



The Burning Bush

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THE BURNING BUSH

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EDITORIAL: CONTEXT AND MEANING

In the last issue of *The Burning Bush*, the article “Playing Foul on Fowler: A Clarification on Quoting O S Fowler on Courtship and Upholding Biblical Morality” met with further criticism regarding the interpretation of Fowler’s 1875 book on chastity and sexual morality. The problem stems from the critic’s misreading of Fowler’s work due to its Victorian English and from anachronistic assumptions regarding Fowler’s rationale. This editorial seeks to highlight the linguistic and contextual misunderstandings underlying this charge and to demonstrate, from Fowler’s own words, that his teaching consistently upholds abstinence before marriage.

The Critic’s Charge

A schoolteacher has strongly objected to the claim that much of the current controversy arises from a modern misreading of Victorian English. In his letter, he wrote:

(iii) ‘Much of the current controversy stems from a modern misreading of Victorian-era language.’—Surely Victorian English cannot be more problematic than the English of the King James Bible! Perhaps I may just as well provide you and your colleague with a gratis lessonette on English reading comprehension to enlighten you that Fowler did advocate Premarital Sex whatever his other views might have been concerning sex!

For your edification, and specifically for him: In a nutshell, Fowler advised that we cannot regard coition frivolously and sex should be after marriage, BUT should an amorous couple ‘cannot *tahan*’, they should first be engaged, betrothed or affianced to be married to indulge in the ecstasy of coitus! To Fowler, since engagement is a commitment to be married, Fowler advocated an engaged couple can begin to have conjugal love. There is absolutely no contradiction in terms!

Shockingly, you are completely ignorant of the philosophy behind Fowler’s rationale! Let your humble English schoolteacher enlighten you. This is a teleological theory propounded by Prof. Joseph Fletcher’s *Situation Ethics: The New Morality*, that loving ends justify any means! Indeed, Orson Squire Fowler has beat [sic] everyone else to it; even more than 200 years ago when Situational Ethics was not formulated, he had already got it in his

being!

One verbatim excerpt from Fowler's book (among the many I sent you in my 1 Dec 2023 email) to jog your memory: Page 486, O. S. Fowler said, 'LOVE-MAKING GIRLS, know this: In and by the very act and fact of making Love to any man you virtually offer to marry, cohabit, and procreate with him. Not that this is wrong, or even immodest, if you can and want to; for you have just as good a right to offer them to him by making Love to him as he to you, by courting with you.'

Whether you like it or not, FOWLER IS AN ADVOCATE FOR PREMARITAL SEX period! Got it?

Such language, though vivid, unfortunately rests upon a semantic confusion and anachronistic reasoning. The issue lies not in Fowler's moral position but in the critic's misunderstanding of Victorian phraseology and context.

Dictionary Meaning and Contextual Usage

The central misunderstanding arises from the modern association of the phrase "making love" with sexual intercourse. In 19th-century English, however, "to make love" referred not to physical intimacy but to courtship—the act of expressing affection or seeking marriage.

However, just as with the word "mate," the schoolteacher unfortunately misunderstands the phrase "making love" or "lovemaking" as commonly used and understood in the 19th-century. According to *Chambers Dictionary* (1901 ed.), "make love to" means "to try to gain the affection of." In those days, it did not mean "sex" or "sexual intercourse." *Collins Dictionary* notes that "making love" is "archaic: to engage in courtship." Similarly, *Webster's Dictionary* (1828) defines "love" (noun) as: "2. Courtship; chiefly in the phrase, to make love, that is, to court; to woo; to solicit union in marriage."

This historical-linguistic understanding is confirmed by Fowler's own usage. In the cited passage, he writes: "you have just as good a right to offer them to him by making Love to him as he to you, by courting with you." Fowler explicitly equates "making love" with "courting," demonstrating that his meaning was entirely consistent with 19th-century usage. There is no sexual connotation in the text as he wrote it. His concern was with the sincerity and moral earnestness of affection expressed in courtship, not with sexual liberty.

What, then, is Fowler saying on page 486? Simply that when a

woman expresses romantic feelings to a man in courtship, she is essentially declaring her desire to marry him, be his wife, and bear his children. As *Webster's Dictionary* (1828) clearly states, this is “to solicit union in marriage.” It is on this basis that Fowler considers such an overture “not wrong, or even immodest” when the intention is sincere towards marriage (i.e., when one is not flirting, playing with a person’s feelings, sending false signals, or engaging in premarital sex). It goes without saying that the consummation of such romantic feelings occurs only after marriage, which Fowler consistently makes clear: “Abstinence till after marriage is the only policy.”

Let it be known that at the Far Eastern Bible College, students in Biblical Hermeneutics and Greek Exegesis classes are taught the elementary linguistic principle that context determines meaning and usage. Students know not merely to consult a lexicon or dictionary, but to ensure that context determines how a word is employed.

The Anachronism of Equating Fowler with Fletcher

The schoolteacher then took an illogical historical leap by framing Fowler as Fletcher—an anachronistic fallacy, forcing a 20th-century idea (Situation Ethics) into a 19th-century context where it did not exist. More tellingly, Fowler’s teaching on chastity stands in direct opposition to Fletcher’s situational relativism. Whereas Fowler appeals to natural law and chastity (with scriptural basis and allusions), Fletcher rejects absolutes. By conflating Fowler’s rationale with Fletcher’s, the schoolteacher, whether wittingly or unwittingly, sets up a straw man, pronouncing guilt by association where no such guilt or association exists.

This same anachronistic fallacy is also evident in his misreading and misunderstanding of Victorian English, as noted above.

Moral and Hermeneutical Reflections

Fowler consistently and explicitly advocated abstinence and the importance of marital commitment in courtship. For Fowler, even engagement or betrothal was not a licence to cohabit or to engage in premarital sex. He makes this unequivocally clear with warnings such as, “Liberties during courtship kill love … All sexual familiarities breed contempt.” “Sexual freedoms belong only to marriage.” “Abstinence till after marriage is the only policy.”

In this respect, Fowler’s moral ethos aligns more closely with the

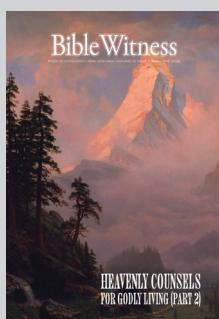
biblical ethic than with any modern situational theory. His emphasis on abstinence till marriage echoes the apostolic teaching that “*this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication*” (1 Thess 4:3).

For interpreters and educators alike, this controversy serves as a cautionary example. Precision in language and fidelity to context are essential in both theological and moral discourse. The failure to observe these principles leads not only to academic error but also to moral misjudgement.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the claim that O S Fowler advocated premarital sex is unsupported by both textual and contextual evidence. The misunderstanding arises from a modern misreading of Victorian English and from the misapplication of 20th-century situational-ethical theory to a 19th-century moral-ethical thought. Fowler’s own words affirm that sexual intimacy belongs solely within marriage and that abstinence before marriage is the only moral course. His writings uphold chastity as a virtue grounded in moral law and in the natural order.

This episode highlights the importance of careful reading, historical awareness, and hermeneutical discipline—principles that remain as vital for theological interpretation as for literary analysis. Having set forth the facts plainly, this clarification may suffice for those who have ears to hear: “*He that hath ears to hear, let him hear*” (Matt 11:15).



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AN EVERLASTING COVENANT: AN EXAMINATION OF WILHELMUS À BRAKEL'S VIEW OF THE FUTURE OF THE JEWS

Lingkang Ko

One's perspective of Israel is quite often a pivotal point of contention in the debates between covenant theology versus dispensationalism. For example, in Millard Erickson's primer concerning eschatology, he delves into a discussion of dispensationalism, and explains that,

A second major tenet of dispensationalism is a sharp and definite distinction between Israel and the church. This is regarded as basic to any correct understanding of Scripture... In this view God made a special covenant with Israel (originally with Abraham) that is unconditional. Regardless of the response of Israel, they will remain God's special people and ultimately receive His blessing.¹

With regard to the progressive dispensationalists, he explains that such a distinction remains:

While earlier dispensationalism had sharply distinguished these two groups, progressive dispensationalists see the church as in continuity with the working of God with Israel, as the inauguration of promises given in the Old Testament, particularly in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. The church is not to be thought of as a new people-group, but is simply redeemed humanity, including both Jews and Gentiles. Yet progressive dispensationalists do not adopt the view of non-dispensationalists that the church simply takes the place of Israel as God's people, and that the promises of Israel are now all applied to the church. They insist that there is still a place for God's special promises to literal Israel.²

Yet when one looks through the debates of the past, one would realise that such a sharp polarising distinction was not always made of covenant theology. There have been theologians that have seen a future promise for national, ethnic Israel, and yet hold to a consistent orthodox view of the covenants.

One such theologian is Wilhelmus à Brakel. He was a Dutch theologian of the late 17th-century who saw a distinct future for Israel, both in her conversion and also return to the Promised Land. His large work on systematic theology, though popular in the Dutch-speaking world, was only recently translated into English, and thus his positions have seldom been heard or featured in discussions of theology or eschatology.

The purpose of this paper is not to have an extended discussion on the millennial views of eschatology, nor a debate on covenant theology versus dispensationalism. The landscape of this debate, especially in the present, is admittedly an extremely diverse and constantly changing one. Furthermore, as hard as it is to categorise theologians of today, it is far harder to assess older writers and place them into categories that are only defined in the 20th- or 21st-century.

Instead, this paper simply seeks to elucidate Brakel's view concerning the future of Israel, showing how his view of the future of Israel is not incompatible but entirely consistent with covenant theology, and a very logical consequence of a covenantal view of God. Some comparisons will also be made considering the continuity or discontinuity of thought with the contemporaries of his time, and how his position would be perceived in light of the ongoing debate between covenant theology and dispensationalism.

Brakel's Life and Theology

His Life and Works³

Wilhelmus à Brakel was born on January 2, 1635, in Leeuwarden, the Netherlands. He was the only surviving son of Theodorus à Brakel, a godly minister, and Margaretha Homma, a mother who prayed incessantly for his soul. He was saved at an early age and was said to have had “a great love for His Saviour Jesus Christ” from his earliest years.⁴ He was trained for the ministry and was accepted as a candidate for the ministry at the age of 24. With few pastoral vacancies at that time, he continued to study under renown theologians Gisbertus Voetius and Andreas Essenius at the University of Utrecht until 1662 when he received the call to his first pastorate, to the congregation of Exmorra, a village in Friesland. Over the next 21 years, he would serve in various pastorates in Friesland, maintaining a strong consistent ministry, warm relationships with his congregations and an increasing prominence as a

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gifted preacher and minister. In 1683, he reluctantly accepted a call to Rotterdam, a large city of 55,000 people. He would serve there until his death in 1711. It was during the latter period of his life that he wrote what has been commonly described as his magnus opus—the *De Redelijke Godsdienst (The Christian's Reasonable Service)*, published in 1700.

This volume has been hugely influential in the Dutch Reformed community, described as “one of the premier and most widely read representatives of Dutch Reformed orthodoxy... until this present day his name recognition exceeds nearly all the men of God with whom Jehovah has graced His church in the Netherlands during the last three centuries.”⁵ It is a defining representation of his years of faithful ministry and close walk with the Lord. It is reflective of both the prevailing theological trends of the time that he was living in, of the *Nadere Reformatie* (Dutch Second Reformation), as well as the influences of English Puritanism. As Bart Elshout comments:

His ministry represents a Christianity that is thoroughly scriptural, experiential, and devotional. In his major work we find one of the most complete, comprehensive, and balanced expressions of *Nadere Reformatie* theology.⁶

A careful reading of *De Redelijke Godsdienst* will dispel the notion that there is a distinct and qualitative difference between the divines of the *Nadere Reformatie* and the Puritan writers... à Brakel's works bridges English Puritanism and the equally rich heritage of the *Nadere Reformatie*.⁷

Of the relationship between these two movements, Beeke also explains that there is a strong historical and theological link between them. He notes that,

The divines of these two groups held each other in high esteem. They influenced and enriched each other through personal contact and especially a vast array of translated writings, particularly from English into Dutch. More Reformed theological books were printed in seventeenth-century Netherlands than in all other countries combined.⁸

It was therefore these two strands of influences that resulted in the unique and monumental work that was the fruit of his life's ministry. Through it, he has an enduring ministry that transcends the place and time that he served in, for his writings have influenced and impacted the Dutch speaking world for the centuries that followed its publication. Since it was published, this book has been republished more than twenty times in the Dutch language, translated into German, and most recently

into the English language.⁹

His View of the Covenants

The very premise of à Brakel's work is grounded in God's covenantal relationship with man. This is clearly indicated in the full title of his magnum opus—"The Christian's Reasonable Service—in which Divine Truths concerning the Covenant of Grace are Expounded, Defended against Opposing Parties, and their Practice Advocated as well as The Administration of this Covenant in the Old and New Testaments". This emphasis is echoed by the translator of his work, Bartel Elshout, who observed that "the covenant of grace is the dominant theme and organizing principle of *De Redelijke Godsdienst*".¹⁰

In volume one of his work, under "Anthropology and Christology", he addresses the topic of covenant theology directly, where he discusses the covenant of works,¹¹ the covenant of grace,¹² and the necessity of satisfaction by the surety of Jesus Christ.¹³ He also deals with the issue of covenants when he discusses the Decalogue. In his introduction to the Law of God, he goes into a rather comprehensive and useful discussion of the relationship and place of the law to both the covenant of grace and of works.¹⁴ His views on the covenants are orthodox, with nothing particularly outstanding or different from the general Reformed view of the covenants. In fact, in a paper by Richard Muller entitled, "*The Covenant of Works and the Stability of the Divine Law in Seventeenth-Century Reformed Orthodoxy*",¹⁵ Brakel alongside his contemporary Herman Witsius are used as examples of Reformed theologians in the 17th-century that have an orthodox view of covenant theology. Upon close examination of their covenantal views, especially pertaining to the covenant of works, Muller concludes that their views stand in continuity with the body of Reformed doctrine and demonstrate "a process of doctrinal development in the Reformed tradition",¹⁶ and show no major deviation from the historic views of law, promise and the covenants.

Specifically with regard to the appendix that this paper will seek to examine in detail, Elshout explains that it was written as a refutation of what he deemed to be Cocceius' erroneous *Old Testament* hermeneutic and to critique certain aspects of his covenant theology.¹⁷ Concerning this section, Elshout recommends that "anyone who wishes to make a serious study of the Reformed hermeneutic of the Old Testament and is looking for biblical ammunition to expose dispensationalism and baptistic

theology for what it is, would do well to study these chapters carefully.”¹⁸

His view on Typology

In an appendix, Brakel provides a rather lengthy and carefully articulated set of guidelines on how one ought to interpret types in Scripture. The rules he offers are deliberately narrow in scope. He states,

If one is to designate something as a type, the following must be true: (1) It must have been appointed by God as a type. (2) Types were given to the church of the Old Testament so that, during that time, she might look unto Christ and believe in Him. (3) Since the types were given to the Old Testament Church for the practice of religion, all those who did not use those types for their intended purpose—to know and believe in the future Messiah—sinned.¹⁹

As a result, he emphatically rejects the notion of Canaan as designated as a type of heaven for Israel. Arguing that such an analogy fails to meet the criteria he set forth, he declares that “the Old Testament does not consist in the inheritance of Canaan as being a pledge of heaven.”²⁰ It is likely that such a strict view of how one can identify types would contribute to his rejection of the notion that the mentions of Israel in the New Testament refer to the church and not national or ethnic Israel.

