But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people.”* (1 Peter 2:9)

Prayer: Lord, help me to show that I love You by my obedience to Your commandments.

“But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people”

HOW SHOULD THE CHURCH PRACTISE HOLINESS?

1 Peter 2:9 describes believers in this age as *“a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people”*. This shows that the local church is now the visible witness for Christ in this world, taking over the role from Israel who was supposed to be this witness in the OT, but failed the Lord. Holiness is separation from the world, and being set apart for God. There were quite a few commandments given to Israel that do not seem to be morally wrong, such as forbidding them to eat certain foods according to the dietary laws in Leviticus 11. The reason given by the Lord is simply that *“I am the LORD your God: ye shall therefore sanctify yourselves, and ye shall be holy; for I am holy”* (Leviticus 11:44). As the heathen nations around Israel all ate such foods, God forbade Israel from doing so, in order that all could see that Israel was holy and set apart for the LORD. Similarly, we the local church must be the visible witness for Christ today, and we must be holy in our witness.

1 Chronicles 16:29 clearly shows the connection between holiness and worship: *“Give unto the LORD the glory due unto his name: bring an offering, and come before him: worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness.”* What we do in worship must clearly show we are an holy nation, not a worldly one. All elements of worship must be holy. Like the OT priests, the worship leaders and musicians must ensure that everything in worship points to the holiness of God, and glorifies Him alone. The focus of worship must never be on man, but worship must cause man to focus on God.

On the other hand, it is virtually impossible to be holy by worshipping with a rock band! How can Christians testify being set apart for God when they dance with wild sensuality in the church aisles? How does worship glorify God when each praise item ends with rapturous applause for a great performance by the vocalists and musicians! How can man focus on God when the church sanctuary is full of statues of dead saints? It is not enough to separate the church from the world, but we must ensure the church must be set apart for God, and this includes how we worship.

Thought: Someone said, the practice of Christianity is “to be what you are”. Do you agree? Do you understand?

Prayer: Lord, teach me to be holy, for I am Your child, and I want to be more and more like my Holy God each day.

HOW SHOULD WE WORSHIP RIGHTLY?

Read the verse today: *“ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people”*; and you might well ask yourself, “what does it mean that we are the temple of the living God?” These words are an allusion to Leviticus 26:11-12: *“I will set my tabernacle among you.... And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and ye shall be my people”*. Think about this: God lives and walks among us, meaning He is present amongst His people. This is because He is our God, and we are His people. Even if we are not in the church sanctuary, we must remember that we must always be holy, for we are the temple of the living God, and the Holy Spirit dwells within us. Our visible witness for God thus extends beyond the church sanctuary, for it is not the physical church building that worships God, but we who are the people of God who do. Some B-P churches in Africa even worship God in the open without any physical building, but nonetheless they are God’s people, and if they worship rightly, are worshipping the Lord in the beauty of holiness.

The verse from 2 Corinthians above is from the passage which starts with 2 Corinthians 6:14: *“Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness?”* In this passage, the context is that some of the Christians in Corinth continued to go to the pagan temples, and take part in the feasts in the temple which were dedicated to pagan gods! Instead, we must practise biblical separation, and this includes not worshipping in pagan temples. How can we who are the temple of the living God be found worshipping in pagan temples dedicated to dead gods?

This principle also extends to when we are in a foreign land on the Lord’s Day and might have to worship the Lord in a church that is worldly in its worship, assuming there is no other fundamental church to worship in. When worldly worship songs are sung, simply refrain from singing, for you are the temple of the living God, and must testify for how your worship must be holy.

Thought: Should I accept my friend’s invitation to attend his charismatic church?

Prayer: Lord, may I be always holy in worship.

HOW ARE WE TO REGARD THE HOLY DAY OF WORSHIP?

Today's verse refers to the 4th commandment, *“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy”*. Do you look forward to the Sabbath every week? When you're attending the worship services, do you feel bored, and wish you can be somewhere else? To answer today's question, we should go back to the basics, and consider: Why did God institute the Sabbath? It was because God Himself rested on the seventh day, setting us a pattern for rest from our labour during the rest of the week (Exodus 20:11). However, it is not simply a day of rest, but it is a day that all who belong to God must keep holy. That is why the verse starts with *“remember”* the Sabbath day, for all who belong to God to remember that this day too belongs to God, and thus we must come worship Him in the house that belongs to Him. In this way, we are a visible witness to the world that we are His, and that is why it is a sin if we disobey this command to come to church on the Lord's Day. Conversely, most unbelievers are surprised to find any Christian who does not do so!

However, to remember the Lord's Day does not simply mean our physical presence, but also refers to our mental state of worship. On this day, our minds must be sanctified with spiritual things, to compensate for the previous six days where our minds were largely bombarded with things of this world. Therefore the main activity on the Lord's Day must be the feeding of God's Word, for this sanctifies our mind. It is thus a double blessing when a church is able to have an evening service as well!

We must likewise prepare ourselves to be sanctified towards holiness. Just as the Jews cleansed themselves in ritual baths before entering the Temple, we too should prepare for the Lord's Day by not sleeping too late the night before, and spending the morning preparing our minds to be fed. One can hardly be ready to be fed if one is looking forward to what you are doing after church instead, or our minds otherwise be preoccupied with worldly matters. We must remember that we are coming to the Lord's house, and coming into the presence of the Almighty God who gives us life itself.

Thought: Do you call the Sabbath a delight?

Prayer: Lord, I thank Thee for liberating me from sin, and now I am free to worship You in gratitude.

"Her priests have violated my law, and have profaned mine holy things"

HOW IS HOLINESS CONNECTED TO SABBATH-KEEPING?

