



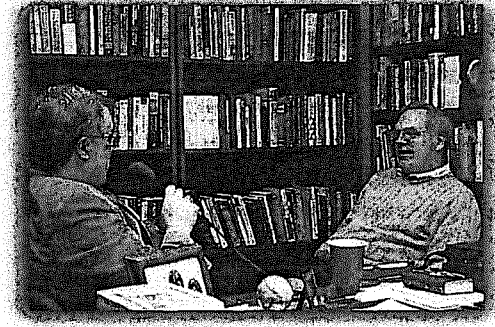
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Interview with Nelson Kloosterman



Dr. Nelson Kloosterman is an unusual seminary professor. He is both a pastor to pastors, a lover of the Church, and a man with many other related loves. Clearly, he loves Christ above all else. As a thinker he is always willing to go where the gospel leads him. I first met Nelson Kloosterman several decades ago when he gave an address to ministers at the Banner of Truth Conference (U.S.) on shepherding the bereaved. It was both wise and compassionate. I have never forgotten that address. In recent years Nelson has ministered with and for Reformation & Revival Ministries. Just after January 1, 2003, we sat down at the offices of Reformation & Revival Ministries and had a wonderful chat that led to this published interview. —John H. Armstrong

R R J —Tell us initially about your family background.

NK —I grew up in Grand Rapids, Michigan, the son of a Dutch immigrant father who came to the United States after World War II as a very young man who had served in the Dutch Resistance movement against the Nazis in the Northern Netherlands. He married an American girl of Dutch ances-

try. When I was eleven, my mother passed away from ALS (Lou Gehrig's disease). She was in a process of decline for three years as she moved from braces, to a wheelchair, and finally to a bed.

My father married again, about a year later. He and my stepmother had three more children. So I come from a large family of eight children. I grew up in a home that I would describe as Christian. My father was probably among the most important formative influences in my life. I didn't know until I was fourteen that he even had an accent, and that only by comparing him with the fathers of my classmates.

He was very serious about the Christian faith and nurtured us at home in family devotions three times a day. Sundays were days of worship and rest. We grew up with a tradition of two worship services each Lord's Day. In addition we had catechism instruction every week. Dad ensured that catechism was learned and that we behaved in class.

His faith was quite evident. I'm fond of telling the story that I was a naughty boy when I was growing up, and among the means of discipline my parents employed was to have me write lines. But the lines they had me write came from the answer of the *Heidelberg Catechism* to the Lord's Day question on the meaning of the fifth commandment.

My great regret was that it was not a short answer. To write it ten times took the spunk out of me as far as naughtiness, at least for awhile. It does show one way in which parents committed to the Lord can use teachings from his Word in a healthy way. People might say, "Well that will only teach you to hate the catechism." In point of fact, looking back on it now, I see that it was an *instrument* of loving discipline.

RRJ —In your Dutch Reformed tradition you were obviously presented to Christ by your parents in your baptism as an infant and thus you grew up in the nurture of the church where you were instructed in godliness. Did you come to a particular point in time where you knew that you affirmed that faith for yourself, where you began to follow Christ consciously as his disciple?

NK —I believe that the Bible does teach the need for a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. In terms of a conscious following of Christ in faith I look back to my junior high years, particularly in the seventh, eighth, and ninth grades. Our family was quite traumatized by my mother's passing, yet this was the time when I felt the Lord calling me to the ministry.

In the eighth grade I told people I was intending to be a minister. It was during an elder family visit in our home that my parents learned this for the first time when the minister asked me, in front of my parents, what I was going to do when I grew up. I said, without hesitating, "Oh, I'm going to be a minister." They all started laughing.

RRJ —The change in you was not so much a dramatic one as it was a realization that you had a heart that now loved the Bible, a heart to trust and obey God.

NK —Yes, and I think it's fair to say that after that moment I realized the Lord had been speaking to me throughout my entire life. His voice, in terms of the promises made to me in the gospel, was quite clear. I recognized the tone of his voice and I saw the tenderness of his heart toward me.

RRJ —Tell us a little about high school and college.

NK —My family was large, and therefore we did not have a lot of things materially. I was often aware in high school of just how little we had. Yet in the midst of that desert and oasis in high school I also met my wife in Bible class. I offered to help her with an assignment and thus we got to know each other and discovered that we were born in the same year and the same month. She was born a day earlier than me so I'm still telling people that I married an older woman. Susan was a blue blood. Her grandfather was the former president of Calvin College, Henry Schultze.

Susan's family was very committed to Christian education. I met Sue at Grand Rapids East Christian High School where I also developed and satisfied a love for languages. I

took Latin, which then was a college prep course. We went on to Calvin College after graduating from high school. We're talking about the late 1960s right in the middle of the Vietnam crisis, the great cultural upheaval in America.

RRJ—You speak and write Dutch fluently. Did this come from your home life or did you learn it later?

