

ARISE & BUILD

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RETHINKING CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

BY MARTIN G. SELBREDE



Today we'll take an extended journey, passing through different waypoints as we travel, to properly build our case. The stops along the way may seem disconnected, but they jointly lay the foundation for arriving at our destination.

In other words, gird your loins: we'll be covering a lot of ground.

THE PRIESTHOOD—AND LEVITICAL STATUS— OF ALL BELIEVERS

The fact that the Reformers would go to the mat for the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers is well-known. Several passages support this conception of the Kingdom of God in the midst of this world. Two passages in Revelation reiterate the matter:

And hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen. (Rev. 1:6)

And hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth. (Rev. 5:10)

The Apostle Peter lays out the same privileges, his second reference mirroring the words of Moses:

Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 2:5)

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

The fundamental Mosaic passage appears in Exodus:

And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation. These are the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel. (Exodus 19:6)

These texts disclose valuable truths, but overreliance upon them has arguably led Christians to neglect the fuller picture concerning these ideas regarding practical application for us today in the realm of reconstruction.

THE MAKING OF A LEVITE

In the prophets, we encounter divine promises regarding the ultimate destiny of the Levites, who were distinctive in putting God's Word and law over blood descent (Deut. 33:9). These depictions focus on the ultimate extension of the Levites in the world. Isaiah's final prophetic words indicate that God will even turn Gentiles into Levites.

And I will also take of them for priests and for Levites, saith the Lord. (Isaiah 66:21)

The preceding context makes clear that these men aren't descended from Aaron or Levi. They are Gentiles. Yet the Lord God will make them priests and Levites. As Keil notes, "Levites also shall be taken from among the heathen."¹ We see flexibility in Scripture regarding priests and priestly functions, for not all of them are descendants of Aaron. Moses was Aaron's brother, not Aaron's son, yet he discharged the office of priest repeatedly, and the Levite Samuel did the same, as

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Delitzsch points out regarding Psalm 99:6.² Hengstenberg, opposing every translation of Psalm 99:6, firmly defends redistributing the phrases so that Samuel is declared to be among His priests.³

We encounter similar reversals in Isaiah 56 concerning foreigners and eunuchs being promoted over the children of Israel; in Israel being “the third” (not the first) after Egypt and Assyria in Isaiah 19:18-25 (where the Gentiles build an altar that God magnifies); in the Gentiles offering pure offerings and incense in Malachi 1:11 versus Israel’s polluted offerings; in the Philistines being converted and elevated to the status of godly governors in Judah and faithful Jebusites in Zechariah 9:7; in the engraving of the wild olive branches into the olive tree whose natural branches were broken off in Romans 11; and how Gentiles in Christ are the children of Sarah while physical/genetic Jerusalem is equated with Hagar the Egyptian (Gal. 4:22-28).

The scriptural concept of a Levite today is not someone physically descended from Levi, but *spiritually* descended from Levi. This has major implications in the book of Jeremiah.

LEVITES INNUMERABLE

It is Jeremiah who proclaims God’s promise concerning the global extension of the kings and priests of the Lord: the seed of David being the kings, the seed of Levi being the priests. The prophecy’s climax is in Jeremiah 33:

As the host of heaven cannot be numbered, neither the sand of the sea measured: so will I multiply the seed of David my servant, and the Levites that minister unto me. (Jer. 33:22)

As with the seed of Abraham as explicated by Paul, so too are the seeds of David and of Levi spiritual concepts. It is here that we encounter the kings and priests described by John and Peter in the New Testament. What is distinctive here is that the *earth is filled to overflowing with innumerable Levites and Davids*, with priests and kings that cannot be numbered.

This is hardly a new teaching. Heng-

stenberg’s analysis is on the mark.

