

The relation between our good works and God's rewards is unavoidable because our Lord himself often made this connection. Today, also because of the prosperity gospel, many are confused. In this book, with its wonderfully fitting title, Brian Huizinga builds on the spiritual and theological wisdom of Augustine, Calvin, Francis Turretin, Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, and Herman Hoeksema, among others, and provides a reliable guide through the tricky shoals of this subject. *Crowning His Gifts* is biblically grounded and confessionally sound in its careful distinctions, clear definitions, and appropriate cautions. This is a groundbreaking, thorough, practical, and timely book.

—JOHN BOLT,  
Professor emeritus of systematic theology,  
Calvin Theological Seminary (Grand Rapids, MI),  
editor of Herman Bavinck's English editions  
of *Reformed Dogmatics* and *Reformed Ethics*



# **CROWNING HIS GIFTS**



# CROWNING HIS GIFTS

Gracious Rewards in the Reformed Tradition

BRIAN L. HUIZINGA



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Scripture cited is taken from the King James (Authorized) Version. Italics in Scripture quotations reflect the author's emphasis.

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Dedicated to:  
Prof. Herman Hanko  
and  
Prof. David J. Engelsma

God's faithful servants through whose tireless labors  
in preaching, teaching, and writing the Spirit of Christ  
significantly advanced my understanding of the Reformed faith  
during my formative years of theological development and  
pursuit of the ministry, causing me to behold  
and love my God as never before.

Soli Deo Gloria!





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## FOREWORD

It is arguably well-known that in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, numerous doctrines on grace emerged that distorted what the Reformation had taught on this subject. Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945) rightly described much of these teachings as an expression of “cheap grace.”

The accusation of cheap grace surely cannot be made against Brian Huizinga’s *Crowning His Gifts*. By dealing with the subject of the reward for good works, the Protestant Reformed theologian does not ignore works in the framework of God’s grace. Using many quotations, the author shows that the doctrine of God’s rewards for our works is in line with the Reformed tradition.

For Huizinga it is clear that God works all things (Eph. 1:10). But the author never slips into a doctrine according to which God is the only one who works: God works everything, but he does not work alone. In fact, the latter view was never advocated by Augustine, nor by any of the great theologians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, nor by any theologian in the Secession tradition (*Afscheiding*). God, who works everything, always calls man as well (1 Thess. 5:24). When God calls man, he does not do so because there is something in man on which he could lay hold. The opposite is the case: God does this as the God who calls the non-existent, God does this as if (!) there were something in us (Rom. 4:17). But it is precisely in calling man in this way that God creates in us the response that

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provides the framework for a mutual relationship of faith, hope, and love. *Crowning His Gifts* is a solid, biblical, Reformed study of our covenantal relationship with God. Pick up this book and read it carefully!

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Germany, March 2024



## PREFACE

In his good providence, God led me to this subject of rewards. Only a few years ago I had no particular interest in this topic. In fact, I must confess to my shame that the biblical truth of rewards never really excited me as it should have. When it came time to preach on Lord's Day 24 of the Heidelberg Catechism defending the doctrine of justification by faith alone, I was always genuinely excited to fulfill my duty. It was thrilling to exalt my Savior, engage in holy polemics, and comfort God's people by showing them from the Catechism that the Bible's teaching of a reward does not compromise the truth of justification. Thanks be to God that the antithetical note of the catechism has always resounded in my soul: the reward is not of merit but of grace!

But looking beyond the Catechism in Lord's Day 24, what about that word *reward* found throughout the Bible? I know how *not* to understand it. What is a proper *positive* explanation of that concept? I did not wrestle with that question as I should have. Looking back I find it puzzling and embarrassing that my heart was lukewarm, because the word *reward* in any other context outside of Scripture excites and allures. We consumers love rewards, and they incentivize our actions. Advertisers know that. Where can you go today from the cash register at The Home Depot to the jet bridge of Southwest Airlines and not see "Rewards" flashed before your eyes? But these are fleeting human rewards on earth, "where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal" (Matt. 6:19). What about the superior, heavenly rewards of God?

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My interest was first piqued in the midst of a conflict that unfolded in the Protestant Reformed Churches in America, of which I have been a lifelong member. Although church conflict is unpleasant and sometimes agonizing, I have always believed and confessed that God sovereignly ordains and works all things, including controversy, for the advantage of his church. One good purpose of God in controversy is to lead his church into a deeper understanding of and appreciation for the truth of his word. Through controversy the Spirit brings different aspects of a theological problem out into the open and then leads the church to a proper solution, sharpening and developing her understanding along the way. Truly, God is good.