NK—Well, here's a little insight, John. You might not realize it but there's a difference between Dutch and Frisian. Frisian is the dialect of Northern Netherlands, which some call a speech impediment. My father and my first mother spoke Frisian in the home to keep their conversation from us, which made me all the more curious to learn it. I didn't pick it up as well as a couple of my other siblings, but I taught myself Dutch in my ministry years later. When I got in the ministry I discovered there was a vein of great theology, particularly preaching, in Dutch. There were people in the Netherlands who held to a confessional covenantal theology that was quite vibrant. I discovered this with the help of some older ministers, now retired.

RRJ—You've mentioned a vein of Dutch tradition that you discovered. Tell us a little bit about this treasure and how it impacted your life. Who were some of the theologians you pursued? Also tell us about your work in translating the works of Dutch theologians?

NK—The colleagues of mine in the Christian Reformed Church who introduced me to Dutch were Rev. John Piersma and Dr. Peter de Young, who had introduced me to this work by saying, "You've got to learn Dutch and read this stuff." Then we began to meet frequently to talk about these books.

The vein of ore I discovered had to do with the continuing confessional and covenantal theology in Holland through the leadership of people such as S. G. DeGraff, whose books you have here on your own shelves. Another was Cornelius Veenhof. And then there was the better known Klaas Schilder.

Another important theologian in this group was B. Holwerda. These men were part of a young preacher/theologian movement within the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands in the 1930s and '40s, and their writing, particularly their preaching, captured the hearts and minds of many in the Dutch Reformed Churches. However, this was not without problems. These men were seen as a threat theologically and ecclesiastically, at least by some. This whole business culminated in 1944 with a sad church split, where some of these men were deposed by the senate of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands.

They continued with the church, as a denomination by the very same name, testifying that they were the continuation of their denomination. That was the political struggle. But on the theological side they represented a fresh appropriation of Reformed theology. A lot of negative things have been written about scholasticism—not all of them correct. However, I think it is demonstrable that during the time of these developments, and following the tendencies of scholastic theology, there was a certain separation of the theology from the text of Scripture.

The more you debate and talk about theological distinctions the less you're talking about the Scriptures, at least in terms of the text of Scripture itself. I think what these men represented was a return to the text of Scripture, a reading of the Bible with freshness.

RRJ—I'm terribly interested, as you know, in the subject of scholasticism. I've read a good bit on it and agree that there are some positive ways to read these developments. I also am quite interested in the way that you've stated a concern that you can become removed from dealing with the text by use of the scholastic method. I think it would be helpful, since our readers will be from a wide spectrum of backgrounds, if we define scholasticism.

NK—Well, first of all let me define it as an appetite for and a penchant for employing, creating and using distinctions in terms and ideas in ways that are not necessarily edifying to the simple ordinary Bible reader.

R R J —Give an illustration.

NK —I think the whole discussion about infralapsarianism and supralapsarianism is an illustration of scholasticism. I'm familiar with this debate but I will guarantee you not many church members would even be able to spell the words, let alone pronounce them. We need to ask the question, as serious theologians, what are we doing here?

R R J —Are you saying, by this illustration, that this kind of question, about the ordering of God's plan regarding what happened in his predestinating purpose, is not really a biblical question?

NK —Yes, exactly. I am personally persuaded that theologians and theology can kill the Church by imposing questions people neither ask or arise directly from the Scriptures. To agitate the Church with respect to these questions and issues ultimately does not serve the cause of the gospel. In the history of Reformed churches they have been harmful.

Now I believe strongly in the need for confessions, as you do. I believe the confessions are boundaries that demarcate what is inside and outside but in the Church we've got to allow people to write freely and to talk and work in a way that fosters life.

R R J —I want to pursue this a bit since it's such a real minefield. Some traditions, like the Presbyterian, have allowed ministers to be ordained while not concurring absolutely with everything written in the confessional tradition.

In a more scholastic setting it seems there is always a tendency to interpret the confession almost the way we interpret the Bible. The creed becomes the final word on what the Bible teaches. Talk about this for a moment because I know you work within a conservative tradition and you're also a conservative theologian.

NK —Well, in the Presbyterian tradition the term generally

used is scruples. One can declare scruples with regard to the confession. The second element of the Presbyterian subscription formula has to do with subscription to the system of doctrine contained in the confessions.

In my Reformed tradition the form of subscription has neither of those terms or words, but simply asks the signatory if they agree that these confessions fully agree with the Word of God.

Historically this has all functioned with the proviso that certain formulations may not be the most felicitous answers—say, in the catechism. They may not be the most complete, even the most accurate. This has led some denominations to revise confessions by adding codicils that correct such errors.

Let me give an example. Back in the early 1900s, Article 36 of the Belgic Confession was changed in the Netherlands. This change was adopted by some of the American church, as well as others. The change had to do with the relationship between church and state. This occurred under the influence of Abraham Kuyper.

