

The Standard Bearer

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Abounding in the Work of the Lord

Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.

I Corinthians 15:58

The turn of the calendar furnishes us another occasion to examine the past year and devote ourselves again in this new year to abounding in the work of the Lord.

However, when we look at ourselves, we might come to the conclusion that we cannot abound in the work of the Lord and that our fight against sin and the devil and our own sinful flesh is hopeless. We might be tempted to think that we cannot finish the race set before us, much less run a good race. In the midst of these thoughts we need to remind ourselves of the words of the inspired apostle, "But, thanks be to God, which giveth us the

victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (I Cor. 15:57). Not we ourselves are responsible to attain the victory; God gives us the victory over sin and death and the grave through Jesus Christ.

In light of that glorious victory we are admonished to abound in the work of the Lord: "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord...." Abounding in the work of the Lord is not about obtaining the victory for ourselves; rather, it is about manifesting our thankfulness for the great victory we already have in Jesus Christ. *Thankfulness* calls us to be steadfast and immovable.

What does it mean to be steadfast and immovable? "Steadfast" may be compared to a tree that is firmly rooted; "immovable" is comparable to that same tree withstanding the buffeting of great winds. To be steadfast is to have our faith firmly or solidly in place; immovable is that same faith as it stands up against the assaults of our spiritual enemies. Steadfast is being thoroughly convinced that God's Word is true; immovable is continuing to stand in our faith toward God in the midst of the trials and circumstances of life. Steadfast is being convinced

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of the truth of God's mercy to us in Jesus Christ; immovable is what happens when we continue to stand in the truth of God's mercy despite being violently assaulted by doubts and fears and difficult circumstances.

Although He did not use these words, Jesus illustrated the idea of being steadfast and immovable in His parable of the wise and foolish men building their houses. The foolish man built his house upon the sand. When the rains came and the floods rose up and the winds blew, his house was destroyed; it was not steadfast and immovable. But, the wise man built his house upon the rock. When the rains fell and the floods came and the winds blew, his house was steadfast because it was founded upon the rock and, therefore, was immovable in the storm. We can only be steadfast and immovable if we are founded upon the Rock, which is none other than Jesus Christ.

When by God's grace we are steadfast and immovable, we will persevere in the faith. When the devil, the world, and our flesh tempt us to forsake the faith and to pursue the riches and pleasures of the world, being steadfast and immovable we say, "Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life." When we are tempted to abandon the clear teaching of Scripture—say, for example, the truth regarding divorce and remarriage—being steadfast and immovable we say, "This is an hard saying; but this is the teaching of God's Word." When we are tempted to walk in disobedience—say, by sinning against our spouse—being steadfast and immovable we say, "How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" To be steadfast and immovable implies that we know the Word of God and are committed to doing it. "Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock" (Matt. 7:24).

Steadfast and immovable go hand in hand with abounding in *the work of the Lord*.

The work of the Lord certainly includes the official work of the church done in the service of Christ's kingdom. But, we may also take it more broadly to include all work that in some way promotes the cause of Christ's kingdom. In other words, the work of the Lord is not merely the work of ministers, professors, missionaries, elders, and deacons. The work of the Lord also takes place when husbands and wives build one another up spiritually, when fathers lead the family in daily devotions,

when mothers are keepers at home, when the elderly pray for and encourage their children and grandchildren, when families open their homes for fellowship, when children study their catechism lessons, and when members give their offering to various causes of the kingdom. In short, doing the work of the Lord is doing all the work that Christ our Master gives us to do, thus promoting His glory and advancing His kingdom.

If God has abounded toward us in grace, thankfulness calls us not only to do the work of the Lord, but to *abound* in the work of the Lord.

There is a difference between merely doing and abounding. Merely doing the work is the rich man giving an offering from his abundance. Abounding is the poor widow giving all she had when she put her two mites into the offering box. Evidently, abounding is not an absolute thing such that only those with greater resources are able to abound while those with few resources need not even apply themselves. Abounding depends on our use of the opportunities and resources God gives us (cf. the parable of the talents). Abounding is using the few and seemingly insignificant gifts God has given us to the best of our ability.

Abounding is not only a matter of doing one or two great works—not simply attending worship twice on Sunday. Abounding applies 24/7/365. Whether eating or drinking, or whatever we are doing, we are called to go beyond and excel in the work of the Lord at all times. If we abound in the work of the Lord, our lives will be centered upon Christ and His kingdom. Then we will be asking ourselves, how can I support this cause? How can I encourage that saint in her needs? How can I serve the body in love?



What a lofty calling!

Indeed, it is an impossible calling because, by nature, we would never even want to do the work of the Lord, much less abound in it. Abounding is impossible in our own strength. Jesus says, "Without me ye can do nothing."

The only possibility of abounding in the work of the Lord must be the work that the Lord Himself has done and is doing. Fundamentally, Christ's work is the work of pursuing His kingdom to the glory of the Father. In that work He was steadfast and immovable. He was fully

committed to doing the will of God and standing against the assaults of the devil in order to seek His kingdom. As He abounded in God's work, He said, "My meat is to do the will of him that sent me" (John 4:34). In that great work Christ poured out His precious blood on the cross, was buried, and rose again the third day. His work of satisfying God's justice and bringing us into favor with God is His work *for us*.

But, in the second place, the possibility of abounding in the work of the Lord is Christ's work *in us*. Not one of us would ever desire to do the work of the Lord unless the Lord Himself had graciously regenerated us by His Holy Spirit. But His work doesn't stop there. Christ also works in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure (Phil. 2:13). Fundamentally, our abounding in the work of the Lord is due to the Lord Jesus abounding in His grace toward us.

Of course, that does not deny our diligent and thoughtful involvement in the work of the Lord. But, when the Lord's work abounds in us, then we will abound in the work of the Lord. That ought to humble us. When we abound in the work of the Lord and see fruits upon our labors, we are tempted to take credit for ourselves. The rich man may not boast that he has abounded in the work of the Lord more than the widow who offered her two mites. Those with more gifts may not boast that they have abounded more than those with fewer gifts or different gifts. "Who maketh thee to differ?" Knowing this should make us fall upon our knees before the Lord, asking for His grace to strengthen us and to encourage us in the work set before us.



We might be discouraged when we see the greatness of the work and the severity of opposition we are up against. We might be discouraged by our own weak-


ness and sinfulness. We might imagine our puny efforts can never amount to anything. The Corinthian church addressed in our text certainly had their share of problems. Humanly speaking, they had every reason to be discouraged. Nevertheless, the inspired apostle gives a great incentive for abounding in the work of the Lord: "forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord." Psalm 127 expresses the same truth: "Except the LORD build the house, they labour in vain that build it." Psalm 127 expresses the truth that *apart* from the LORD, all our labor is in vain. In I Corinthians 15:58, the same truth is expressed in the opposite way: *in* the Lord, our labor is *not* in vain.

There is a labor that is not done in the Lord. The world labors for its own purposes and in its own strength. It labors for a great earthly kingdom. Their labor is in vain because it is not in the Lord. But, when the Lord works in us so that we do His work, He is certain to bless even our feeble efforts. That's because He never allows His own work to be in vain. He always accomplishes what He sets out to accomplish.

We can be certain, therefore, that whatever we do for the sake of Christ's kingdom will not be in vain. We might labor and toil and see what appears to be little fruit. We might be tempted to

be discouraged and give up. But God will not allow His work to be in vain. When the Word of God goes out, it never returns void. When even a glass of cold water is given in Christ's name, it is not given in vain. The smallest labor of love will not be in vain. "Your labour is not in vain in the Lord."

Why? Because God gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

May the Lord cause us to abound in His work this coming year and into the future. 

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Sine Timore Aut Favore

A Motto for Preachers

If much thought is given to the pre-service prayers in the confistory room, these prayers can be very helpful and encouraging to the minister. During a couple periods of my ministry, one elder rarely failed to include in his prayer the phrase “without fear or favor.” The phrase was used in the context of a petition for the minister’s preaching. The elder prayed God to enable me to preach *without fear or favor*. It is an important expression, the significance of which every minister should pay attention to.

“Without fear or favor” is the literal translation of an old Latin expression that forms the title of this editorial.¹ If one performs an act or makes a decision *sine timore aut favore* he does so *impartially*. That is, without *fearing* those who may oppose his decision or action—thus making his life difficult; and without any attempt to curry the *favor* of those who may profit him if they like what he does. Decisions are made without fearing opponents or favoring friends. Actions are taken on the basis of principle, not

pragmatism. “Without fear or favor.”

This faithful elder was seeking God’s blessing upon my ministry of preaching, I paraphrase, something like this: “God of the church, strengthen our pastor to preach truth *without regard to men’s faces*”—another expression he often used, if I am not mistaken. The brother realized—and rightly so—that the lives of the people of God can have a negative effect on the gospel preaching in the congregation.

Preaching changes lives... but lives change preaching

That *preaching* changes *lives* almost goes without saying among Bible-believing Christians. But that *lives* change *preaching* is true as well, and that is my concern.