His Eschatology

Though the purpose of this paper is not to enter the millennial debate, nor to be caught up discussing matters of eschatological systems, it is nonetheless necessary to give a very brief overview of Brakel’s eschatology, as far as it relates to his views concerning Israel. Brakel has been described as a historical millennialist with postmillennial tendencies.²¹ His biographer summarises his view on Revelation 20 as such:

He views this as relating entirely to the future. During this kingdom of peace in which the antichrist will have been annihilated and the devil will have been bound, “the entire Jewish nation will acknowledge our Lord Jesus to be the only and promised Messiah, will turn to Him in repentance, will love Him in an extraordinary manner, and honor and glorify Him.”²²

Therefore, when he speaks of the future conversion of the Jews and their restoration to the land, he pins it down to the millennium of Revelation 20, which will happen in a future kingdom of peace.

The Historical Understanding of the Jews

Identity of the Jews

What did Brakel mean when he uses the term “Jews”? We find his clarification here:

When speaking of the conversion of the Jews, we understand this to refer to the entire nation, and not only to Judah and Benjamin who had returned from Babylon and lived in Canaan until the destruction of Jerusalem. Rather, it also refers to the ten tribes... After the destruction of Jerusalem, the entire Jewish nation was dispersed and no longer has a specific residence. We are speaking here of this nation without distinction.²³

We see here that when Brakel speaks of the Jews, he is unequivocally referring to the ethnic nation of Israel—the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He maintains that they remain an identifiable people with whom God has established covenantal promises, and he asserts that God will certainly fulfil these promises in accordance with His covenantal dealings. Brakel appeals to texts such as James 1:1 and Acts 2:5–11 as evidence that, although the Jews have been dispersed from their land, they continue to be recognised as a distinct people—one to whom the New Testament explicitly refers.²⁴

History of Jews

In a section at the end of his book—*The Christian’s Reasonable Service*—Brakel devotes a large appendix to discuss what he terms as “The Administration of the Covenant of Grace in the Old and New Testaments.”²⁵ In it, he traces the redemptive history of what he terms the church of the Old Testament from Adam to Abraham; Abraham to the Law; Sinai to Christ; and then of the New Testament Church from the birth of Christ to the Revelation of John. He also deals with topics such as the nature of the ceremonial laws of Sinai, the suretyship of Christ in the OT, and the state of Old Testament believers. In all these, he focuses on the outworking of the Covenant of Grace and clearly and comprehensively demonstrates the unity of the Old and New Testament believers, all being under the Covenant of Grace, enjoying the full benefits of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. He also narrates the history of God’s covenantal dealings in the different administrations of the Covenant of Grace, of the distinctives and continuity from one period to the other. He answers numerous objections, especially regarding the nature of the covenant made at Sinai, and the commencement of the church under the Covenant of Grace.

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Through his arguments, he concludes that the church had its beginnings when the Lord announced the Covenant of Grace to Adam in Genesis 3:15,²⁶ and continues through to the present where “through the same covenant, the same Mediator Jesus, and the same spiritual benefits were a reality in the Old Testament as much as they are today.”²⁷

Future Conversion of the Jews

Brakel’s view concerning the future of the Jews, is that as a nation “it will acknowledge that Jesus is the Christ—the Messiah who was promised in the Old Testament and anticipated by the fathers.”²⁸ He makes his point by citing and exegeting various passages from both the Old and New Testament, and his arguments will now be presented in the order which it is given.

Romans 11

Citing Romans 11:1, Brakel understands the phrase “his people” to refer to God’s people, the Jewish nation. Here, he comments that,

one ought to know that throughout the entire New Testament the name Israel is never assigned to believers, that is, the church of the New Testament. Rather, it is always understood that this refers to the Jewish nation; that is, in distinction to and separation from all other nations.²⁹

He follows up this point made with an explanation of two commonly cited passages, Romans 9:6–8 and Galatians 6:16 that are often used to argue for the view that Israel in the New Testament refers not to ethnic Jews but to the New Testament church of true believers of the gospel.

He explains that “Israel” in Romans 9:6 does not refer to a sort of spiritual Israel, or the embodiment of Gentile believers. Rather, he explains that Paul is proving that “God has not annulled His promises and covenant (with Abraham and his seed), for not all who descended from Abraham were partakers of the covenant and the promises.”³⁰ He then cites Ishmael and Esau as examples of such, who were descendants of Abraham and then Israel, yet not part of the covenant. Likewise, he explains, many descendants of Jacob were also unbelievers who were not part of the promise, but nonetheless God’s covenant remains. The Israel that is not of Israel refers then to unbelieving Jews who have rejected the covenant, but that through their rejection, the covenant that God made with them remains steadfast through the believing Jews. Therefore, he sees this passage as speaking only of the physical descendants of Israel,

what he terms the “natural seed” of Abraham, and not the spiritual descendants in the New Testament church.

Likewise, for Galatians 6:16, he maintains that the “Israel of God” refers to the believing Jews mentioned by Paul alongside the believing Gentiles. He argues from the context of Galatians, explaining how Paul addressed the uncircumcised believing Gentiles and the Jews who claimed to be converted but insisted that all must be circumcised according to the law. Paul’s line of argument was that these two groups ought to be united. Thus, he concludes, “he declared peace and mercy to be upon those who walk according to this rule; that is, upon the believers of the uncircumcision and of the circumcision. Them he calls the Israel of God.” Brakel interprets the final “and” in the verse as referring to two distinct groups of people, rather than being applied epexegetically.

Having established the point that Israel refers to the Jewish nation, Brakel returns to the passage in Romans and examines the context of the preceding chapter, where he again seeks to prove that there is a “continual contrast between Israel and the Gentiles.”³¹ He follows on with a rather lengthy eight-page exposition of Romans 11.³² He sees the main gist of Paul’s argument as a refutation against the idea that God’s eternal covenant with Abraham had been disannulled because of Israel’s rejection of the Messiah. He emphatically states that “That is impossible... God will neither do it, nor intends to do it, nor is it possible that he would do it. He is the faithful God; they are His people...”³³ He does make a distinction between Paul’s argument of whether God has cast away His people entirely or ultimately, and he contends that Paul proves that it is negative in both cases. He acknowledges the present blindness of the Jews, but as the natural branches of the olive tree, they will one day be grafted back in, and such a process, as compared to the wild branch of the Gentiles, “is more compatible with nature, is easier to perform, and has better results than that you, being wild by nature, are grafted into their stem.”³⁴

Focusing then on verses 25–27, he interprets the “mystery” in verse 25 as the future conversion of the Jews, who are presently “so hardened and hostile toward the gospel, would once embrace in faith, and with love and joy, the very gospel they now so hated.”³⁵ He pins the timeline of this event as coming after the conversion of all the elect Gentiles. He also cites several Old Testament passages, such as Isaiah 59:20 and Jeremiah 31:33–34, as prophecies that foretold such a future conversion of the

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Jews, showing that the nature of the mystery was not that God did not previously reveal this to them, but that it was not completely understood prior to Paul's explanation of it.

A final proof that Brakel sees in Paul's arguments is from verses 28–32, based on "the immutability of the covenant made with Abraham and his seed."³⁶ Again he bases the arguments on the covenantal relationship that God had established with his people, and relates the themes of God's election of Israel to be partakers of the covenant, and His unchanging nature to it. He explains how the Jews who are presently enemies of the gospel, will one day come under the mercy of God again, and will be received in grace.

Therefore, in all this, Brakel bases his understanding of the future conversion of the Jews as very much part of his understanding of an immutable, covenant-keeping God. He sees the covenant that God made with Abraham as an unconditional, binding promise, and one that God will certainly keep, for it goes against the very nature of God to break His covenants.

2 Corinthians 3

The next main passage that Brakel brings up to prove his point is from 2 Corinthians 3, specifically verse 16. In examining the context of the chapter, Brakel asserts that the contrast is not between the Old Testament and its administration, or with the New Testament and its administration. Rather, he sees the contrast as being between the letter and the Spirit, whereby the ministry of the Spirit ought to be exalted above that of the letter. Concerning the letter, he then explains that it does not refer to the writings of the Old Testament, nor does it refer to its ceremonies, but that it should be understood as "the moral law in its demands, promises and threats—as being a condition of the covenant of works."³⁷

It must be noted here that in Brakel's previous chapters, he shows that he does not equate the Mosaic covenant with the covenant of works, but that the covenant of works, when first given to Adam, "had, as far as content is concerned, the law of the Ten Commandments."³⁸ What he means here in referring to "the letter that killeth" (2 Cor 3:6), is that those who would attempt to keep the law externally as a means to attain salvation will ultimately find death and condemnation.

Concerning the ministration of the spirit, Brakel understands this

as “the gospel in which Christ is offered and men are allured to come to Christ to be justified by His merits.”³⁹ This is a glory that far excels any glory that the giving of the Decalogue had. Now in the administration of the New Testament, the glory of the letter, when compared to the glory of the Spirit, “is extinguished, obscured, and becomes black, so to speak.”⁴⁰

According to Brakel, the veil over Moses depicts the veiling of the glory of the moral law. Because of this veil, Israel was prevented from seeking the law as a means to attain salvation. This, Brakel argues, serves as an analogy for the present state of the Jews: the veil covers their “heart, intellect, and will,” preventing them from seeing Christ—the present and greater glory of the gospel—when reading the Old Testament. Essentially, Brakel sees the veil as masking the means to salvation. For Moses, this was beneficial, as it prevented the Jews from relying on the law to achieve justification. In the present, however, the same veil obscures their recognition of Christ as the promised Messiah and the way of salvation. Therefore, in 2 Corinthians 3:16, “it,” which refers to the people of Israel, will turn to the Lord, seeing Christ as He is and receiving and believing in Him.

Matthew 23:38–39

Having made his main arguments in the two previous examples, Brakel examined the next few passages in much lesser detail with only brief expositions given.

In Matthew 23:38–39, Brakel highlights the timing of the future conversion of the Jews, viewing it as occurring after their present period of blindness has ended. He notes a close correlation between this passage and Romans 11:25–26, linking the Jews’ blindness and the fulness of the Gentiles to Matthew 23:39, where Jerusalem “shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord.” Thus, Brakel concludes that all Israel will be saved when they acknowledge Christ, who comes in the name of the Lord.⁴¹

Isaiah 61:1–4

Brakel describes this passage as a prophecy of “a most excellent restoration of Israel after her destruction.” He asserts that it undoubtedly speaks of a future restoration, not of deliverance from Babylon following their captivity. He offers four arguments in support of this view: (1) This deliverance necessarily comes after the first advent of Christ, as evidenced by Jesus Himself reading the first part of this passage in Luke 4:14, 21,

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and explaining that the prophecy was being fulfilled by His presence among them. (2) It will occur after a desolation of “many generations,” which cannot refer to the Babylonian captivity, as that period lasted only 70 years, and those taken captive from the same generation returned with memories of the first temple’s glory (Ezra 3:12). (3) Referring to Isaiah 61:7, Brakel argues that Israel had not received the promised double blessing; since their return from captivity, they experienced neither true spiritual blessing nor stability, being lost in ignorance and ungodliness, embroiled in troubles and wars, and never fully regaining possession of their land. (4) The glory described in these verses was never fully realised by Israel in the years following their captivity, nor were all the people regarded as priests of the Lord (Isa 61:6).⁴²

Thus, seeing as all these prophecies have never come to complete fruition, Brakel concludes that the context of this passage does not refer to the physical return of Israel after their Babylonian captivity, but that it certainly points to the future conversion and restoration of Israel.

Jeremiah 31:31–40

Of the spiritual benefits promised in the new covenant, Brakel acknowledges that the Gentiles have certainly become a partaker of them. However, he asserts that Israel and Judah, referring to the Jewish nation, also do have a part in them as well. He reiterates his position that the names Israel and Judah never refer to the church of the New Testament, but that they refer to the Jews who will “all know Me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them.” Brakel makes similar arguments as he did in the previous section explaining why the verses here cannot refer to the return from captivity in Babylon, but to the conversion and re-establishment of the Jewish nation in her country.⁴³

Hosea 3:4–5

Brakel pins eschatological significance to the passage here that speaks of a future after a period of desolation where Israel will seek the Lord and fear Him. This acknowledgment and reception of Christ as the Messiah will only happen in the future, and not after their period of Babylonian captivity. He contends that the description of the kingless age cannot be likened to the captivity in Babylon, for they yet had priests and prophets to teach them, and kings of Babylon to rule over them. They also did not turn to the Lord after their captivity in the manner described in Hosea. Therefore, the fulfilment of this passage can again come only after

the coming of the son of David, for “David their king” is a reference to the Messiah.

Future Return of Jews to Canaan

More than just the future conversion of the Jews, Brakel also saw a return to their historic land of promise as a necessary corollary of their acknowledgment of the Messiah. He believed that, in light of various Scriptural passages, there would come a time when “the Jewish nation [would] be gathered together again from all the regions of the world and from all the nations of the earth among which they have been dispersed... [and they will] come to and dwell in Canaan and all the lands promised to Abraham... [and] Jerusalem [will] be rebuilt.”⁴⁴ He does, however, deny that the temple will be rebuilt or that the Old Testament form of worship will be reinstated, for these, he says, were but types pointing to the coming of Christ. He also rejects the idea that Israel will exercise dominance over the world or other popular notions prevalent among the Jews at that time.

Instead, he sees the future state of Israel that will be an “independent republic, governed by a very wise, good-natured, and superb government.” He also saw how “Canaan will be extraordinarily fruitful, the inhabitants will be eminently godly, and they will constitute a segment of the glorious state of the church during the thousand years prophesied in Revelation 20.”⁴⁵ This was already indicated to some extent in his consideration of Isaiah 61 and Jeremiah 31.

In consideration of the fulfilment of all the promises to Israel that are yet to come, he explains how the curses warned of in Deuteronomy 28 were not fully realised in the Babylonian captivity, neither did the extent of the spiritual restoration and protection as described in Deuteronomy 30:1–6 occur during their return from captivity or any other time in Israel’s history. He simply argues that since none of these things have happened to their fullest extent, whether spiritually or physically, therefore “such a spiritual conversion and a restoration to the land of Canaan is still to be anticipated.”⁴⁶

The promise of Amos 9:14–15 states that “they shall no more be pulled out of their land which I have given them.” Brakel contends that Israel only possessed the land for five hundred years after their captivity, after which they were evicted. Since that time, they had never—at the time of his writing—returned to the land. Therefore, he concludes, a

future permanent occupation is to be expected.⁴⁷

Again, in Ezekiel 37:21–25, Brakel remarks that Israel never experienced such conditions after their return from Babylon. He emphasises the promise of a king, noting that they had no true king following the exile, and that the reference to David as their king will only be fulfilled when they acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah. Since the Jews did not occupy the land for long after Christ's first coming—when the land was destroyed and the people dispersed—this prophecy must again point to a future time.⁴⁸

In a similar vein, in Isaiah 62:1–4, Brakel understands the state of desolation and being forsaken as referring to Israel in her present condition, not the post-exilic period, while the glorious state in which she shall be called Hephzibah and her land Beulah is still to be realised.⁴⁹

Brakel quotes Zechariah 2:4, 12:6, 8, and 14:10–11 that speak of Jerusalem being inhabited. He contends that Jerusalem has never experienced such a state of inhabitation after the return from Babylonian captivity and therefore understands these passages as referring to a time yet to come. It is, accordingly, a specific promise that not just the land of Canaan, but the city of Jerusalem itself will be rebuilt, and that the Jews will once again reside there.⁵⁰

Despise Not the Jews

As he closes the chapter, Brakel addresses a few common objections to his view, none of which substantially alter the arguments he has already presented. He then provides reasons for why he chooses to focus on this topic. Among the reasons he gives—such as the importance of not despising the Jewish nation, having compassion on their state, and praying for their conversion—one stands out: the significance of God's covenantal relationship with His people.