I view the confessions and my signature to the confessions very solemnly, as an oath. However, your question alludes to how the creeds *function*. You suggested that at times they almost function like the Bible. I think you are quite right, and I am concerned about this because I view the confessions as a *road map* for traveling the Bible.

As you know, road maps, even topographical maps, don't give you every detail. By design they are reductionistic. I think we have to always remember that confessions are needed for ecumenicity, for discipline, and for instruction. But we must always remember that they are subject to revision and improvement.

R R J —You've taught ethics. Do you think that there are ethical concerns, especially related to bioethical and sexual ethics, that warrant inclusion in any new confessional statements?

NK —I do, but you've put your finger on something that's extremely difficult to manufacture in a confessional way. On



I'm very, very concerned that we articulate basic perspectives, perspectives on the meaning of life. I do think the Church needs to confess the beginning of life. I believe marriage is so much under attack in our culture and we really face the extinction of marriage and the home in the wider culture.

the one hand we want to avoid moralism, which is the impulse to direct people's moral thinking and moral choices by imposing external constraint. I'm very, very concerned that we articulate basic perspectives, perspectives on the meaning of life. I do think the Church needs to confess the beginning of life. I believe marriage is so much under attack in our culture and we really face the extinction of marriage and the home in the wider culture.

This is part creation and part nature, and people do not succeed long in denying creation *and* denying nature. I believe that the Church, at this point, needs to take a position that stands outside the culture, and thus identify herself as over against the culture.

RRJ —So, if I'm hearing you correctly, we would not precisely define certain bioethical responses but we would lay out the parameters of where life begins. I think of this culture as a culture of death. We should respond to that by affirming life in the face of this culture of death, without all the specificity of certain ethical conundrums including the twists and turns that we will have to deal with as the people of God.

NK —That's right. Let me say three things here: First, despite all of our disagreements with the Roman Catholic church, we Protestants don't do nearly as good a job in this area. Moreover, we tend to leave it entirely to individual conscience. There we go again with the *individual*.

Second, I want to say that this attention must drive us to reflect about how we use the Bible in moral discourse. I think that we need to have a hermeneutical discussion that involves the use of the Bible in ethics. With Dr. Douma's permission, I added an appendix to his book on the Ten Commandments when I translated it. Douma speaks of using the Bible as a *guide*, where it is explicit in telling us what we must do, and as a *guard* where it says, "Whatever you do, don't do that." It's also a fence and a compass. As a compass, it tells us in what direction we should go, and this is extremely helpful in bioethical decisions. Finally, it provides examples. Douma is not afraid to speak of examples in the Bible that include exemplary character, life, virtue, and so on.

The third thing that I want to say has to do with the need to make a moral or ethical stand as churches. We tend to have avoided this far too long.

RRJ —Let's transition from this discussion of ethics to the much debated discussion of "The New Perspective," a subject we addressed in the *Reformation & Revival Journal* last year (Volume 11, Number 2). Since the term is so variously defined, would you give us a simple working understanding?

NK —"The New Perspective" (on Paul) is a term that I think was probably coined by Dr. James D. G. Dunn in reference to the work of writers such as E. P. Sanders and Krister Stendahl. I think there are three constitutive elements in "The New Perspective."

The first involves a re-assessment of Second Temple Judaism. The second constitutes a re-assessment of Paul's view of the law. Was Paul negative or antagonistic toward the law? Paul had grown up in the covenant as a Pharisee, which is exactly what he was converted from when he came to know the

Lord Jesus Christ. But what was his attitude toward the Jewish law?

A third element has to do with a re-assessment of the doctrine of justification itself. What is its proper place in the whole corpus of Paul's thinking? You'll notice that I don't talk about Paul's theology precisely because I am uncomfortable with speaking of a theology within the Bible. I believe theology is an activity of our human reflection upon divine revelation.

Paul was an agent of revelation. He certainly was reflective in his thinking and the Holy Spirit used him. But what we have in the Bible is not theology—what we have is divine revelation.

RRJ—That's an important point in the face of the last 100 years of New Testament theology, so-called. This has tended to grow out of a less than high view of the divine part of biblical revelation. This movement for biblical theology tends to say, "Well, Paul had a theology, and John of course had a theology, and Peter also had a theology."

Having said this, let's go back to "The New Perspective" for a moment. The first point you made I think I can just pass by since it's rather complicated in terms of the whole argument and there are a number of different proponents of several different ways to approach Second Temple Judaism. I think it's fair to say to our readers in general that this first aspect of reinterpreting Second Temple Judaism is a fertile field for scholars, but one particular scholar doesn't agree with another on exactly what they're saying.

NK—Exactly, part of it is the sheer number of sources. People are reading Talmudic material back into the Second Temple period and this presents some real problems.

RRJ—What would be the most fruitful aspect of this New Testament study that's gone on the last 20 years or so? Most of our readers are not going to read this kind of Talmudic literature nor are they going to read E. P. Sanders work. In most cases they really shouldn't. But what's the one contributing value

that this debate has given to us as Christians when we read our Bible?