Reformed Christians have no doubt that preaching changes lives. The Heidelberg Catechism teaches that the Holy Spirit works faith by the preaching, and Dordt’s Canons teach that grace to live godly is “conferred by admonitions.” Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. The students at seminary hear nothing if they do not hear the reality that preaching is God’s chief means of grace. Because the Word of God is powerful, and because *the preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God*, the preaching

of the Word of God is powerful to transform lives.

What we may fail to realize is that the reverse is true, too: lives can transform preaching. And not for the better. Evil in the lives of members of the church can have such an effect on the preaching that the preaching deteriorates on account of it.

This damaging effect of the people’s lives on gospel preaching is explained from the weakness of the minister. As more and more members walk in a particular sin, the minister may fear to expose the sin. If the prevalent sins that should be exposed are those of the wealthy or powerful—who have shown material favors to the preacher—the pressure on him becomes even greater. Fear and favor.

“A massive alienation of members”

Fear and favor play into many aspects of the Christian life. In a recent radio commentary, Eric Metaxas, the Christian social commentator and well-known biographer of Bonhoeffer, expressed dismay that the culture wars did not include a battle against divorce and remarriage. Evangelical Christian leaders were willing—even in public, he said—to denounce and oppose

¹ Some may know the phrase better from the old hymn, “In the Hour of Trial”: “In the hour of trial, Jesus, plead for me, Lest by base denial, I depart from Thee; When Thou seest me waver, With a look recall, Nor for fear or favor Suffer me to fall.”

almost all our culture's sins. They would combat abortion and homosexuality. They were bold to oppose pornography and resisted sex education in the schools. But their deafening silence on the greatest evil in our culture—divorce—was shocking and scandalous.

Metaxas was reflecting on an interview that Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (Louisville, KY), had with a sociologist, a scholar of American evangelicalism. When Mohler asked the sociologist for an explanation of the evangelical silence on divorce, he was told that if Christian organizations like the Moral Majority or the Christian Coalition would speak about the evil of divorce, they “risked a massive alienation of members.” That is, *fear* of man determined what they would say and what they would never say. *Favor* is the other side of the same coin, of course, since the alienated members, once they were offended, would no longer send in their support checks.

Likewise, when certain sins take hold in the lives of church members, unless radical measures are taken, sermons will change. To put it bluntly, evil in the lives of the people muffles the message. The minister fears the response of so many members who have come to embrace a certain fault. *Timore et favore*. Fear and favor.

In the PRC?

It will be to our peril if we underestimate the power of fear and favor in the ministries of even the most faithful and determined preachers.

Fear and favor are terrible powers. Add to this the dynamic that sinful natures blind men to their own faults and failures. That is, unless someone shows them plainly, the preacher may well not be aware of his lack. Culpably unaware, indeed, but unaware. We all have our blind-spots. PRC preachers as much as any.

Someday, PRC preachers may keep silent about the sin of homosexuality. God forbid it to be so, but could it be out of fear of PRC members? Someday, PRC preachers may keep silent about the evils of Roman Catholicism, Islam, Pentecostalism, or other heresies and damnable errors. As the days become more evil, will it be out of fear of PRC members involved in these errors or who have relatives in them? Someday, PRC preachers may shrink back from saying that the Lord hates divorce. Will it be so because the minister fears offending the increasing number of divorced members among us? Someday, PRC preachers may stop short of saying that God forbids the remarriage of a divorced person as long as his spouse still lives. Could this hesitation appear because members of the church have made it plain to him that they will not disapprove this sin in others?

Fear.

Or favor. Will *favor* cause a man to preach to the choir, as they say, exposing all the sins that the influential members of his congregation love to censure, so that these influential members will wink at his failures to expose their own sins? Will *favor* cause the pulpit to high-

light the heresies that the preacher's supporters have read about and oppose, but smooth over the faults that are presently doing damage in the congregation?

A sinful silence

No preachers and no pulpits are impervious to the influences of the lives of the people. I was reminded of that, too, when I opened the new *Perspectives in Covenant Education* magazine last week. I was saddened to read a passing comment—made only in passing, since no reflection on it was given—about how frequently teachers today hear children talk openly about TV shows and movies they have watched. What has changed? I asked myself. What happened to the pulpit's condemnation of drama and the pulpit's exposure as evil of the content of most television and movies?

What happened is not that the church changed her position that drama is wrong and that most programming—in both content and philosophy of life—is evil. More likely, the people have so adopted this mode of entertainment that the preacher either fears to speak of it, or has given up in frustration. Have the lives of the people influenced the pulpit?

More than a few times in recent years, members of the churches have asked me about the church's view of mothers working outside of the home. They have said that the pulpit formerly and with regularity reminded young mothers of their biblical calling to be “keepers at home,” so that the “word of God

be not blasphemed" (Titus 2:5). According to some, this sound has been muted in the churches. If indeed this note *has* been missing, we preachers (and elders) may ask ourselves whether fear or favor are in play. Are there enough women employed outside of their homes that ministers do not dare, for fear of waking a sleeping dog?

Nothing is simple, but Sabbath observance may be another good illustration. By "nothing is simple" I mean to acknowledge that the church must neither be legalistic about Sabbath-keeping nor fail to recognize the allowances Reformed Christianity has always made for works of mercy and works of necessity on the Lord's Day. Having said that, however, since we are always inclined to slip and the evil one is always inclined to push us to slip, we can ask whether the pulpit may become more reserved about applying the fourth commandment than in the past? Does it hesitate because,

here also, the pulpit *recognizes the changes in the lives of the members* and fears repercussions? Are businessmen, travelers, business owners, vacationers, job-seekers, and others, fudging on Sabbath requirements?

If we find ourselves cheering for the examples I have given, let us remind ourselves that in our blind spots there are likely as many and worse sins that need to be exposed and repented of. This editorial will have failed in its purpose if it allows *any* of us to settle on our lees. What is necessary is *self*-evaluation. With what sins am I allowing *myself* to become comfortable?

The longer there is silence, or a muted sound, on a particular weakness in the congregation, the more difficult it will become ever to speak about it again. The easier it will be simply to abandon this particular aspect of the Christian faith or life.

All the parties involved must pull together to keep the church

from this sad end. Ministers must be bold. Indeed wise, careful, and patient, but also *bold*. Let the fear and favor of God, not man, govern what and how he speaks. And the favor of God upon the congregation that is sanctified by bold preaching will be all the reward any faithful minister needs, even if he loses favor of some men.

Elders will help the ministers to be fearless. They can begin by praying for their ministers to be bold... and wise. To preach without fear or favor.

And we who sit in the pew will take heed to the words spoken, *object* to them if they are applications improperly made, and *follow* them if they are truth.

Next editorial, D.V., I will try to spell out more fully these responsibilities of ministers, elders, and members.

In the meantime: Whom do *I* fear? Whose favor do *I* seek? ☞

FEATURE ARTICLE

REV. CLAYTON SPRONK

The Importance of Knowing Church History (2)

We have to know church history because it is required by God (see the previous article). We also want to know church history because of the rich benefits the knowledge of this history affords us. Of the numerous benefits of knowing church history I have chosen to highlight four in this article.

First, knowledge of church history gives us the oppor-

tunity to see the grace of God at work in the salvation of His people. We are able to say with the psalmist in Psalm 40:5, "Many, O LORD my God, are thy wonderful works which thou hast done, and thy thoughts which are to us-ward: they cannot be reckoned up in order unto thee: if I would declare and speak of them, they are more than can be numbered." Certainly we see God's wonderful works when we study Scripture, but we also see them when we study the history of His church.

Who raised up Athanasius to develop and defend the church's confession of the doctrine of the Trinity against

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the heresy of Arius? God did! Who raised up Augustine to develop and defend the doctrines of grace against the hellish teachings of Pelagius? God did! Who raised up Luther to deliver the church from all of the evils of the Roman Catholic Church and rediscover the truth of justification by faith alone? God did! And who raised up John Calvin to bring about a more thorough Reformation of doctrine and worship? God did! What do we see in the Reformation of the church known as the Afscheiding in 1834? What do we see when we study the PRC history of 1924 and 1953? We see God at work preserving and purifying His church.

A second benefit of the knowledge of church history is that it can help protect us from errors. There are important lessons to learn from church history when it comes to maintaining and defending the truth. Just as the truth develops in every age, so too does the lie. If we study how the church rejected false doctrine in the past, it will enable us to reject false doctrine today. Take the Federal Vision (FV), for example. The FV is a development of the Arminian heresy rejected by the Canons of Dordt. Arminianism teaches conditional salvation. The FV teaches a conditional covenant. Arminianism denies the five points of Calvinism. The FV in a more subtle way also denies the five points of Calvinism. As Protestant Reformed Churches we have been able to use our understanding of how the doctrines of grace refute the conditional theology of Arminianism to see that these same doctrines of grace refute the FV's conditional covenant theology.

But the study of church history does more than help the church fight against old heresies that come in new clothing today; it teaches the church about other pitfalls to avoid. The study of church history warns the church not to neglect the exercise of Christian discipline. The disastrous consequences of neglecting discipline are recorded repeatedly on the pages of church history. Throughout history, evil spread in the church when discipline was neglected. Sadly, many churches today have not learned about the importance of discipline. That is one reason we are seeing the spread of great evils in the church. The theory of evolution has spread throughout many denominations. Many have approved women's ordination. And homosexuality is on the way to gaining widespread approval in churches. Why? In part, because

the people who promote such ungodliness are not disciplined.