Have you ever read Ezekiel? He is an Old Testament prophet who does not mince his words! Read this whole verse, and get the full impact of Ezekiel's wrath: *"Her priests have violated my law, and have profaned mine holy things: they have put no difference between the holy and profane, neither have they shewed difference between the unclean and the clean, and have hid their eyes from my sabbaths, and I am profaned among them."* Imagine, the priests who have been entrusted with God's word, have not taught it to the people, but instead have *"violated"* God's law both by twisting God's Word for their own purposes and by otherwise showing a terrible testimony, and *"profaned"* God's holy things! (Profane is the opposite of holy) Perhaps the priests had taken the offerings and used them for their own purposes. These corrupted priests were thus being soundly rebuked by God for their blatant disregard for the law, and their flagrant malpractices that were abominable to the Lord. In profaning the Sabbath, the Lord told them that He was now being profaned among them!

Do you see similar things happening today? If we have been brought up and spend our whole lives in our church, we may not have seen anything like this. But the abuse of God's Word and utter disrespect of God is so common in many churches. Some pastors over the pulpit preach their own ideas rather than God's words, and members of these churches learned things which they think are Christian/biblical but are in fact a violation of God's Word. There are some pastors who have profaned the holy things by using part of the Lord's Day offering to purchase luxuries for themselves. There is a church in Singapore which recently started services on Saturdays, to cater to families who otherwise would not come for Sunday services, because their children have tuition on Sundays. Dear Teen, don't you think this is an abuse of the Sabbath? What about you? Do you abuse the Sabbath yourself?

Thought: *"If thou turn away thy foot from the sabbath, from doing thy pleasure on my holy day; and call the sabbath a delight, the holy of the LORD, honourable; and shalt honour him, not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking thine own words: Then shalt thou delight thyself in the LORD; and I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth, and feed thee with the heritage of Jacob thy father."* (Isaiah 58:13-14)

Prayer: Lord, teach me to be holy and honour Thy Sabbath.

WHAT ARE UNACCEPTABLE WAYS OF WORSHIPING GOD?

Read this whole passage (Matthew 15:7-9): “Ye hypocrites, well did Esaias prophesy of you, saying, This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.” Jesus was speaking to the scribes and Pharisees, who taught and followed their traditions more than God’s word! Their worship is thus unacceptable, for they do so in vain, for God does not hear them.

When you read these verses though, don’t you feel a sharp sword piercing through your hearts? Jesus doesn’t mince his words! He calls a spade a spade! He sees right into our hearts – we may think we are drawing near to him with our mouth and honouring him with our lips (eg. saying the Lord’s prayer), but He knows our hearts, and knows when we’re just paying Him lip service!

So, what are the unacceptable ways of worshipping God? I’m sure you know – look around the sanctuary on a Sunday morning, and observe the many people looking bored (they look as if they’d rather be somewhere else!). Some don’t sing the hymns, some sing as if they’re in funerals. Some spend half the time texting on their phones. Some look as if they are paying attention to the preacher, but their hearts are far away from God, either not belonging to Him in the first place, or thinking of worldly pursuits like where to go after church, instead of focusing on what the Holy Spirit is teaching them through His Word preached.

In the mega-churches you can hear drums and guitars and stirring solo performances. The singing can sound very joyous, but they’re more often man-centred than God-centred. Yes, this so-called worship does capture the attention of the church goer, but that is not the purpose of worship! This worship is also unacceptable to God because their hearts are focused not on what God is teaching but on what man is doing.

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

Prayer: Lord, teach me to worship You acceptably.

*“And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me,
and keep my commandments”*

WHAT ARE THE BLESSINGS OF REFORMED WORSHIP?

Reformed worship is basically worship which rightly gives God the foremost position in all that we do. He is the sole object of worship, and all that we do would be in accordance to His will. To answer today's question, we should read the whole of the First Commandment in Exodus 20:2-6. The answer to the question comes in all the five verses, for when we obey His Word, we are worshipping Him in the way that He wants us to!

“I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage” – the blessings come from knowing the one true God, who is all-powerful, and all-loving! Reformed worship reminds us that He has brought us out of the bondage of sin, so that we are free to love Him, and through Him to love our friends and neighbours!

“Thou shalt have no other gods before me” – the blessings of knowing, loving and serving the only true God; and not be deceived by “lesser gods”, whether it is the so-called god of other religions or other “gods” that we might worship (money, luxury, fame, popularity etc). Thank God for blessing us with this reminder during worship!

“Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image” – any visual representation of God can only be the wrong image, and give us a false impression of what our God is really like! Reformed worship helps us learn what God is like through a loving study of His Word, rather than by an adoring study of some statue!

“And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments” – By focusing on God alone, Reformed worship reminds us of the mercy of God, to remind us that it is by His mercy alone that we are alive. God is merciful by causing His Word preached in worship to remind us of our unrepented sin that we must repent of before He chastises us.

Dear Teens, do you know of these blessings during worship?

Thought: *“For a day in thy courts is better than a thousand. I had rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God, than to dwell in the tents of wickedness.”* (Psalm 84:19)

Prayer: Lord, we are created to worship our Creator. Teach me how to do this for Thy glory.

*“Enter into his gates with thanksgiving, and into his courts with praise:
be thankful unto him, and bless his name”*

WHAT IS THE REFORMED ORDER OF WORSHIP?

Have you attended the worship services in other churches? I have! Some are terrible! Especially some charismatic churches, with their drums and guitars and solo singers (like pop concerts). The sermons are often very short, with their pastors speaking more like “motivational speakers” than preachers of God’s word! You’d probably leave the service with the impression: “too much entertainment! Too much noise! Too little message”!

Coming back to the more “solemn” style of worship in a typical Presbyterian church like ours, you’d heave a huge sigh of relief! – this is the benefit of the “Reformed Order of Worship”! What does it mean? If you look at our church bulletin on Sunday, you’ll see items (in sequence) like “call to worship”, “opening hymn”, “invocation” etc. You may also sense that the focus is on the sermon – and also, once a month, the Lord’s Supper.

Why is the order of worship important?

