

THE SALTSHAKER

A PUBLICATION OF COVENANT REFORMED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NORTH CAROLINA

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The Use of Religious Oaths

By Rev. Sean McCann

We have had a full year already at Covenant Reformed – and it is only March! In addition to our usual ministries of worship, nurture, and witness, we have had several special occasions during our worship services: we have installed new church officers, we have baptized babies, and we have received both new members and new communicant members. Each of these services has been unique and special in its own way, but one thread that runs through them is the use of religious oaths as part of the ceremonies during the worship service. You may have never given oaths or vows a passing thought, but since we have heard them so often lately, I want to pause to consider what it is that we are doing when we make these promises to God and to one another. Specifically, over the coming editions of the *Saltshaker* I plan to take an extended look at each of our membership questions, as well as some of the other promises we make during worship services.

As a starting point, the Westminster Confession of Faith devotes an entire chapter to this topic, helpfully differentiating an oath (a promise *before* God) from a vow (like an oath but made *to* God alone). To summarize Chapter 22 of the WCF: an oath is a solemn promise, or swearing, by which an individual calls God to witness what he asserts or promises; and calls God to judge him according to the truth or falsehood of what he swears. The reformed church has historically recognized that lawful oaths and vows are appropriately considered part of religious worship, as long as they are used in a holy and religious manner. In matters of “weight and moment,” an oath is even warranted by the Word of God. These matters of weight traditionally include promises given at membership, baptism, and ordination. On these special occasions we are calling God to witness our promises. And with God as our witness, we make these promises with all holy fear and reverence, never daring to swear vainly or rashly.

Of particular interest are the five membership questions found in Chapter 57 of our Book of Church Order

(BCO). The BCO does not use the language of “oaths,” instead it uses the language of “declarations and promises.” The words may be different, but the action is the same: we stand before our God in religious worship to call on him to witness, and to judge us according to our words. Taking public oaths in the context of religious worship is no small matter, and it shows how serious we take membership in the church.

In one sense, membership in the visible church is a voluntary association: no one forces us to become members, and no one forces us to remain members. Dr. Sean Lucas explains how “believers submit themselves voluntarily to the government and oversight of the church.” This is one reason we have a membership class: so that prospective members are forced to take time to consider and understand what they are promising, and what they are joining. They don’t hear the membership questions for the first time during the worship service or in their meeting with the elders. Rather, we ask them to heed the words of WCF: “Whosoever taketh an oath ought duly to consider the weightiness of so solemn an act” (22.3).

According to our BCO, the members of the visible church “are all those persons in every nation, together with their children, who make profession of their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and promise submission to His laws” (1-3). These two parts – profession and promise – are represented by the membership questions, and by answering these questions in the affirmative we “enter into a solemn covenant with God and His Church” and assume “solemn obligations.”

This is something that we often take for granted today. We show up at a church building at a certain time, services happen, and then we leave. We can go through the motions as if we are attending an event at some institution that is disconnected from us and our lives. But if this is all that “church” is, how is it any different from going to see a movie? Or volunteering at a shel-

Continued on Page 2

March–April

Upcoming Events

For more information about any of these events, refer to our website (www.covenantreformed.net), or the church office (828-253-6578; office@covenantreformed.net).

The Lord’s Supper

Please prepare your hearts in advance to take of the sacrament together.

During Morning Worship:	During Evening Worship:
March 5, 19	April 30
April 2, 16	

Fellowship Lunch:

April 2, following morning worship.

Week of April 3

- No Wednesday evening activities on April 5
- Good Friday service at 6:00 pm on April 7
- No evening service on Easter, April 9

Weekly Events

Sunday:

Sunday School	9:30 am
Morning Worship	10:45 am
Evening Worship	6:00 pm

Except for 1st Sundays and April 9th

Wednesday Evenings:

Supper	6:00 pm
Bible Study/Prayer	6:45 pm

Bible Study

For Men:

Men’s Prayer Breakfast	8:00 am	2nd & 4th Saturdays
ROMEOS	8:00 am	Every Thursday
<i>(Retired Old Men Eating Out)</i>		
at Cornerstone Restaurant, Tunnel Road		
Norm Bomer’s Home	7:00 pm	1st & 3rd Thursdays

For Women:

Gail Albee’s Home	9:30 am	Every Tuesday
Fellowship Hall	10:00 am	Every Thursday
Fellowship Hall	7:00 pm	Every Thursday

Continued from Page 1

ter? Or meeting up with some friends to study the Bible? While we can certainly call the church a voluntary association, it is more accurate to say that the church is a covenant community, to which members voluntarily bind themselves through making and keeping oaths of membership.