The Pharisees have been a favorite pulpit illustration of legalists, traditionalists, conservative Church leaders, or religionists. We sometimes think of them as Roman Catholics and thus we can use them as the embodiment of the enemy that we don't want to become. But I tell you Jesus came to save the Pharisees too, along with the publicans and the sinners.

NK—Well, one of the things it has given to us is a renewed desire to listen carefully to the text of the Bible. When Jesus, for example, has conflicts with the Pharisees you have to understand the Pharisees are the closest of any group to Jesus. They are, using a term from my history and tradition, the conservative members of the Christian Reformed church. They are the conservative members of Israel and they come to Jesus with open Bibles, and he says to them, "You don't understand this book, because you don't believe in me."

Here's the key to everything—their rejection of Jesus Christ turns everything sour in their hands and stomach. The covenant is soured, the law is soured, and the revelation is soured. Why? Because they don't believe in Jesus Christ, the one sent from God. And believing means repentance, and they say, "We don't need to repent, we're the children of Abraham."

What this means, succinctly, is that the benefit of this re-assessment and new look is a fresh and needed balance in our

reading of these stories. The Pharisees have been a favorite pulpit illustration of legalists, traditionalists, conservative Church leaders, or religionists. We sometimes think of them as Roman Catholics and thus we can use them as the embodiment of the enemy that we don't want to become. But I tell you Jesus came to save the Pharisees too, along with the publicans and the sinners.

And so, I believe that's one of the key benefits of this discussion. That's not to say that I agree with all the conclusions relating to "The New Perspective" and the implications and inferences that are sometimes drawn.

R R J —You mentioned a second and third aspect of "The New Perspective" that makes a positive contribution. Let's talk about these helpful aspects a little bit more because this gets a little closer to where I think "The New Perspective" provides some help to us in understanding the Bible, which you've already been talking about. Again we're not saying that we believe one should follow "The New Perspective" as some kind of new wave or trend. We do not think everything that's being written in this field is wonderful.

We have some serious criticisms to be made but we're willing to interact with it more positively precisely because we think it's helping us understand better some of the questions the Bible actually puts to us. Talk about the second and third contributions you mentioned before.

NK —How can the law be treated and rejected so negatively if more than two-thirds of the Bible comes from the Old Testament Torah, from its application and wisdom, its proclamation by the prophets, its central place in the Psalms and so forth? The Psalmist and the saints of the Old Testament loved the law—how did we ever end up hating it as Protestants? I won't blame anybody for this hatred, but I believe a fundamental insight that we are being given by "The New Perspective" is to see what I will call *the redemptive historical* function of the law.

By this point I mean that God's law was given in the context of grace to the people of Israel. It was a custodian given to

bring Israel to Christ. Once Christ came, he embodied the law, he fulfilled the law, all of it—the ceremonies, the types, the precepts and everything else. If you reject Christ then you're going to be forced into legalism, because now you've got the law without the giver of the law.

R R J —Does not the New Testament treat Jesus as the fulfillment of law, of the covenant, of promise, of the law, and in a very real and almost obvious sense it all becomes incarnate in him? You have noted that two-thirds of the Bible is law. I can't help but tie this together and ask for your further reflection. I ask my friends who seem to think the law has only one *primary* purpose, to condemn and destroy, "What do you do with the Psalms? What do you do with this great book of Christian *experience* that speaks of *loving* the law, of *walking* in the law, of *meditating* in the law, even of *prospering* because we do these things?" If all the law is meant to be is a standard no one can keep, then what's the real point? If that's the way we think of it, as that which *always* condemns because no one can really keep it, then what is the point of all this Christian experience we see in the Psalter?

NK —Well I think you've hit upon the fundamental dilemma that's being exposed by "The New Perspective." (I'm not suggesting they've given us fully satisfactory answers to this, but what they're doing is putting their finger on a problem.) Reformed and Lutheran confessional people need to look this squarely in the face.

Let me give you an illustration from my own tradition. The Heidelberg Catechism talks a lot about how the law condemns. Let me give you a question that illustrates this better than any question the catechism gives us: "How do you know your misery?" Answer: "The law of God tells me." Now we're ready to run and say, "Yes, there you see it. That's it, period."

But listen to the next question. "What does God's law require of us?" Answer: "Christ teaches us this in summary in Matthew 22, 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, with all your strength. This

is the first and greatest commandment, and the second is like it, love your neighbor as yourself. All the law and the prophets hang upon these two commandments."

I want to point you to the first word that Christ teaches. This function of the law that we call condemning, misery-exposing, and the sin-exposing function of the law, I don't deny at all. It's there, yes, but it's in the hands of Christ that it functions in this manner. And if we de-Christologize that function of the law I think we end up with a function of the law that's abstracted from the covenant. It's abstracted from our relationship with God the Father. And my own confession teaches that.