The study of church history also warns against false church unity, that is, unity at the expense of the truth of the gospel. Today, for the sake of unity, emphasis is placed on areas of agreement rather than on differences. So now evangelicals are willing to seek unity with the Roman Catholic Church. They will stand with Rome to fight against abortion. They will stand with Rome to fight against homosexual marriage. But they will not fight against Rome's false gospel. The doctrines that distinguish evangelicals from Rome are viewed as unimportant and are being lost. For example, many evangelicals seem to be willing to compromise even the doctrine of justification by faith alone. If evangelicals would study and embrace the history of the Reformation, they would never make any doctrinal compromise with Rome.

A third benefit of knowing church history is that it gives us strength and courage to be convicted of the truth. The church needs more conviction today—the knowledge of the truth, but also the willingness to stand up and say what the truth is and not be moved from it. We live in a post-modern age in which the attitude is that there is no propositional truth. This thinking influences the church today. Theologians admonish church members not to be convinced that what they believe is true and what others believe is false. It is valid to believe God created the cosmos in six 24-hour days, but they say, you should be open to other opinions. We are told as Protestant Reformed Churches that it is all right to reject common grace but we should not make it a matter of conviction. We should not allow the issue to become a reason for division.

In this day of doctrinal spinelessness the church needs to learn from men of conviction who stood up for the truth in the past. We need to learn of the conviction of Athanasius who stood, it is often said, “against the world.” We need to learn the conviction of Luther, Calvin, De Cock, Hoeksema, and others who were willing to endure harsh consequences for standing for the truth. Conviction is not an indication of evil pride. Conviction is godly zeal for the truth of God that has characterized His people through the ages!

And I believe that studying church history as an encouragement to be convicted of the truth is especially

important for the Protestant Reformed Churches. We are a small denomination. Not many people today agree with the articles of the Christian faith as taught in our churches, especially when it comes to confessing sovereign particular grace and rejecting common grace. This can be unsettling. It may even cause us to waver in our conviction. But if we study church history and see that what we believe is the same as the saints who have gone before us, then we know that we stand with generations of believers who confessed the same thing. We do not stand alone. We stand with the church of all ages!

A fourth benefit of studying church history is that it enables us to see more of the beauty of the truth of God's Word. The church must not simply try to cling to the past. That is done sometimes today. Some people think that the development of the truth ended with the Reformation. I am convinced that this is why the charge is often lodged against the Protestant Reformed Churches that our teachings are extra-confessional.

That charge is really a compliment. It means that we have been blessed with growth in our knowledge of the truth. Nothing we teach is contrary to the confessions. I am convinced of that. But it is true that some of what we teach is not fully explained in the confessions. For example, our confessions do not have a full explanation of our doctrine of the covenant of grace. That is because the truth of the covenant was not understood as fully at the time our confessions were written as we understand it today. Having studied the confessions carefully, we have been able to grow in our understanding of the covenant and see more of its beauty than previous generations could.

Church history provides many examples of how the church uses the knowledge of the past to continue to grow in the knowledge of the truth. The church's confession of the Apostles' Creed, which is Trinitarian in structure,

later led to the formulation of the Nicene Creed, which more fully explains the truth of the Trinity. If the church had neglected the Apostles' Creed, she would never have been able to come to a deeper understanding of the truth to write the Nicene Creed. The Canons of Dordt more fully explain the doctrines of grace taught in the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession. The Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession are the stem of TULIP (five points of Calvinism) and the Canons of Dordt is the beautiful flower that the healthy stem produced. If our church fathers did not know and consciously build on the past, we would not have our beautiful Canons of Dordt!

Think of how privileged we are to be part of the church today. We have the privilege of seeing more fully the beauty of the blossoming of the Reformed truth than the saints did in the past. John Calvin never knew the Canons of Dordt. And although he taught the doctrines of grace, he did not know or understand God's sovereign particular grace as we do today because of our history of battling

against common grace. And although we can trace our covenant doctrine back to Calvin, he did not understand the covenant of grace as clearly as we do today. Standing on the shoulders of the saints who went before us, we are able to see the beautiful truth that the covenant is an unconditional and unbreakable bond of friendship that God establishes with His people in Jesus Christ.

The opportunity to grow in our understanding of the truth makes the study of church history exciting! If you study church history you will not only have the pleasure of seeing the beauty of the truth as it was confessed in the past, but maybe the Spirit of truth will enable you to see some

beautiful aspect of the truth you never saw before.

I hope you are convinced that it is not only an *obligation* but a *joy* to study and know the history of the church. ☺

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Abortion: the Culture of Death

■ Emily Letts' "Positive Abortion Story"

Emily Letts is an abortion counsellor at Cherry Hill Women's Center in New Jersey, USA. Having given advice to many women faced with "crisis pregnancies," she found herself pregnant: "I knew immediately I was going to have an abortion. I knew I wasn't ready to take care of a child. The guy wasn't involved in my decision."

Troubled by the fact that many women feel guilty about abortion, Letts made a short video of her abortion to promote the idea that one can have a "positive abortion experience:"

I searched the Internet, and I couldn't find a video of an actual surgical procedure in the clinic that focused on the woman's experience. We talk about abortion so much and yet no one really knows what it actually looks like. A first trimester abortion takes three to five minutes. It is safer than birth. There is no cutting....

For Letts the abortion was a wonderful, moving, almost spiritual experience:

I was focused on staying positive and feeling the love from everyone in the room. I am so lucky that I knew everyone involved, and I was so supported. I remember breathing and humming through it like I was giving birth. I know that sounds weird, but to me, this was as birth-like as it could be. It will always be a special memory for me.

Emily Letts feels no remorse:

...every time I watch the video, I love it. I love how positive it is. I think that there are just no positive abortion stories on video for everyone to see. ...What I really wanted to address in my video is guilt. Our society breeds this guilt.¹

¹ Emily Letts, "Why I Filmed My Abortion," *Cosmopolitan*, May 5, 2014, <http://www.cosmopolitan.com/politics>, [accessed December 11, 2014].

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In another interview she admitted,

I do realize it was potential life. I have a special relationship with my ultrasound. People say it sounds weird, it's my process. I realize it was potential life, and I love it in my own special way. I'm not glib and cavalier. I'm comfortable with my decisions.²

In the video itself, Emily Letts says, "I don't feel bad. I feel in awe of the fact that I can make a baby. I can make a life. I knew what I was going to do was right because it was right for me and no one else."³



A few comments on Emily Letts' video and interview:

First, the video itself is a lie. We do *not* see an abortion procedure. In fact, abortion advocates *never* show an abortion procedure, because in an abortion a baby is destroyed. What we see is a smiling, humming Emily in a surgical robe. We never see what the doctor was actually doing. If we saw *that*, we would be physically sick. To suggest that abortion is "safer than birth" is absurd and wicked, for abortion, laying aside the physical and emotional damage it causes women, is *not safe* for the child.

Second, Letts, perhaps unwittingly, reveals the truth about her abortion. She does not call the child a clump of cells, a growth, a tumor, but *a baby*. "I can make a baby. I can make a life," she enthuses. Elsewhere, she calls the *baby* "potential life," but there can be no doubt that the baby she had the doctor kill was a life—unique, irreplaceable, precious life.

Third, notice Letts' utter selfishness. Her child is robbed of life, because this decision was good for Emily Letts and "no one else." When Emily Letts irresponsibly (because of the sin of fornication) became pregnant, she

² Emily Letts, "Q&A: Actress Emily Letts on the Reaction to Her Abortion Video," *Philadelphia*, May 7, 2014, <http://www.phillymag.com/news/2014/05/07>, [accessed December 11, 2014].

³ "Emily's Abortion Video," <http://vimeo.com/84797427> [accessed December 11, 2014].

selfishly destroyed the baby before he/she could become an inconvenience to her.

Fourth, notice Letts' god-complex. Hannah rejoiced, "The LORD killeth and maketh alive" (I Sam. 2:6). Emily Letts enthuses, "I can make a baby. I can make a life." Emily Letts cannot make a life. For that, a man is required, and God Himself must open the womb and grant conception. What Emily Letts did was wickedly *kill* a life.

Fifth, if Letts truly feels no remorse and no guilt for paying someone to murder her unborn child, and did not make this video to attempt to suppress her guilt, she is a terrifying example of one with a "conscience seared with a hot iron" (I Tim. 4:2). A society made up of such conscience-less souls is surely ripe for judgment.

■ "An Open Letter to the Little Life I Won't Get to Meet"

A user, called *scaredthrowingaway*, on the social network site *Reddit* penned an "open letter" to the child she planned to abort. One can only hope that this was a hoax, but it reveals the heart of one ready to do the unthinkable.

Little Thing:

I can feel you in there. I've got twice the appetite and half the energy. It breaks my heart that I don't feel the enchantment that I'm supposed to feel. I am both sorry and not sorry.

I am sorry that this is goodbye. I'm sad that I'll never get to meet you. You could have your father's eyes and my nose and we could make our own traditions, be a family. But, Little Thing, we will meet again. I promise that the next time I see that little blue plus, the next time you are in the same reality as me, I will be ready for you.