The initial controversial theological issues centered on the place and function of the believer's good works and involved the doctrines of the covenant, justification, and sanctification. Eventually the controversy would also touch on the reward of grace as it appears in the Heidelberg Catechism. We gave new thought to this concept, raised new questions, and proposed answers that were sometimes varied. Eagerly, I went back to the literature of the Reformed tradition to see what the church of the past had to say about rewards. After an initial search, I was disappointed to find no book dedicated to the subject, and precious little in many of the trustworthy sources of systematic theology.

As the dispute unfolded in the churches, I was appointed by synod to professorship in our Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary in the summer of 2019 and began pursuing an advanced degree at Calvin Theological Seminary (CTS). When it came time to select a theological subject for a major research paper in one of my classes, I thought it would be helpful for me, and thus for the churches, if I would examine the reward of grace in the theology of John Calvin. I found his teachings to be tremendously valuable and enlightening. I penned an article entitled, "John Calvin and the Reward of Grace." It was later published in the *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* (April 2020).

However, I subsequently discovered more material in Calvin's

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commentaries that could enrich the presentation. Furthermore, I wanted to dig deeper into the writings of the Reformed theologians after Calvin, especially in the Dutch Reformed tradition. When it came time to decide on a subject for my ThM, I settled on the topic of rewards. I quickly discovered that many of the most helpful resources are commentaries that Reformed theologians and preachers wrote on the Heidelberg Catechism (Lord's Day 24) and Belgic Confession (article 24). Since many of these works were written in the Dutch language, and have never been translated, I took two semesters in Dutch theological reading to sharpen my Dutch abilities, which had deteriorated since my days as a student in seminary. I then researched and wrote my thesis on rewards, finding the topic thrilling, the process rewarding, and the CTS faculty gracious. With a few minor alterations then, the content of the book you hold in your hands is the master's thesis I submitted to the faculty of CTS in May 2022.

I express my thanks to the *Reformed Free Publishing Association* and all those who labored so meticulously on its behalf to help prepare the thesis for publication in book form.

I am grateful to the Protestant Reformed Churches and our Theological School Committee for the good and wise program designed to transition newly appointed seminary professors into their fulltime duties. We are given time to devote to pursuing an advanced degree. Had I gone directly from the pastorate into full time teaching, I would have missed out on very valuable time for study and preparation. And I would not have been able to research and write this book.

I thank the Lord for leading me to a topic I never would have chosen apart from his providential directing of the course of my life. The topic of rewards now excites me, chiefly because it leads me to greater adoration of the God of my salvation for how he marvelously works out his counsel in the salvation and final glorification of each one of his chosen people in Jesus Christ.

—Brian Huizinga





# INTRODUCTION

I am not aware of any theological work in the confessional Reformed tradition that provides a comprehensive and systematic treatment of the biblical teaching that God rewards the good works of believers. Enter any library of a Reformed seminary and amble down the aisles of theological books; though you will find countless books comprehensively and systematically treating doctrinal topics such as the Trinity, predestination, creation, original sin, the covenant, justification, baptism, the millennium, and so on, I am confident you will not find a similar work on rewards—even if you use an electronic search engine.

To say that there is no theological work offering a thorough examination of rewards is not to say that Reformed theologians have ignored this subject. If that were true, a Reformed view of rewards would have to be constructed almost from the ground up. Scattered throughout the theological writings of Reformed theologians is, if collected and synthesized, a surprisingly robust exposition of the biblical doctrine of rewards in all its essential components; however, there is no single theological work providing a *comprehensive* and *systematic* treatment. There is no evidence in the literature that any Reformed theologian has carefully engaged in an extended biblical, historical, and theological study dedicated to the concept of rewards. There is no work that has compiled, organized, reflected upon, carefully formulated, and worked out various implications of the existing elements of Reformed thought as they are scattered throughout the literature.

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Therefore, the question this book seeks to address is: What, according to a confessional Reformed perspective, is a proper understanding of the biblical teaching that God rewards the good works of believers?