R R J —That's excellent. Let's see if we can put this in a succinct way. The law does have the purpose of exposing our sinfulness and showing us our misery without Christ, and thus of driving us to him. We're not denying that purpose. But there has been the tendency, has there not, even though the Reformed community speaks of a third use of the law, to miss this very positive point? And in the Lutheran tradition that third use of the law doesn't have the same significance as it does in the Reformed tradition. But it would seem to me that popularly the Lutheran position has become the dominant one in American evangelical experience. By this I mean that the law's purpose is to condemn, since no one can keep it. So Jesus says, "Love the law." But love it in what sense? Well, we often hear, "Love it in the sense that you know it exposes your sin and drives you to Christ."

So the Reformed tradition says we have this third use to give instruction to the Christian. The law is, as one of the Puritans would say, "love's eyes." I believe that, but what has gone wrong in the Reformed tradition makes "The New Perspective" something that can help us recover a biblical perspective.

The Lutheran perspective doesn't generally see this use quite the same as we do. For some reason it seems the Reformed have often lost it, at least practically. You love the Church, you want to reform the Church, you believe in the Church, I know. So how does this help us love the Church?

People say to me, "Oh, all you guys are talking about is the third use of the law, that's all. No big deal, we've always believed that."

But there's something missing in this response. We're trying to say something *significant* without shredding or destroying the law at all. We're trying to say there's something in our own tradition that's being developed further here, something that we think would actually help us in reforming our churches further.

I think what we are trying to develop is, and please listen to my words carefully, the essential and genuinely *inseparable connection* between justification and sanctification. It's this *connection* that is part and parcel of this debate. I believe that the Reformed tradition has made a positive contribution in the history of Christianity by going beyond justification. I'm not saying we've outgrown this by any means. But I am suggesting that justification is not the *last word* of the gospel.

The last word of the gospel is the *glory of God*, and the glory of God is reached when his children are made to look more and more like him, and that means holiness. That means obedience, which necessarily springs forth from justification. And in the Reformed tradition, what we're risking I think, is being afraid of our own vocabulary and our own tradition.

R R J —Justification, the very word itself, relates to the righteousness language we find in the New Testament. It is used in past, present and future tenses in the New Testament. It seems to me that we have forgotten that it has a future tense at all.

NK —Quite true. In addition, *all* salvation is past, present and future. I wish we had four hours because I'd love to tell you about my thinking and reading in the past year with the help of Scott Hafemann and other biblical scholars who are writing on the nature of the Christian life as future oriented, as *living by promise*.

R R J —Let's talk briefly about living by the promises of God, or living in hope.

NK —Do you know that when you preach and declare to people that their sins are forgiven you've given them nothing but a promise? They can't weigh it, they can't measure it, and they can't quantify it. All you've given them is a word, and we live by that word everyday. By the way, that's the only way you live with your wife too, by a word, and she with you. You live together by the word of your wedding vows. And every time you part ways for the day you are confident that this word is still good. But it's a word from the past, with implications for the present, and always aiming at the future.

Well, so is God's Word. It's a word about the past, which we can't see, and have access to only through his Word. And it is for the present and about the future. That future word of forgiveness, just to take one of many points, means God says I will never hold this against you again. And that's all we have, when we go to sleep and when we get up. John, that's the gospel. And we tell people that this is all it is—it is a declaration.

This is what makes the state a perpetual competitor to the Church because it makes promises too. This is what makes economics a perpetual competitor to the Church, because it makes promises. Everybody is making promises. We say, "You believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and die, and you're going to rise again." Do you see? All of life is promissory in that sense.

R R J —That's great. So the Church has been given this inexhaustible treasure, this great resource in a simple message. We are commissioned to preach it, to teach it, and to celebrate it in worship and with the great symbols, the great realities of the sacraments that Christ has given to the Church in baptism and the Lord's supper. So, in this understanding, what is the place of the weekly gathering, of the declared spoken word, and the visual word of the Supper? It seems to me that you actually must hold a pretty high view of these things?

NK —Absolutely! The preaching of the word is the Word of God. Yes, I have a high view of preaching and the sacraments, because the preaching of the word of God is the Word of God, think of that at confession. And I teach my students that and

it gives them both confidence and, God willing, humility, so that when they're in the pulpit, and they are opening the text of God's Word faithfully, it is God whom the congregation really hears.

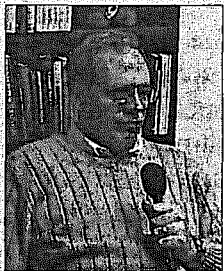
In the sacraments, it is God's promises that are conveyed and communicated by these visible physical realities and by the *real presence of Jesus Christ* in the Lord's Supper, which is spiritually apprehended. We have this dichotomy or opposition between real and spiritual. You'll get this with children when they ask, "Well, how is Jesus present? If it's not physical, it's not real." Well, Jesus is really present, and he's really feeding us with his real body, and his real blood in the elements of the bread and the wine.

