

Angels in Reformed Spirituality

by Johan D. Tangelder

Since the Reformation, Protestant theology has shown a reluctance to discuss angels, contrasting sharply with the wealth of medieval speculation.

The Reformers accepted the existence of angels on Scriptural authority, putting the proper emphasis on the centrality of God in Christ. Martin Luther often spoken about angels and demons. It was Luther's experience that "as soon as the Word is preached and as soon as there are people that accept and confess it, the devil quickly appears with all his angels and arouses the world with all its might against this Word to stifle it and completely destroy those that have and confess it." In his battles with the forces of evil, Luther was encouraged and strengthened by the protecting nearness of good angels.

In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* John Calvin offers a thorough treatment of the Reformed doctrine of angels. He also referred to them in his sermons and commentaries. Although Calvin was quite clear that God acts through angels, he repeatedly emphasized that angels are merely God's helpers: "The whole praise of salvation rests with God alone; for the angels do not bring help to whomever they wish to help, nor are they moved by their own will; they only obey the rule of God." Calvin's reserved attitude toward angels became the norm for Reformed and evangelical theology. Most Reformed dogmatics offer nothing more than modest summaries of Biblical data on angels. For example, in his *Systematic Theology* Dr. Louis Berkhof devoted only nine pages to good and fallen angels. Even the historic Reformed confessions have few references to angels. The *Belgic Confession* affirms "the creation of all things, especially of angels" (Art. 12). The *Heidelberg Catechism* speaks of angels as willingly and faithfully carrying out the will of the heavenly Father (Q&A 124).

In today's Reformed spirituality the role of angels suffers from benign neglect. Reformed Christians become aware of angels only through Christmas and Easter hymns. In a discussion on angels in his dogmatics, Dr. H. Bavinck observes that Reformed Christians sin more by inattention than by excess. He finds this regrettable. He points out that although the angels are not an object of our religious devotion, they are still of great importance in the redemptive history and derive from it their value for our spirituality. I agree. I believe angelology should regain its rightful place in Reformed theology and spirituality.

Angels and our Salvation

Angelic appearances are always a sign of God's decisive and miraculous intervention. They are messengers of His saving plan (Cf. Heb 1:14; 1 Pet 1:12). When Adam and Eve walked in the presence of God in paradise, angels did not make an appearance. They did not enter the stage of history until Adam and Eve fell into sin and were ousted from their perfect habitat. But immediately after the fall God began His rescue operation. He placed cherubim in front of the Garden of Eden with a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the tree of life. No living human being can ever enter paradise again. It remains untouchable and unapproachable. These four-winged cherubim serve God's wonderful plan of salvation. They had to protect Adam and Eve against themselves. In their fallen state they could no longer see God and live. At the gate of paradise the cherubim represent God's law, which Adam and Eve had disobeyed. They were forced to cut their ties with the past and go into the future with the promise of the coming Savior (Gen 3:15). And centuries later the cherubim symbolize God's presence in the midst of His people Israel (Ps 80:1). In the temple and tabernacle they revealed the mystery of God's mercy: the Holy God and sinful human beings are reconciled through the atoning sacrifices offered, foreshadowing the perfect sacrifice of God's own Son (Cf. Ex 25:18f; 1 Kings 6; 2 Chron 3).

Angels are focused on the history of mankind. They exist to serve God and live for His glory. They know that this glory shall not be fully realized until all the elect shall be gathered in and perfected, the world shall be renewed, and Satan shall be cast forever into outer darkness. They are eager to catch a glimpse of God's total victory over sin, death, and hell. They know everyone's standing with God. They are anxious to see sinners come to Him. They love people, God's image bearers. They long to see them become part of God's family and make their home in heaven.

So each time a sinner repents there is rejoicing by the angels in the presence of God (Luke 15:10).