This is the foremost reason why Brakel sees a future for the nation of Israel. He calls for attention to the immutability of the covenant God made with Abraham and his seed, the unchanging nature of God's covenant with Abraham and his descendants. Despite their sins and stubbornness, God does not break His promise or let His words fail. Believers are to take comfort and be encouraged that God will surely keep His promises to His people, and to trust in their fulfilment with faith and patience.

For Brakel, the question of Israel's future is not merely a matter

of exegeting particular passages or satisfying curiosity about a people with a unique history. Rather, it touches the very framework through which God's Word is interpreted. He views it as a logical and necessary consequence of a high view of God's covenants. The character and nature of God are at stake: if He does not fulfill the promises made to Abraham and his seed, it would imply that God has broken His Word. Conversely, recognising the future conversion and return of Israel to their land underscores God's faithfulness, offering profound spiritual encouragement and glorifying Him as the covenant-keeping God.

Evaluation of Brakel's View

What then can be said concerning Brakel's position concerning the future eschatological program for the Jews? Was he an outlier amongst the theological trends of his time? Or can it be said that his rejection of any use of "Israel" in the New Testament as a reference to the church was an incipient form of the dispensationalist "two-covenant" system of thought? Is such an interpretation in conflict with his framework of understanding Scripture as a whole?

Continuity with Puritan and Dutch Reformed Theology

First, it must be noted that Brakel's writings align with the prevailing eschatological thought of his time. In his day, it was not uncommon to anticipate a future conversion of Israel and a future return to their land.

While the reformers like Luther and Calvin did not see a future conversion of the Jews in Scripture, there were other contemporaries of theirs that did, such as Theodore Beza and Peter Martyr.⁵¹ There continued to be a consistent stream of thought that advocated such a position, through prominent theologians such as William Perkins, Richard Sibbes and Thomas Goodwin. In fact, Iain Murray notes that "from the first quarter of the seventeenth century, belief in a future conversion of the Jews became commonplace among the English Puritans."⁵² Furthermore, in examining the passages that the Puritans would often cite as evidence for the future conversion of the Jews, various similarities can be noted in both the texts cited and the interpretation given. For example, passages Romans 11:25–26 were often cited and discussed in great detail, along with texts like Matthew 23:38–39 and 2 Corinthians 3:15–16,⁵³ which were all used by Brakel to prove his point as well.

Regarding the fulfilment of the land promise, there were also influential streams that supported this interpretation. Andrew Crome notes that although it was initially taught by “radicals” such as Roger Edwards, Ralph Durden, and Francis Kett, “the idea of a restoration of the Jews to Palestine began to become more mainstream over the early seventeenth century... by the middle of the seventeenth century, the concept of Jewish restoration to Palestine was an established part of eschatology in both England and New England.”⁵⁴ He observed such thought in the writings of Englishmen like Thomas Brightman, John Owen and Jeremiah Burroughs, and also amongst New England theologians like John Cotton, Peter Bulkeley and Increase Mather.⁵⁵

Recalling the influence of English Puritanism on the Dutch Second Reformation and noting that Brakel was ministering during this same period at the end of the 17th-century, he would likely have been aware of—and possibly influenced by—such writings available to him.

Yet a more direct influence would have been his teacher and mentor—Gisbertus Voetius—whom he studied under at the University of Utrecht from 1659–1662. Analysing the works of Voetius, Peter Toon notes that Voetius was well aware of the various schools of thought, especially of the English writers, concerning Romans 11:26. In his disputation *De Generali Conversione Judaeorum* (1636), “Voetius derived from the analogy of the context, from the analogy of Scripture and from reason plead for the interpretation favoured by the majority of exegetes—among whom Voetius specially mentioned the English theologians—that the text points towards a general and future conversion of the Jews.”⁵⁶

This was the general expectation of much of 17th-century Dutch theology. As Toon further notes, after a survey of much of the eschatological expectation in 17th-century Netherlands: “with most theologians of those days we find the expectation of a further conversion of the Jewish people, which in its turn led to a sincere interest in the ways and means of their salvation.”⁵⁷

However, regarding the return of the Jews to the land, Toon notes that Voetius was uncertain, warning against apocalyptic speculations: “dark is the interpretation of every unfulfilled prophecy.”⁵⁸ There were, however, others who held a firmer belief in the return to the Holy Land, found in the writings of what Toon describes as the Cocceian school, following the teachings of Johannes Coccejus (1603–1669) and other writers such as Petrus Serrarius and Pierre Jurieu.⁵⁹

Therefore, in this regard, Brakel takes a step further than his teacher and asserts together with Coccejus and others that in accordance with his understanding of prophecy and the covenants, the return of the Jews to the land is a certainty.

It is clear that Brakel did not arrive at his understanding of the future of the Jews in isolation. His views stand in continuity with the prevailing thought of his contemporaries, including English Puritans and Dutch Reformed writers such as his teacher Voetius. Yet Brakel was also an independent thinker: he chose to reject Voetius' warnings against speculations on unfulfilled prophecy and firmly argued that, since the Old Testament prophecies concerning the glorious return of Israel to their land had not yet been realised, they must refer to a future promise still to be fulfilled. It is also noteworthy that Brakel arrived at this understanding long before the Zionist movements of the 19th and 20th centuries, or the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. His position was entirely one of faith—trusting that God would fulfil His covenant, turn the hearts of the Jews back to Him, reverse the diaspora, and restore them to the land of promise.

Conflict with Present Reformed Theology

However, while Brakel's writings aligned with much of the Reformed thought of his time, there is considerably more dissonance when compared with contemporary writings, particularly regarding the future of Israel. Among modern Reformed theologians, views on the future conversion of Israel vary. In his paper on this topic, Cornelis Venema identifies three main prevailing interpretations of “all Israel” in Romans 11:26 among Reformed scholars:

The first view takes this phrase to refer to the people of Israel as a totality (though not necessarily every individual Jew) who will be converted at some time after the fullness of the Gentiles has been gathered)... The second view takes this phrase to be a reference to the salvation of all elect, Jew and Gentile alike, gathered through the preaching of the gospel in the whole course of the history of redemption... The third view takes this phrase to be a reference to the total number of the elect from among the people of Israel. According to this view, the fullness of Israel refers to the sum total of the remnant of elect Jews whom God has gathered, is gathering, and will yet gather throughout the entire history of redemption until the time of Christ's coming.⁶⁰

Of these views, Brakel (and also the position taken by Venema)

would fall into the first category, that there will be a future conversion after the fulness of the Gentiles. And so there is a place for Brakel among contemporary Reformed thought concerning just the conversion, though it would be in the minority.

However, regarding the return of Israel to the land, this view has become increasingly the minority among contemporary Reformed writers. This is likely due in large part to Brakel's firm assertion that "Israel" in the New Testament always refers to ethnic Jews and not the church. His interpretation of Galatians 6:16 concerning the "Israel of God" would conflict with many within the Reformed tradition⁶¹ and aligns more closely with dispensational thought.⁶² Brakel's approach to Old Testament prophecies is largely literal, and he does not spiritualise them as referring to blessings for the church in the New Testament. He sees the everlasting covenant God made with Abraham as one that will be fulfilled in the future through Israel's return to Canaan. Keith Mathison notes that this distinction between Israel and the church is "the heart of that system of theology. Dispensationalism may, therefore, be defined as that system of theology which sees a fundamental distinction between Israel and the church. This distinction is the cornerstone of dispensational theology."⁶³ Similarly, Gerstner is highly critical of dispensational views that insist on an ethnic identity for Israel and the unconditional nature of God's covenant with Abraham for Israel.⁶⁴

This, however, is by no means an indication that Brakel was a dispensationalist, for he was undoubtedly a covenant theologian par excellence. Nor is it fair to attempt to categorise a 17th-century theologian within a system of theology that only arose in the 19th-century. This serves as a caution against making sweeping generalisations about the distinctions between covenant and dispensational theology. It is entirely possible to uphold a covenantal framework for God's dealings with humanity while still adopting a more "dispensational-esque" view of eschatology—at least with respect to the future of Israel.

In fact, there are present-day groups that hold views similar to Brakel's regarding Israel without being dispensational in their understanding of Scripture. Historicist Postmillennialists, who align closely with many aspects of Brakel's eschatology, are one such group. They were even responsible for translating and publishing Brakel's commentary on Revelation,⁶⁵ at a time when the original translators were hesitant due to the perceived weakness and controversial nature of

that work.⁶⁶ Other examples include Reformed but Premillennial Bible-Presbyterians, who also anticipate a future restoration of Israel—not only in terms of conversion but also with regard to their return to the land.⁶⁷

Conclusion

Though in many ways, Brakel's view of Israel today may seem like an anomaly and would be rejected by those who subscribe to Reformed theology and the covenantal framework of interpreting Scripture, yet it has been shown that it was in fact the majority position of his day. His writings are a useful representative of prevailing opinion concerning the future of Israel in a time where the current nation had not yet been reconstituted as the nation of Israel as it is known today. As clearly argued by Brakel, the recognition of the place of Israel in God's eschatological plans is one that is biblically consistent with God's covenants to His people.

The relatively recent translation of his works into English gives voice to a theologian that was relatively unknown and unheard in the theological dialogue in contemporary times. This paper has demonstrated that there is in fact such a stream of thought amongst the Dutch Reformed theologians, relating also to English Puritanism that hold to such a position, which in their day was common, but probably more unique and in the minority today.

Nonetheless, it is a perspective that deserves attention, demonstrating that some of the sharp distinctions drawn between Covenant theologians and Dispensationalists could be softened. Neither dispensationalism nor covenant theology should be defined solely by their views on the identity of Israel in the New Testament or the future of Israel. Greater interaction and understanding are needed to recognise that these systems are not entirely opposed; middle-ground positions can be taken in certain areas, particularly in matters of eschatology.

Notes

1 Millard J Erickson, *A Basic Guide to Eschatology: Making Sense of the Millennium* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 115–116.

2 *Ibid.*, 121.

3 The following brief biographical look at Brakel is summarised from W Fieret, in Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, 4 vols (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 1992), 1:xxxii–lxxxi.

4 *Ibid.*, 1:xxxii.

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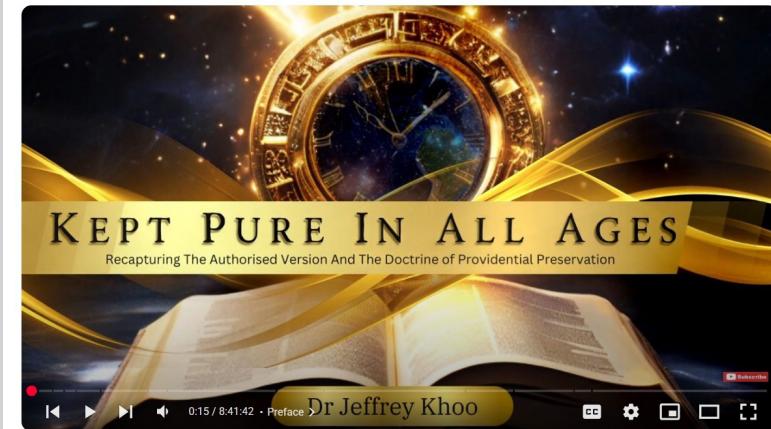
- 5 Bartel Elshout, *The Pastoral and Practical Theology of Wilhelmus à Brakel* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 1997), 6.
- 6 Ibid., 10.
- 7 Ibid., 13.
- 8 Joel R Beeke, “The Dutch Second Reformation,” in Brakel, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service*, 1:lxxvii.
- 9 Elshout, *The Pastoral and Practical Theology of Wilhelmus à Brakel*, 3.
- 10 Ibid., 23.
- 11 Brakel, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service*, 1:369–381.
- 12 Ibid., 1:427–464.
- 13 Ibid., 1:465–492.
- 14 Brakel, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service*, 3:40–51.
- 15 Richard A Muller, “The Covenant of Works and the Stability of Divine Law in Seventeenth-Century Reformed Orthodoxy: A Study in the Theology of Herman Witsius and Wilhelmus à Brakel,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 29 (1994): 75–101.
- 16 Muller, “The Covenant of Works and the Stability of Divine Law in Seventeenth-Century Reformed Orthodoxy,” 100.
- 17 Elshout, *The Pastoral and Practical Theology of Wilhelmus à Brakel*, 48–50.
- 18 Ibid., 51.
- 19 Brakel, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service*, 4:382.
- 20 Ibid., 4:386.
- 21 Elshout, *The Pastoral and Practical Theology of Wilhelmus à Brakel*, 51.
- 22 Fieret, “Wilhelmus à Brakel.” lxxvii.
- 23 Brakel, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service*, 4:510.
- 24 Ibid., 4:510.
- 25 Ibid., 4:373–535.
- 26 Ibid., 4:375.
- 27 Ibid., 4:506.
- 28 Ibid., 4:510.
- 29 Ibid., 4:511.
- 30 Ibid., 1:511.
- 31 Ibid., 4:513.
- 32 Ibid., 4:513–520.
- 33 Ibid., 4:514.
- 34 Ibid., 1:517.
- 35 Ibid., 4:518.
- 36 Ibid., 1:519.

- 37 Ibid., 4:522.
- 38 Ibid., 1:539.
- 39 Ibid., 4:522.
- 40 Ibid., 4:523.
- 41 Ibid., 4:526.
- 42 Ibid., 4:527–528.
- 43 Ibid., 4:528–259.
- 44 Ibid., 4:530.
- 45 Ibid., 4:531.
- 46 Ibid., 4:532.
- 47 Ibid., 4:532
- 48 Ibid., 4:532
- 49 Ibid., 4:532
- 50 Ibid., 4:532–533
- 51 Iain H Murray, *The Puritan Hope: A Study in Revival and the Interpretation of Prophecy* (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1971), 39–43.
- 52 Ibid., 43.
- 53 See *ibid.*, 60–76, for a lengthy discussion on this, along with an analysis of various Puritan’s exposition of Romans 11.
- 54 Andrew Crome, ed., *Prophecy and Eschatology in the Transatlantic World, 1550–1800* (United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 129.
- 55 Ibid., 130–131. See also William C Watson, *Dispensationalism Before Darby: Seventeenth-Century and Eighteenth-Century English Apocalypticism* (Oregon: Lampion Press, 2015), 13–46, for a detailed look at the writings of many Puritan writers who held such views concerning both the future conversion and return to the land of the Jews.
- 56 Peter Toon, ed., *Puritans, The Millennium and the Future of Israel* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co. Ltd, 1970), 141.
- 57 Toon, *Puritans, The Millennium and the Future of Israel*, 153.
- 58 Ibid., 141.
- 59 Ibid., 145–152.
- 60 Cornelis P Venema, “In This Way All Israel Will Be Saved: A Study of Romans 11:26,” *Mid-American Journal of Theology* 22 (2011): 28–29. See also his footnotes in this section that give a brief survey of the major works that take these various views.
- 61 Christopher W Cowan, “Context is Everything: ‘The Israel of God’ in Galatians 6:16,” *Southern Baptist Theological Journal* 14 (2010): 78–85.
- 62 S Lewis Johnson, “Paul and ‘the Israel of God’: An Exegetical and Eschatological Case-Study,” *The Masters Seminary Journal* 20 (Spring 2009): 41–55.