Little Thing, I want you to be happy. More than I want good things for myself, I want the best things for the future. That's why I can't be your mother right now. I am still growing myself. It wouldn't be fair to bring a new life into a world where I am still haunted by ghosts of the life I've lived.

I want you to have all the things I didn't have when I was a child. I want you to be better than I ever was and more magnificent than I ever could be. I can't do to you what was done to me: Plant a seed made of love and spontaneity into a garden, and hope that it will grow on only dreams.

Love and spontaneity are beautiful, but they have

little merit. And while I have plenty of dreams to go around, dreams are not an effective enough tool for you to build a better tomorrow.

I can't bring you here. Not like this.

I love you, Little Thing, and I wish the circumstances were different. I promise I will see you again, and next time, you can call me Mom.⁴

Notice the confusion in this young woman's mind:

First, this person believes that it would be more compassionate to kill her child (whom she calls "Little Thing") than for her child to grow up in what many might call "disadvantaged circumstances." "This is goodbye," she says. Why? She wants her child, who otherwise will not have the best things for the future, to be happy. Behold the cruelty of the tender mercies of the wicked! (Prov. 12:10). In our increasingly materialistic society, we need the reminder: a child does not need all the best things. A child needs life, and a child needs love! Both of these this woman denies to her child. Love worketh no ill to his neighbor, and that includes not killing the neighbor (Rom. 13:10; Heidelberg Catechism, LD 40). Her final words to "Little Thing" ring hollow: "I love you..." Have we now reached a point where a murderer can say "I love you" just before she snuffs out the life of the one she claims to love?


Second, this person has convinced herself that in killing this child she will be ready to receive him/her again in the future. Notice her illogical statements: "we will meet again; the next time I will be ready for you; I can't be your mother right now; next time you can call me Mom." But, if she ever does become pregnant again, and if she ever gives birth to a child in the future, *it will not be the same child*. The child whom she has aborted (murdered) is a unique person, forever lost, never to be repeated, never to be replaced. She will never see him/her again in this life. On the Day of Judgment, when she will give account for her selfish sin of murder, she will see that child again. But then that child will not be "Little Thing," but he/she will rise up to accuse her of her sins.

Abortion is a multi-million dollar industry. Abortionists are becoming more and more brazen in their advocacy of this horrible crime. No longer do they pretend that the victims of their crime are clumps of cells or blobs

⁴ "I am getting an abortion next Friday. An open letter to the little life I won't get to meet," <http://www.reddit.com/r/TwoXChromosomes/comments>, (accessed December 11, 2014).

of tissue. Fetuses or babies are *persons*, real human beings, biologically and genetically distinct from their mothers, fearfully and wonderfully made. Emily Letts' ultrasound, which she kept as a memento, testifies to that fact. Both abortionists and those seeking abortions

know it. But the abortion industry does not care: these babies are unwanted, inconvenient persons, who need to be sacrificed on the altar of human selfishness.

We live in a society in love with death. Let us find refuge in Christ, our Life. 

THINGS WHICH MUST SHORTLY COME TO PASS

PROF. DAVID ENGELSMA

Chapter Five

Premillennialism (3)

Orientation (3)

“Chiliasm is not of Christian but of Jewish and Persian origin.”

“Chiliasm...comes in conflict with Christianity itself. In principle it is one with Judaism and must get to where it attributes a temporary, passing value to Christianity, the historical person of Christ, and his suffering and death, and it only first expects real salvation from Christ's second coming, his appearance in glory. Like Judaism, it subordinates the spiritual to the material, the ethical to the physical, confirms the Jews in their carnal-mindedness, excuses their rejection of the Messiah, reinforces the veil that lies over their minds when they hear the reading of the Old Testament, and promotes the illusion that the physical descendants of Abraham will as such still enjoy an advantage in the kingdom of heaven.”

“The community of believers has in all respects replaced carnal, national Israel.”

- Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*

The Time-Line of Premillennialism

The complicated time-line of premillennialism regarding the future, as we described premillennialism in the preceding articles in this series, is as follows:

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Previous article in this series: December 1, 2014, p. 111.

1. the rapture of the church at any moment, perhaps as I sit typing this article for the *Standard Bearer* (evidently not, since the article is published), or perhaps as you sit reading it;

2. seven years of God's special dealings, once again, as in the Old Testament, with national Israel—physical Jews—to restore Israel as His kingdom, as in the Old Testament, including the rise of Antichrist and his persecution (tribulation) of the Jews for three and a half years, the latter half of the seven year period;

3. the visible, bodily return of Jesus Christ, not as Savior of the church, but as king of the Jews, in order to establish an earthly kingdom of Israel, headquartered in Jerusalem, where the risen Jesus will sit on an earthly throne for a thousand years of continued history (the millennium);

4. the millennium of the worldwide kingdom of Israel—the carnal peace, prosperity, and power of the Jews for one thousand years of world history;

5. an astounding revolution of the ungodly masses, who have been in this carnal kingdom all along, against Christ's earthly kingship and kingdom. The revolution of the ungodly against King Jesus, proposed by premillennialism, is astounding in view of the awesome majesty of the risen Christ Jesus. Before Him, the beloved disciple John “fell at his feet as dead” (Rev. 1:17). Reprobate, ungodly men, in contrast, are supposed to have the cour-

age to take Him on, personally, in combat. The result of the battle of the ungodly against Jesus at the end of the millennium, we are happy to learn from premillennial scholars, will be the victory of Jesus.

6. the triumph of Jesus over His enemies in this final battle will spell the end of history and the onset of eternity. At that time, there will be yet another resurrection of all the dead and the conducting of the final judgment.

Dispensationalism

Fundamental to all of this eschatological nonsense is the doctrine of “dispensations.” Hence, the full name of the heresy: premillennial *dispensationalism*. (One may be excused for hearing in the second part of the name a hint of the word, “sensationalism.” Read Hal Lindsey’s *The Late Great Planet Earth*, aptly sub-titled, “Incredible Prophecies.” “Incredible” means ‘unbelievable.’ No Reformed Christian believes Lindsey’s sensationalized, but essentially accurate, description of premillennialism’s millennium. No Reformed Christian gives any credence to the description whatsoever. Nevertheless, how popular this incredible premillennial doctrine is among professing Christians, the advertisement on the cover of my 1971 edition indicates: “Over 600,000 copies in print”; Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth: A Penetrating Look at Incredible Prophecies Involving This Generation* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 15th printing 1971].)

Premillennialism divides human history into a number (the preferred number, if not the orthodox number, in premillennial circles, is seven) of distinct, different periods, or “ages,” or “dispensations.” The different periods are distinguished, supposedly, by God’s differing dealings with humans during the dispensations, specifically His testing of humans in various ways.

In his notes in the Scofield Reference Bible, C. I. Scofield defined a dispensation as it occurs in dispensational theology as “a period of time during which man is tested in respect of obedience to some specific revelation of the will of God.”¹ Ryrie’s own definition is essentially the same: “A dispensation is a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God’s purpose.”² Ryrie immediately adds

¹ Cited in Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), 22.

² Ibid., 29.

the fundamental, dispensational elements of “distinctive revelation, testing, failure, and judgment.”³

For our purposes, it is enough to note that premillennialism sharply and radically distinguishes the time of the Old Testament, from Moses to Jesus Christ, as the dispensation of Israel—the nation of Jews—as God’s earthly kingdom, with the law as the controlling word of God. The present time, from Jesus Christ to the imagined and imaginary rapture, is the dispensation of the church as the spiritual body of Jesus Christ, saved by grace, with the gospel as the controlling word of God (the law having been discarded).

The goal of all the dispensations is the dispensation of the millennium, as the time of the restoration of Israel as the kingdom of God on earth in the most glorious form of the kingdom. In this yet future dispensation, the church loses its prominence in the estimation of God and in the working of God in history. The Jews are all. Not Christ Jesus as the church’s head and the church as His body and bride are the goal of history, but the Jews and their earthly kingdom of a thousand years.

My description and criticism of premillennial dispensationalism in the articles that follow will concentrate on the eschatology of this false doctrine, its teaching about the last things, especially its teaching of the millennium. Because the notion of dispensations is fundamental to the eschatology of premillennialism, specifically its teaching of the millennium, my criticism of premillennialism must, nevertheless, take the doctrine of dispensations into account.

Purpose

It is not my purpose with this section of my treatment of the eschatology of the millennium to engage in polemics with premillennial dispensationalism. This was my purpose with the preceding examination of postmillennialism. Postmillennialism claims to be Reformed. The error is prominent today in some Reformed and Presbyterian churches. It is aggressively promoted by prominent Reformed and Presbyterian theologians. Reformed Christians are falling for the fantasy of postmillennialism. It was necessary, therefore, to engage postmillennialism in controversy.

Such is not the case with premillennialism. By the

³ Ibid.

admission of its leading proponents, premillennialism is not Reformed. Indeed it is anti-Reformed. Premillennial writers usually describe the Reformed theology that they oppose as “covenant theology.” All the apologists for premillennialism oppose Reformed, covenantal theology. They oppose covenant theology openly, by name. They oppose it vehemently. All acknowledge that premillennialism and the Reformed faith are diametrically opposed at the very root of the two beliefs.