1. Worship (both public worship and private worship) is a very important part of our Christian walk!
2. The Bible says that we should worship Him *“in spirit and in truth”* (John 4:24) – not in any way we like, but with our sincere heart, and in accordance to God’s truth.
3. We should do everything (especially worship) in an orderly manner, pleasing to God (1 Corinthians 14:40 – *“Let all things be done decently and in order”*)

If you’ve ever attended the worship services of those contemporary churches, you would get the feeling that they are doing it according to their own ideas! We thank God that we have followed the Reformed tradition (which is based on faithfulness to God’s word), which allows us to worship our God *“in spirit and in truth”*.

Thought: God has ordained as to how we should worship Him.

Prayer: Lord, thank You for the privilege of worshipping You as our loving heavenly Father.

*“Now concerning the collection for the saints,
as I have given order to the churches of Galatia, even so do ye”*

WHAT IS THE REFORMED ORDER OF WORSHIP? (LITURGY)

Have you heard of the word ‘liturgy’ before? It means “a fixed pattern of worship”. If you pick up the church bulletin, you’d see that one of the pages looks like the program sheet for a meeting or concert! It starts with “call to worship”, then “opening hymn”, and to other items, and finally the “benediction” (“the Lord bless you and keep you”).

Do you think, “hmmm.... This is so boring! Why can’t we be spontaneous and do different things each Sunday?”

But think again – this will make everybody so confused, that we lose our focus and will be unable to worship God properly.

Why do we need such “rigid” liturgy? These are a few scriptural reasons:

1. The pattern of worship in the Old Testament. If you read the Old Testament, especially the book of Leviticus, you can see how detailed the Bible is in specifying how God wants us to worship Him.
2. A set/prescribed liturgy allows us to concentrate on the substance of worship, and not be distracted by the style. It is like playing the piano – once you have learned the basic techniques, you can feel free to play the music – correctly and beautifully!
3. In today’s passage, in 1 Corinthians 16:1-2, we see that there was a sort of an established pattern of worship that the early church was observing. Paul knew that when the Corinthian church gathered every Lord’s day, on the first day of the week, there would be a gathering of collections amongst the other things that they would do. 1 Corinthians 11:20 also speaks of how they would come together to partake of the Lord’s Supper, and 1 Corinthians 14:26, of other things such as singing psalms, preaching of God’s Word and other mutually edifying activities.

Dear Teens, do you know how wonderful it is if (during our worship service) we can focus on each and every part of the liturgy (eg. paying attention to what the chairman says in the “call to worship”, to each phrase in the Lord’s prayer...), and find meaning in each of them.

Thought: “the acceptable way of worshiping the true God is instituted by himself and so limited by his own revealed will” (Westminster Confession of Faith).

Prayer: Teach me to worship You in a manner pleasing in Thy sight.

“So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading”

WHAT IS THE REFORMED ORDER OF WORSHIP? (PREACHING)

If you go to different churches, you'll see that they often have different orders of worship! And the difference could be rather shocking! Many years ago, when I was having my medical training in Jerusalem, I went to the Mount of Olives and strayed into a church there. Suddenly all the doors were closed, and the whole church plunged into darkness except for a few candles. The whole place was also dead silence, except for the chanting of the priest. I later realised that this was a Roman Catholic Church where the liturgy focused on the priest's chanting in a language no one understood!

In the early history of the Christian church, the order of worship was divided into two main segments: “The Liturgy of the Word” (preaching) and “The Liturgy of the Upper Room” (Holy Communion). Subsequently, different denominations (Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Protestant churches of different denominations eg. Anglican, Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian etc.) developed different kinds of liturgy, with different emphasis.

Our B-P church is part of the Reformed tradition, and one of the distinctiveness of the Reformed tradition is its focus on preaching. We believe that the mission of the church is evangelism and discipleship – this explains the focus on the Word. The focus of the whole worship service builds up to the sermon, where the preacher is tasked with the role of ‘giving the sense’ of God's Word, like Nehemiah did in his time. “The Liturgy of the Word” is thus divided into “Preparation” (preparing the congregation for the message – prayers, singing of hymns etc.) and “Proclamation” (the message proper).

Dear teens, do you prepare your hearts for the message when you attend to the pastoral prayer and the singing of hymns? Do you realise that when a sermon is preached, it is a proclamation of God's Word, and if the preacher preaches in accordance to God's Will, it is as it were God speaking to our hearts!

Thought: When I listen to a sermon, do I come away from it with a better understanding of God's Word?

Prayer: Lord, I thank Thee that Thy word is proclaimed faithfully and powerfully each week from the pulpit.

HOW SHOULD WE PARTICIPATE IN WORSHIP?

God’s Word clearly states “thou shalt worship no other god: for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.” Hezekiah understood this, which was why he gathered the priests and Levites and asked them to sanctify themselves, and restore the temple for the worship of the LORD. His father Ahaz was a terrible king who introduced the worship of false gods, but Hezekiah brought Israel back to the right path, to worship only the one living and true God.

But Hezekiah did not simply obey God’s Word on the surface; he did it with all his heart. We see this in 2 Chronicles 29:36 when he “rejoiced, and all the people, that God had prepared the people: for the thing was done suddenly”. Even though Ahaz had left the worship of God in a terrible state, the people were able to quickly cleanse themselves and all the temple instruments and make themselves ready to worship God in accordance to His will. Everything was done speedily, and according to the law that God had given to Israel in the book of Leviticus. Hezekiah saw all this and rejoiced that the proper worship of God had been restored, and that the people were prepared to worship Him in spirit and in truth. Worship of God was precious to Hezekiah, and he felt great joy when they were able to do so once again.

Do we, like Hezekiah, understand the need to obey and worship the LORD, and Him alone? Are there idols in our hearts that have replaced God? When we come to church to worship Him, it is possible for us to not truly be worshipping God alone if we simply go through the motions without really meaning it. We may sing hymns and be present in the worship service, but our minds can be fixed instead on the things that we treasure more, or are more concerned about. May this not be so! Let us learn from Hezekiah, so that we are able to worship God with great joy, and in accordance to God’s Word.

Thought: Am I truly worshipping God alone, or do the idols in my heart distract me during worship service?