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- 63 Keith A Mathison, *Dispensationalism: Rightly Dividing the People of God?* (New Jersey: P & R Publishing Company, 1995), 8.
- 64 John H Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth: A Critique of Dispensationalism* (Tennessee: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, Publishers, Inc., 1991), 181–209.
- 65 Wilhelmus à Brakel, *Not to be Ignored: Rev. Wilhelmus à Brakel's Commentary on Revelation*, Kindle ed. (McCarter Providential Enterprises LLC, 2016). See especially the forward by the translator that outlines their position and delineates points of agreement with Brakel's eschatology.
- 66 Elshout, *The Pastoral and Practical Theology of Wilhelmus à Brakel*, 51.
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THE TONGUE AND ITS SINS: FLATTERY AND HYPOCRISY

Jonathan Ryan Hendricks

The tongue was made by God for the purpose of praising and worshipping Him. But when man fell into sin, that holy purpose was lost. In his unconverted state, man uses his tongue to blaspheme God and to destroy his neighbour. The tongue also reveals a person's character. The Puritan Thomas Brooks wisely said, "We know metals by their tinkling, and men by their talking." It reveals either godliness or sinfulness.

The unbridled tongue can be a destructive tool in the hands of Satan. James 3:6, 8 describes its destructive nature. It is likened to "fire" and called a "world of iniquity." It not only corrupts a man but sends him straight to hell. The tongue is untameable—an "unruly evil" and full of "deadly poison." Another Puritan writer observed, "An unbridled tongue is the chariot of the devil, wherein he rides in triumph."¹

Out of the many sins of the tongue recorded in the Bible, flattery and hypocrisy are among the most common and yet the most deadly. The simple purpose of this paper is to show how destructive these two sins are as described in Scripture. This paper will focus only on these two particular sins and will also show how they can be subdued with the help of the Holy Spirit. The person who guards his mouth is wise. Guarding the tongue enables one to stay out of trouble: "*Whoso keepeth his mouth and his tongue keepeth his soul from troubles*" (Prov 21:23).

The Sin of Flattery

The Bible has much to say about the sin of flattery, especially in the book of Proverbs. One well-known passage from the Old Testament is Proverbs 26:28: "*A lying tongue hateth those that are afflicted by it; and a flattering mouth worketh ruin.*" A notable New Testament verse is Romans 16:18: "*For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple.*"

Flattery is a form of speech used to insincerely favour or praise

someone in order to gain something. It is a sin of the tongue that seeks to extract something from another person with deceptive motives. It appears to be “fair speech” coupled with “good words,” but the intention is to harm and bring about destruction. W E Vine defines flattery as words used “not simply as an effort to give pleasure, but with motives of self-interest.”²

In the Old Testament, the general Hebrew word for flattery is *נַפְרָא*, meaning “smoothness” or “slippery” (Prov 29:5; 26:28).³ Literally, it is used in connection with idol-making, where metal is smoothed in the process of forming an idol—so smooth that it might slip from the hand. Figuratively, it describes the smoothness of speech—flattery—that is smoother than butter and oil. The flatterer can be so smooth with words that the victim easily believes what is said. Flattery also carries a seductive aspect, as seen in Proverbs 7:5, where it describes the strange woman who uses flattering speech to seduce simple-minded men. This paints flattery as insincere and ultimately hostile.

In the New Testament, the Greek word for flattery is *κολακεία*, referring to flattering words (1 Thess 2:5).⁴ This term points to insincere praise or excessive compliments given with the intent of gaining favour or advantage. It highlights deceitful or manipulative speech that lacks genuine love or truth. The end result of flattery is destruction.

Proverbs 26:28 says, “*A lying tongue hateth those that are afflicted by it; and a flattering mouth worketh ruin.*” This proverb describes the destruction that the tongue can cause. It is interesting to note that the “lying tongue” and the “flattering mouth” are metonyms for deceitful speech. Both are closely associated with deceptive words.

First, the lying tongue hates those it seeks to destroy. It describes the nature of a wicked person—someone who is set in his heart to invent lies against the one he hates. Such a person is given to the habit of lying and will stop at nothing until he brings about the ruin of his target. The great danger of the lying tongue is not only that it causes harm, but that it expresses deep hatred through slander, false accusations, gossip, and deceit.

An example of the destruction caused by lying lips is seen in the actions of the Jews against Stephen in Acts 6. Stephen was hated for preaching Christ, so they tried to destroy him with false accusations. They charged him with blasphemy against Moses and God (Acts 6:11)—a crime punishable by stoning under the Old Testament Law. They even set

up false witnesses to confirm their fabricated charges, which ultimately led to his death (Acts 6:13). Their hatred had reached such a peak that, lacking any real evidence, they resorted to deceit. Stephen had not blasphemed; rather, he proved from Scripture that Jesus of Nazareth, whom they had crucified, was the Messiah who fulfilled the Law. Thus, out of lying lips flows hatred.

On the other hand, the flattering mouth is even more dangerous than lying lips. This is because the flatterer appears kind and gracious. Sweet words seem to flow from his mouth. As the Hebrew word נַפְרֵץ in verse 28 indicates, the flatterer is a smooth talker. He does not lie outright but uses praise and compliments to deceive the simple. Flattery is often a cover for lies. Though it is a form of lying, its subtlety makes it harder to detect.

Charles Bridges observes that the flatterer presents an attractive face to gain favour, but upon closer discernment, he reveals himself as a subtle and murderous enemy. The word “ruin” in Hebrew comes from the root נָפַר meaning “to push” or “to thrust.”⁵ In its noun form, it refers to a stumbling block—something that leads to spiritual or moral downfall. The root connotes the idea of pursuing and casting down with the intent to harm.⁶ This implies that the flatterer is not content with merely winning favour; his goal is to crush or ruin the one he flatters. For the flatterer, flattery is a trap—and ruin is the end.

The Psalmist likewise concludes that there is no faithfulness in the mouth of a flatterer. Whenever he speaks, his intent is destruction. The only thing to do with such a person is to submit him to the judgment of God, as the Psalmist did: “*Destroy thou them, O God; let them fall by their own counsels*” (Ps 5:10). God will ultimately bring down their devices.

At the same time, Scripture warns believers to beware of flatterers. The Psalmist declares, “*He that worketh deceit shall not dwell within my house: he that telleth lies shall not tarry in my sight*” (Ps 101:7). Believers are called to do the same—shun and avoid flatterers. We must never entertain their “kind compliments.” Instead, we are to reject their smooth words and guard our hearts against their deceit. Knowing ourselves rightly before God will help us resist the temptation to be puffed up by flattering speech.

Romans 16:18 says, “*For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the*

hearts of the simple." In the immediate context, Paul is warning believers to pay close attention to those within the church who cause divisions. He commands them to "mark" and "avoid" such people (Rom 16:17). The word "they" refers to those who create factions and promote doctrines contrary to God's Word. Why must they be marked and avoided? Because "they serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly." Their "belly" is their god, and their chief concern is to satisfy their own appetites.

But they go beyond merely serving themselves—they use "good words and fair speeches" to "deceive the hearts of the simple." Although the word "flattery" is not explicitly mentioned in verse 18, the concept is clearly implied in their smooth and persuasive language. The Greek preposition διά ("by") indicates that their "good words and fair speeches" are the instruments they use to deceive. The phrase "good words" (Greek: χρηστολογία) means smooth or plausible speech—language that appears kind and appealing but lacks sincerity.⁷ This is closely related to the Hebrew idea of flattery in Proverbs 26:28: speech that is smooth and seductive, used to manipulate and mislead.

This kind of speech is not rooted in truth but is crafted to deceive, flatter, and gain favour through false means. The conjunction καὶ ("and" or "even") intensifies the connection: not only do they use good words, but even "fair speeches."

The phrase "fair speeches" translates the Greek word εὐλογία, which typically means blessing or praise.⁸ In most contexts, it refers to speech that is good and uplifting. However, in this context, it is used negatively—referring to fine-sounding words or false eloquence. The flatterer skilfully adapts such speech to captivate the hearer's attention. The irony is striking: a word meant to bless is here used to deceive. Paul describes false teachers who disguise their flattery in the language of "love," all while denying the fundamental truths of the faith. Their smooth talking does not lead people to Christ—it leads them away from Him and draws them to themselves.

John Calvin rightly observed that such men were impostors who enticed others to follow them. They tolerated the vices and errors of the simple in order to keep them bound to their influence. They soothed the ears of the undiscerning with vain praises.⁹

Those who are "simple" are the undiscerning—those who lack spiritual maturity and fail to recognise deceitful speech. These individuals

are especially vulnerable to flattery and fall prey to such manipulators. Paul warned the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:29–30 to take heed to themselves and to the flock, for “grievous wolves” would rise up even from within the church to “draw away disciples after them.” One of the primary tools these bloodthirsty wolves use is flattery. Through their seductive speech, they draw the simple-hearted into spiritual ruin and destruction. They do not build up the church of Christ—they lead souls down the path to hell.

One well-known example of flattery in the Bible is found in Acts 24:1–6. The flatterer in this passage is a man named Tertullus, who was hired by the Sanhedrin to bring false accusations against Paul before Governor Felix. Not much is known about Tertullus, except that he was “a certain orator” (Acts 24:1). Judging by his smooth speech and flattering words directed at Felix in verses 2–3, it is clear that he was skilled in rhetoric and belonged to the class of professional orators. He certainly had a way with words.

Tertullus addressed Felix as “most noble Felix” (Acts 24:3), and praised him for his supposed “worthy deeds” done for the nation, as well as for bringing “great quietness” to the region. He could have simply called him “noble,” but he added “most.” He also exaggerated by adding “great” to quietness and “worthy” to deeds. This is a clear picture of flattery. Tertullus was a smooth talker who knew how to win favour with Felix. In fact, he spent almost as much time praising Felix in his introduction as he did presenting charges against Paul. It appears that Tertullus carefully chose his words to inflate Felix’s ego, hoping he would side with the Sanhedrin.

But was Felix really the kind of man Tertullus portrayed him to be? According to several historians, Felix was the exact opposite. Tacitus, a well-known Roman historian who lived during the early church period, records that Felix became procurator of Judea in AD 52 and describes him as “a very bad and cruel governor.”¹⁰ Felix was known for his lustful pleasures and immoral lifestyle. He married three women of royal birth, one of them being Princess Drusilla. He was also notorious for his violent use of repressive force and self-serving rise to power. Prior to his political career, he had been a slave, but he gained his freedom and curried favour with the imperial court. Tacitus summarised his character by saying that Felix “exercised royal power with the mind of a slave.”¹¹

Tacitus also notes that Felix was responsible for the assassination of

the high priest Jonathan, who had criticised his governance. Felix hired assassins to mingle with the crowd going up to the temple for worship and kill Jonathan.¹² Clearly, Felix was not the noble man Tertullus made him out to be. He was neither righteous nor a benefactor of the nation. Tertullus flattered him in order to secure approval for the false accusations against Paul. His over-the-top praise revealed the despicable nature of flattery. Yet, this should not surprise us, for it is how sinful men behave. Tertullus sought to destroy an innocent man's life with flattering speech, but God, in His providence, used Paul to proclaim the gospel to Felix. In the end, the Sanhedrin and Tertullus's plot to persecute Paul was thwarted.

God has declared in His Word that He will cut off flattering lips (Ps 12:3). In Psalm 12, there is a striking contrast between God's perfect, trustworthy words and man's vain, deceitful speech. While man's words are unfaithful (Ps 12:2), God's words are pure and preserved forever (Ps 12:6–7). It was this same faithful God who gave Paul wisdom to make a bold and respectful defence before Felix. Unlike Tertullus, who showered Felix with flattery, Paul presented an honest and respectful defence. In the end, Tertullus's flattery, combined with false accusations, came to nothing. God, in His sovereign power, remained in control.

The best antidote to the sin of flattery is to speak the truth sincerely. Flattery is destructive because it is rooted in lies, selfishness, and deceit. It brings ruin and harm rather than edification. A shining example of sincerity and truthfulness is found in Paul's testimony in 1 Thessalonians 2:5–6. Paul affirmed that his ministry among the Thessalonians was free from flattery, self-interest, and vain glory. He and his team preached the gospel boldly even amidst persecution (v. 2). They never used deceit or behaved immorally (v. 3). Their goal was not to please men but to please God, who tests hearts (v. 4). Some may have falsely accused Paul of using flattery for personal gain. Though Paul had the right as an apostle to be financially supported (cf. 1 Cor 9:15–18), he willingly gave up that right for the sake of the gospel and the Thessalonians.

Therefore, he boldly called God as his witness to refute these false accusations (v. 5). He ministered with gentleness and sincerity, like a nursing mother caring for her children (vv. 7–8). Paul never used eloquent speech to exploit the Thessalonians. Instead, he sought to edify them. In verse 1, Paul appealed to their personal knowledge of his integrity. They knew he was not motivated by greed or manipulation. As ministers of

the truth who genuinely cared for their hearers, Paul and his companions never flattered others for personal gain.

Paul's ministry is a model of sincerity and truthfulness. The only way to resist flattery is to follow Paul's example—speaking the truth in love and seeking to please God, not man. Only a Judas Iscariot would use flattery, in the form of a kiss, to betray Christ for thirty pieces of silver. But a sincere servant like Paul will speak the truth and edify God's people. May we strive to be like Paul, not a deceitful flatterer like Judas.

The Sin of Hypocrisy

Another subtle but dangerous sin of the tongue is hypocrisy. Scripture repeatedly warns against it. This sin often begins in the heart and is eventually revealed through words and actions. Even the Lord Jesus strongly condemned hypocrisy in His time. In Matthew 23:13–29, He pronounced eight woes upon the Pharisees and Scribes, calling them hypocrites, serpents, and blind guides. Those who practise hypocrisy will face severe judgment from God.

Hypocrisy is the act of pretending to be someone or something one is not. In terms of speech, it means saying one thing but doing another—talk without action. It is a sin of omission and deception. The Greek word for hypocrisy, ὑπόκρισις (used in Matt 12:15, 23:28; 1 Tim 4:2), denotes pretence or outward show.¹³ It originated from the practice of Greek and Roman actors speaking behind large masks, symbolising a false front. Over time, it came to refer metaphorically to those who pretend to possess moral or spiritual integrity.¹⁴

Jesus used this word fifteen times in the Gospel of Matthew, often targeting the Scribes and Pharisees. Today, the term “hypocrite” is nearly synonymous with “Pharisee” due to their reputation for masking inward corruption with outward religiosity.

In 1 Timothy 4:2, Paul describes false teachers of the last days who will spread doctrines of demons. These apostates will promote their heresies through lies and hypocrisy. Paul identifies Satan as the ultimate source of these lies.

These false teachers, though dressed in clerical garments and using pious speech, are agents of the devil. They appear religious but teach lies about Christ and His Word. Like their father the devil—who was a liar from the beginning and disguises himself as an angel of light—these teachers operate in deceit.

The term “hypocrisy” in this verse is in the dative case, describing the *manner* in which these teachers speak lies—under a mask of pretence. To hide their true character, they disguise themselves as pastors, teachers, or professors. Though they appear religious, they serve Satan, not God.

Eventually, their hypocrisy leads to a hardened conscience. Their moral sensitivity is so damaged by continual deception that they no longer feel conviction. It is as if their conscience has been cauterised—burned and deadened. This is divine judgment upon hearts that persist in hypocrisy.