In looking back over the history of the Christian church, one discovers that serious reflection on the biblical subject of rewards first surfaced with Augustine during the Pelagian controversy of the fourth and fifth centuries AD. In the context of a larger dispute over the doctrines of grace, Pelagius taught that the sinner can of his own free will render to God good works that are pleasing to him and worthy of reward. Seeking to defend the doctrines of grace, Augustine wrestled with the biblical presentation of rewards and raised what he regarded as “no small question” when he asked: “If eternal life is rendered to good works...how can eternal life be a matter of grace, seeing that grace is not rendered to works?”<sup>1</sup> Augustine answered his own question from the Scriptures, writing: “This question, then, seems to me to be by no means capable of solution, unless we understand that even those good works of ours, which are recompensed with eternal life, belong to the grace of God, because of what is said by the Lord Jesus, ‘Without me ye can do nothing.’”<sup>2</sup> Augustine added:

Well now, is not a crown given as the reward of good deeds? It is, however, only because he works good works in good men, of whom it is said, “it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure,” that the Psalm has it, as just now quoted: “He crowneth thee with mercy and compassion,” since it is through his mercy that we perform the good deeds to which the crown is awarded.<sup>3</sup>

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- 1 Augustine, “A Treatise on Grace and Free Will,” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, first series, vol. 5 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 451.
  - 2 Augustine, “Treatise on Grace and Free Will,” 451.
  - 3 Augustine, “Treatise on Grace and Free Will,” 452.

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Good works are of grace, and their crown is of grace. Throughout his writings Augustine famously taught what would be repeated for ages after him by theologians and confessional statements in the Reformed tradition: when God rewards our good works, he crowns his own gifts in us. This led John Calvin (1509–1564), for example, to write: “How often does this thought recur in Augustine: ‘God does not crown our merits but his own gifts’; ‘we call “rewards” not what are due our merits, but what are rendered for graces already bestowed!’”<sup>4</sup> In denying the Pelagian conception of free will and meritorious works, Augustine championed the sovereign and saving grace of God and applied the teaching of grace to rewards.

During the medieval period there was not as much significant reflection upon the concept of an eternal reward as there was ongoing discussion among various schools of thought focusing on the concept of *merit* and whether God could be obligated to man in any sense. Thomas Aquinas and other schoolmen refined the teaching of merit by formulating a distinction between merit *de condigno* and merit *de congruo*. Merit *de condigno* refers to works that are performed by the power of the gracious principles infused in baptism. These works are fully meritorious, so they justly deserve a reward of God. Merit *de congruo* refers to works that are performed with the natural conscience and by the power of a prevenient grace that is distinct from the saving grace of regeneration. These works do not truly deserve a reward, but by virtue of prevenient grace it is congruent for God to reward them, so in his generosity he does. While many theologians worked within the framework of merit and employed such distinctions, strict Augustinians like Gregory of Rimini maintained

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4 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols., Library of Christian Classics 20–21 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977), 2.5.2, 1:318.

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Augustine's doctrine of grace and rejected any teaching of meritorious works.<sup>5</sup>

Arguably the most significant period in the history of the Protestant church for shaping the church's understanding of divine rewards came at the dawn of Protestantism during the Reformation of the sixteenth century. The reformers were forced to contend with the doctrine of meritorious works developed and taught by the Roman Catholic Church. Following Augustine, the leading theologians of the Reformation and some of the significant confessional statements arising out of the Reformation taught that God rewards the good works of believers, but the reward is not of merit, it is all of grace. For example, the Second Helvetic Confession, authored by the Swiss reformer Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575), concludes its extended exposition of good works by affirming: “Though we teach that God gives a reward to our good deeds, yet withal we teach with Augustine that ‘God doth crown in us, not our deserts, but his own gifts.’ And, therefore, whatever reward we receive, we say that it is a grace.”<sup>6</sup> To this day, all Reformed theologians who take up the subject of rewards make an explanation and defense of the gracious character of the reward over against merit the primary focus of their instruction.

In the rather small but fruitful field of existing literature relevant to a study of rewards in the Reformed tradition there is a wide variety in the extent to which Reformed theologians treat

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5 For an explanation of the development of the concept of merit and a summary of the teaching of works and rewards in the Middle Ages, see Alister McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 109–119, 172–179; Charles Raith II, *After Merit: John Calvin's Theology of Works and Reward* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2016), 37–89; and Joseph Wawrykow, *God's Grace and Human Action: "Merit" in the Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016).

6 Second Helvetic Confession 16, in James Dennison Jr., ed., *Reformed Confessions of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries in English Translation*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), 2:844.