J. Gresham Machen seriously erred, therefore, when, trying to enlist premillennial churches in his righteous warfare against theological liberalism, he downplayed the difference between premillennialism and Presbyterian covenant theology.

The recrudescence of “Chiliasm” or “premillennialism” in the modern Church causes us serious concern; it is coupled, we think, with a false method of interpreting Scripture which in the long run will be productive of harm. Yet how great is our agreement with those who hold the premillennial view!... Their error, serious though it may be, is not deadly error; and Christian fellowship, with loyalty not only to the Bible but to the great creeds of the Church, can still unite us with them.⁴

Ryrie recognizes covenant theology as a main opponent of premillennialism, if not *the* main opponent of premillennialism, by devoting an entire chapter of his defense of premillennialism to a refutation of “covenant theology.”⁵

Acknowledging covenant theology as the chief theological foe of premillennialism, the contemporary, “progressive” premillennialists concentrate on achieving

⁴ J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 123), 49. Contemporary, “progressive,” or “moderate,” dispensationalist, Craig Blaising, who is eager to have dispensationalism recognized as a legitimate form of evangelical Christianity and who is engaged in achieving fellowship of dispensational theologians with covenant theologians, is correct, therefore, in stating that Machen “advocated closing ranks [of Presbyterians and dispensationalists—DJE] in support of the authority of Scripture” (Craig A. Blaising, “Dispensationalism: The Search for Definition,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, ed. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992, 21).

⁵ Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 177-191. Ryrie begins the chapter by acknowledging that “throughout this book reference has been made many times to covenant theology” (177).

some accommodation with covenant theology. The second chapter of Blaising and Bock’s *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church* is titled, “The New Covenant and the People(s) of God.”⁶

What the radical opposition between dispensationalism and Reformed, covenant theology is, we consider in what follows.

Because of the avowed unreformed and anti-Reformed nature of premillennialism, my purpose is not to contend with that teaching, even though some contending must inevitably take place. For such polemics, the interested reader may consult John H. Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth: A Critique of Dispensationalism* (Brentwood, Tennessee: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1991); John H. Gerstner, “A Primer on Dispensationalism,” (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R, 1982); O. T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1964); Abraham Kuyper, “Chiliasm or the Doctrine of Premillennialism,” tr. G. M. Pernis (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1934); Herman Hoeksema, “The Millennium,” in *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: RFPA, 1966), 816-829 [although this treatment of what Hoeksema calls “chiliasm” is brief, it is helpful in that it enters closely into premillennialism’s mistaken interpretation of key passages in the book of Revelation]; and Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol 4: *Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, tr. John Vriend, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 655-690.

My purpose in treating of premillennialism, at the conclusion of my explanation of the millennium, is to demonstrate to Reformed amillennialists the error of the eschatology, or doctrine of the last things, of premillennialism and the differences between the two eschatologies.

... to be continued. 

⁶ Bruce A. Ware, “The New Covenant and the People(s) of God,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, 68-97. The great divide between premillennialism and the Reformed faith and that the great divide remains in the theology also of “progressive” dispensationalism are indicated clearly by the letter in parentheses in the title of Ware’s article.

Report from the Seminary

Greetings to all the friends and supporters of the Protestant Reformed Theological School!

By the time you read this, the first semester of the 2014-15 school year will be over, classes completed and exams administered, graded, and returned. Fourth-year student Ryan Barnhill will have returned from his six-month internship in the Protestant Reformed Church in Edgerton, MN. It has been an exciting semester.

One of the most notable new features for the nine students in their second year of seminary has been the addition of “practice preaching.” In this new endeavor, the students must take the “theory” of what they learned thus far—particularly, Greek and Hebrew language skills, interpretation of Scripture (hermeneutics), and making of sermons (homiletics)—and apply it to making and preaching real sermons. Since it is new for them, I suspect it is new for most readers, so allow me to explain the process.

Each student first translates the text assigned him for preaching. The students desire to work with the very words that the Spirit gave in the text. They then explain the grammar of the text—perhaps put it into a sentence diagram so that every word is accounted for grammatically—subject, verb, prepositional phrases, and modifiers. The meaning of the text is determined by the *words* and the *grammar*, and every part of the text must be explained in the sermon.

Next is “word study,” that is, learning how the Bible uses the terms found in the text. This is one aspect of the main Reformed principle of interpretation—Scripture interprets Scripture. Carefully drawing the meaning of terms from the rest of Scripture, they arrive at the point where they define the term or concept—say, “justification by faith,” or “the glory of God.” They know that their

professors will be looking for a clear definition, with proof that it is drawn from the Bible and especially from this text. Then they set about to explain each concept. Since the Bible is the revelation of God in the face of Jesus Christ, they seek to understand how each term (concept) is related to the crucified and risen Lord. After they have a good grasp of each concept, they study relationships: how is each concept related to the others in this text?

In all this, the student is seeking the one main thought that the Spirit conveys in the text. That will be the theme of his sermon. Obviously much time is put into this—the theme and the (usually) three points.

When this is accomplished, the student writes out his exegesis (i.e., interpretation) of the text, starting with the main thought, and continuing to the lesser points. It is a good idea at this point to check his work by reading a couple of good commentaries. From this he may learn that he has missed certain thoughts that ought to be developed. He might discover to his dismay that John Calvin or Herman Hoeksema gave a very different explanation of the text. At that point he faces a significant decision. He has been instructed to deal honestly with the contrary explanation of good commentaries, perhaps changing his own, or going with what he has. Either way, he must be able to justify his interpretation on the basis of the text, the context, and the whole of Scripture.

All that is the enjoyable part. Searching the Scriptures, having the meaning of the text come out—the glory of God, the wonder of salvation, the comfort of the Word. This is a thrill!

What follows can be a struggle considerably less pleasant. “Homiletics.” Putting the exegesis into a sermon outline. It starts with the best formulation of the theme, and proper divisions. Then all that the student has drawn from the text must be pressed into a formal outline—an outline that is logical, balanced, flows well, and will be easy for *others* to follow. Included in this must be appropriate applications based squarely on the

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doctrine, and a sharp eye to polemics besides (defending truth over against error). The students earnestly desire a sermon that will edify God's people and give glory to God through Jesus Christ.

Finally, the sermon is "ready"—typed, copied, handed out to the professors and the assigned student evaluators on Friday. Come Monday morning, it is time to lead in "practice preaching"—to deliver the sermon before the whole student body and the professors. Every student aspires to deliver the sermon with conviction, passion, and earnestness. All the while he is speaking, he is trying to block out the knowledge that he is being evaluated for his volume, use of pause, gestures, enunciation, eye contact, and even facial expression. Not to mention that his *sermon* is being critically evaluated.

After each sermon is delivered, the two designated fellow students, and all three professors have the opportunity to give their critique—of the sermon itself, as well as of the delivery. Some encouragement is offered, and some criticism. It is hardly a painless experience, as you can probably imagine. To have poured one's soul into a sermon for weeks, only to be told that you missed the point of the text—painful indeed! To imagine that you

were being forceful and dynamic in the delivery, only to be told that you gestured only three times, rarely changed the pitch of your voice, and were exceedingly low-key—a distressing discovery! And you are sent home with a video of your session, so that you can see for yourself what others observed.

All that happened eighteen times this past semester. Difficult and humbling as it may be for them, the aspiring preachers must get accustomed to critique, since elders are called to evaluate the preaching, and the people surely will express their views. Practice preaching is the time-proven method that the Spirit uses to fashion our students into preachers. They all have varying gifts for exegesis and for crafting outlines, and yet again, talents for preaching. But they must all develop into excellent preachers. The glory of God demands it, and the wellbeing of Christ's church depends on good preaching. We professors know that, the students know that, and thus we persevere.

Pray for us, that these men may continue to develop in knowledge and godliness, and above all, as preachers.

For the Seminary,
Prof. Russell Dykstra, Rector

STRENGTH OF YOUTH

REV. GARRY ERIKS

Dating for God's Glory (1)

Does the Bible say anything about dating? This is a good question for young people who are dating and who desire to date. The answer to this question is what parents should be discussing with their young people.

There are two answers to this question. The first answer is, "No." If you search in your Bible app or concordance you will not find the words, "date," "dating," "boyfriend," or "girlfriend." Paul did not write about what to

do on a first date. He does not tell us how long to date before marrying. Dating is the recent practice that men and women in our culture use to find a spouse. In other cultures and at different times a spouse was found by parental arrangement. Abraham found a wife for Isaac by sending his servant who prayed that the woman who gave a drink to him and his camels would be the woman God wanted for Isaac. This does not mean that God requires we find a spouse in this same way (which many of you are probably relieved to hear).

But there is a second answer to our question, "Does the Bible say anything about dating?" Yes it does. Although the Bible does not give all kinds of rules for

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dating, God's Word does give *important principles* that apply directly to dating. The Bible makes clear parents must oversee dating. Because marriage must be in the Lord, dating should be in the Lord as well.

What should govern our dating practices more than anything else is the *truth of marriage*, because dating is for marriage. If we are going to date in a right way, we must know where we are headed. The goal is that we would be godly and loving in dating, so that one of these dating relationships will develop into a godly and loving marriage.