Prayer: Lord, help me not to simply worship only Thee, but to do it with joy as well!

HOW CAN WE WORSHIP WITH GODLY FEAR?

The writer of Hebrews ends the chapter with this sober reminder: *“For our God is a consuming fire.”* This in the context of a reference to Exodus 20, when the LORD appeared at mount Sinai to give the law, where all the children of Israel demonstrated a reverential fear of Him. They asked Moses to speak to them in God’s place, because God’s spoken word alone caused the earth to shake, and His appearance was accompanied with thunder, lighting, the sound of a trumpet, and the smoking of the mountain. No one was allowed to come near the mountain – only Moses was given the honour and privilege of coming forth and being able to meet the LORD. Any who disobeyed would be killed instantly.

Today, we worship the same God who has not changed in His holiness, in His hatred for sin, or in His power and ability to bring to judgment all who disobey Him.

We need to remember that God has a standard that He expects from His children, which He has revealed to us in His Word. We cannot come before God flippantly when we worship Him – it must be done with all due reverence and godly fear. Because of the finished work of Christ, we are able to approach God – it is not our own merit. Therefore, we ought to come before God with the same godly fear that the people of Israel demonstrated at the foot of Sinai, knowing that we are only sinners before a thrice-holy God.

Worshipping with godly fear means that we come with a prepared heart, and that we are completely focused on what we are doing. We understand that God hears every word we sing, knows every thought that passes through our mind, and understands the motives of our heart. Therefore, it means we take great care when approaching Him, and we ensure that we are coming before God with clean hands and a pure heart, knowing that anything less is unacceptable in the sight of a righteous God.

Thought: Is my worship acceptable if I do not come before the LORD with godly fear?

Prayer: Lord, help me to remember Thy holiness, and to come before Thee with reverence and godly fear.

WHAT ARE THE ELEMENTS OF WORSHIP?

When the New Testament church was newly formed, there was a great number who received the Gospel message and believed. Acts 2:42 lays out for us the elements of their worship – the apostle’s doctrine, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayers. The word “*doctrine*” simply means “teaching”. Receiving the Gospel was but the first step in their lives as Christians – now they needed to take heed to God’s Word that was delivered through the apostles. “*Fellowship*” is a word we are familiar with, which indicates “partnership” – the fact that they were of the same mind and purpose in gathering together. Breaking of bread refers not simply to ordinary meals together, but also refers to the Lord’s Supper that reminded them of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. Last but not least, they set aside time for prayer.

What does worship entail for us today? Our present setting and culture may be very different from the early New Testament church, but the fundamental elements remain the same. We have no Apostles who speak inspired Scripture to us, but we do have the Bible – the written Word of God itself. The preaching of God’s Word is central to our worship service, and through the preaching of God’s Word we learn what is His will in our lives.

Fellowship is also essential – the fact that we all have a relationship with God is the basis of our coming together to worship Him. If anyone is not born again, then that person cannot truly participate in worship with the rest of God’s people.

The Lord’s Supper reminds us of Christ’s sacrifice that makes our gathering before God acceptable in His sight. As sinners, there is no reason for God to have any regard for us. Yet because of Christ’s finished work, sinners saved by grace are able to gather together and offer worship that is acceptable and pleasing in God’s sight.

Finally, prayer allows us to align ourselves with God’s will. As a church, it means that we pray for His will to be done at every worship service.

Thought: Do I understand the elements of worship, or am I just going through the motions?

Prayer: Lord, help me to worship Thee in spirit and in truth.

DOES WORSHIP REALLY MATTER?

Why do we bother with worship in the church? Is it something that God needs from us? When we worship God, are we doing Him a favour? Is it something that God wants from us, but which doesn't have any bearing on our spiritual lives?

We know that God has a purpose for everything, and worship is no exception. Philippians 4:8 tells us to think – to carefully consider – all things that are true, honest, just, pure, lovely, of good report, virtuous and praiseworthy. When we think upon these things and allow them to fill and transform our minds, then our lives will in turn be changed. It is no coincidence that worship invites us to obey what has been laid out for us in this verse, with the study of God's Word being central to it all.

How exactly does the worship service help us to do what is required of us in Philippians 4:8? If there is any single object of contemplation that captures all the qualities listed in the verse, it would be the Word of God.

Consider the elements of worship. The apostle's doctrine – God's Word itself – comes to us through every aspect of the service. The hymns we sing are rich with doctrine. The prayers we offer follow the principles left for us in Scripture. The messages are from the Bible, where we listen to God's Word being clearly explained and expounded on. The Lord's Supper makes us recall the fullness of Christ's sacrifice, which is taught to us from the Bible. Even the act of coming together is based on our understanding of God's Word that we are all part of the same body of Christ, and fellowship with each other because of the bond we share in Him.

If we participate in worship with full understanding, there is no aspect of it that does not make us consider the qualities outlined in Philippians 4:8. Knowing this, we ought to be convinced of the absolute necessity of worship – it is the channel through which we, as God's people, receive innumerable spiritual blessings when we come before Him with all our thoughts firmly fixed upon His Word, and what it means to us.

Thought: What do I spend most of my time thinking of, and do these things possess the qualities listed in Philippians 4:8?

Prayer: Lord, help me to understand the richness of Thy Word, and help me to meditate upon it as I worship Thee.

WHAT ARE THE MEANS OF GRACE?

Psalm 1:2 introduces us to one of the means of grace – the law of the LORD. It tells us that the man who delights in and meditates upon it is blessed. What is a means of grace? A means of grace is simply an instrument that God uses to dispense His blessings. The means of grace we are familiar with in Reformed Theology are the Word of God, sacraments (baptism and the Lord’s Supper) and prayer.

Why are these considered the means of grace? Psalm 1:1-2 shows us that delighting in God’s Word and meditating on it will help us to lead a holy life that is pleasing before God.

Baptism is the sacrament that God used to replace physical circumcision – it is a public confession of our inward faith. By being baptised, we are obeying God’s Word and also showing our desire to be identified with Christ and the church, and to claim the blessings that God has reserved for His children.