John Piper summarizes this idea of a covenant community: “What establishes the visible union of a group of believers into a church is that they make a covenant with each other to be the church.” Without the bonds of membership promises, there is little else that can hold a local body of believers together in community for any period of time. I recently loaded up my truck for a trip and ensured that the load was secure. If I had planned to merely taking a slow ride on smooth roads, it wouldn’t really matter how I strapped the load down, or if I did at all. But the busy highway and bumpy backroads that I planned to travel meant that I needed to ensure the straps were tight and the load was secure. Like those straps, the bonds of membership may not seem necessary when everything is smooth and easy for a local church, but in those difficult times, when the road gets bumpy, good bonds hold us together and maintain our unity.

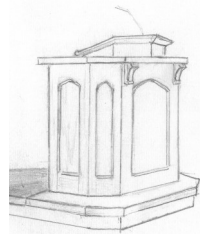
How might our life together as a church grow and deepen were we to truly understand that our relationships to one another within the church are formed by our covenant bonds? Maybe we would faithfully attend the public gatherings of the church

not because we feel like it that day, but because that is when and where our covenant community meets, and we have promised to support the worship of our church. Maybe we would serve the church body not because service gives us a sense of personal fulfillment and purpose, but because we have promised to support the work of the church. Maybe we would stay in a church – even when it is hard – not because it fits our preferences, but because we have promised to submit ourselves to the government of the church. Maybe we would pursue people – even hard people – not because we want new friends, but because we have promised to work towards the peace of the church. We might even go to a baby shower not because we are close with the mom, but because we are responsible to assist the parents in raising their children in the Lord. I could go on, but you get the picture. Our vows do not force us to begrudgingly obey, but they do oblige us to funnel our relationships through the filter of God’s word and so live in unity together as the body of Christ.

Our “solemn covenant with God and His Church” means that we rightly understand and joyfully embrace the duties and responsibilities of Christians towards God and one another. It means that we aim to fulfill those duties and responsibilities in the context of our fellow members in the local church. May the Lord deepen and strengthen our fellowship and unity as we rely upon the grace of the Holy Spirit to make and keep our membership promises.

The Sacred Desk

By Rev. Jim Curtis



As we were wrapping up our series in 2 Samuel in the evening services, Pastor Sean and I went through several options to pick up. We considered longer books and shorter books, desiring to keep our typical practice of preaching from one Testament in the morning services and the other in the evening services. Ultimately, we landed on the prophet Hosea.

When we made that decision, we did so intentionally, but the Lord further opened my eyes to the providential aptness of it. I had the privilege of taking some study time at the RTS Charlotte library, where I studied the entire book in detail to prepare for this series. Hosea fits a specific bill for the life of Covenant Reformed: it is both a well-known prophecy (perhaps only second to Jonah) and filled with riches not yet plumbed in a sermon series here. These are the two things I want to consider as we embark upon this series together in the evenings.

First, Hosea is *accessible* to people at Covenant Reformed. Of course, all of the Bible is accessible in the general sense—our English translations are incredibly good! What I mean, though, is that the book’s familiarity can act as a gateway giving access to the rest of the book. In other words, as a well-known prophesy, Hosea brings us comfort. This is important for Covenant Reformed in this current moment because in a new year full of resolutions, new diets, and unfamiliar patterns, our evening worship offers something you already know—a book full of oracles, promises, judgments, and redeeming love (for all you Francine Rivers fans!).

Second, however, Hosea is *richer* than I think many people realize. This could be a downside to the familiarity and comfort, but this providential blessing also provides a unique opportunity. I believe it will be like discovering an old possession. You may know the ins and outs of the lost token, even the feel of it and know how it works, but isn’t there something almost magical about discovering new things about it? It is both familiar and unfamiliar, and the thrill is finding out more.

Most people know about the nature of Hosea’s marriage to Gomer—that is the familiarity. Yet as important as his marriage is, the details of their family life are incredibly sparse. This indicates the primary theme of the book is *not* Hosea’s marriage—that is the richness. It goes deeper than just the fact that Hosea married a prostitute by showing us that God himself has an unfaithful bride—and what lengths he is willing to go to in order to get her back.

Preaching Schedule		
Date	Morning	Evening
Mar. 5	Matt. 17:1-13	
Mar. 12	Matt. 17:14-21	Hosea 2:14-23
Mar. 19	Matt. 17:22-27	Hosea 3:1-5
Mar. 26	Matt. 18:1-14	Hosea 4:1-19
Apr. 2	Matt. 18:15-20	
Apr. 9	Matt. 18:21-35	
Apr. 16	Matt. 19:1-12	Hosea 5:1-15
Apr. 23	Matt. 19:13-30	Hosea 6:1-3
Apr. 30	Matt. 20:1-16	Hosea 6:4-11a

Assistant or Associate?