...[T]here is a verbal reference to the promise to Abraham in Gen. xv. 5, xxii.17. Since these words, which originally referred to all Israel, are here transferred to the family of David, and to the Levites, it is thereby sufficiently intimated that all Israel shall be changed into the family of David, and into the tribe of Levi. This idea need not surprise us. It has its foundation in the Law itself [at Exodus 19:6].⁴

... [I]n order that they might know that they themselves were the real bearers of the priestly dignity, [the laymen] retained, even after the institution of the Levitical priesthood, that priestly function which formed the root and foundation of all others, viz., the slaying of the covenant-sacrifice, of the paschal lamb, which formed the center of all other sacrifices ... [Philo wrote]: “In offering up the paschal lamb, the office of the laymen is by no means simply to bring the sacrificial animals to the altar, that they may be slain and offered up by the priests; but, according to the regulations of the Law, the whole people exercise priestly functions, inasmuch as everyone in his own behalf offers up the prescribed sacrifice.”⁵

It was realized by the raising of the whole true posterity of Abraham to the royal dignity, through Christ. This most striking antithesis to the despair—the despair saying: there is no king in Israel; the consolation: all Israel are kings—is expressly brought forward in Jeremiah 33:22.⁶

Jeremiah takes the Ark of the Covenant out of the sweep of history at Jeremiah 3:16 to signify changes to come.⁷ Moreover, the certainty of God’s promise concerning this multiplication of Levites is vouchsafed to us when God compares His covenant concerning the unceasing alternation of day and night (promised in Genesis 8:22) with His covenant with David⁸ and with Levi⁹ (Jer. 33:21). As Hengstenberg says, “By the inviolable maintenance of the course of nature, He binds Himself to the inviolable maintenance of the moral order.”¹⁰

HOW WERE THE LEVITES DISTRIBUTED THROUGHOUT CANAAN?

George C. M. Douglas pointed out how the Levites were dispersed throughout the land.

... there was a peculiarity in providence as to their geographical distribution. There were forty-eight cities allotted to them in all; that is, to four divisions, consisting of the priests and the three great Levitical families.¹¹

Nehemiah succeeded in restoring pretty much the arrangements of David, at least as to the singers and porters; only, as the territorial arrangements of the tribes were not restored, there is nothing said of properly Levitical cities.¹²

At the time of Nehemiah's reconstruction, the Levites were completely diffused throughout Israel's geography. Like leaven penetrating everywhere, the Levites were distributed amidst every tribe. Like salt, the presence of faithful Levites served to preserve the nation.

The tribe of Levi had an organization quite different from that of the other tribes ... Its members were dispersed through all the territories of Israel.¹³

Moses gave to the tribe of Levi the particular organization, under which we find it. He distributed it throughout all the other twelve tribes, and assigned to it specific duties. The high priest ... had his permanent residence at the capital ... From this center, the system spread itself out to the utmost extremities of the nation. Everywhere its influence was exerted to inspire a love of law and order; to promote peace; to cement the bonds of social and political union, to insure a constantly progressive civilization ...¹⁴

Levites were diffused throughout the entire nation because "the Levites were not a centralized institution."¹⁵

The modern state is at war with the church, and most directly with its teaching ministry, with its lifeblood. State after state seeks to control this Levitical function and to deny its centrality in the life of Christ's church. For the church to surrender this area to the state is to deny Jesus as Lord. For churchmen to submit the Levitical ministry into Caesar's hands

and control is to forsake the faith.¹⁶

We have a world to conquer for Christ. We do it, not through coercion, but through conversion. We do not seek a top-down solution, an imposition from above, but a grassroots strategy, the conversion of peoples and the reordering of their lives in terms of God's law-word.¹⁷

[The Levites] were the teachers and scholars of Israel. Their cities were throughout the land, strategically located to give every area a center of learning and a radiating influence.¹⁸

The Levites were as deeply embedded in Israel as the leaven was embedded in the meal in Christ's parable.