In this article and subsequent articles we will consider how the biblical truth of marriage applies to dating. To understand what godly, healthy dating is we need to understand what a godly, healthy marriage is. When we understand what a godly, healthy marriage is, we will strive to establish godly patterns and foundations in a dating relationship. If we do not have the goal of marriage in mind, this will lead to a weak foundation and ungodly patterns in dating.

God's Word informs young men and young women that seeking a relationship that will blossom into marriage is a good thing, for example, in Genesis 2:18, where we read that it was not good for man to be alone. Although many of you young people are not ready for marriage right now, you probably picture yourself being married at some point. This is a good desire to have. God revealed to Adam his need for a wife by bringing the animals before Adam two-by-two so that he could name them. Adam saw that he was alone, which was not good. Still today, this Word of God teaches that it is not good for man to be alone, normally. Our culture sends a very different message to young men especially, but also to young women. The world says that if you marry too soon, you will miss out on a good time. But the real danger is that young men and young women develop sinful, selfish attitudes and behaviors that will make marriage difficult. In addition, there is the danger of sexual desires young men and women succumb to while single.

Because dating is for marriage, we face this fundamental question: why did God ordain marriage? God has ordained marriage *not for our own personal happiness, but for His glory*, as He uses marriage to teach us about His covenant established with His people in Jesus Christ. Because this is true, the focus of dating must be

the glory of God, as we seek a relationship to reflect and learn more about God's covenant with His people in Jesus Christ. For those of you who are dating, is this the focus of your heart? For those who desire to date, do you want to date for the glory of God in Christ?

God's goal for marriage is not our personal happiness, fulfillment, or meaning. Expecting this from marriage is like expecting my 2001 Yukon XL to get 40 miles-per-gallon on a road trip. It was not designed to get that kind of gas mileage. It was designed to carry my large family and to get 17 miles-per-gallon, at best. If we expect that marriage is all romance, bliss, and happiness, we will be sorely disappointed because the reality is that a sinner marries a sinner. Because there is sin in marriage, there can be periods of sadness, struggle, conflict, and disappointment. This is why our Marriage Form begins (not pessimistically, but realistically) "Whereas married persons are generally, by reason of sin, subject to many troubles and afflictions...."

God has ordained marriage to be a covenant to teach us about His covenant with us in Jesus Christ. We know this from the many passages in Scripture that use marriage language to describe our relationship with God. In Hosea 2:19, 20, we find this language when God speaks to His people and says, "I will betroth thee unto me forever; yea, I will betroth thee unto me in righteousness, and in judgment, and in lovingkindness, and in mercies. I will even betroth thee unto me in faithfulness: and thou shalt know the LORD." This same idea is found in the outstanding New Testament passage on marriage (Eph. 5). In verse 32, Paul says, "This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church." The mystery revealed here is that God has ordained marriage to teach us about our relationship to Christ.

Marriage is a covenant through which we learn about the highest and best relationship we have, in this life and the next. This is not a relationship with a man or woman, but *our relationship with God*. As close and wonderful as marriage is, or as cold and difficult as some marriages can be, we have a better, closer, and longer-lasting relationship with God. In this relationship God delights in us and draws us close to Himself although we sin and commit spiritual adultery against Him. In this relationship we are called to live to glorify and please Him.

This teaches young people to approach dating and

marriage from a *God-centered* perspective instead of a man-centered perspective. What is the difference?

Because God has not designed marriage for our personal happiness, dating must not be for that either. I wish I understood this when I was in high school. It would have radically changed the way I viewed dating. A *man-centered* perspective on dating and marriage will cause one to approach dating from the perspective of personal happiness. This is the as-long-as-this-person-makes-me-happy-I-will-date-this-person attitude. If not, then the relationship must end. Maybe it should end, because the other person is not godly or is self-centered. Our dating (and marriages) should have the perspective that is so much higher than personal happiness.

How much has this emphasis of our culture affected us? The world says to do what feels good and makes you happy. If dating makes you happy and it feels good, then do it. Date for fun. Enjoy the romance of a young man trying to win you with gifts, appearance, kindness, and making you feel special. Enjoy the happiness this brings. Embrace, the world says, sensual caresses, kissing, and even sexual intimacy in dating. But understand what the Bible says about this. If we date for these reasons, we are not dating for God's glory, but for what we get out of it. We date because it makes us feel good and happy.

To guard our hearts from this kind of dating that feels so good and so right, we must understand God's *purpose* for marriage. A God-centered perspective on dating sees God's glory in His covenant as the ultimate end. The ultimate goal of all things is to serve and glorify God. Marriage is for the purpose of growing in our relationship with God. What does this mean for dating? It means a couple dating with the goal of God's glory seeks to prepare for marriage with all seriousness for that sacred bond. Through a dating relationship, we should want to please God and grow in our knowledge of Him. The relationship should aid my growth in sanctification. This is the driving force of a good dating relationship. If the relationship is not focused on this, it is not a good relationship.

Through marriage we learn about God's love and we learn to love God. God uses marriage as a tool to deliver us from our self-centeredness. Marriage is the instrument of God for our sanctification. God uses many other instruments for our sanctification—the single life,

friendships, His Word, and prayer—but He also uses marriage. Our greatest need is to be delivered from our selfishness. He joins us to a spouse who is different than we are and who will sin against us. As we struggle to love because of our own sin and the sin of the spouse God has given, we learn of the wonder of God's perfect love for sinners. This is the purpose of marriage.

Marriage is a relationship of friendship and love that teaches us about God's unconditional and undeserved love in Jesus Christ. Love is not merely a feeling. It is an activity of self-sacrifice that desires the good of the other person although that person does not deserve it. This is God's love for us in Jesus Christ (John 3:16). God gave His only begotten Son to save us from our sins. This amazing love of God is not based on anything we do. This is what love in marriage should look like. It should reflect the love of God for us. This love must be focused on God first and then the spouse.


This is important to understand for dating. I am afraid many couples are expressing their feelings by saying to each other, "I love you," without understanding what this really means. Does anything feel better than to be told, "I love you"? But do we understand these three words? We should be sure to understand them before we say them. Dating with a view to marriage is a time to learn what love is, and whether or not you will make the commitment to love this person until death with the love of Christ. Love in marriage is a life-long commitment. Before these words are spoken in a dating relationship, this must be understood. How many couples say these words to each other ignorantly and later break up and don't marry? That shows the couple did not fully understand the impact of those words. I would caution dating couples not to speak these three intimate words until they are ready to make a commitment to each other.

Another way a dating couple focuses on God's glory is by dating within the boundaries of *sexual purity*. God's Word clearly reveals that sex is only good and right within marriage. God says to you in dating, "Flee fornication and be pure!" (I Cor. 6:18). Part of dating in preparation for marriage includes not practicing physical intimacy. Instead, God calls us to purity. A couple who loves God and is learning to love the other will set clear and definite physical boundaries for the relationship. This is especially true for young men, since statistics have

shown that young men think about sex every ten seconds! All the more reason to set boundaries.

I would encourage couples to think about this and talk about this under the guidance and accountability of parents. Here are some suggested boundaries. Set the boundary of not being alone in a place where sexual sin would be a temptation—for example down in the basement on the couch all alone. Set the boundary of

no sensual kissing or caressing, because this is part of foreplay that leads to sex. Dating should not be the time to arouse each other sensually, but to learn to love with a view to determining if this is the person you should love for a lifetime.

The Bible has so much to say about dating. Date to the glory of God with an eye on marriage! 

The Qualifications of the Office of Elder (9)

The Elder's Aptness to Teach

In preceding articles we have now commented on every qualification of the office of elder mentioned in I Timothy 3 and Titus 1. Even that qualification that we consider here, “apt to teach” (I Tim. 3:2), we have already examined as part of the broader subject of the elder’s relationship to the truth.

But this particular qualification raised more questions than we had time to answer in our last article. Does this qualification apply only to the church’s pastors (“teaching elders,” to use the term commonly used by Presbyterians), or also to her elders (“ruling elders”)? If also to her ruling elders, *why* must they teach, and *how* do they teach, when they are not preachers?

Concluding our examination of the qualifications of the office of elder, we answer these questions.

Teaching elders only?

Some are of the opinion that the phrase “apt to teach” applies only to pastors, or to what Presbyterians call “teaching elders.”

Perhaps some ruling elders favor this notion for personal or practical reasons. Asked to teach catechism

when the pastor is sick or out of town, they might argue that they cannot do so, or at least they cannot do so *well*. After all, the pastor went to seminary, while the elder pursued some other area of study in college, or finished his formal studies when he graduated from high school, or did not even graduate from high school (years ago this was more common). The pastor knows the material better than they. And he is used to standing in front of people and speaking to them; they lack that ability.

That was a “perhaps.” More concretely, at least one Reformed pastor (Rev. Daniel Hyde) argues in writing that “apt to teach” applies only to pastors, or teaching elders. He bases his argument both on exegetical reasons, and on the claim that other Reformed fathers were also of this opinion. I’m going to quote his comments at length so that the reader has the full context of the quote and can understand Rev. Hyde’s rationale in his own words. Having quoted I Timothy 3:1-7, Rev. Hyde says:

Here we want to ask ourselves how does Paul’s list in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 (cf. Titus 1:5-10) apply to the elder? This is an important question because, as we have seen, the offices of minister and elder are distinct. Using 1 Timothy 3 for the elder would seem to cause a problem since it lists “able to teach” as a qualification (v. 2).