When we take the Lord’s Supper, we are reminded of our sinfulness, and it also requires us to examine ourselves of any sins and to deal with them before we partake of the bread and the cup.

Prayer is also a means of grace because we can only pray to God if we do not have any sins that have not been dealt with, and coming to God in prayer requires us to confess all our sins. We also know from God’s Word that He will only answer our prayers if they are according to His will – therefore, prayer helps us align our own desires with God’s desires.

The means of grace are meant to help us in our spiritual walk. We must approach them in the proper manner, and use them to examine our lives and determine whether or not we have been living in accordance to God’s Word. It helps us to see where we have sinned, and leads us into a closer walk with God.

Thought: Am I enjoying all the blessings that God has prepared for me through these means of grace?

Prayer: Lord, grant me the grace to live for Thee, and help me to claim the blessings Thou hast prepared for Thy children.

FOR WHOM DOES THE CHURCH SING IN WORSHIP?

Who are we singing of? Psalm 98 is a psalm of praise – it exhorts us to praise God for the marvellous things He has done, and for His righteousness. God Himself is the clear object of our worship when we sing.

But who are we singing to? We are told to sing and make a joyful noise *“unto the LORD”*. This phrase appears thrice in this psalm, along with a similar phrase that exhorts God’s people, and God’s creation, to make a joyful noise *“before the LORD”*. Therefore, when God’s people sing in worship, it is both of God, and to God.

Music is an integral part of worship – indeed Psalm 98 mentions various instruments along with the instruction to sing. Proper worship makes us think upon all that God is and all that He has done. This places in us a reverential fear and lifts our spirits as we remember that He is our God. When we are thus moved, singing is the natural outpouring and expression of these emotions.

However, we must remember that all these things must be done as unto the Lord. In our day and age, it is easy to allow the attitude of singing for our own listening pleasure to creep into our worship service. While there is nothing wrong in taking pleasure in the music that we make when we worship God, we must remember that ultimately, it is God’s pleasure in our worship that is the most important. The question we should ask when we sing to God is not *“Am I melodious and pleasing to listen to?”* but *“Is God pleased with my singing?”* The answer to that question lies in whether or not our worship is done according to His Word.

Thought: “Take my voice and let me sing, always, only, for my King.”

Prayer: Lord, help me to make sure that my singing is acceptable unto Thee.

WHAT IS GODLY MUSIC?

Zephaniah is a book that outlines the judgment of God upon Jerusalem, and also His plans for the future restoration of His people. Verse 17 speaks of how God will save His children in joy and consequently “*rest in his love*”. The word ‘rest’ literally has the idea that “He will be silent” – which means God will not bring any accusation of sin against us because His righteousness is imputed to us. He takes joys in His children’s singing. Through this verse, the overwhelming idea of God’s joy for his children is expressed, and what better way to do it than through singing?

The Bible did not define for us what melody is holy, so how do we determine what constitutes godly music?

We can draw principles from Scripture to guide us in understanding what godly music is. In yesterday’s reading, we learned that when we are singing, it must be to God, and therefore one principle we can use to guide us is that godly music is only what pleases God.

In today’s passage, one of the things we can learn is that godly music is employed for the purpose of expressing joy. However, does this mean that any music that expresses joy is godly?

This is most certainly not the case in this verse. The cause of God expressing joy over His children is tied to the fact that they have been saved. Thus, we learn that the joy must be based on what God has done.

In summary, godly music is music that pleases God, and music that helps us to rejoice by bringing to mind what God has done for us. Of course, there are many other biblical guidelines that we must employ in ensuring that the music we employ in worship is acceptable to God, but these are just a few basic principles that we must understand and use to discern godly music.

Thought: Does the music I listen to cause me to rejoice over what God has done in my life?

Prayer: Lord, help me to rejoice in the things that Thou hast joy in.

WHAT CONSTITUTES CONTEMPORARY MUSIC?

In 2 Timothy 4:2, the Apostle Paul charges Timothy to preach the Word of God and to be ever ready to teach the people using it. It is God's Word that will sanctify the people and help them to guard against false doctrines and corrupted practices that are not pleasing in God's sight. Without God's Word to convict us, we will be led away by our own lusts.

Music is meant to be an aid in our worship and contemplation of God. However, contemporary music serves many other purposes instead. How often do people listen to music as a way to relax, with it serving as a distraction or to simply provide the 'mood' for something? Music has also become a way for people to vent all manner of emotions, from sadness to anger. Music has even become a means for man to venerate himself, as evidenced by the emergence of innumerable pop idols.

In this present age, this attitude of contemporary music has also crept into music used to worship God. Contemporary music mingled with worship has produced worship services today that are more like concerts, with tunes that are hardly distinguishable from those found in the rock genre, or which sound more like sentimental love songs than reverent praise and worship. While emotions have their place in worship, we must remember that ultimately worship is for God – therefore even our emotions in worship must be pleasing in God's sight.

The warning in 2 Timothy 4:3-4 is even more pertinent today, and it is as relevant to the topic of music as it is to any area of Christian life. Do we not see, those who no longer want to sing hymns of old filled with sound doctrinal emphasis, but instead seek after shallow contemporary choruses that contain just the same few cliché lines? Do we not see them, with their itching ears, just wanting to sing the same few heart-warming themes to revel in the sentimental nature of God's love without exploring any other aspect of God in their worship? They have turned their ears from the truth!

We must ask ourselves, is our understanding of music in line with what God's Word has revealed to us concerning its proper use, or is it instead conformed to the world's ideas of what music ought to be?

Thought: Can contemporary music ever be pleasing in God's sight?

Prayer: Lord, teach me to take pleasure only in what pleases Thee.

HOW ARE WE TO MAKE SOUND JUDGMENTS IN OUR WORSHIP?