THE ENEMIES RATTLE THEIR SABERS

The enemies of Christian Reconstruction, or of any effective building done by Christians, mirror the mental and emotional attributes of Sanballat, one of the first to troll against God's work:

The different moods of Sanballat in Nehemiah are described in an interesting fashion ... [His anger] is the anger of people who were uncertain what to expect or what to do ... [being] helpless spectators of events of which they did not approve.¹⁹

Sanballat's combination of scorn and rage against the work of reconstruction arose out of a sense of impotence, because he "could not complain about it to the Persian king, because Nehemiah did the work with his permission."²⁰ So too today, Christian Reconstruction is assailed because that is the limit of what can be done against us: to speak evil of God's work. They rage out of their impotence.

Williamson comments on the wording used in Nehemiah, pointing out that the transition from a sickly to a healthy state was in progress.

The "restoration of the walls" is referred to by way of a metaphor derived from the healing of a wound.²¹

But God's enemies wanted to keep Jerusalem in a weak, sickly, wounded state. The offense of Nehemiah was in reversing the impotence of the Lord's people, and this prompted new strategies by Sanballat

and his colleagues. Raising the threat of physical attack had a clear goal:

Nehemiah has not only to counter “fightings without” but also, and potentially more debilitating, “fears within.”²²

[The threat in Neh. 4:11] was to “kill them and so make the work stop.” On the one hand, such actions by local officials would clearly not have been tolerated by their seniors—the satrap and the court itself. Especially was this so when Nehemiah’s authorization was so clear. On the other hand, they may have thought that if they acted quickly enough and so presented their seniors with a *fait accompli*, there would be few, if any, reprisals. After all, they were only doing what they had been authorized to do shortly before, according to Ezra 4:21-23.²³

Furthermore, they no doubt made sure that these same Jews were under the clear impression that their design was only upon Jerusalem and its wall-builders. Any who returned home to their townships would not be threatened. Thus it was that “time and again” groups of concerned relatives and fellow villagers were coming to Jerusalem to implore their menfolk: “You must return to us.”²⁴

The builders’ own families were leveraged against them, calling for them to drop their tools and come home where it was safe.

NEHEMIAH’S STRATEGY

In response, Nehemiah lays out a path forward with wisdom worth emulating.

Most simply, he motivates them with concern for their families and homes: “fight for your brothers, your sons and your daughters, your wives, and your homes.” This exhortation will have been the more effective for the fact that he had already marshaled them according to family association (cf. Neh. 4:13).²⁵

Note here how Nehemiah puts families first, strengthening the people’s resolve in regard to their closest communal affiliations. In conjunction with his reminders of God’s faithfulness in lifting up the cause of His people against oppressors, this was a potent formulation. Fensham notes,

They were mustered according to their families. This might be an indication that the family as such played an important role in military matters. The army or host was built around the families.²⁶

Trust in God . . . is not a trust in God without any action. It is not a mystical wait on him. It is trust *and* action. The Jews must defend their families and their property. This call of Nehemiah is a masterstroke of diplomatic language. He got his audience involved emotionally. They must think of their children and wives.²⁷

The opposition’s tactics have parallels with our own situation today. Raymond Brown paints the picture vividly:

[Sanballat and Tobiah were] mildly amused (2:19) that [Nehemiah] had devised such a ridiculously ambitious program. Once they witness his determination, it is no longer a laughing matter. They begin to impute wrong motives and are intent on bringing him down in the king’s eyes (2:19).²⁸

The scorn continued as the enemy belittled their qualities (*feeble Jews*), derided their ambitions (*Will they restore their wall?*), mocked their optimism (*Will they offer sacrifices?, i.e. of thanksgiving and dedication when the wall is rebuilt*), lampooned their enthusiasm (*Will they finish it in a day?*), undermined their confidence (*Can they bring the stones back to life?*) and magnified their problems (*those heaps of rubble—burned as they are*).²⁹

Tobiah’s insulting claim that were a fox to run up the wall it would fall down is deliberately overstated, given that the walls were nine feet thick, requiring “more than a few robust foxes to demolish it.”³⁰ We can expect similar overblown rhetoric against the Lord’s work in our generation as well.