R R J —And as I understand from my own study, the early Church, at least up until several centuries after the death of the apostles, confessed that there was a *mystery* in all this. That's as far as they would go to explain the presence of the real body and blood of Jesus in the Supper. It was only in the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries that the Church began to talk about what actually changes, or what's *under*, what's *over*, what's *in*, the elements. These became great debates in the sixteenth century but in the early Church they simply confessed that Jesus was really there. They never really said *how*, they just said he was there. Now it seems to me, on the Reformed and non-Reformed side of evangelical faith and practice, we've debated the how and thereby lost the *reality of affirming that he's really there*.

NK —Yes, he's there! And I think that you've been writing and speaking a great deal on the whole meaning and nature of worship, and I am one-hundred percent with you in terms of reformation and revival being connected to this recovery. Reformation and revival will come when God's people apprehend him in worship as God intends to be apprehended and received. Then you and I need to move to the next stage, if we ever get past this one (I don't believe we ever outgrow it). This next stage is the Lord's Day, the keeping of the Lord's Day, or

the honoring of the Lord's Day. When we recover worship, understood biblically, our understanding of this day begins to take on the idea of a wedding day.

R R J —Now you have raised my interest level even higher. I want to talk about the Lord's Day. Our readers would range all the way from those who hold to a Puritan Sabbath view of the Westminster Confession to others who believe it really is a day no different from any other except that we go to church for an hour on this day. I'm quite sure you're not on either side, at least rigidly. Talk a little bit about the actual celebration of the Lord's Day, in terms of the theology of the Church and the gospel as you've been articulating them to me.



On Sunday, the Lord's Day, we have a family get together. It's a wedding day of sorts because the Lord Jesus is coming to his bride, and while the wedding hasn't taken place, we're in preparation for that wedding. May I say, we're in rehearsal for the wedding.

NK —One of the blessings of the Lord's Day is to get to see people from whom you've been divided and scattered throughout the week. We live and work in a dirty world, and the businessman, the college student, and the homemaker, all do the bump and the grind of everyday life in this present world. On Sunday, the Lord's Day, we have a family get together. It's a wedding day of sorts because the Lord Jesus is coming to his bride, and while the wedding hasn't taken place, we're in preparation for that wedding. May I say, we're

in *rehearsal for the wedding*.

I don't know about your wedding day, but on my wedding day, there were things that came up unexpectedly, for which we had to go to the store. Now you know this happens on Sunday, doesn't it? Sometimes you run out of this, or you run out of that, and, now a rigid view would say, "Well, you know, we're just not going to eat today, because we forgot to buy food at the store, or we're not going to go to church, because we don't have gas in the car."

I believe that a more balanced prudent view would say, "You know what, we're going to do what we need to do today, and next week, but next Lord's Day when it comes around, we're going to be ready."

R R J —We're going to do what we need to do to maximize this rehearsal in our preparation for the great marriage to come with Christ. We are the bride and he is the bridegroom so we're going to maximize this rehearsal day celebration. I mean, we maximize this hope that we have in what's going to come, all because of the promise.

NK —That's right, and it's a rehearsal day in terms of the way we treat each other in the congregation of God's people. That's why I'm very big on eating together, in terms of congregational fellowship meals, but that they be used for meaningful fellowship.

R R J —Now I'm going to push the envelope a bit. You said you were provocative so I'm going to be provocative about ecclesiology. I'll appeal to Calvin's practice. Calvin, as you know, said that he believed a healthy church would be best served by having the Lord's Supper every single Lord's Day. I profoundly agree with Calvin here and I have recently affiliated with a church that practices weekly communion. I cannot begin to tell you what this has meant in my own life. I travel a great deal to speak in various churches, thus I'm not in my own church every Sunday. For many years, I often went months and didn't take the Lord's Supper because we only

had it once a month. Now I don't even have to think about this. I know that if I'm going to my own church community I will see my Christian family whom I've missed during the week (often for weeks in my case) and we're going to pass the peace and take the Supper. Please comment on that.

NK —My own tradition, the Dutch Reformed, has over the years moved from four times a year, to six times a year, and some to maybe twelve times a year. I agree with you about the weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper for exactly the reasons you give. You didn't mention this, but in terms of the visible sign reinforcing the audible Word of the gospel how can we not think of taking the meal more often?

R R J —But never one without the other, right?

NK —That's right, and we don't privatize the communion and have it at retreats. It is always a congregational fellowship meal. I've been in churches, as you have, where they do practice weekly communion, and I've been interested not only to participate but to watch how it's done. How do they do it meaningfully, solemnly, effectively? It can be done.

You know, in my tradition, people say, "Oh it would become too familiar." And I say, "Oh, has the preaching become too familiar, because we get that every week?" We get the voice of the Lord spoken every week, but we don't get the voice of the Lord *visualized* every week, because that would breed contempt.