This text has been understood in church history,

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Previous article in this series: December 15, 2014, p. 135.

including the Reformation, as speaking of the office of the pastor. This has been the case because the terms *episkopos* (bishop, overseer) and *presbuteros* (elder) are used interchangeably in the New Testament of the office of the minister of the Word. [Rev. Hyde then makes two references to Calvin's writings, DJK].

Yet the main reason this text has been understood to speak of the minister is that it speaks of the one who is *didaktikon*, that is, gifted in the skill of teaching the Word (cf. Titus 1:9). This is one of the main problems with the "two-office view" of the offices of the Church. Basically, if ruling elders are of the same office as "teaching elders," meaning that they are both "able to teach," then there is no reason for an elder not [to] pursue the full-time ministry of the Word. If an elder has the gift and aptitude of teaching, he is compelled to preach the Word in season and out of season. Not to do so would be to reject the gifts Christ has given.

For this reason we need to be careful to point out that being gifted to teach speaks of the minister and not the elder. When we look to 1 Timothy 3:1-7 for the qualifications of the office of elder, the list applies except for those qualifications that are exclusive of the minister of the Word (i.e., teaching, administering the sacraments)....¹

Whether Calvin meant to apply "apt to teach" exclusively to pastors, and not at all to elders, is an interesting question. I will leave it aside for now, because it makes no difference for our purpose. The fundamental question is this: does (or does not) every qualification of the office of bishop listed in I Timothy 3:2-7 apply as well to elders, as to pastors? Rev. Hyde said: no. Particularly, to requote a sentence found above, "...being gifted to teach speaks of the minister and not the elder." I take the opposite view.

Ruling elders also!

I Timothy 3:2 requires both pastor and ruling elders to be "apt to teach."

To say this is not to deny that in the New Testament church the office of pastor and elder are distinct. Nor is this to deny that the work of teaching is *the primary work* of the minister, while for the elder the primary work is *ruling*.

¹ Daniel R. Hyde, "Rulers and Servants: The Nature of and Qualifications for the Office of Elder and Deacon," *Called to Serve: Essays for Elders and Deacons*, ed. Michael Brown (Grandville, MI: Reformed Fellowship, Inc., 2006), 11.

Rather, to say this is to deny that I Timothy 3:2 distinguishes between pastor and elder.

Nowhere in the entire passage (I Tim. 3:1-7) does one find any indication that some qualifications apply only in particular instances. Paul does not so much as hint in the passage that he distinguishes between the offices of pastor and elder. The inspired apostle is explicit that he speaks throughout the passage of one who holds "the office of a bishop" (v. 1). Literally, the bishop is an "overseer," a ruler. Thus Paul indicates that he refers to the office of rule—the office of elder (pastor included). So when he says that "a bishop then must be..." (v. 2), he states what every ruler in the church, every teaching elder, but also every ruling elder, must be. To quote another: "However, it should be noted here that these qualifications [he refers to I Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9] count for both the teaching and the ruling elder. No distinction is made."²

The fact is that to introduce a distinction of offices into I Timothy 3:2-7 is to muddy the waters. Now we have to keep asking with regard to each qualification: does this apply to the pastor only, to the elder only, or to both? And, *why* the one, or the other, or both?

I am convinced that the Spirit did not intend us to be asking these questions while reading this passage.

Nor can one appeal to the distinction between pastors and ruling elders as found in I Timothy 5:17, to help understand I Timothy 3:1-7. I'm not denying that Scripture interprets Scripture. And clearly, I Timothy 5:17 does distinguish between pastors ("those who labor in the word and doctrine") and ruling elders (those who do not labor in the word and doctrine). Also, I Timothy 5:17 clearly implies that teaching is the primary work of the minister, for their field of labor is especially "the word and doctrine." But the distinction made in I Timothy 5:17 cannot be read back into I Timothy 3:2-7. If anything, I Timothy 5:17 indicates that, while there is a distinction to be made among elders (teaching and ruling), both kinds of elders *are elders*. So the qualifications of I Timothy 3:2-7 apply to all.

It follows, then, that one who is "apt to teach" is *not* compelled, by that very fact, to pursue the gospel ministry. This qualification, and the ability to convince

² Cornelius VanDam, *The Elder: Today's Ministry Rooted in All of Scripture* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 115.

gainsayers (Tit. 1:9), “are not the equivalents of a call to, gifts for, and ordination to the office of the minister of the gospel.”³

Why Must Ruling Elders Teach?

My purpose in the foregoing sections was to emphasize that the qualification “apt to teach” applies as well to ruling elders as to pastors. This begs the question, *why* must ruling elders be able to teach?

They must, because teaching is one means by which they rule. The rule of elders in the church is the enforcing of God’s law and the principles of Scripture in the lives of God’s people. To restate more simply, elders administer the Scriptures to the congregation. To do so, elders must teach the people what the Scriptures say. It is not reality to suppose that every child of God, at all times, understands the Scriptures and properly applies them. The elders must teach us how to do this.

For instance, the work of discipline involves teaching—teaching the erring member what God’s law requires, teaching what constitutes true repentance, and teaching the certainty of enjoying God’s forgiveness in the way of that repentance.

I do not say that the rule of the elders involves teaching *only*; rather, teaching is one means by which elders rule.

How Do They Teach?

How, then, do the elders implement this aspect of their work?

Not just by stepping in to help the pastor teach cat-

³ W. M. Henry Roberts, *A Manual for Ruling Elders and Church Sessions* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian Board of Publication and Sabbath-School Work, 1918), 65.

echism. True, when the elders do teach catechism, they are *teaching*. But this is not all; it is not even primary.

As I alluded to earlier, the elders teach when they visit the wayward sheep. Titus 1:9 tells us why the bishop must hold “fast the faithful word as he hath been taught”: so “that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers.” The Spirit uses the teaching and application of the Scriptures to turn the erring.

The elders teach on family visitation. I don’t mean that family visitation is a formal class, with the family being visited participating but little. But in conducting family visitation from the viewpoint of a Scripture passage, the elders have something to teach. And perhaps something said at family visitation gives occasion for instruction.

The elders teach when they visit the sick. Comfort, which the sick need, is based on knowledge of the truth. (Does anything serve to illustrate this better than our own Heidelberg Catechism, and especially the first Q&A?) But this truth must not merely be stated; it must be explained and applied.

Lawrence Eyres states it well, and emphatically (all emphasis in the following quote is his): “This teaching function must be done with a view to its *application to the needs of men*.... I hasten to add that an elder need not be a gifted public speaker, or an able teacher of the Bible to large groups, though both these gifts are highly desirable. But at the very least, *an elder must be able to deal with people on a one-to-one basis, applying the Word to the needs of the individual*.”⁴

⁴ Lawrence R. Eyres, *The Elders of the Church*, (Phillipsburg, PA: P&R Publishing, 1980), 34.

BRING THE BOOKS...

MR. CHARLES TERPSTRA, review editor

Prepared by Grace, for Grace, Joel R. Beeke and Paul M. Smalley. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Reformation Heritage Books, 2013. Paperback, pp. xiii + 287. [Reviewed by Rev. Martyn McGeown.]

It is no secret that Joel Beeke loves the Puritans. In this book, Beeke and Smalley examine one of Puritan-

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ism’s most controversial doctrines, preparatory grace or “preparation.” The Puritans were faced with a situation in which almost everyone was a member of the state church. Clearly, a great number of churchgoers were unbelievers. How, then, could the preacher awaken the carnal, self-righteous hypocrites sitting in the pews to their need of salvation? The Puritans developed a theology to awaken their listeners by preaching the law of God. The idea was that God used the law to convict sinners of their sin, so that they would see their need for Christ and come to

Him for salvation. This, in itself, was not wrong: the Heidelberg Catechism uses the law to teach us our misery (LD 2). The problem was that the Puritans made preparation a very elaborate process, which in practice distressed the consciences of true believers. Conversion becomes impossibly convoluted and complex.

Prepared by Grace, for Grace traces the doctrine of preparation through many different Puritan writers (William Perkins, Richard Sibbes, John Preston, William Ames, Thomas Hooker, Thomas Shepard, John Cotton and many others). Most of these men agreed on the main lines of preparation, but they differed on the details. Much of the disagreement involved *when* exactly regeneration could be considered to have taken place, *how much* preparation is necessary, and (to me this is crucial) how preparation *differs* in the elect and reprobate.

Exactly at that point, Puritan preparatory theology becomes distressing: how much preparation must a sinner undergo, before he can have assurance that he is saved? Often as I read the book, I found myself writing in the margin, “Is this regeneration yet?” “Is such a person a believer yet?” “Can a person reach this step and still perish?” That is the fundamental issue that I have with Puritan preparatory theology: it makes assurance of salvation very difficult to attain. What might appear to be evidence of regeneration and saving faith could, in fact, be simply preparation. Reprobates might come so far!