Recovering Worship

The first and most obvious task of angels is the worship and praise of God. They stand in the presence of God and worship Him. Jesus said that the "angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven" (Matt 18:10). They have a specific task in heaven's liturgy. "Let all God's angels worship him" (Heb 1:6). While their worship activity usually takes place in God's presence, on at least one occasion they sang His praises on earth – at the birth of Jesus the angels sang, "Glory to God in the highest" (Luke 2:13-14). The angels glorify God, focusing on His majesty and holiness. For example, Isaiah writes that the seraphs, who were above the throne of God, called to another and said, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory" (Is 6:3). The seraphs are highly placed angels, who are always in God's heavenly presence. Nowhere do we read that God gives them a mission for this earth. Isaiah's vision reveals God as the "Ruler of Glory." What a lesson for us! We must speak of God, and must speak of Him truly. He is the God Most High; He inhabits glory, and He is the sovereign Ruler of the universe. The worship of the seraphs stands in stark contrast to the breezy flippancy in many modern church services. The seraphs in Isaiah's vision reveal God's nature. Three times they repeat the single word "holy," giving the church its most solemn anthem. "Only once in sacred Scripture is an attribute of God elevated to the third degree," comments R.C. Sproul. "Only once is a characteristic of God mentioned three times in succession. The Bible says that God is holy, holy, holy. Not that He is merely holy, or even holy, holy...He is holy, holy, holy, the whole earth is full of His glory." When we see worship in the light of the seraphs' praise, it will become a moving and even thrilling experience. Their liturgy teaches human worshippers not to become over-familiar with God. With all the attempts to make churches services seeker sensitive and friendly, the worship of the Holy God tends to be dumbed down. In worship services the seraph's song of praise is a far better model than our popular culture. Its relevance for Reformed spirituality is clearly evident. It rebukes any notion of uncontrolled experimenting in the worship of the Holy God as well as any over-familiarity in addressing Him, both of which is so common today. As Marva J. Dawn put it: "Worship is idolatry unless it is a total waste of time in earthly terms, a total immersion in the eternity of God's infinite splendor for the sole purpose of honoring God." How do we worship Him in our supposed urbane and modern sophistication? Have we made God too small? Have we become too comfortable with the name of our God? Before our covenant God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and before the amazing truths of the death and resurrection of Christ, we cannot but fall down in awe and utter adoration, in unrestrained wonder and praise.

Of course, worship is not the exclusive privilege of angels. The enjoyment and glorification of God is the chief end of God's people. We worship the same awesome God as the angels. Angels, whose primary function is to worship God, might be regarded guardians of order in public worship. We even worship with them as we gather as God's people in our church services. As John Calvin put it: "God willed to appoint the angels to care for our salvation. Consequently they attend the sacred assemblies, and the church is for them a theatre in which they marvel at the varied and manifold wisdom of God (Eph 3:10)." I wonder whether we ever think about this when we attend church. The thought of their presence should humble us and encourage us in our worship.

Thee, mighty God, heavenly King, we magnify and praise. With the angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven, we worship and praise Thy glorious name, every more praising Thee and saying: Holy, holy, Lord God of Hosts, heaven and earth are full of thy glory; Glory be to Thee, O Lord Most High.

Angels in our daily lives

If we believe that angels are real, constantly employed by God as His messengers and ministers of His will in the Church and in the government of the world, should we then not pay more attention to them than we have been doing? Angels work in ways unseen and unsung. The active ministry of angels is a tremendous blessing as the Church faces increased opposition and persecution. Christians are not alone in the fierce struggle with spiritual and political powers. Sometimes God shows His care for His people by dispatching angels to intervene on behalf of His suffering saints in need of heavenly encouragement. When the apostle Paul sailed to Rome to face Caesar, a fierce storm threatened to wreck the ship. Crew and passengers had given up all hope of being saved. But all hope was not lost. God intervened He sent an angel to Paul with the message, "Do not be afraid, Paul, you must stand trial before Caesar; and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you" (Acts 27:24).

God knows our weaknesses, our perils, the enemies we constantly face, the threats to our faith. Without His help we would fall into despair, and become overpowered by the spirit of this age. In His mercy, immeasurable goodness, and kindness He sustains us and has given us innumerable guardians to help us along our journey to the New Jerusalem. As John Calvin put it: "Therefore he [God] makes use of angels to comfort weakness, that we may lack nothing at all that can raise up our minds to good hope, or confirm them in security."

Conclusion

We live in perilous times. The powers of evil seem to have the upper hand. The fallen angels are impacting our culture and world, and the nearer we come to the return of our Lord the more frenetic their demonic activity. But God's powerful, faithful angels are active also; and their victory has been secured by Christ (1 John 3:8). Soon the Lord will come with His angels and overcome His enemies. I pray that Reformed spirituality will no longer be known for its benign neglect of angels. In the words of Thomas F. Torrance:

In the fulfillment of God's supreme purpose, angels are surely still active in their missionary as well as their providential service. Disregard of the ministry of angels will certainly lead to a serious deficiency in Christian spirituality, bringing many forms of shallowness and instability in its train. That modern eyes should be opened to the ministry of angels is very much to be desired.