But now I want to back up, and I want to surround us with pastoral theology here. The people among whom I live would have to overcome some very instinctive resistance to a weekly communion. We have preparatory service on the Sunday *before*, and the application *following* the service. That's our tradition. We need to educate people that we're *always preparing to come to the Lord's table*, if we're living close to the Word of God and close to God.

And I think we need to abbreviate or vary liturgical forms. I'm a proponent of mutually agreed upon, please listen care-

fully, *mutually agreed upon liturgical freedom*—you know, through a federation or fellowship of churches where we hold each other accountable. But I do agree that we, the Church, are weakened by *not* having the Lord's Supper often.

R R J —That's a function again of your very strong ecclesiology and the way you've defined it to me previously.

NK —That's right. I believe that by mutual voluntary agreement we are accountable to each other for how we behave as churches. And then within the local congregation, getting back to ministry, we need to fortify the elders. We cannot expect, however, God-pleasing biblical reformation and revival simply to proceed from the ministers. We've got to have elders who are in and among the flock, but that's another conversation.

R R J —Let's explore this for just a moment. You are a professor of theology and a professor of ethics and you teach pastors, or young pastors in the making, and you also minister to pastors in the ministry. How important is it to regain a reformational pastoral model? I would put it this way—we need to recover the classical model of the shepherd who is *with* the sheep, who *knows* the sheep, and who *prays for* the sheep. This shepherd should *love* the sheep *personally* and *relationally*. There is a family relationship bond with them. This minister doesn't just preach and do exposition of the Bible. I believe for over thirty years we've promoted biblical exposition as a method. I know this sounds like a heresy to some conservative ministers, but we've virtually driven a particular form of study and preaching into the ground and the people are starving relationally at a very deep level.

These days I'm pleading with those who are preparing for ministry, and with people already in the ministry, to understand the role of a shepherd as seen in this classical Christian model. John Calvin reinvigorated this in his reforming efforts in the sixteenth century. Richard Baxter did it in England. I think we've come a long way from it and I think we need a

reformation of a true pastoral model. What are your thoughts on this need for reformation?

NK —John, the Lord has worked in our lives, your life and my life, along some very parallel tracks. When we started Mid-America Reformed Seminary some years ago it was an effort of reformation and revival within the denomination we were all part of at the time. We were emphasizing preaching, preaching, and more preaching. We've been in business for over twenty years now, and we're coming to see, indeed I'm coming to see more and more clearly, exactly what you're saying. It must be preaching *plus*, and the *plus* is the incarnational model. It's really the incarnation of the shepherd's heart.

Let me add a couple of things here. Number one, we've got to have seminary professors who themselves have been pastors. (Maybe, in some cases, they still are pastors!) It kills the Church when we teach pastors in a strictly academic way. Number two, we need real apprenticeship programs in our seminaries, where our students are thrust into the Church under real eldership supervision, alongside other ministers for a hands-on learning of the nuts and bolts of pastoral visitation, leadership, and care.

R R J —And preferably not just for three months or only a summer between terms at school.

NK —Exactly. It needs to be long term. I think, we need a re-configuration of the model of seminary education in this country. We need a far more modular approach to matters rather than a lecture approach. We need far more interaction between the field and the classroom. We need a far greater blend of parsonage training with rigorous academic work. We've got to find this blend.

I'm a bit critical, I must tell you, of parsonage training [apprenticeship], that is strict parsonage training, but I'm exceedingly critical of an academic theological education that leads directly to the ministry. We desperately need the blend.

R R J —I've asked this of others in the past and this is probably a good place to ask it now. You're aware of the lecture given many years ago by B. B. Warfield on the life of theological students. This emphasis in Warfield is also to be seen in Helmet Thielicke later on. It is an emphasis upon the inner person who ministers. I think this emphasis is being regained. I actually see a rain cloud forming across traditions and denominations in terms of recovering classical spiritual theology.

Along with this there is a real concern for spiritual formation that says what you *are*, as a minister, is first, not what you *do*. I want you to talk about this. Tell us about how you've fanned the flame that God put within you as a boy. What have you used, I mean what disciplines, routines, and methods have you employed to keep your own heart close to the Lord and to the fire, to the work of the Spirit?

NK —Well, let me begin with methods. First, let me describe what it means to me to teach in a seminary where I try every day to inculcate spiritual formation. This may sound arrogant. I hope this is not the case, but I will be very honest.

I've had this problem of breaking down and crying in classes when I am overcome by a certain discussion that we're having with students in whom I see my own early responses to some things. Sometimes I begin to plead, and exhort, and preach in class to my students. I tell them for the sake of God's people, you've got to do this, you've got to be this, you have to find this out.

Sometimes I end up overwhelmed with emotion and I have to leave the room. That's happened more and more in the last few years, in part I guess because I sense my own weaknesses in pastoral ministry. What I do, and this may sound a bit odd at first, is my daily work. This keeps me close to the Lord. When I teach a course in Christian spirituality and pour myself into that course, I want to talk to students about their spirit before the Lord. This January, for a whole month, I taught such a course. I talked to them about these vital issues. I talked to them about theological issues in a most personal way.