A classic example of hypocrisy is found in the conduct of the Scribes and Pharisees. As spiritual leaders of Israel, they were entrusted with the care of God’s people. But instead of teaching God’s Word faithfully, they prioritised man-made traditions, outward piety, and self-righteousness.

In Matthew 15:1–2, these leaders accused Jesus’ disciples of breaking tradition by not washing their hands before eating. This ritual was a tradition of the elders, not a commandment of God. The Pharisees turned a human rule into a religious law, revealing their hypocrisy.

Jesus responded by rebuking them sharply: “*Ye hypocrites*” (v. 7). He exposed their elevation of tradition above God’s commandments. He quoted Isaiah to describe them: “*This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me*” (v. 8). Their religion was merely outward—a show of piety without heart-worship.

Charles Spurgeon rightly observed that the Pharisees had a “mouth religion and lip-homage.” They seemed holy outwardly but harboured hearts far from God.¹⁵ The Puritan Stephen Charnock aptly called the hypocrite a “religious atheist”—a person masked with religion but without true faith.¹⁶

God detests religious hypocrisy and will judge those who succumb to it. He despises the one who has only a form of godliness but denies its power (2 Tim 3:5). Jesus warned His disciples to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, for hypocrisy spreads like yeast in dough. Thomas Watson highlights some dangers of hypocrisy. Firstly, hypocrisy—or a mere show of godliness—is a sin that enrages the Almighty and draws His wrath upon man (Isa 10:6). Secondly, hypocrisy is self-delusion. The hypocrite may deceive others while he lives, but he deceives himself when he dies. Thirdly, hypocrisy is offensive both to God and to man, and is

hated by both. Lastly, hypocrisy brings nothing but shame and judgment. Everything is lost. He may receive applause from men, but he will not receive his due justice from God at the end (Matt 6:5).¹⁷

The best antidote to hypocrisy is to have a humble spirit before God and man. Pride is the root cause of hypocrisy. God hates pride. He resists the proud but gives grace to the humble. The publican in Jesus' parable is a good example of humility. He was unlike the Pharisee, who wanted people to see him pray and who boasted of his "good works." The publican's prayer was, "*God be merciful to me a sinner.*" God heard his prayer and declared him righteous (Luke 18:11–14). The Lord is always near to those who have a broken heart and will save those who have a contrite spirit.

Another antidote to hypocrisy is to be not only a hearer of God's Word but also a doer. The one who hears but does not act deceives himself. Hypocrisy is all talk and no action. Genuine obedience is "walking the talk"—it is talk plus action. It is a living faith, not a dead one. Walking the talk also involves seeking to please God alone. There is no ulterior motive to glorify self or please man, but solely to glorify God (1 Cor 10:31).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the sins of flattery and hypocrisy pose a serious threat to one's spiritual life. Both flattery and hypocrisy deceive not only their victims but also those who commit them. These sins of the tongue are destructive in nature. They bring harm to our neighbour and displeasure to God. They are closely linked and cannot be separated. Flattery is another form of hypocrisy, and the hypocrite is often a flatterer.

The fact that these sins are emphasised multiple times in the Bible shows how dangerous they are and how diligently they must be avoided. All of us, at some point, have committed these transgressions. The only way back to God is through repentance and a heart that desires to change. To have holy lips is to be like the Lord Jesus Christ. We must also be like the psalmist who prayed, "*Set a watch, O LORD, before my mouth; keep the door of my lips*" (Ps 141:3). This is a prayer that God will surely answer.

May we also guard our own hearts. Let us never be self-confident, thinking we will not fall. If we ever think that we are standing tall, we ought to take heed lest we fall. As believers, our speech must always be with grace, seasoned with salt (Col 4:6). Only the Holy Spirit can help us. Amen.

Notes

- 1 I D E Thomas, *The Golden Treasury of Puritan Quotations* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2007), 296.
- 2 *Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, s.v. “Flattery”.
- 3 BDB, s.v. פָּלָג.
- 4 BDAG, s.v. κολακεία.
- 5 BDB, s.v. ἐπίπεδος.
- 6 TWOT, s.v. ἐπίπεδος.
- 7 BDAG, s.v. χρηστολογία.
- 8 BDAG, s.v. εὐλογία.
- 9 John Calvin, *Commentary on Romans* (Grands Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, n.d.), 486.
- 10 *Hasting's Dictionary of the Bible*, s.v. “Identity of Felix”.
- 11 John F Walvoord and Roy B Zuck, eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament* (Colorado Springs: David C Cook, 1983), 421.
- 12 *New Unger's Bible Dictionary*, s.v. “Felix”.
- 13 BDAG, s.v. ὑπόκρισις.
- 14 *Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, s.v. “Hypocrisy”.
- 15 C H Spurgeon, *The Gospel of the Kingdom: A Popular Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew* (New York: Baker and Taylor, 1893), 233.
- 16 I DE Thomas, *The Golden Treasury of Puritan Quotations*, 152.
- 17 Thomas Watson, *The Godly Man's Picture* (Portland: Monergism eBooks, n.d.), 12-13.

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IN DEFENCE OF THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS: A RESPONSE TO A CRITIQUE OF “THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS AND THE MINISTRY OF PRAYER”

Jeffrey Khoo

In the July 2025 issue of *The Burning Bush*, my paper entitled “The Communion of Saints and the Ministry of Prayer: A Reformed and Protestant Perspective” was published.¹ Shortly thereafter, I received a lengthy letter accusing me of promoting a “new doctrine”—namely, that departed saints in heaven pray or intercede for believers on earth. The letter further alleged that this teaching is Roman Catholic heresy and would inevitably lead to practices such as praying to the saints. I contend that such reasoning reflects both a logical fallacy and a common misunderstanding—akin to the mistaken assumption held by certain Baptists that infant baptism is inherently Roman Catholic, when in fact the Reformed and Protestant tradition affirms it on entirely different biblical and theological grounds.

While the critic’s letter is detailed and earnest, it nevertheless misinterprets Scripture, misunderstands the Reformers, misapplies the Reformed-Protestant confessions, misrepresents my position, and misconstrues my paper by constructing theological straw men—what the Chinese idiom calls “drawing a snake and adding legs”—thereby putting words in my mouth and saying things I did not say. Whether deliberately or not, the critic ignores or distorts key statements I made, presenting a picture I never painted.

The critic’s letter thus provides me with an opportunity for further instruction. In this response, I will clarify and develop the substance of my paper, demonstrating that my position is neither novel nor heretical, but wholly consistent with Reformed and Protestant orthodoxy.

Why This Response Is Necessary

It is regrettable that destructive criticisms, rife with unfounded accusations, have been widely disseminated—not only through the internet, social media, and other online platforms, but also from pulpit and pen. Sadly, this is not uncommon. In an age of fake news, it is astonishing to see preachers, presbyters, and pew-warmers alike propagate slander and falsehood so readily. Equally troubling is the tendency among immature readers and hearers to accept spurious reports without question, without taking the time or effort to verify their validity.

The unchecked spread of falsehoods, combined with the unbridled zeal of religious agitators quick to broadcast baseless claims and cry “heresy”, has stirred anxiety and angst, heightened confusion and contention, and caused unnecessary dissension and division. *“And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity … it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison”* (Jas 3:6, 8). Such behaviour falls under the condemnation of Scripture, which warns: *“These six things doth the LORD hate: yea, seven are an abomination unto him: … a lying tongue, … a false witness that speaketh lies, and he that soweth discord among brethren”* (Prov 6:16–19).

As noted above, this is not merely an academic matter but one that has been publicly expressed and communally experienced. In recent times, misinformation and disinformation regarding this issue—and others, such as the doctrine of the Verbal Plenary Preservation (VPP) of Scripture, which, despite its biblical and confessional basis, was likewise falsely labelled a “new doctrine” and “heresy”—have stirred unwarranted alarm and provoked unnecessary schism within the Bible-Presbyterian community, even contributing to division within certain churches. Indiscriminate—and at times malicious—accusations of “heresy” have been made without careful biblical exegesis, thorough investigation, sound theological discernment, or a humble and obedient reception of the truth.

Too often, such charges arise from those who have a personal axe to grind or a political agenda, or who rely on faulty reasoning and slanderous counsel—displaying little of the noble spirit of the Bereans, who *“received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so”* (Acts 17:11). Such men fall short of the humility and teachability enjoined by the Apostle James: *“Wherefore lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls”* (Jas 1:21). Witlessly or

unwittingly, they become faultfinders and troublemakers. What is sorely needed is a biblically noble, humble, and teachable spirit, one that will guard against rash accusations and foster unity grounded in truth and governed by charity (1 Cor 13:4–6).

In the digital age, the flood of information can be both a blessing and a curse. Without sound biblical-theological knowledge and Spirit-wrought maturity and discernment, even a simple online search can mislead a neophyte into confusion and wrong conclusions. Many a critic may have relied on internet sources and social media, mistaking cursory googling and casual browsing for genuine “research”. Lacking a firm theological foundation and spiritually grounded judgement, such armchair efforts to expose supposed “new doctrines” or “heresies” often do more harm than good—spreading falsehood in the guise of truth.

It must be cautioned that internet platforms and AI tools, while offering rapid access to information, often reduce nuanced doctrines into oversimplified or misleading dichotomies—for example, turning any mention of saints’ prayers into a charge of Roman Catholic intercession. AI lacks both confessional precision and spiritual discernment. Ask the wrong questions and you get the wrong answers. In an age of digital misinformation, there is no substitute for careful reading, scholarly accountability, and a determined resistance to algorithmic influence in the safeguarding of theological truth.

Ultimately, the good old-fashioned path of hard work and hard knocks in the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom remains both indispensable and irreplaceable. *“Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth”* (2 Tim 2:15). There is no royal road or shortcut to learning. Moreover, spiritual things *“are spiritually discerned. But he that is spiritual judgeth all things, yet he himself is judged of no man”* (1 Cor 2:14–15). This is why Far Eastern Bible College (FEBC) must continue to exist: to train those called to the ministry of the Word in the biblical, theological, and spiritual foundations necessary for the faithful proclamation and defence of *“the faith which was once delivered unto the saints”* (Jude 3).

Since the critic accuses my paper of promoting a “new doctrine” dangerously close to Roman Catholicism, and misrepresents both its intent and content—a misunderstanding and misjudgement that others may also share—a pastoral clarification is warranted for the public good. This response is therefore offered not so much as a personal defence,

but to uphold the truth in the service of theological instruction and accountability (1 Pet 3:15).

Not a “New Doctrine”, but a Biblical One

The communion of saints is a doctrine as old as Scripture itself, not a recent innovation. Yet the critic incessantly accuses me of introducing a “new doctrine” that borders dangerously on Roman Catholicism. This, however, reflects not merely a misreading but a serious misrepresentation and mischaracterisation of my paper. In discussing the communion of saints and the ministry of prayer, I have never taught or implied that: (1) the saints in heaven are mediators, (2) Christians should pray to saints, or (3) the departed saints are agents of salvific or providential grace. In fact, my paper strongly and explicitly condemns these errors.

What I affirm concerning the communion of saints is thoroughly Reformed and Protestant: the saints in heaven—perfected in holiness and love—remain members of the Body of Christ and are therefore united with the Church on earth in spiritual union and communion (cf. Heb 12:22–24). The absence of communication does not mean the absence of communion. It is not only possible, but also theologically fitting, that the saints in glory should expressly desire for the ongoing sanctification and ultimate glorification of their fellow brethren with whom they are in spiritual union. This is not Romanism! It is communion, not invocation; it is fellowship, not mediation. As Scripture says, *“And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it”* (1 Cor 12:26). This spiritual solidarity transcends death, for we are one body in Christ, joined across time and space.

Abraham Kuyper conveys this thought excellently: “For what is the communion of saints otherwise than Love in its noblest and richest manifestation?” He further explains that the “Communion of saints,’ i.e., the rule of Love … [is] a communion found among saints, not by chance, but because it is born from the fact that they are saints, rooted in their being saints, and derived from Him who sanctified them to be saints. Hence it is a love which death cannot destroy; which, stronger than death, shall continue as long as there are saints, unquenched, forevermore.”²

Thus, the communion of saints is the amazing love of God expressed among the saints—a living, Spirit-motivated reality that unites the elect of God across both time and eternity. It affirms that the prayers and spiritual concern of those in glory continue for the good of the Church on earth.

Roman Catholic Distortion of the Communion and Intercession of Saints

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC)³ affirms the doctrine of the communion of saints and understands it to be the Church itself (CCC 947). This doctrine is also affirmed by Reformed and Protestant churches. However, the Roman Catholic application of the communion of saints goes beyond what Scripture prescribes. For instance, Catholicism teaches the existence of “canonised saints”—those in heaven officially recognised for their heroic virtue, martyrdom, or miracles, and subsequently honoured as models and intercessors (CCC 828, 956). According to Catholic teaching, the merits of these saints, united with the infinite merits of Christ, constitute a spiritual “treasury” from which indulgences may be granted to the faithful (CCC 1476–1477).

The Catholic Church further teaches: “The witnesses who have preceded us into the kingdom ... share in the living tradition of prayer by the example of their lives ... and their prayer today ... Their intercession is their most exalted service to God’s plan. We can and should ask them to intercede for us and for the whole world” (CCC 2683).

Not only are the canonised saints regarded as intercessors, but Mary, as “Mother of the Church”, is also believed to intercede and dispense salvific grace: “This motherhood of Mary in the order of grace continues uninterruptedly ... until the eternal fulfillment of all the elect. Taken up to heaven, she did not lay aside this saving office but, by her manifold intercession, continues to bring us the gifts of eternal salvation. ... Therefore, the Blessed Virgin is invoked in the Church under the titles of Advocate, Helper, Benefactress, and Mediatrix” (CCC 969).

Another aspect of this teaching is what the Catholic Church terms “communion with the dead”, whereby it maintains that, since “it is a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead that they may be loosed from their sins, she offers suffrages for them ... Our prayer for them is capable not only of helping them, but also of making their intercession for us effective” (CCC 958).

**Invocation versus Intercession in the Communion of Saints:
A Catholic-Reformed Contrast**

Aspect	Catholic Tradition	Reformed Tradition
Communion of Saints	The spiritual union of the faithful on earth, the souls in purgatory, and the saints in heaven, in the one body of Christ, involving a mutual exchange of prayers, merits, and intercessions, with saints in heaven serving as mediators for believers on earth.	The spiritual union of all true believers in Christ, both living and departed, in the one body of Christ, sharing in His blessings and one another's gifts and graces, with all prayer directed to God alone through Christ the only Mediator.
Mary's Role	Highly venerated as "Queen of Heaven", "Mother of the Church", and "Mediatrix of all graces", and may be invoked in prayer for help.	A sinner saved by grace through faith in Christ, like all other believers, not given a position of veneration in heaven, and not to be prayed to.
Angels' Role	Angels serve as guardians and intercessors for all baptised Catholics and may be invoked in prayer for help.	Angels are servants and messengers of God who minister to believers at His command and are not to be prayed to or invoked.
Saints' Role	Canonised saints are to be invoked and prayed to, seeking their intercession and assistance for spiritual and temporal blessings through their merits.	Saints in heaven are not to be invoked and do not hear prayers. Yet they pray to God according to His will for the spiritual good of fellow believers on earth (Rev 5:8, 6:10, 8:3, cf. Calvin, Witsius).
Liturgical Practice	Liturgies include petitions to saints (e.g., "St Martin, pray for us").	Liturgical prayers are addressed solely to the Holy Trinity.
Purgatory & Prayer	Prayers and Masses are offered for the dead to aid their release from purgatory, drawing support from the Apocrypha (2 Maccabees 12:44–45).	Rejects the doctrine of purgatory; the souls of believers go immediately to be with God, making prayers for the dead unnecessary.