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul writes against those who say that there is no resurrection of the dead. In verse 33, he states that such a saying is characterised by evil because it denies the truth of God. Such evil sayings will corrupt good manners. “Ethos” is the Greek word behind “manners”, from which we get the word “ethics”. Thus, denying the truth of God leads to a corruption of our behaviour. Therefore, the only way to ensure that our behaviour is characterised by goodness is to stay away from all evil communication, or false teachings, and to cleave to what God’s Word says.

The same principle which applies to the issue about the resurrection of the dead also applies to the issue of making sound judgments in choosing music for worship.

The world today is full of many different voices, each trying to convince us of what is acceptable or even necessary in worship. The choice of music has become more contemporary, with one common argument being that the worship service needs to be ‘updated’ in order for Christianity to remain relevant in this modern day and age. The argument is that if the worship service remains too ‘traditional’, then people will not be attracted to church.

When we apply Scripture to judge between what is acceptable as worship music, we are able to understand that such an argument is flawed. Instead of worship being for God, that argument changes worship into something that is man-centred – the worship service becomes a means to attract crowds to church, using the carnal affections and preferences of men by playing the music that they want to hear. Such a teaching is clearly against Scripture.

We must be constantly on guard against evil communications. No matter how logical or reasonable an argument may seem, it is still considered evil if it is against God’s Word. Listening to such arguments will ultimately corrupt our understanding, and eventually it will corrupt our behaviour. Our sole guide must not be the persuasiveness of men – instead, our lives must be based on God’s Word alone.

Thought: Am I easily swayed by the arguments I hear from the world?

Prayer: Lord, help me to guard against all evil communications.

HOW DO WE EXERCISE DISCERNMENT IN WORSHIP?

Romans 12:1-2 is a passage familiar to many of us, and it is applicable to any area of Christian living. We are called to give our lives entirely over to God, just like a sacrifice. When we do so, our lives should be clearly different from the rest of the world.

This is only possible if our minds are renewed by the Word of God and if our thoughts are in line with God’s will. This in turn will lead to a transformation in the way we live. A renewed mind also helps us to “*prove*” – which means “discern” – what the good, acceptable, and perfect, will of God is in our lives.

This passage teaches us that the most important thing we need in being able to discern what is right from wrong is the renewing of our mind. Only when our mind and our entire way of thinking has been transformed through the studying God’s Word, will we then be able to discern God’s will in all things, including worship.

How exactly do we get a renewed mind? It begins first with salvation. Without salvation, we are spiritually dead and will not be able to exercise any discernment at all when it comes to spiritual matters. Once we are saved, we must continually study God’s Word so that we know more and more of Christ, and so that we can put on the mind of Christ. We will know what Christ thinks about worship, about music, and about what is considered acceptable before God.

Dear Christian, we cannot exercise discernment if we put little or no effort into studying God’s Word. Without discernment, we will only be listening to the words of men without really understanding whether or not we are following the good, acceptable, and perfect will of God. May we make it our business to be always learning more of the Bible, so that it will help us to discern what is right and wrong when we engage in worship?

Thought: Do I know, from God’s Word, what is considered acceptable worship?

Prayer: Lord, grant me the wisdom and ability to exercise discernment in knowing how to worship Thee.

ONLY TWO SACRAMENTS?

As we come towards the end of this series on Reformed Theology, we will be studying in the next few days the doctrine of the sacraments. The first question we have to ask is: What is a sacrament? It comes from 2 Latin words meaning "to hallow, consecrate" and "instrument or medium of". The Westminster Larger Catechism defines it as "an holy ordinance instituted by Christ in His church". An ordinance is simply something that is ordained by God, ie. something that is decreed or established by God, such as the Bible and marriage. The Bible is full of ordinances. But what, then, makes a sacrament so unique and special that there are only 2 of them in the entire history of Christianity? Read the definition again – a sacrament is "instituted by Christ". Throughout Christ's life on earth, there are only 2 occasions when He instituted an ordinance. The first is the Lord's Supper, which He instituted during the Passover feast right before His crucifixion. Hence Paul describes it as such in today's reading – it was not something which man had come up with, but it had been "received of the Lord". Christ had been the one who established it. The second sacrament is Baptism, which Jesus commanded His disciples to do right before His ascension into heaven (Matthew 28:19).

As we study the 2 sacraments in the days to come, therefore, remember that the sacraments are unique and significant in that they are ordained by God, and instituted by Christ. That is the only basis for which we practice them. They are not created from the imagination of man, nor do they come forth from any worldly background or influence. They are of deep spiritual significance and value in the life of every believer. Dear teen, may you thus gain a deep understanding and appreciation of the sacraments, that you may be able to practice them with full understanding and thankfulness.

Thought: The significance of the sacraments lies in their Author.

Prayer: Lord, teach me and grant me understanding on Your sacraments.

WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SACRAMENTS?

According to the Westminster Larger Catechism, the purpose of a sacrament is to signify and seal those that are within the covenant of grace. What does this mean? In today's first reading, Paul discusses the role of circumcision in Abraham's life. [While we do not practice circumcision today, the sacrament of baptism is the church-age equivalent of it.] Paul describes the sign of circumcision as *“a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised”*. This verse sums up so well for us the significance of the sacraments. It is clear that we are not saved by the sacraments, ie. being baptised or partaking of the Lord's Supper is not what grants us entry into heaven. Salvation is always about the inward workings of the heart, and not the external acts and works. This is why Abraham's faith is described as being that *“which he had yet being uncircumcised”* – before he was circumcised, he already had saving faith. But the reason why God gave the commandment for him to be circumcised was so that it could be *“a seal of the righteousness of the faith”*. Basically, this means that it was to be an outward, visible sign of the inward change that he had undergone when he put his faith in Christ. Remember always that the physical act of baptism is to symbolise the spiritual workings in our hearts. Similarly, the Lord's Supper is to be an outward testimony of the work of Christ in our salvation – whenever we partake of it, we *“shew the Lord's death”* (I Corinthians 11:26).