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the subject of rewards and what questions they choose to address. When theologians cover the topic of rewards in their works of systematic theology, they either treat rewards in connection with sanctification and good works in the locus of soteriology, or they treat rewards in connection with the final judgment in the locus of eschatology. Many theologians say very little about rewards, mentioning the term or idea only in passing with a brief comment or two. Representative is the Calvin Theological Seminary professor Louis Berkhof (1873–1957) in his widely used work, *Systematic Theology*. In his treatment of sanctification Berkhof devotes a paragraph to the refutation of meritorious works, while in his explanation of the final state of the righteous he devotes a brief paragraph to the nature of the eternal reward and teaches that the final reward is eternal life and that there are degrees of bliss in heaven.<sup>7</sup>

Among theological works that are helpful for understanding rewards is the *Institutes* of Calvin. Over the breadth of the entire corpus of his theological writings, which in addition to his *Institutes* includes his commentaries, polemical treatises, and sermons, Calvin addresses the main elements of the concept of rewards more thoroughly than any other theologian to this date. As we will see, Calvin's articulation of the concept contributes more than any other to my attempt to assemble a Reformed understanding of rewards. Calvin is particularly helpful in his treatment of temporal rewards as well as in his careful explanation of the practical effect that God intends his promise of rewards to have in the life of his children on earth.

Although Martin Luther (1483–1546) has no theological work specifically addressing rewards, several of his writings compiled in *Luther's Works* provide helpful and characteristically colorful comments on the often-controversial subject. These include his explanation of God as the believer's reward, his application of degrees of glory for glorified saints, and his description of the suffering that saints endure on this earth.

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7 Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1953), 542, 737.

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*Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, by the Genevan-Italian theologian Francis Turretin (1623–1687), is also helpful for understanding the nature of the eternal reward, including degrees of glory in heaven, for Turretin provides an analysis of arguments against degrees and a biblical defense of it.

Turning to the Dutch Reformed tradition, *Reformed Dogmatics* by Herman Bavinck (1854–1921) contains no extended treatment of rewards, but his brief comments on rewards dotting his magnum opus are characteristically penetrating insights. For example, he calls attention to the significance of rewards in connection with our nature as sensuous creatures and how God relates to us with images like crowns.

In his well-known work on eschatology, *The Bible and the Future*, Anthony Hoekema (1913–1988), professor at Calvin Theological Seminary, devotes several pages to the reward in his consideration of the final judgment and makes some insightful remarks about how to understand the organic relation between our works and rewards in time and eternity. G. C. Berkouwer (1903–1996), professor of systematic theology at the Free University in Amsterdam, in his work *Faith and Justification*, devotes nearly twenty pages to the topic. He demonstrates the perfect theological and practical harmony between the central Reformed confession of salvation *sola fide* and a meaningful teaching of a reward according to works.

More recently David J. Engelsma, a theologian of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America (PRCA), in his work *The Gospel Truth of Justification*, gives valuable exposition that covers most of the important questions, including the nature of the reward and how we are to understand the correlation between good works on earth and a variation of rewards in heaven.

However, none of these theological works takes up the subject of temporal rewards with any detailed analysis or development. Furthermore, none of these sources demonstrates (nor do they

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intend to) what, if any, of the author's explanation is grounded in the Reformed tradition.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to theological works, the other significant source of material on the subject of divine rewards includes the commentaries on the Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 24 and Belgic Confession article 24 produced in the Dutch Reformed tradition.<sup>9</sup> Two of the most beneficial commentaries on the Belgic Confession are *Onze Nederlandsche Geloofsbelijdenis* (Our Netherlands Confession of Faith) by A. D. R. Polman (1897–1993), professor of dogmatics in Kampen, the Netherlands, and *Onze Geloofsbelijdenis* (Our Confession of Faith) by the preacher J. G. Feenstra (1888–1966). Polman's work in interpreting the Belgic Confession is noteworthy because he consistently interacts with and draws from the theology of Luther and Calvin. The subtitle of his commentary is *Verklaard uit het verleden geconfronteerd met het heden*, which is, *Explained out of the Past, Confronted with the Present*. He intentionally and explicitly grounds his exposition in the theology of the reformers.