From a Reformed and Protestant perspective, the Catholic formulation is heretical because it introduces an intercessory or mediatorial reciprocal exchange between the living and the dead that Scripture does not authorise. While the Bible affirms the fellowship of all believers in Christ—whether in heaven or on earth—it does not teach that we are to pray to Mary or the departed saints for intercession or salvation, nor that they can offer or confer the “merits” of their earthly works on our behalf. By extending the communion of saints into an organised system of bidirectional prayer and intercession between the living and the dead, the Catholic Church moves beyond the biblical witness into serious error, both doctrinally and practically.

My teacher—the Rev Dr Timothy Tow—was absolutely right to comment that in Revelation 6:9-11, the martyrs are not Christian Bodhisattvas: “Though they were killed for Jesus’ sake, they did not thereby earn salvation for themselves nor gather extra merits to bestow salvation on others. White robes given them shows that they were saved and cleansed only by the death of Christ in their stead. Roman Catholicism which promotes martyrs to be sort of Christian Bodhisattvas make them minor saviours which they are not.”⁴

My paper, “The Communion of Saints and the Ministry of Prayer”, as is clearly evident, is replete with repudiations of the errors of Roman Catholicism that undermine the biblical doctrines of justification by grace alone through faith alone, and the sole and supreme mediatorship of Christ.

Reformed Theological Basis for the Prayers of Saints in Glory

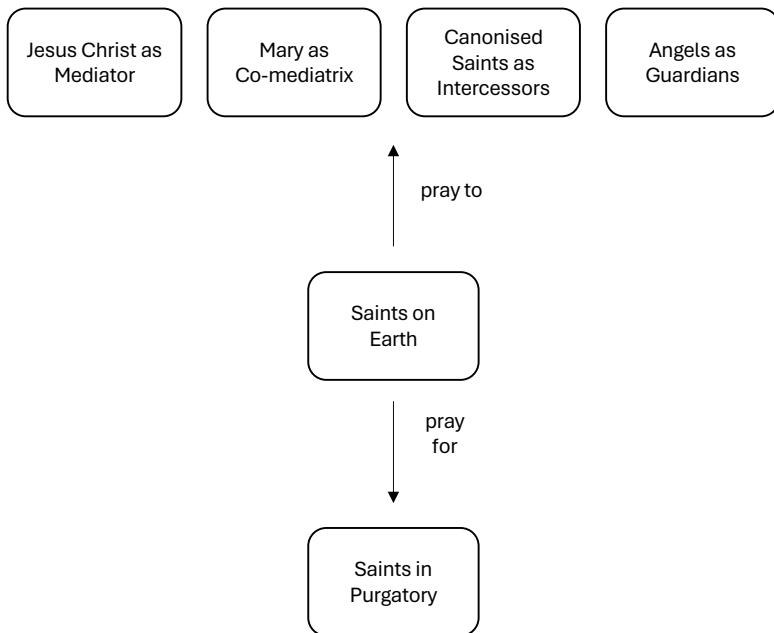
Although the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) and the Second Helvetic Confession (SHC) do not explicitly state that the saints in glory pray for those on earth, their silence does not amount to denial. What is significant is their affirmation under the doctrine of the communion of saints, that believers in heaven and on earth “have fellowship and union one with another”, and “being united to one another in love, have communion in each other’s gifts and graces” (SHC 17, WCF 26.1). These “gifts and graces” encompass not only the gifts and fruits of the Spirit but also the acts of worship, fellowship, prayer, and charity (Rom 12:3-13; 1 Cor 12:4-31).

Does this communion cease at death? Scripture indicates otherwise: “*Whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord’s*” (Rom 14:8). Since the Body of Christ remains united in Him, the communion of saints—

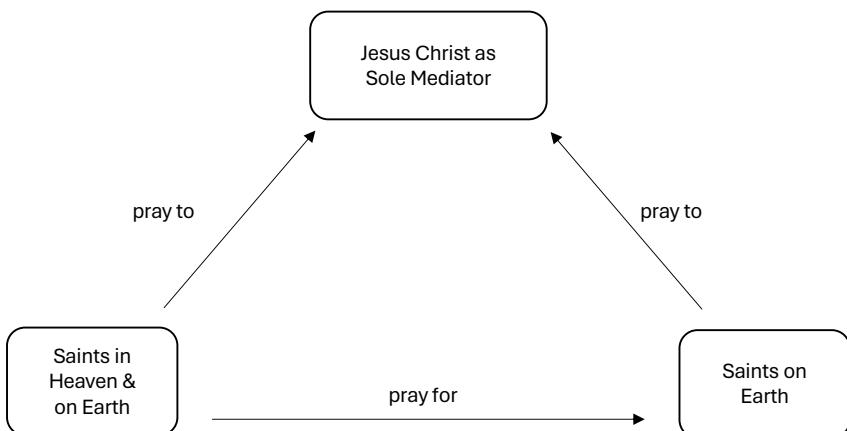
IN DEFENCE OF THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

INVOCATION VERSUS INTERCESSION: A CATHOLIC-REFORMED CONTRAST

CATHOLIC



REFORMED



though altered by death—is not severed. While the exercise of spiritual gifts may cease with the loss of physical presence on earth, the spiritual fellowship and love we have with one another in Christ continue in the Church in heaven.

John 8:56–58 offers biblical support for the communion of saints by affirming the ongoing spiritual awareness and joy of the faithful departed. Jesus declared, “*Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad*,” indicating that Abraham—though long physically dead—was spiritually alive and consciously rejoicing in the fulfilment of God’s redemptive promises in Christ, not only in the past but also in the present (cf. Luke 20:37–38). This conscious joy underscores that the saints in heaven are not disengaged or indifferent, but are alive unto God and united to the eternal, ever-living Christ. Their love perfected, they eagerly anticipate the consummation of all things. As 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17 teaches, they await the resurrection of the body and the reunion with their fellow saints at Christ’s return: “*Wherefore comfort one another with these words*” (1 Thess 4:18). If Abraham could rejoice at the coming of Christ while in glory, it is not unreasonable to believe that the saints in heaven are now lovingly longing for—and faithfully praying towards—the ultimate triumph of the Gospel and the full redemption of their fellow saints on earth. This is a profoundly unifying and comforting truth for the Church militant and the Church triumphant, across both heaven and earth.

There is, therefore, no conflict with the confessions in affirming that the saints in heaven maintain an enduring union with the saints on earth. Being perfected in holiness, they continue to participate in the life of the Church through their worship, fellowship, love, praise, and prayer for the full redemption of God’s people (Rom 8:23; Rev 6:10–11). This is not mere speculation, but an area where careful biblical and confessional reflection proves both theologically profitable and pastorally meaningful.

The confessions explicitly reject praying to saints (WCF 21.3, SHC 5), and rightly so. My paper emphasises this clearly in sections titled “Pray Not to Saints in Heaven” and “Neither Pray for the Dead”. Nonetheless, the Reformed confessions clearly affirm the unity of the Church universal which “consists of the whole number of the elect that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the head thereof: and is the spouse, the body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all” (WCF 25.1). This intrinsic union upholds the doctrine that the Church in heaven remains spiritually connected to the Church on earth. United to Christ

and perfected in love, the saints above share in the hope of His kingdom and beseech Him for the ultimate glorification of all His people (Rev 22:17, 20).

In sum, while the confessions reject Roman Catholic distortions, they clearly affirm the enduring spiritual communion between the Church in heaven and the Church on earth. This communion forms the theological basis for the saints in heaven praying for their fellow believers on earth without being invoked. This communion—rooted in Christ and expressed truthfully and lovingly—constitutes a genuine yet non-mediatorial testimony to the unity of the saints across life and death.

Reformed Theologians: Historic Support, Not Denial

The critic claims I misrepresent theologians like John Calvin and Herman Witsius concerning the “intercession” of saints in heaven. But this charge does not hold under scrutiny.

Calvin does not absolutely reject all intercession by the saints; rather, he affirms a non-mediatorial, general spiritual intercession in which the saints in heaven pray for the ultimate fulfilment of God’s redemptive plan for the elect. In his *Letter to Sadolet*, he writes: “In asserting the intercession of the saints, if all you mean is, that they continually pray for the completion of Christ’s kingdom, on which the salvation of all the faithful depends, there is none of us who calls it in question.”⁵ Here, Calvin’s use of “if” is not hypothetical but qualifying: he does not dispute “the intercession of the saints”, so long as it does not involve human invocation or mediation apart from Christ. That is why he cautions in Institutes III.20.24: “If we attribute intercession to them, let us not imagine they have any other way of praying to God than by Christ ... [They who] pray through the saints ... dishonour Christ, and rob Him of the character of the only Mediator.”⁶

Indeed, in his *Institutes*, Calvin decisively concludes: “Concerning intercession of the dead, Scripture has not a syllable to say about it.”⁷ But what does he mean here by the “intercession of the dead”? Calvin makes it very clear that he is referring to the idolatrous practice of the Roman Catholics: “They chose each his particular saint, to whose protection they committed themselves as to the care of tutelary gods. At length multitudes invoke them, not as subordinate promoters, but as principal agents, in their salvation. Prostrate before the statue or image of Barbara, Catherine, for example, they mutter *Pater Noster*, ‘Our Father.’ They

supplicate the holy Virgin to command her Son to grant their petitions.”⁸ Thus, the earlier mention of his *Letter to Sadolet* concerning the proper “intercession of the saints” has nothing to do with the Roman Catholic invocation of the departed, but rather everything to do with the true communion of saints.

Calvin’s concern is to safeguard the unique and exclusive mediatorship of Christ—not to exclude all spiritual awareness, affectionate prayer, or holy desire among the faithful departed. Far from rejecting it, Calvin supports heavenly intercessions that are entirely Christ-centred and God-glorifying. He writes: “All the intercessions of the whole Church should be directed to that principal One, in our mutual intercessions for one another.”⁹ Such statements affirm that, while upholding the sole mediatorship of Christ, there remains an unbreakable communion among believers whether in life or in death—without lapsing into Roman Catholicism.

Witsius explicitly taught that the saints in heaven “by their earnest prayers unite with us in soliciting … the complete redemption of the Church.”¹⁰ This is a clear theological affirmation of spiritual solidarity and eschatological longing—what may rightly be described as godly desire expressed through sincere prayer—without in any way undermining the sole mediatorial role of Christ. At the same time, Witsius cautioned against supposing that the saints in heaven are all-knowing or privy to every detail of believers’ lives on earth. Nevertheless, he is emphatic: the saints in heaven do pray, and they pray with us.

Witsius, with pastoral insight, saw how the communion of saints—and its consequent ministry of prayer and intercession—is a profoundly unifying and edifying doctrine: “How refreshing is it to the soul of an afflicted saint, if at any time he becomes languid in prayer, to encourage himself by the thought, that there are so many myriads of believers making intercession for him with our common Father! … In this communion of saints, in fine [i.e., to sum up], there is a kind of prelude of heaven, where there will be no private or separate interest, but ONE GOD SHALL BE ALL IN ALL.”¹¹ The “myriads of believers” refer to the saints in heaven who continue in spiritual fellowship, “making intercession” for the Church on earth. In this way, they demonstrate that the communion of saints extends beyond death—a “prelude to heaven,” as Witsius calls it—without compromising the sole mediatorship of Christ.

The term “intercession of saints” is not heretical when rightly

understood within the parameters of Reformed and Protestant theology. This prayer ministry, as alluded to in the communion of saints, will not grow multiple heads when Christ is the only Head. In fact, such a ministry—and others for the benefit of the saints—can exist only if Christ remains the sole and supreme Head. Without Him, the whole Body falls apart and has no reason to exist or function properly and profitably.

It is worth emphasising that the historical and theological context in which Calvin and Witsius framed their dictum on intercession must not be ignored, lest distinct theological categories be conflated, leading to fallacious reasoning, erroneous conclusions, and unjust accusations. The critic rightly opposes the Roman Catholic doctrine of intercession that usurps Christ's unique and exclusive role as Mediator—which, as my paper clearly demonstrates, I likewise firmly oppose.

Scripture: Affirming, Not Silent

The critic appears to dismiss the biblical references I cited as symbolic or mere allegory or misinterpretation, following the lead of certain commentators. Yet these texts cannot be so readily set aside. A careful and honest reading shows that Scripture provides substantial indication that the saints in heaven remain prayerfully concerned for the Church on earth—not in a mediatorial, intercessory, or invocative sense as in Roman Catholicism, but in a manner entirely consistent with their spiritual union with Christ and their perfected love (WCF 26.1).

Furthermore, the fact that many Reformed commentators interpret Revelation allegorically or symbolically is unsurprising, given the prevalence of amillennial eschatology within the tradition. By way of disclosure, as a Reformed theologian, I affirm a futurist premillennial understanding of the end times, applying a consistent literal—historical-grammatical-canonical—hermeneutic throughout Scripture. I believe this view best upholds God's sovereignty and covenant faithfulness, including the future fulfilment of His national, geographical, regal, and liturgical promises to Israel, in continuity with Reformed covenant theology.

Revelation 5:8 gives us a glimpse of heavenly worship, where the 24 presbyters of the universal Church are seen offering prayers to God as part of their adoration—a reality that cannot be denied. The 17th-century Lutheran theologian Johann Andreas Quenstedt comments: “That the saints in heaven, triumphing with Christ, pray in general for the Church ... By odors are not meant the prayers of saints who are still in this life,

but of those blessed ones who are reigning with Christ in heaven.”¹² It is clear that Quesnstedt affirms the prayer ministry of the saints in heaven, but he categorically denies that they “have a special knowledge of all things, and are to be religiously invoked.”¹³ He further clarifies that their prayers are not propitiatory, meritorious, or satisfactory prayers, as though by virtue of their merit they could intercede on behalf of others, but rather prayers of thanksgiving, as described in Revelation 5:9–10.

Revelation 6:9–11 offers compelling exegetical evidence that the martyred saints in heaven are not merely singing or praising, but are also praying. Praying is part and parcel of their worship of God. Their direct address to God—“*How long, O Lord, holy and true*”—is a clear example of their purposeful and prayerful pleas, echoing the laments and petitions found throughout the Psalms. This plea reflects not only their longing for justice concerning their own martyrdom but also their ongoing concern for the persecution of their fellow saints on earth. The use of the pronoun “our” does not merely refer to their personal suffering, but when read in context, represents all who will be martyred. To dismiss this as mere allegory or symbolism is to flatten the text and overlook its rich doctrinal and pastoral depth. Here, the communion of saints is not speculative; it is scripturally grounded and spiritually profound.

Revelation 8:3 tells us that “*the prayers of all saints*” were offered upon the golden altar. As already mentioned in my paper, Methodist founder John Wesley comments that the prayers of the saints here are not only from those on earth but also those in heaven.¹⁴ Additionally, Anglican theologian Christopher Wordsworth similarly states: “There is a communication [i.e., joint participation] of prayer between all saints (namely, the saints departed, and the saints on earth) ... ”¹⁵ In other words, prayer in heaven is not an isolated or merely individual act but part of the wider fellowship of the Church—i.e., the communion of saints—where the praying saints on earth join with the praying saints in heaven as one worshipping body before the throne of God. This does not imply any communication between saints in heaven and saints on earth. As an Anglican bishop, Wordsworth was firmly Protestant and faithful to the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, which explicitly reject the Roman Catholic doctrine of the invocation of saints as “vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the Word of God” (Article 22). In the same vein, Presbyterian and Reformed-Anglican commentators Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown, while insisting that “Christ alone is the Mediator through whom, and to

whom, prayer is to be offered”, also note that the prayers mentioned in this passage are “the prayers both of the saints in the heavenly rest, and of those militant on earth.”¹⁶

Given these glimpses of the heavenly scene, it is clear that the saints in heaven do pray—but not in the manner understood by Roman Catholicism. Therefore, to claim that the saints in heaven do not pray at all simply because the Romish church asserts they do, or to assert dogmatically that there are no prayers whatsoever in heaven, is untenable.