I finished serving a term as an elder in our congregation where I did family visiting. I'm still doing marriage counseling as a result of that. I try to demonstrate this reality in front of my students by teaching adult Sunday school in my congregation, by teaching a young adult forum one Sunday night a month in my home, and by teaching a ladies Bible study at Mid-America on two Wednesday afternoons a month. I try to show them how it is that we keep in the Word.

RRJ —I want you to respond to this in the same way. I've been a Christian for more than forty-five years. I have found in the last five-to-ten years that my own heart is more in love with Christ than ever, and yet I've put many of the models and the forms of Bible reading and prayer that I learned as a young man aside. That may shock some people. I don't always read long portions of the Bible every day like I once did. I'm not saying you shouldn't, nor denying that this was part of my early formation.

But I think it needs to be said that there is no *one* way to do this, and that's been so freeing for me to discover that I can now pursue the love of Christ *for* me, and *in* me, by the Spirit in a fresh way. I'm finding in John Calvin, as an example, a gold mine that takes me much deeper. I find this vein of gold in the whole catholic spiritual tradition. Calvin, for example, didn't throw the monastic movement in the trash. He actually borrowed from it and learned from it. I've begun to do the same. I'm using all kinds of resources that I didn't even know existed five and ten years ago. Tell me how this has worked with you because I sense that in your heart you weep, as you confessed a moment ago, precisely because you also feel like your past was so weak in these matters.

NK —I can only say this is the Lord's continual refining in his sanctifying grace within my life. My wife and I recently joined a local health club because we've had some physical problems that we need to keep on top of with exercise. I have a CD player and headphones that I use when I exercise. Do you know what I play on my CD? I play the Bible. I listen to the Bible.

I've never done that before. Have you ever *listened* to the Bible?

RRJ —I have, but I haven't done enough of it, but I'm about to do it. Tell me more.

NK —It's a challenge—it's a real challenge.

RRJ —You *hear* the Word; it makes a difference. It's like what Paul says to Timothy, to "read the Word" in public so people will hear it.

NK —That's right.

RRJ —In the congregation you hear it read aloud. So you're saying, it's a different thing to hear it, not just to read it?

NK —Absolutely! I'll give you a second example that has impressed me. I heard a number of lectures on tape given by Tom Wright. I discern from him, or somebody who knows him, that when he was working on a commentary, on a particular New Testament book, he *wrote* it all out in Greek, and pasted it on his wall. He memorized the Greek, the whole text. Or, he read it on tape in Greek and then played it back to himself.

I cannot emphasize the text of the Bible enough. Just to meditate on a verse will send me forward for two weeks, just a verse of Scripture. I'm going to teach Colossians next semester, for the first time. Right now I'm reading Colossians and I'm listening to Colossians. That kind of devotional approach strengthens me—it satisfies my appetite.

RRJ —I'll give you an illustration from a friend that I'm going to actually name. He's not a minister, but he is well known. Some of our readers know I've had a long friendship with Bill McCartney, the founder of Promise Keepers and a former football coach, not a theologian or preacher. We've had a great friendship and great conversations about theolo-

gy. I love Bill, and I want him so much to develop his theology as he keeps growing.

Bill does something I found very interesting, and I admit that I am a borrower. I'll borrow from you, I'll borrow from anybody, because I need all the help I can get. I was in Bill's car going from his home to his office in Denver last year and he pushed a cassette tape in and said, "John, this is what I do every morning on the way to work." This tape was timed to fit his drive from his neighborhood to his work, about twenty minutes. It was his own voice on the tape speaking of the things he wanted to pray for that day. He spoke to God in a way that refreshed his mind during times that he might listen to the news. He was affirming, listening and responding to his own voice, saying, "Lord, I want to pray for this, and yes I agree with this." As we drove out of his cul-de-sac outside his home he said, "I do this when I leave my garage in the morning. I go around the cul-de-sac and my street each day." He prayed with me in the car and then he began to pray for each home as we drove past it. At one place he stopped and said, "There's a real need here, Father, I want to ask for this particular person," and then moved on. Then he pushed the tape in after we got out of the cul-de-sac. It was amazing. I sat there and said, "For all the criticism that people level at this man he is clearly seeking God with all his heart. This has affected my prayer life over the last year. How do you respond to that, in terms of prayer?"

NK —Well, in terms of prayer I have found that when I put the Scriptures in, or when I do the Greek, or when I meditate and try to rehearse in my mind that text, I was meditating over it in a way that's accompanied by prayer. I'm not very original either, and that's why I appreciate my friendship with you. If I could say anything to my brothers-in-tradition, note the hyphen here, *brothers-in-tradition*, it would be *stand firm and stand free*. Be free to receive and to appropriate the kind of thing you just spoke about.