Thomas Hooker, for example, wrote, “In preparation the soul grieves because of the Holy Spirit’s piercings and woundings, yet it does not yet have an inward principle of grace to love God and hate sin as sin” (81) and “a man under godly sorrow is not yet ‘in Christ’ but only ‘prepared for Christ.’ This sorrow is not ‘sanctifying sorrow.’” To this, Beeke and Smalley remark, “Here Hooker diverged from most Puritans in teaching a true, godly sorrow in the unregenerate” (87). Thomas Shepard explained that “there is in the elect a farther stroke of severing the soul from sin, conjoined with the terrors and sorrows [before their closing with Christ], which is not evident in the reprobate.” Shepard’s order of salvation was “common preparatory sorrows, the special grace of cutting off the old man, grafting into Christ by faith (calling), justification and sanctification” (96). John Norton had as many as *twelve steps* of preparation in his scheme!

The Puritans’ exegesis was, in my view, quite fanciful. They labored to explain preparation using many figures and illustrations, some taken from Scripture, others not. For example, preparation was like drying wood before it was burned; preparation was God giving the soul “fitness to receive” grace, like an empty bucket can receive water “but has no ability to fill itself or even to move itself under a faucet” (57); preparation was God gathering together the dry bones in Ezekiel 37, before He breathed life into them (one might be a gathered, flesh-covered, yet lifeless, skeleton); preparation was the forming of Adam’s body from dust, before He breathed into it the breath of life (248-249). John Cotton posited a double-work of the Spirit, giving a “spirit of bondage” (severing sinners from worldly entanglements and impressing upon them the weight of their sins) and a “spirit of burning” (consuming their hypocrisy), before He gave them the Spirit of regeneration. “People may go so far and not enter into adoption,” he warned (120). That is very fanciful exegesis of passages such as Romans 8:15 and Isaiah 4:4!

The research and the scholarship of the book are good and quite extensive, and the authors interact with some modern critics of Puritan theology, clearing away some misconceptions. If one is not interested in what the Puritans taught, however, simply read the last chapter for the authors’ conclusions. There I find myself in agreement with the criticisms (cautions) offered by Beeke and Smalley (251-254). These include the fact that the Puritans “at times did not choose their words as wisely as they should have;” the Puritans were guilty of a “lack of balance in presentation even in the context of a sound system of doctrine” (one man memorably put it that “a man may be held too long under John Baptist’s water”!); and the Puritans rigorously developed and painfully applied sequences of steps that could easily mislead their audiences into thinking that they were not yet saved.”

The Puritans have written some good material, but their doctrine of assurance (which flows out of their doctrine of preparation) is, quite frankly, miserable. Why, then, do Beeke and his allies insist on publishing books which praise the worst of what the Puritans have written? If you are interested in historical theology, this book will be helpful; if you are interested in the assurance of salvation, avoid the Puritans. ☞

Mission Activities

Rev. Vernon Ibe, pastor of the Berean Protestant Reformed Church located in metro Manila, the Philippines, accompanied Rev. John Flores, pastor of the Protestant Reformed Church of Bulacan (PRCB) to the Philippine island of Leyte, and more particularly to the municipality named Albueria, from November 29 through December 1. This smaller island of Leyte lies southeast of the main island of Luzon on which our missionaries labor, and is the site of the Protestant Reformed Fellowship of Albueria, a mission outreach of the PRCB. This fellowship recently celebrated its seventh anniversary in October. The PRCB has made regular visits to Albueria for a long while, and numerous visits in the last year, usually sending Pastor Flores and an elder. This was the first trip there for Rev. Ibe.

The purpose for the visit was to assess the physical and spiritual condition of the fellowship one year after typhoon Yolanda struck the area. The delegation reported good attendance and growth in numbers in the fellowship and still much interest in the Reformed faith, with approximately 80 souls (including children) worshiping there each Sunday. A steering committee had been previously appointed consisting of three men from the fellowship. These men are committed to lead

the group in worship using reading sermons. In addition, they conduct a Friday Bible study. There are convictions that a full-time missionary in Albueria would be beneficial for the people there—even ideal—but that does not seem possible at the present time for various reasons. Not the least of those is that the people of the fellowship in Leyte are primarily Tagalog speaking. English is a second language that they can somewhat comprehend, but most are not conversant in English. This imposes limitations as to who might be able to labor there as a full-time missionary.

The mission church in Pittsburgh, PA had a busy day on Sunday, December 14. The sacrament of the Lord's Supper was administered in the morning service, with a fellowship dinner enjoyed at noon. During the evening service the sacrament of holy baptism was administered and the annual Christmas program followed the service that night. Definitely a blessed time of spiritual renewal and fellowship and an enjoyable day!

Congregational Activities

Christmas is a time for singing. As evidence of that, many church choirs, school choirs and bands, catechumens, and Sunday school groups rendered programs during the Christmas season. Many church groups also caroled to elderly members of their congregations and others. Singspirations were held in some locales. Glory to God in the highest! May we always echo the

song of the angels in our celebration of the birth of our Redeemer!

At the Protestant Reformed School Society meeting the first week of December in Wingham, Ontario, Canada the decision was taken to move forward with plans to begin a Protestant Reformed school there. Those in Wingham have taken an exciting first step! Our prayers are with them in this important endeavor.

On December 18 two Bible study groups in Calvary PRC, Hull, IA held a combined meeting using the topic "Parenting and Holidays." Questions for discussion included: How does one best live out the calling of the antithesis with holidays such as Halloween, Christmas, Easter, etc.? How does one make holidays that are supposed to be spiritual celebrations, spiritual? How do parents teach their children properly concerning the issues involved in these holidays? A profitable discussion took place with much spiritual benefit acquired.

There is a change at the First PRC of Holland, MI as they recently took the decision to hold their evening services at 5:00 P.M. instead of 6:00. The congregation also approved new floor coverings for the main floor of the parsonage.

Faith PRC, Jenison, MI added new stackable chairs to their fellowship hall and voted to approve recent remodeling work in the parsonage.

In Hudsonville, MI PRC new church signs and renovation work in the parsonage were approved.

Mr. Van Edgom is a member of the Protestant Reformed Church of Doon, Iowa.

Standard Bearer

1894 Georgetown Center Dr.
Jenison, MI 49428-7137

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All the Bible study groups in Hudsonville, MI congregation were invited to a joint special Christmas Bible study centering on Isaiah 59, while the congregation of Grace PRC, Standale, MI was invited to a special Bible study discussing the wise men and the star they followed.

A farewell program and lunch was planned in the Edgerton, MN PRC after the second service on December 28 for seminarian Ryan Barnhill and his family.

Seminary Activities

Seminarian Ryan Barnhill rejoins the other seminary students for semester two of the 2014-2015 school year. With first semester exams concluded in December, the

list of classes to begin on January 20 are: Greek, Hebrew, NT Exegesis, World Religions, OT Exegesis, Church History, Church Polity, Dogmatics, NT Isagogics and practice preaching. These commence after the interim course taught by Prof. Ronald Cammenga on "The Theology of John Calvin."

Some of our seminary students have been assigned to teach various catechism classes in the Grand Rapids area during the second semester.


Minister Activities

On December 21, Rev. Ronald Van Overloop announced that he declined calls from Peace PRC, Lansing, IL and First PRC, Grand Rapids, MI.

Doon, IA PRC, the calling church for the denomination's mission field in the Republic of the Philippines formed a new trio consisting of: Rev. Allen Brummel (Heritage PRC, Sioux Falls, SD), Rev. Garrett Eriks (Hudsonville, MI PRC), and Rev. William Langerak (Southeast PRC, Grand Rapids, MI). This call was to be extended on December 25, D.V.

Classis Activities

Classis East was scheduled to meet in regular session January 14 at the First PRC of Holland, MI.

"To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven." Ecclesiastes 3:1. 

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Teacher needed

■ Hope PR Christian School (Grand Rapids, MI) is seeking applicants to fill positions in both kindergarten and a lower-elementary grade for the 2015-16 school year. For more information or to submit your resume contact David Langerak (616-437-3643, dave.langerak@gmail.com) or Dan Hanco (616-453-9717, dhanco@hopeprcschool.org).

Classis West

■ Classis West of the Protestant Reformed Churches will meet in Doon PRC on Wednesday, March 4, 2015, at 8:30 A.M. the Lord willing. All material for the Agenda is to be in the hands of the stated clerk by February 2 (30 days before classis convenes). All delegates in need of lodging or transportation from the airport should notify the clerk of Doon's consistory, Jim Hoogendoorn, (712) 726-3573, jimhoog@premieronline.net.

Rev. D. Kuiper, Stated Clerk

Resolution of Sympathy

■ The Council and congregation of Hull PRC express their Christian sympathy to Chalice Altena in the death of her husband,

ELROY J. ALTENA.

May the Spirit apply the words of Christ to her heart: "For thou hast delivered my soul from death, mine eyes from tears, and my feet from falling. I will walk before the Lord in the land of the living" (Psalm 116:8, 9).

Rev. Laning, President
Gerald Brummel, clerk of records

Seminary

■ All students enrolled in the Protestant Reformed Seminary who will be in need of financial assistance for the coming school year are asked to contact the Student Aid Committee secretary, Mr. Bill VanOverloop (Phone: 669-1504). This contact should be made before the next scheduled meeting, March 10, 2015, D.V.

Student Aid Committee
Bill VanOverloop, Secretary