RETHINKING CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY: CITIES ON A HILL VS. GHETTO MENTALITY

Some writers have instinctively sensed that we need to rethink our conception of Christian community. Greg and Lou Poumakis released a new book, *Ecclesia Communities: Key to a Godly Social Order*,³¹ which attempts to grapple

with these issues and map out possible starting points to guide future discussion.

The issue of community was even important enough for Dr. Rushdoony to deliver six public lectures on the topic on May 6-7, 1988.

Concerning communities, not all Native Americans today are tied to reservations. Some have a more pervasive notion of their place in the world, their businesses and institutions being dispersed and all but hidden in plain sight. The Chickasaw Nation thrives under this decentralized approach.³² It isn't too far from a Biblical model, excepting that a Christian variation would promote the law of God and not shy away from being a city on a hill rather than hidden. The Chickasaw peoples, like the Levites, are geographically distributed.

Our enemies, however, would prefer that we concentrate ourselves in enclaves, in separate communities, in reservations, in ghettos, far away from perceived centers of power. The Amish aren't a threat, Christians in a self-inflicted ghetto are no threat, Christians filtering cultural impact solely through the lens of a pretribulation rapture are no threat. Christians living next door who homeschool, who thereby establish Christian self-government: *they* are a threat.

The more successful they are in every enterprise, the more that Christians will be maligned,³³ just as Nehemiah had been. The enemy does not want to see anyone come remotely close to building a city on a hill, unless it is built to their specifications, under their oversight. And humanists know a thing or two about building cities (starting with the world's first city-builder and murderer, Cain).

City planners in Europe started designing cities with straight, rather than curving, streets. This was not out of any aesthetic sense, but rather because it was easier to run a cannonade down a straight street and mow down people than it was along a curved street.³⁴ Streets were straightened to better control the populace—because *control is key*. When Christians employ God's law as their

standard, whereby God is in control and man's control is denied, they are throwing a curve at the humanists: curved streets in lieu of straight ones that can't be exploited for control. To be beyond the control of the humanist state is the one unforgivable sin in the state's eyes because such independent men deny the state's premise of ultimacy, of lordship. When faithful men govern themselves and build according to God's pattern, using God's tithe, the state is put to shame: the government is upon Christ's shoulder and not upon theirs.

The concept of the city itself has suffered decay under humanism, whereby the city has become a rapidly imploding realm. The ties that bind are tattered nearly beyond repair, as Rushdoony noted.

The city is intended to represent *community* and *a common life and refuge*.

The two basic aspects thus of the city are (1) a common faith, and (2) a common defense. But today the city has no common faith, and it is a place of increasing lawlessness and terror. Somehow, the city has failed; the city has failed to be a city. Instead of walling out the enemy, it has walled in the enemy.³⁵

This is also true for today's seminaries: instead of walling out the enemy, they too have walled in the enemy.

Nehemiah's work was resented despite his interest in peace. A parallel for us is when the state denies scholastic test results to be admitted into evidence in court trials against Christian schools. The state's concern for "quality of education" is a pretense: they're only interested in control of the children. Superior test results of children beyond state control are considered to be attacks on state ultimacy, the solution being to criminalize Christian education. We have Sanballats aplenty calling for precisely that, so we must look to Nehemiah's example for building in the midst of opposition.

LEVITE AND LEAVEN

The leaven to which the Kingdom of God is compared to is said to be "hidden" in three whole measures of meal

(Matt. 13:33). The Greek word is akin to our word for encryption: the leaven was encrypted until everything was leavened (when its effect revealed its presence).

We're not counseling pietistic withdrawal, nor approaches like the one Rod Dreher outlines in *The Benedict Option*.³⁶ Dreher's subtitle indicates he is promoting "A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation," whereas we would argue we need a strategy for Christians in a post-humanist era which foresees the collapse of the agendas of today's Sanballats. Dreher is calling "for a new Christian politics, one that grows out of our own relative powerlessness in contemporary America."³⁷ But to what extent is this "powerlessness" of Dreher's the consequence of declaring our era to be a post-Christian one? Who would rally to battle when the trumpet is sounded so indistinctly (1 Cor. 14:8) that Christians leave the world to dive back into the saltshaker?