Dear teen, may you thus come to understand the deep spiritual significance and purpose of the sacraments. While baptism and the Lord's Supper do not give us salvation, they are a sign of those who have been born again. If you have truly trusted in Christ for your salvation, may you not hesitate in seeking public baptism, and then you will also be able to partake of the Lord's Supper and enjoy all the associated spiritual benefits.

Thought: Sacraments are an outward sign of an inward change.

Prayer: Lord, may I truly understand the significance of the sacraments.

WHAT IS WATER BAPTISM?

Water baptism is one of the only two sacraments instituted by Christ when He was on earth. John the Baptist was the first to administer baptism by divine authority, as a sign of faith in Christ who is to come, but Christ only formally instituted it as a perpetual ordinance just before His ascension. Today's reading contains the command known commonly as the Great Commission, which was Christ's instruction to His disciples before His return to heaven at the end of His earthly ministry. The disciples were commanded to baptise all nations "*in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost*". By invoking the name of the Triune God in baptism, it is a sure sign of the believer's identification with God in his salvation.

Baptism is carried out using water, because water is a symbol of cleansing. Just as water has the ability to cleanse a physical stain, likewise the blood of Christ has the power to cleanse sinners of their spiritual stain. When we undergo baptism, therefore, the water which is applied to us is a visible reminder of the wonder-working blood of Christ which has washed us of all our sins and purified us.

Dear teen, do you desire to be baptised? In our church, the common practice is for teens not baptised as an infant to seek baptism at around the age of 17 onwards. Until then, it is good for you to understand the true meaning of baptism, so that when the time comes, you will understand and be ready for this event of great significance.

Thought: Baptism is an outward confession of an inward transformation.
Prayer: Lord, help me to be ready to be baptised when the time comes.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE BAPTISED INTO JESUS DEATH?

In today's reading, we read of this idea of being "*baptism into death*". You may be thinking to yourself, "Isn't baptism supposed to represent eternal life? Why then does the Bible speak about being baptised into Jesus' death?" It may sound strange and confusing, but Paul certainly did not get it wrong. Here, Paul was speaking not of water baptism, but of spiritual baptism which water baptism symbolises ie. the baptism with the Holy Spirit. This is basically the work of salvation in a believer's heart. When we are baptised with the Holy Spirit, we are united with Christ and are thereby able to enjoy the benefits of His death, resurrection and new life. By being "baptised into his death", we are identifying ourselves with Him in His death. Remember that Christ died on the cross in our place – it was our sins that nailed Him there, for the sake of our righteousness and our justification, to give us eternal life.

The promise to us as believers is therefore that, even as we have been baptised into Jesus' death, likewise "*we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection*". Baptism is therefore a sign and seal of a believer's resurrection unto everlasting life! Having been baptised into Jesus Christ, we can look forward to this hope of being resurrected one day into eternal life in the heavenly kingdom.

Dear teen, truly the work of salvation and the baptism with the Holy Ghost is a doctrine of such rich spiritual truths. Though it may seem confusing and difficult to understand, may you be able to gain spiritual understanding, that you may truly be able to give thanks to your Saviour for the wonderful work He has done in your life.

Thought: "*...even so we also should walk in newness of life.*" (Romans 6:4)

Prayer: Thank You, Lord, for the new life that I have in You.

IS INFANT BAPTISM BIBLICAL?

If you come from a Christian home and grew up in church from young, you may have been baptised as an infant. Is this baptism the same as the water baptism which we have been learning about? But isn't baptism supposed to come after salvation, and not before? How can a mere infant who cannot even walk or talk be saved? Why then do we practice infant baptism?

First of all, we must understand that God is a covenantal God. In Old Testament times when God instituted His covenant with Abraham, His promise of blessing extended not just to Abraham personally, but to his children and descendants through all generations. God didn't just say that the covenant was *“between me and you”* – it was also to *“thy seed after thee”*! That is why God instituted the rite of circumcision as a sign that children were most certainly included in His covenant. In the New Testament, baptism has taken the place of circumcision, but the principle remains the same. When Christian parents bring their children before the Lord to be baptised, they are claiming God's covenant blessing for their children. It is a sign of faith in God's promise of blessing. This is clearly taught in today's second reading. The presence of a believer in a household has a sanctifying effect on the rest of the family members, even if they are not yet saved.

Another reason why we practice infant baptism is because it signifies a commitment on the part of the parents to bring up their children in the fear and knowledge of God. The parents are making a promise before the Lord to do all that is within their power to instruct the child in the teachings of the Bible.

Dear teen, if you have been baptised as an infant, may you come to understand the significance of it. At the same time, be reminded that just because your parents are Christians doesn't mean that you are one too. Salvation is still always a personal relationship with God. When the time comes for you to seek reaffirmation of your faith, may you be ready to do so.

Thought: Infant baptism alone does not save!

Prayer: Lord, may I have a true personal relationship with You.

WHAT IS THE LORD'S SUPPER?

The second (and last!) sacrament which we will be studying is the Lord's Supper. It is named as such is because it was instituted by our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, on the night He was betrayed. The bread and the wine which were consumed during this meal were used by Jesus to give His disciples a perpetual sign of His death and sacrifice at Calvary.

What is the purpose of carrying out the Lord's Supper? First of all, Christ has commanded that we are do it *“in remembrance of me”*. Each time we partake of the Lord's Supper, we commemorate the death of Christ. The bread symbolises the body of Christ which was so painfully and humiliatingly broken for our sakes, while the wine symbolises the blood of Christ which was shed so freely and abundantly for the cleansing of our sins. The Lord knows that we as humans are so forgetful, despite the greatness of the salvation that He has wrought in our lives. Therefore we need the Lord's Supper as a constant reminder to us. Secondly, whenever we eat the bread and drink the cup, we *“shew the Lord's death till he come”*. While the Lord tarries, Christians around the world are to continue in remembering the finished work of Christ on the cross, and to demonstrate through the partaking of the elements our belief that this record is true, and that we are looking forward to the Second Coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Dear teen, how real has the death and sacrifice of Christ been to you? Even if you have not yet started to partake of the Lord's Supper, this does not mean that you do not have to understand its significance. On a daily basis, you, too, can constantly remember the wondrous work that Christ has done for you. Remember His body which was broken for you, remember His blood that was shed for you, and give thanks in grateful adoration to our wonderful Saviour who has done so much for you.