Until that day of resurrection and consummation, the saints in heaven—who are “*made perfect*” (Heb 12:23) but not yet clothed with their glorified physical bodies—may still express longing and prayer in accordance with God’s will. As Christ Himself taught His people to pray, “*Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven*” (Matt 6:10). That divinely given prayer for the eschatological arrival of God’s kingdom continues to serve as a holy aspiration not only for the saints on earth but also for the saints in heaven—until the day of its full and final fulfilment, when God’s will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

Will there always be prayer in heaven? It is worth noting that a theological case may be made for the absence of prayer in the eternal state—the new heaven and new earth—when all things will be consummated and made perfectly perfect, but such a condition has not yet arrived.¹⁷ On that final day, as Scripture declares, “*God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away*” (Rev 21:4). This, to be clear, is a theological deduction, not dogma. For while certain forms of prayer—such as supplication and intercession—may no longer be necessary, prayer as an expression of worship may well continue forever, since the worship of God will never end. This aspect of theological reflection warrants further study and meditation.

Christ the Only Mediator: Clearly Upheld

One of the critic’s major allegations is that this teaching of saints praying in heaven undermines Christ’s unique and exclusive role as Mediator (1 Tim 2:5). However, this confuses categories and commits a category error.

Scripture clearly affirms horizontal, non-mediatorial intercession: Paul prayed for the churches, and the churches prayed for one another (Rom 15:30; Eph 6:18). The love of the saints, now perfected in Christ,

cannot possibly be so diminished as to exclude their fellow members still on earth. Surely, such a blessed and loving communion among the saints does not undermine but rather depends upon Christ's unique and exclusive mediatorship—for all such prayers are offered through Him and in His Name.

I therefore affirm this unequivocally: the saints in heaven are not mediators, but members of the Body of Christ. Nonetheless, Christ, and Christ alone (*Solus Christus*), is the sole and supreme Mediator: “*For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus*” (1 Tim 2:5). This truth is expressed clearly throughout my paper, as seen in the following statements:

1. “It must be clarified that although the saints in Christ are ‘priests’, they are in no wise priests like their Lord and Saviour whose Priesthood is unique and eternal for He alone is *Theanthropos* (both God and Man in one Person).”
2. “It goes without saying that those in heaven can confer no spiritual benefit or help to the saints on earth. The only one who can confer any spiritual benefit or help is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself who alone is the ‘*author and finisher of our faith*’ (Heb 12:2).”
3. “Let it be reiterated that although the saints in heaven ‘by their earnest prayers unite with us in soliciting, and so to speak, accelerating, the day of the complete redemption of the Church’, it does not mean that they have taken the place of the Lord Jesus Christ who is the only Mediator and Saviour of His Church (1 Tim 2:5, Eph 5:23).”
4. “Likewise, when the saints in heaven pray (e.g., Rev 6:9–11), they are not intercessors like Christ, for we do not pray or intercede based on our own name or merits (for we have none), but only in and through the name of Christ and Christ alone.”
5. “[W]hy would earthly saints tell their earthly needs to the saints in heaven when they have the Lord Jesus Christ who alone is all they need? They can tell Him all their needs for He is their Great High Priest ... The saints in heaven are not omniscient or omnipotent and as such are totally helpless to come to our aid. Only God, being all knowing and all powerful, is able to help us, and Jesus is God. Pray only to Him.”
6. “It must also be clarified that the saints in heaven are not privy

to everything that is happening on earth or in our lives. That is not their prerogative, nor their privilege. Only the Lord Jesus Christ has that prerogative and privilege for only He ‘*is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us*’ (Eph 3:20).”

Rebuttal to the Critic’s Arguments on Prayer

In her final section, the critic presents several elaborate arguments against the idea that saints in heaven pray for believers on earth—arguments which warrant closer attention and rebuttal. While I appreciate her concern for doctrinal fidelity, her critique rests on several faulty assumptions, category mistakes, and a superficial grasp of not just Holy Scripture but also Reformed and Protestant theology. For theologically astute readers, a careful and objective reading of my paper will clarify and sharpen the distinction I have explicitly drawn between the Reformed position and Roman Catholic distortions.

Christ and the Spirit as Exclusive Intercessors

The critic rightly affirms that Christ and the Holy Spirit intercede for the saints on earth (Rom 8:26–27; 1 Tim 2:5)—a non-negotiable tenet of Reformed and Protestant theology. However, to suggest that this divine intercession necessarily excludes all other forms of prayer—whether by saints on earth or in heaven—is to misunderstand the nature of horizontal, non-mediatorial intercession among believers.

Paul regularly exhorted believers to pray for one another (Eph 6:18), even as he himself interceded for the churches and earnestly sought their prayers in return (Rom 15:30; Col 4:3). This mutual intercession in the body of Christ does not infringe upon His unique and exclusive mediatorship; rather, it affirms our communion with Him and with one another.

If believers on earth, though imperfect, are called to intercede for one another in union with Christ, why should the saints in heaven—now perfected in love—be presumed to have lost all concern or longing for the Church militant? Earthly saints pray without omniscience, not because they are mediators like Christ, but because they are united to Christ as their sole Mediator, who alone hears and answers prayer. In the same way, heavenly saints, though not omniscient, may still pray according to God’s revealed purposes, now untainted by sin’s distortion (Rev 6:10). This is not the “hearing of prayers” erroneously ascribed to saints in Roman Catholic

dogma, but the biblical reality that “*the Spirit and the bride say, Come*” (Rev 22:17)—a unified prayer and plea spanning both heaven and earth.

Just as angels are depicted as presenting the prayers of the saints (Rev 8:3–4) without mediatorial authority, so too the saints in glory may participate in the Church’s longing for the coming of the Kingdom without usurping Christ’s sole and supreme role as Great High Priest (Heb 4:14).

Some may question: If the saints intercede for one another, is that not mediatorial? Reformed and Protestant theology answers no—because while intercession among believers, whether on earth or in heaven, is an expression of their union with Christ and communion with one another, it is categorically distinct from the mediatorship of Christ. Scripture and the Reformed and Protestant confessions affirm that Jesus Christ alone is the Mediator between God and man, whose priestly work is unique, sufficient, and non-transferable. The intercession of saints, unlike Christ’s, does not involve propitiation, atonement, or direct access to the Father on their own merit, but is always dependent upon and grounded in Christ’s ongoing mediation. Thus, any intercessory act by saints is non-mediatorial in nature, supportive in function, and never a substitute for the exclusive and perfect work of Christ as our sole Mediator. We only pray to God, and none else. We pray only in the name of Christ, and in no other name—for “*Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved*” (Acts 4:12).

My paper reaffirms the unique and exclusive mediatorship of Christ and denies any salvific or transactional efficacy in the prayers of the saints. The critic, however, erects a false dichotomy by assuming that any acknowledgement of heavenly prayer must necessarily undermine Christ’s role as sole Mediator—when in fact, it does not.

Ministering Spirits: Only Angels?

The critic asserts that only angels are said to minister to the saints, and therefore the departed souls of believers cannot do so. However, this argument is questionable. The Bible records instances where God, in exceptional cases, sends departed saints to earth to carry out tasks typically associated with angelic ministry. For example, Moses and Elijah appeared to strengthen Jesus at His transfiguration (Matt 17:3), and the two witnesses in Revelation 11—commonly understood to be Moses and Elijah (or other Old Testament prophets)—are sent to prophesy on earth

during the Great Tribulation. Importantly, in none of these cases did the saints on earth invoke or summon the departed through prayer; rather, God Himself sent them according to His sovereign will and purpose.

These examples invite deeper theological reflection on how the departed saints may, according to God’s sovereign will and good pleasure, be employed in ways that serve His eschatological purposes. With their wills and affections perfected and fully conformed to God’s redemptive design, they naturally yearn for the full ingathering of their brethren. Just as the angels rejoice over one sinner who repents (Luke 15:10), it is reasonable to consider that the saints already at rest in paradise likewise rejoice in the triumph of the Gospel and the eventual homecoming of all God’s elect.

The Saints in Heaven: Silent No More

The critic argues that Scripture does not explicitly state, “The saints in heaven pray for those on earth”. That is true. However, an argument from silence or the absence of a word-for-word declaration is an insufficient basis for denouncing a doctrine as “deviant” or “heretical”—especially when that teaching is biblically and theologically grounded and stands in full harmony with the core truths of the Christian faith as expressed in Reformed and Protestant theology.

But is Scripture truly silent? Many cherished doctrines in Reformed and Protestant theology are derived “by good and necessary consequence”, not from explicit proof texts—especially when such texts are unavailable.¹⁸ For example, the salvation of elect infants, the change of the Sabbath to the Lord’s Day, the recognition of the 27 books of the New Testament canon, and the precise identification of the VPP text are not grounded in any single explicit verse, but arise from careful exegesis of Scripture, faithful synthesis of doctrine, and Spirit-guided reasoning in accordance with the logic of faith.

Similarly, my paper offers a Reformed and Protestant perspective grounded in the analogy of Scripture: the saints in heaven, united with us in Christ, indeed long for the good of the Church before God. Revelation 6:9–11, for example, present the dead as conscious, alert, and expressive. The souls of the martyrs cry out to God for justice—they are not passive. While the text focuses on their own suffering and plea for vindication, it is reasonable—within the broader biblical teaching of the communion of saints and the justice of God—to understand their cry as encompassing

concern for the persecuted Church on earth as well.

In Luke 16:27–28, the rich man in hell expresses concern for his five brothers, lest they also come to that place of torment. Calvin did not interpret the account as merely a parable, but as a historical incident: “Some look upon it as a simple parable; but, as the name *Lazarus* occurs in it, I rather consider it to be the narrative of an actual fact.”¹⁹ If even the damned can express such concern, is it unthinkable that the saints in glory—perfected in love—may likewise be mindful of their fellow brethren, including loved ones who remain unsaved? Such holy concern would mirror the longsuffering heart of the Lord, who is “*not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance*” (2 Pet 3:9). Moreover, this passage demonstrates that death does not erase memory, moral reasoning, or godly desire. These souls are not asleep, but aware and articulate—further supporting the Reformed rejection of the heretical doctrine of soul sleep, as taught by Seventh-Day Adventists (cf. WCF 32.1).

Thus, it is a theological error to imagine that the saints in heaven are utterly oblivious, mindless, or disengaged souls without thought or affection for the Church militant. While they are not omniscient and have no knowledge of the daily affairs of the saints on earth—nor do they hear their petitions—their love is perfected, and their union with Christ and His Body remains unbroken. Though they no longer maintain any physical connection or direct communication with the saints on earth, their fellowship within the one Body of Christ continues in glory, as they communicate with their God and Saviour and remain in spiritual communion with those still on earth.

Christ’s Prayer in John 17:24

The critic cites Jesus’ high priestly prayer in John 17:24 as evidence that saints in heaven behold only Christ’s glory and therefore have no regard for their fellow believers. Again, this is a non sequitur fallacy—it wrongly assumes that all prayer is mediatorial—i.e., salvific or redemptive, when in fact, intercessory prayer among believers (on earth or in heaven) is of a different category: it is horizontal, supportive, and dependent on Christ, not substitutive or redemptive.

It is important to understand that the saints in heaven are not distracted by lesser affections but rather participate more fully in the mind and heart of Christ, “*seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them*” (Heb 7:25). If Christ is burdened for His Church, it is unthinkable

that the perfected saints, in spiritual union with Him, would be utterly indifferent. Their intercession is not of the same order as His, for He alone is Mediator; yet as members of His Body, now perfected and wholly attuned to His will, they share in His concern and love their brethren on earth with a pure and Christlike affection.

In sum, none of the critic's arguments convincingly refute the claim that the saints in heaven pray for the Church on earth in a non-mediatorial, Christ-centred, and Spirit-led manner. My paper carefully avoids crossing the line into Roman Catholic invocation, idolatry, or superstition; indeed, it forcefully warns against such abuses. Rather, it seeks to encourage believers to reflect more deeply on the unity of the Church across life and death—namely, that the departed saints, being united to Christ their Head and to all members of His Body, share in the heavenly longing that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven. This meditation is grounded in the Reformed and Protestant doctrine of the communion of saints and is offered in a spirit of doctrinal illumination and ecclesiastical edification. Properly understood, it strengthens the unity of the Body of Christ and guards against carnal divisions or divisiveness within the Church on earth. It is, therefore, no heretical innovation.

Multiple Statements Forbidding Prayers to or for the Departed Saints

For the sake of emphasis, let me reiterate that my paper contains no fewer than 15 explicit statements affirming the Reformed and Protestant position against praying to or for the saints who have gone before us:

1. “We pray only to God and not to any creature—angels or humans or animals or nature.”
2. “... it must not be taken to mean that we can pray to ‘angels and saints departed’ or call upon them to pray for us, which is idolatry and superstition.”
3. “God forbid that we pray to or through the saints in heaven. Praying to the dead or departed people is idolatrous and an abomination ...”
4. “We must not apply it as the Roman Catholics do, by praying to supposedly super-holy ‘canonised saints’ in heaven ...”
5. “We do not talk to the dead, pray to the dead, or consult the

- dead—that is necromancy, which is an abomination and clearly forbidden in the Scriptures (Lev 19:31, Deut 18:9–12, Isa 8:19)."
6. "Neither do we pray to the saints in heaven, for prayers must be offered to God alone ..."
 7. "... praying to them [the saints in heaven] or calling for their help is in vain; and not only in vain—it is idolatrous and blasphemous, a serious affront to God..."
 8. "... we pray for one another, but not for the dead—not for the saints in heaven, nor for the reprobates in hell."
 9. "There is nothing in the Scriptures that teaches the saints should pray for the dead."
 10. "It is of no use and in vain to pray for the dead."
 11. "There is thus no need to pray for those who have already died."
 12. "We should never talk to the saints in heaven or ask them to pray for us."
 13. "... nowhere in the Bible are we told to pray for the departed saints."
 14. "... we do not and should not cry to dead saints in times of distress and desperation."
 15. "... praying to departed saints and seeking their intercession ... is a Roman Catholic teaching and a heresy."

It should be clear from my paper that I do not teach the Roman Catholic doctrine of praying to departed saints or seeking their intercession. Any suggestion to the contrary misrepresents the plain meaning and intent of my work, distorts the Reformed and Protestant doctrine of the communion of saints by fallaciously extrapolating a heretical application, and misleads others from the historic Reformed and Protestant position I have faithfully upheld in contrast to the Roman Catholic view.

What Is the Point?

The critic's main objection, stated in her own words, is this: "*The doctrine of the priesthood of the saints in heaven would open the door for prayers to the dead, or at least communication with them, and requests for their intercessory prayer.*" However, this assertion, as already shown, is

a misconception that conflates distinct biblical truths and relies on a fallacious slippery-slope argument. A careful examination reveals that this conclusion is ill-conceived. To reiterate, let me highlight the following points:

First, the Reformed understanding of the priesthood of all believers, whether on earth or in heaven, does not grant saints any mediatorial authority or divine prerogatives. Their priesthood is a non-mediatorial priesthood, rooted in their union with Christ—the one and only Mediator (1 Tim 2:5). Unlike Christ’s unique priesthood, which alone mediates between God and man, the saints’ priesthood consists in offering spiritual sacrifices and prayers to God, not receiving prayers from others. We pray to God alone, never to man.