How different Nehemiah's approach is from Dreher's implicit monastic retreatism. Dreher favorably cites a leader of a community he extols: "This is a season for saving the seed. If we don't save the seed now, we won't have a harvest in the years to come."³⁸ In stark contrast, Dr. Rushdoony focused on "casting your bread upon the waters"—precisely the opposite strategy.³⁹

While we must decline Dreher's model, neither do we commend the Amish model or the reservation model, where cultural insularity also prevails in differing degrees (with no transforming leaven in the picture).

Note that the magnetic pull of Isaiah 2:2-3 is depicted even more emphatically by Zechariah:

And the inhabitants of one city shall go to another, saying, Let us go speedily to pray before the Lord, and to seek the Lord of hosts: I will go also. Yea, many people and strong nations shall come to seek the Lord of hosts in Jerusalem, and to pray before the Lord. Thus saith the Lord of hosts; In those days it shall come to pass, that ten men shall take hold out

of all languages of the nations, even shall take hold of the skirt of him that is a Jew, saying, We will go with you: for we have heard that God is with you. (Zech. 8:21-23)

The meaning isn't that the world will follow Christians back into their monasteries and enclaves. Rather, their faithfulness shines a light that draws their neighbors to the King. If our approach doesn't lend itself to having ten people grabbing hold of our clothes demanding to go with us, it is inadequate. If Nehemiah can't recognize our strategy, we're in trouble. If none can recognize the Levite in our walk, our light has grown dim.

The Levites have a bright future, and you're one of them. God's promise to multiply the Levites until they cannot be numbered will discomfit the spiritual descendants of Sanballat, those who seek to cast off God's law. When you build communities by the light of His Word and His law, reconstructing the concept of community in the process, you become a city on a hill.⁴⁰

Warfield famously said, "If there's no fire in the pulpit, it falls to you to kindle it in the pews"—meaning spiritual life would arise among faithful laymen rather than among the clergy. Was Warfield spit-balling here, making this up as he went along? Perhaps not, considering that there came a time in Israel's history where "the Levites were more upright in heart to sanctify themselves than the priests" (2 Chron. 29:34b). *Those* are the kind of Levites we need today: Christians whose zeal for the Kingdom burns brighter even than that of their religious leaders. Such men see *building* as a conscious outworking of *seeking first His Kingdom* instead of hiding behind defeatist theologies or kowtowing to the enemy campaign to discredit and demoralize His people. 🏰

1. Keil, C. F., and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament, Vol. VIII* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982 reprint), part 2, p. 76.

2. "Samuel, it is true, is only a Levite (by descent), but by office in a time of urgent need a priest (*cohen*), for he sacrifices independently in places where, by reason of the absence of the holy tabernacle with the ark of the covenant, it was

not lawful, according to the letter of the law, to offer sacrifices; he builds an altar in Ramah, his residence as judge, and has, in connection with the divine services on the high place (*Bama*) there, a more than high-priestly position, inasmuch as the people do not begin the sacrificial repasts before he has blessed the sacrifice (1 Sam. ix. 13).” Cf. Keil & Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament, Vol. V* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982 reprint), part 3, p. 101-102, discussing Psalm 99:6.

3. “Not only Moses, but also Samuel, is numbered among the priests, next after Aaron. That we have here a mere merismos, that is, Moses, Aaron, and Samuel, were among the priests and among those who called upon his name, is evident from the *qraim* repeated from the preceding word, *they called (b'grai)*, which refers to Moses and Aaron as well as to Samuel, although the calling literally is ascribed only to Samuel. Aaron only was a priest in the usual sense ... hence the expression, ‘among those who call upon his name,’ can be nothing more than an *explanation* of ‘among His priests.’” Cf. Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Psalms, Vol. III* (Cherry Hill, NJ: Mack Publishing Company, n.d., reprint of 1848 original), p. 195. (N.b. “merismos” means merism: contrasting parts representing the whole.)