The most helpful commentaries on the Heidelberg Catechism include *De Heidelbergsche Catechismus* by Jan Bavinck (1826–1909), the father of the more well-known Herman Bavinck and an influential preacher in the Dutch Christian Reformed Church (Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk) that seceded from the state church during the *Afscheiding* of 1834. *E Voto Dordraceno* (variously translated as *The Pledge of Dordt* or *According to the Will of Dordt*) by Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920) contains a lengthy exposition of rewards that is most helpful in explaining how the degrees of glory in heaven correspond to works on earth. In *The Triple Knowledge* and in his *Reformed Dogmatics* and *Behold He Cometh*,

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8 Berkouwer is an exception as he frequently cites Calvin to demonstrate the Reformed rejection of meritorious works.

9 Throughout this book all translations from sources in Dutch are my own.

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a commentary on the book of Revelation, Herman Hoeksema (1886–1965), one of the founding fathers of the PRCA, provides valuable exposition as well as some critical interaction with what he finds peculiar in Kuyper’s presentation of rewards in *E Voto*.

While all these sources, and many others to which I will refer in the course of this study, are helpful in understanding a Reformed conception of rewards, none of these works includes a compilation of Reformed thought in demonstration of the position of the Reformed tradition. Furthermore, various elements of the concept need development and clarification, such as the nature and significance of temporal rewards. For over 450 years Reformed believers have confessed with the Heidelberg Catechism that God rewards our good works “in this life,”<sup>10</sup> but does our theology do justice to those three little words? Additionally, we need to sharpen our conception of degrees of glory corresponding to works performed on earth as well as carefully formulate an expression of the purpose of the reward and whether the desire for rewards is properly regarded as a motive of obedience.

The aim of this book is to demonstrate that although there is no outstanding work in the Reformed tradition providing a comprehensive systematic explanation of the truth that God rewards the good works of his people, there is what can properly be called a Reformed understanding of rewards, that is, a Reformed consensus. This Reformed understanding arises out of the Reformed confessions and can be distilled from the teachings of various Reformed theologians who have to one degree or another touched on the main elements of the concept of rewards. The Reformed tradition has not ignored rewards but has left the church with an inheritance to be identified, cherished, and cultivated so that our collective understanding as the servants of Christ’s kingdom

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10 Heidelberg Catechism Q 63, in Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes*, 6th ed., 3 vols. (New York: Harper and Row, 1931; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 3:327.



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may advance toward full maturity in expectation of him who said: “Occupy till I come” (Luke 19:13).

After I set forth several reasons why a study of rewards is important (chapter 2), I will demonstrate that the Reformed faith teaches the following: there is an eternal reward in heaven and it consists of eternal life (chapter 3); corresponding to one’s good works performed on earth, there are degrees of bliss and glory among the saints in heaven (chapter 4); there are temporal rewards in this life that can consist of special privileges, responsibilities, opportunities, and honors in God’s kingdom (chapter 5); the reward in time and eternity is not of merit but of grace (chapter 6); and the purpose of the reward is to stimulate believers to continued obedience and perseverance in an unholy and hostile world (chapter 7). In the last major chapter, I will work out some significant implications of the reward for the Christian life (chapter 8).

The method undertaken in this study is primarily one of theological retrieval in drawing out of the tradition any previous engagement with the fundamental elements of the concept of rewards, then arranging the findings systematically along with commentary. I want to give voice to the Reformed tradition so that the reader has a clear understanding of what the tradition has said on this subject. Furthermore, at various points along the way this study does aim at theological construction, for example, in the area of temporal rewards and degrees of glory in heaven, as well as by providing a carefully studied and precisely articulated explanation of God’s purpose in promising rewards.

As I reach back over the Reformed tradition, the theologians upon whose work I will mainly rely fall into three basic groups. First, I will rely upon the magisterial reformers, primarily John Calvin. Although Martin Luther does not belong to the Reformed tradition in the strict sense of the word but is the source of the stream that is the Lutheran tradition, I will frequently draw from Luther, since the Reformed tradition owes so much to him when it comes to soteriology and the doctrines of grace. Second, I will draw

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from the Dutch Reformed theologians in the Netherlands after the Secession of 1834; and then, third, I will refer to the theologians of the PRCA. From time to time I may cite other theologians who are Calvinistic in their soteriology. Occasionally I include quotations from Presbyterian theologians of the Westminster tradition in order to demonstrate unanimity with the continental Reformed tradition; nevertheless, I avoid the enormous Presbyterian tradition as a whole lest the field of study become unwieldy. An underlying goal of mine is to trace the line of the Reformed tradition as it began in the Reformation in Europe, ran through the Netherlands in the Dutch Reformed tradition loyal to Dordt, and continues to this day in the church of Jesus Christ, specifically in his body as manifested in the PRCA.