Second, Scripture clearly distinguishes between the role of Christ as the sole Mediator and the communion of saints. The prayers of the saints in heaven, as depicted in Revelation 5:8, 6:9–11, and 8:3–4, are offered to God through Christ, not to the saints themselves. There is no biblical warrant for praying to the departed saints or requesting their intercession. The distinction between the worship of God and the invocation/intercession of saints must be maintained: saints in heaven worship God and care for the Church through perfected love, but they are neither to be invoked by believers on earth nor regarded as mediators of salvific or providential grace—an office that belongs to Christ alone.

Third, the idea that the priesthood of the saints in heaven “opens the door” to necromancy or communication with the dead wrongly assumes that acknowledging their existence and perfected love logically entails or encourages unbiblical practices. This is a non sequitur—it simply does not follow. The Reformed and Protestant tradition has consistently upheld both the communion of saints—the spiritual union of believers across heaven and earth—and the unique and exclusive mediatorship of Christ, rejecting all forms of prayer to or invocation of saints.

Finally, guarding against abuses such as prayers to the dead is crucial, but so is maintaining a biblically balanced view of the communion of saints and the ongoing spiritual concern and prayers of departed saints for those still on earth. To deny that the saints in heaven retain any spiritual interest or expressed concern for those still on earth is to contradict the biblical testimony of their union with Christ and their inseparable fellowship with the whole body of believers.

In conclusion, the doctrine of the priesthood of the saints in heaven—rightly understood within the Reformed and Protestant doctrine of the communion of saints—in no way endorses or opens the door to prayers to the dead, necromantic communication, or requests for intercessory prayer from the departed. Rather, it enforces and welcomes the unity of the Body of Christ—both in heaven and on earth—while steadfastly preserving the sole mediatorship of Jesus Christ.

Warning: Zeal Without Knowledge Is Dangerous

The critic's zeal for doctrinal fidelity is commendable; however, her criticism veers into extremism and ultimately falters due to several logical fallacies. Lacking appreciation for the spiritual depth of the biblical text and theological method of the Reformed and Protestant tradition, she mistakes careful scriptural-doctrinal reflection for heresy or dangerous innovation. Such a posture does not edify the Body of Christ; rather, it risks dividing it by falsely labelling thoughtful theological engagement—conducted within the bounds of Holy Scripture and our historic confessions—as doctrinal error. It would have been wise for the critic to heed the apostolic counsel: "*Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God*" (Jas 1:19–20).

It bears remembering that Reformed and Protestant theology has never avoided biblical truths simply because they might be misapplied. Just as we uphold the sacraments of water baptism and holy communion despite historical abuses, we must not neglect the scriptural teaching on the communion of saints—including the worship and prayers of the saints in heaven (Rev 5:8, 6:9–11, 8:3–4)—merely because Rome has corrupted this doctrine by promoting mediatorial intercession. Therefore, the solution is not silence, but faithful biblical exposition with clear theological boundaries: (1) All prayer is directed to God alone (Matt 6:9); (2) Christ remains the sole Mediator (1 Tim 2:5); (3) Any heavenly prayers by the saints are non-mediatorial acts of worship, requiring divine action and not personal or private interventions in earthly affairs (Rev 5:8, 6:9–11).

To withhold this aspect of biblical ecclesiology is like refusing to learn how to swim for fear of drowning—a surrender of truth to the risk of error. Beyond being logically fallacious, such doctrinal paranoia stifles the Church's growth in knowledge and wisdom. The Reformed way is to

affirm what Scripture teaches, reject what it denies, and trust the Spirit to guide the saints into all truth (John 16:13) and to guard that truth from abuse and misuse (John 10:25–27; 1 John 2:20–27).

My paper remains firmly within the Reformed and Protestant tradition, offering a biblical-theological meditation on what it means to be “*one body in Christ*” (Rom 12:5), united across time and eternity. Far from contradicting Scripture or undermining the Reformed and Protestant confessions, it seeks to deepen our appreciation of the communion of saints in a Christ-centred, biblically grounded, theologically conservative, pastorally edifying, and ecclesiastically unifying way. It reminds us that, in Christ, “*ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, … to the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant*” (Heb 12:22–24)—unto the ultimate realisation that “*we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another*” (Rom 12:5), and that “*whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord’s*” (Rom 14:8).

Supervision Opportunity Announcement

I am pleased to announce my willingness to supervise a qualified FEBC student—preferably at the Doctor of Theology (ThD) level, though a Master of Theology (ThM) candidate may also be considered—who desires to undertake research on the topic: **The Communion of Saints and the Ministry of Prayer in the Church Militant and Triumphant: A Reformed and Protestant Theological Investigation.**

This study will explore the biblical, historical, and systematic theological dimensions of the often-neglected doctrine of the communion of saints, along with its practical implications for the life of the Church. It will seek to identify the theological distinctions necessary to uphold the unique and exclusive mediatorship of Christ, while also examining the biblical evidence for the ministry of prayer exercised by both earthly and heavenly saints within the one Body of Christ. Particular attention will be given to articulating this doctrine in a manner that is faithful to Reformed and Protestant theology, in contradistinction to Roman Catholicism.

Such a scholarly work would meaningfully address a notable gap in Reformed and Protestant theological literature and contribute to the academic and pastoral resources available to future scholars,

pastors, and churches.

I look forward to supervising students who are deeply committed to advancing biblical, fundamental, conservative, and confessional theology in this vital area. The aim is not to produce any “new doctrine”, but to be faithful in diligently studying what more may be drawn from the inexhaustible reservoir of Holy Scripture, and to recover the good old truths that have long been forgotten or neglected.

We must diligently seek the truth, for our Lord has said, “*Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free*” (John 8:32). As the Apostle Paul affirms, “*For we can do nothing against the truth, but for the truth*” (2 Cor 13:8). Let us therefore be committed to the pursuit, proclamation, and preservation of the truth of God’s Word—without compromise, without fear, and without favour. Amen.

Notes

- 1 Jeffrey Khoo, “The Communion of Saints and the Ministry of Prayer: A Reformed and Protestant Perspective”, *The Burning Bush* 31 (2025): 65–81.
- 2 Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, https://ccel.org/ccel/kuyper/holy_spirit/holy_spirit.viii.ii.viii.html.
- 3 Geoffrey Chapman, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (London: A Cassell Imprint, 1994).
- 4 Timothy Tow, *Coming World Events Unveiled: A Study of the Book of Revelation* (Singapore: Christian Life Publishers, 1995), 32–33.
- 5 John Calvin, *Letter to Cardinal Sadolet* (1539), <https://www.monergism.com/john-calvins-letter-cardinal-sadolet-1539>.
- 6 Timothy Tow, *An Abridgment of Calvin’s Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Singapore: Far Eastern Bible College Press, 1997), 296.
- 7 Ibid., 298.
- 8 Ibid., 296–297.
- 9 Ibid., 296.
- 10 Herman Witsius, *Sacred Dissertations on What Is Commonly Called The Apostles’ Creed* (Glasgow: Khull, Blackie & Co, 1823), 2:379–80.
- 11 Herman Witsius, *Symbolum XLVII, XLVIII*, <https://witsius.wordpress.com>.
- 12 Johann Andreas Quenstedt, *Theologia Didactico-Polemica sive Systema Theologicum, in Opera*, ed Johann Friedrich Cotta (Leipzig: Bernhard Christoph Breitkopf, 1715), 4:365.
- 13 Ibid.

IN DEFENCE OF THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

- 14 John Wesley, *John Wesley's Notes on the Bible*, <https://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/john-wesleys-notes-on-the-bible>.
- 15 H D M Spence and Joseph S Exell, eds., *The Pulpit Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Wm B Eerdmans, 1950), 22:231.
- 16 Robert Jamieson, A R Fausset, and David Brown, *A Commentary on the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 3:558.
- 17 Timothy Tow and Jeffrey Khoo, *Theology for Every Christian: A Systematic Theology in the Reformed and Premillennial Tradition of J Oliver Buswell* (Singapore: Far Eastern Bible College, 2007), 461. See also Jeffrey Khoo, "Heavenly Worship", *True Life Bible-Presbyterian Church Weekly*, 5 November 2023; "Heaven and Earth United", *True Life Bible-Presbyterian Church Weekly*, 10 August 2025.
- 18 Rowland S Ward, *The Westminster Confession of Faith: A Study Guide* (Australia: New Melbourne Press, 1996), 21-22. On 1.6, Ward comments, "Contrary to those who insist that explicit words for every practice are needed and hence, for example, reject baptism of believers' infants or the change of the day of rest from Saturday to Sunday, we confess the validity of the necessary implications of and deductions from Scripture statements."
- 19 John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, trans. William Pringle (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845), 2:191. See also Jeffrey Khoo, "The Reality and Eternality of Hell: Luke 16:19-31 as Proof", *Stulos Theological Journal* 6 (1998): 67-76.

The Rev Dr Jeffrey Khoo serves as Principal of the Far Eastern Bible College and Pastor of True Life Bible-Presbyterian Church. He wishes to record his gratitude to several colleagues on the faculty, as well as to pastors and elders within the Bible-Presbyterian Church, who have graciously taken the time to engage in discussion on the subject, read this paper, and provide thoughtful feedback. Their insights have been of genuine help in refining both the argument and its presentation. It goes without saying that any errors or oversights remain the sole responsibility of the author.

COLLEGE NEWS

Day of Prayer

The new semester commenced with a Day of Prayer on Monday, 21 July 2025, at the Life Bible-Presbyterian Church sanctuary. The college family gathered to seek the Lord's blessing for the new term through a time of Bible meditation, testimony, thanksgiving, and prayer. The Principal preached on the theme, "I Am Nothing, God Is Everything" (Exod 3:1-14). This is the spiritual principle we must all adopt if we desire to serve the Lord and be useful to Him.

Enrolment

The July-November 2025 semester saw a bumper enrolment of 15 new students from eight countries: from China – *Zhu Xinkai*; from India – *Shapbrang Lyngdoh Nongrang*; from Indonesia – *Salion Gombo* (Papua) and *Timothy Cervino Purba* (Batam); from Korea – *Jeon Yoon Beom* and *Ma Eun Jin*; from Myanmar – *Cing Sian Hoih, Mayit Pong San Aung, Ndop Pung San*, and *Timothy Lal Hu Thang*; from the Philippines – *Jerum Bucad, Regine Ogario Saladaga*, and *Earlyn Joy Tindaan*; from Singapore – *Hannah Joy Chew Hui En*; and from Thailand – *Alongkorn Harichaikul*.

The total enrolment was 625, consisting 44 full-time residential students and 581 part-time/online students. They came from 15 countries: Australia, Cambodia, China, Congo, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Sierra Leone, Singapore, South Korea, Tanzania, Thailand.

Lecturers and Courses

The lecturers/tutors (and courses) during the July-November 2025 semester were: Rev Dr Jeffrey Khoo—*Calvin's Institutes I, Revelation, Jude*; Rev Dr Quek Suan Yew—*Hebrew Reading I, Homiletics, Deuteronomy*; Rev Dr Prabhudas Koshy—*Isaiah II*; Rev Dr Koa Keng Woo—*Bible Geography I, Cults III*; Rev Stephen Khoo—*Esther*; Rev Tan Kian Sing—*2 Thessalonians, Titus*; Rev Clement Chew—*Elementary*

Hebrew I, Minor Prophets II; Rev Dr Jose Lagapa—Roman Catholicism; Rev Zhu Jianwei—Old Testament Survey I (Chinese); Rev Samuel Joseph—Greek Exegesis I; Miss Carol Lee—Youth Christian Education, Jesus the Master Teacher, Advanced English I; Mr Joshua Yong—Greek Reading I, Contemporary Theology III; Mr Cornelius Koshy—Elementary Greek I; Miss Joycelyn Chng—Teaching Methods; Mrs Cheng May Lynn—Beginner Pianoforte; Mrs Patricia Joseph—Elementary English I; Mrs Ng May Shyen—Intermediate English I.

Basic Theology for Everyone

Sixteen Basic Theology for Everyone (BTFE) courses were offered to the public on campus and online in the July–November 2025 semester: (1) Calvin’s Institutes I, (2) Deuteronomy, (3) Revelation, (4) 2 Thessalonians, (5) Titus, (6) Epistle of Jude (7) Esther, (8) Isaiah II, (9) Minor Prophets II, (10) Jesus the Master Teacher, (11) Roman Catholicism, (12) Cults III, (13) Contemporary Theology III, (14) Youth Christian Education, (15) Teaching Methods, (16) Old Testament Survey I (Chinese).

End-of-Term Thanksgiving and Retreat

FEBC held its end-of-term thanksgiving service on 14 November 2025 at the FEBC Hall. A thanksgiving dinner preceded the service with the principal speaking from 1 Thessalonians 2 on FEBC’s place in God’s plan and purpose.

The college also returned to Resort Lautan Biru in Mersing, Malaysia, for a thanksgiving retreat from 17–19 November 2025. We had thought the last retreat in May would be our final one, as Calvary Jaya Bible-Presbyterian Fellowship—the trustees of the resort—had put it up for sale. Although the resort was sold, it was preserved by the providence of God. A Christian businessman, who is Bible-Presbyterian, purchased it and has a heart to use it for the Lord and His people. The new owner has renamed it “Blue Ocean Resort.” The name change is, in fact, not really a change, as “Lautan Biru” means “Blue Ocean.”

New English Tutor

The college is pleased to welcome Mrs Julie Aw as the new English tutor for the Advanced English classes, effective 2 January 2026. Mrs Aw was an adjunct lecturer at the National University of Singapore (NUS), where she taught professional communication and presentation courses, as well as English writing and speaking skills to international students at

various tertiary institutions, including Nanyang Technological University (NTU) and Singapore Management University (SMU). She holds a Master of Education (English Language) from NTU, and a Bachelor of Arts and a Postgraduate Diploma in Education from NUS.

Timothy Tow Cantata

The True Life Bible-Presbyterian Church and Far Eastern Bible College choirs presented a cantata on the life and times of their founder—Rev Dr Timothy Tow—at the 22nd Anniversary Thanksgiving of True Life BPC held at the Regional Language Centre (RELC) on the Lord's Day, 5 October 2025.

A TRIBUTE IN SONG & STORY

TIMOTHY TOW: HIS LIFE AND SONGS

**A Cantata Celebrating the Legacy of
the Founding Pastor of the Bible-
Presbyterian Church Movement**



Date: The Lord's Day,
October 5, 2025

Time: 9.30 am

Venue: RELC Auditorium, 30
Orange Grove Road,
Singapore 258352

Join us for a moving worship service of hymns, narration, and thanksgiving as we remember the life and ministry of Rev Dr Timothy Tow—pastor, hymn-writer, theologian, and founder of the Bible-Presbyterian Church in Singapore and Far Eastern Bible College. Featuring original songs and beloved hymns written or translated by Rev Tow, accompanied by narration that traces his spiritual journey.

♪ Presented by the Choir of True Life Bible-Presbyterian Church ♪
"The Lord gave the word: great was the company of those that published it."
- Psalm 68:11

**New Students Matriculated
on 21 July 2025**



**FEBC's Mid-Semester Outing:
Students @ the Marina Barrage, September 2025**