4. Hengstenberg, Ernst Wilhelm, *Christology of the Old Testament, Vol. I* (MacDill AFB, Florida: MacDonald Publishing Company, reprint of 1844 edition), p. 732.

5. *ibid.*, p. 733.

6. *ibid.*, p. 730.

7. *ibid.*, p. 728, 730.

8. 2 Samuel 7:14-16.

9. Malachi 2:4-5, 8.

10. Hengstenberg, *Christology*, p. 731.

11. Article on “Levites” in Fairbairn, Patrick, ed., *Fairbairn’s Imperial Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1957 reprint of 1891 edition), vol. 4, p. 89.

12. *ibid.*, p. 92.

13. Wines, E. C., *Commentaries on the Laws of the Ancient Hebrews* (New York, NY: Putnam & Co., 1853), p. 609.

14. *ibid.*, p. 613. Wines further explains why the Levites resisted the pull toward tyranny at p. 615: “Moses took away from his priesthood the power derived from property; the power derived from military command; the power derived from illusions. What, then, did he leave it? Nothing but the power of the law; a law, which they did not make, which they could not change, and which they were themselves bound to obey. Here, surely, is no basis of tyranny. Here is no foothold for despotism [or] ecclesiastical oppression.”

15. Rushdoony, R. J., *Faith and Action* (Vallecito, CA: Chalcedon/Ross House Books, 2019), vol. 1, p. 108.

16. *ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 925.

17. *ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 1443.

18. Rushdoony, R. J., *Leviticus* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 2005), p. 356.

19. Fensham, F. Charles, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), p. 180.

20. *ibid.*

21. Williamson, H.G.M., *Word Biblical Commentary: Ezra, Nehemiah* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1985), p. 225. Keil says the expression used means “to lay a bandage on” the walls to heal them, cf. Keil & Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament, Vol. 3* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982 reprint), part 3, p. 202.

22. *ibid.*

23. *ibid.*

24. *ibid.*, p. 226.

25. *ibid.*, 227.

26. Fensham, op. cit., p. 185.

27. *ibid.*, p. 186-187.

28. Brown, Raymond, *The Message of Nehemiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), p. 72.

29. *ibid.*, p. 73.

30. *ibid.*

31. Poumakis, Greg and Lou Poumakis, *Ecclesia Communities: Key to a Godly Social Order* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2022).

32. <https://www.chickasaw.net/our-nation/history/present-day.aspx>

33. The latest bogeyman is the specter of Christian nationalism, the new pejorative term.

34. “City planning began in the eighteenth century, and it called for straight streets, so that the state could send its cavalry charging down the streets and dominate the city. With straight streets, guns could be mounted at strategic intersections to command every approach ... This *open city* of the humanists was supposedly an ideal concept of brotherhood; in practice, it meant the opportunity for total control of all men. It led to totalitarianism and tyranny.” Rushdoony, R. J., *Faith and Action* (Vallecito, CA: Chalcedon/Ross House Books, 2019), vol. 2, pp. 746-747.

35. *ibid.*, p. 744.

36. Dreher, Rod, *The Benedict Option* (New York, NY: Sentinel, 2017, 2018).

37. *ibid.*, p. 88.

38. *ibid.*, p. 240, where Dreher quotes Marco Sermarini.

39. Cf. Rushdoony, R. J., *A Word in Season, Vol. 2* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books/Chalcedon, 2011), pp. 71-73. The “bread” was rice being cast upon the waters to sacrificially raise a harvest despite the uncertainty of the undertaking. See Ecclesiastes 11:1.

40. Intriguingly, such communities might even mimic the Levitical cities of refuge. Providing refuge is a prerogative of all the Lord’s people according to Isaiah 32:2.



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Since 1965, the Chalcedon Foundation has served as the founding and leading ministry for the message of Christian Reconstruction, which is simply the mission of advancing the Kingdom of God in every area of life. Now, this many years later, the need for this message and ministry is greater.

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gained significant ground through helping to restore Christian education, but it’s time to move into other spheres by God’s grace, law, and power.

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