Thought: How often do I remember the Lord's death and reflect on its significance in my life?

Prayer: “Lest I forget Gethsemane, lest I forget Thine agony, lest I forget Thy love for me, lead me to Calvary.”

HOW DO WE PREPARE FOR THE LORD’S SUPPER?

Having learnt about the great significance of the Lord’s Supper, we know that it is definitely not something to be taken lightly. It is something that we must approach with the utmost sobriety and seriousness. First and foremost, the prerequisite of everyone who comes before the Lord’s table is that he must be born again. Only when we have called upon Christ to be our personal Lord and Saviour can we claim the benefits of His death. Therefore the severe warning is given to anyone who eats of the bread and drinks of the cup *“unworthily”* i.e. without yet having been cleansed by the blood of Christ – he *“shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord”*, and he *“eateth and drinketh damnation to himself”*.

If you have indeed been born again, the next step to make sure you are prepared for the Lord’s Supper is to *“examine [yourself]”*. What sins have you committed in the past week/month? What are the ways in which you have fallen short of God’s standard? How has your spiritual walk been? How much have you grown in your faith, in your knowledge of God? In what ways have you shown the love of God to those around you? Now, the purpose of this self-examination exercise is not so that you can say, “Oh no, I have been so sinful, I am therefore not worthy to partake of the Lord’s Supper and should abstain from it”. Rather, the process of examining yourself should provoke you to confess and repent of whatever sins that you are still willfully clinging on to; to desire an ever closer walk with the Lord; to grow in your thirst and knowledge for things of eternal value. Then will you be able to come before the Lord’s table with a clear conscience, knowing that, although you were once lost in sin, the blood of Christ has cleansed you from all unrighteousness, and continues to effect the work of sanctification in your life even as you grow in your faith.

Dear teen, even if you do not currently take the Lord’s Supper, you are equally able to examine yourself on a regular basis. A good time is during the Lord’s Supper service itself, which our church conducts on a monthly basis. Do take the time to reflect on your walk with God, and may it spur you on towards an ever closer walk with Him.

Thought: Each Lord’s Supper is a time for me to draw closer to God.

Prayer: Lord, grant me spiritual sight to be able to examine myself.

HOW DO WE RECEIVE THE LORD’S SUPPER?

The institution of the Lord’s Supper is recorded for us in all 3 of the synoptic gospels, as well as expounded by Paul in 1 Corinthians. From each of these biblical accounts, we see that the instruction given on how we are to receive the Lord’s Supper is consistently clear. First of all, we are to follow our Lord’s example in how he had “given thanks”. Of course, we know that we are to say grace before every meal that we eat. But beyond that, this prayer of thanksgiving is so important whenever we partake of the Lord’s Supper, because through it we express our immense gratitude and thankfulness to God. Never for one moment forget that, but for the grace and mercy of God, you would be a sinner, lost and condemned, never able by your own strength or merits to receive eternal life. And yet, God in His great love and compassion towards us unworthy sinners, saw it fit to give us His only begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, to be slain as a sacrifice to take away the sin of the world. Can we receive this gift with anything but the greatest thanksgiving?

This is followed next by an instruction from Christ – *“Take, eat”*. The bread was offered freely to the disciples, and all they had to do to receive it was literally to take it from Christ’s hands, and then to eat it. Likewise, we receive the Lord’s Supper simply by taking of the bread and the cup, and then to eat it. Yes, it certainly seems so obvious and straightforward! But realise that the spiritual truth behind this is equally simple and straightforward. Christ’s body was broken for all who would simply come and claim its benefits. It does not require any effort on our parts, for all that is necessary to satisfy the justice of God has already been accomplished by Christ at Calvary.

Dear teen, do you realise how much Christ has done to earn your salvation? How then can you show your gratitude to Him? As you prepare to receive the Lord’s Supper in the future, may this attitude of thanksgiving influence your life in every way, not just on Sundays when you take the Lord’s Supper, but each and every day of your life.

Thought: Remembrance is the hallmark of gratitude.

Prayer: Thank You, Lord, for Your great sacrifice!

HOW SHOULD WE REGARD OUR BRETHREN AFTER THE LORD’S SUPPER?

In some churches, the keeping of the Lord’s Supper is sometimes referred to as observing or partaking of the “Holy Communion”. The Lord’s Supper is significant not only because of how it affects your own personal relationship with God, but also because of how it affects your relationship with fellow believers in Christ. In today’s reading, Paul describes the cup and the bread as being the “communion” of the blood and body of Christ respectively. The word for communion in the original Greek language is “koinonia”, which carries the idea of participation and fellowship. We who receive the elements of the Lord’s table together are all participants of the body and blood of Christ, meaning that we share the common bond of all being members of the body of Christ. That is why Paul says that, although we are many different people, we are *“one bread, and one body”*. We are united as one in the covenant community of God’s blessings through Christ Jesus.

Knowing this, we are therefore to regard our fellow Christians as truly brothers and sisters in Christ. There should not be any irreconcilable differences or unsolvable conflicts between Christians, for what conflict can be so great that the blood of Jesus cannot overcome? Rather, we should have a genuine care and concern for our Christian brethren. The bond that we share is not of earthly flesh and blood, but of the spiritual blood of Christ that has cleansed each and every one of us of our sins.

Dear teen, may you truly learn to love your fellow brothers and sisters in Christ with a true unconditional, sacrificial love. If there be any conflict or disagreements, resolve them before coming to the Lord’s table. And after partaking of the Lord’s Supper, may it fill you with a renewed zeal to love your neighbor as yourself, and to show true Christian charity to all who are around you.

Thought: *“...if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another.”*

(1 John 4:11)

Prayer: Lord, may I be able to experience true “koinonia” with my fellow brethren.

Notes

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