By Rev. Sean McCann

This past month our congregation voted to call our assistant pastor, Jim Curtis, as our associate pastor. Those of you with some history in our denomination, the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), likely know of this distinction, but if you’re new to the PCA it may be unfamiliar. As a sports fan, I get the concept of associate head coaches (the #2 coach on the staff), and, lower in the pecking order, the assistant coaches. But that paradigm doesn’t translate to our system of government.

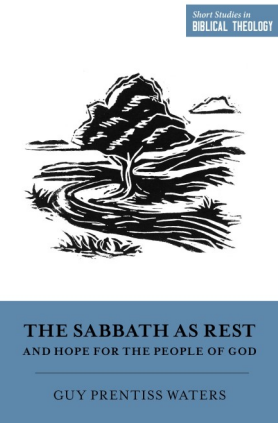
To go back to preliminary principles, we hold that the members of a church have the right and power to choose those officers whom God has appointed in his church. We see this take place in the election of ruling elders, deacons, pastors (teaching elders). According to our Book of Church Order (BCO) pastors and associate pastors are both called by the congregation, with the approval of the Presbytery, and as such they sit on the session of the local church and bear the keys of the kingdom jointly with the ruling elders. The pastor is a member and serves as the moderator of the session, while the associate pastor(s) may also vote along with the ruling elders. This understanding and approach to associate pastors is consistent among the rest of our sister Presbyterian denominations, however, our PCA polity is somewhat unique in carving out the position of assistant pastor.

For an associate the relationship with the church is determined by the congregation (under the oversight of the Presbytery), while for an assistant pastor that relationship is determined by the Session (also under the oversight of the Presbytery). So, while a congregational meeting and vote is required to call an associate, for an assistant the session issues the call. In addition to the difference of who issues the call, the second difference between the two positions also goes back to preliminary principles. Since the congregation does not call the assistant, he does not have a vote on the Session (though he usually attends) and is not in a position to exercise the joint power of jurisdiction over the congregation. (In an interesting twist, since all pastors hold their membership in the Presbytery, assistant pastors who cannot vote at the Session level do have a right to vote at Presbytery.)

Although it is often misunderstood and misapplied in churches, the move from assistant pastor to associate pastor is not a promotion. I’ve known young associate pastors and old assistant pastors (I have personally served in all three of the different pastoral relations). A church or a Session may have any number of reasons for calling an assistant instead of an associate, or vice versa, and our BCO gives us latitude in making that decision. That being said, there is a unique relationship between a congregation and those pastors that she has called, a relationship defined in scripture as that of shepherds to their flock. For that reason, I celebrate the call issued last month from you to Jim Curtis, and I rejoice in the faithfulness of our God to provide shepherds to the flock during this season of life and ministry.

The Sabbath As Rest

by Mr. Wilson Goins



What is the Christian Sabbath, and how does it pertain to me? If you find yourself asking these questions, then Guy Prentiss Waters’ book, *The Sabbath Rest and Hope for the People of God*, has all the answers you’re searching for! Succinctly, the answer is this: the Sabbath is a gift of God to you, Christian. It’s not just for Old Testament Israel or Seventeenth Century Puritans, but for all men. As Waters quickly points out, Jesus told us that “the Sabbath was made for man” (Mark 2:27). Often, people assume when referring to “the day of rest” that it is a day when we do whatever we wish. However, this view fails to capture the true benefits of the Sabbath as God’s gift to man. Waters expresses it this way: “The Sabbath is a day of worship and spiritual resting, a day to receive the blessings that God particularly promises to those who draw near to him in worship on that day.” In other words, the Sabbath is a day when Christians cease from work, regular occupations, and worries, to focus completely on the worship of God.

Waters traces that theme from the first day of rest in Genesis 2 all the way through to the Book of Revelation, in order to show the Sabbath’s main purpose is to rehearse that eternal Sabbath rest which is to come. The book makes it plain, we are commanded to observe this day in the Fourth Commandment, but it is by no means a burden to us. Think about it this way: when we gather together as Covenant Reformed Presbyterian Church to meet with God in His worship, we are receiving a foretaste of that which we will do for eternity! That is what we as Christians should be excited for, and by God’s grace we get a glimpse of it now.

Not only does Waters explain why the Sabbath is of importance in our lives, but he examines New Testament passages thoroughly to show why we worship on the first day of the week, or “the Lord’s Day.” Simply put, it’s the day our Lord Jesus Christ was raised! This is what the Sabbath has pointed to since its beginning, the chief and highest end of man to worship God forever, which has been made possible for us by the work of Jesus. The Sabbath is a gift to man, but the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath. Further, Waters includes a section at the end of the book on “practice”. He does not give us a bunch of “do’s” and “do not’s”. Rather he rightly tells us that if we orient our Sundays around the worship of our Lord, the rest of our day should naturally fall into place.

This book is not only informative on such an important part of the Christian life, but it is food for the soul as we Christians long for the eternal sanctuary in the presence of the lamb.