

The Standard Bearer

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A New Year—Steadfast in the Scriptures

“... even as our beloved brother Paul also according to the wisdom given unto him hath written unto you; as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction. Ye therefore, beloved, seeing ye know these things before, beware lest ye also, being led away with the error of the wicked, fall from your own stedfastness.”

II Peter 3:15-17

The apostle Peter is inspired to conclude his second epistle to new Christians with an appeal that they be stable and endure. He knows that there is a danger that they faint and be led away. He fervently desires that they be established in the truth (1:12). To that end he has been assuring them that things will not continue without an end and that there will be a divine judgment in which all things will be set right. He writes to the end that they may patiently endure and not fall away.

Rev. VanOverloop is pastor of Grace Protestant Reformed Church in Standale, Michigan.

The key to the possession and practice of patient endurance is the knowledge of God’s Word. Thus Peter speaks of the Scriptures as they came through his spiritual brother Paul (15, 16). A knowledge of God’s Word prepares us to face the future. It alerts us to dangers that will come. It equips us with the ability to be steadfast in the face of what could be difficult times.

In these verses, Christian believers are encouraged to be in the Scriptures, for they are the source of steadfastness. As we begin a new year we too have reason to give ourselves to the study of the Scriptures, which enables us to grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.



Why is the admonition to be steadfast necessary and important?

First, there is the apparent delay in the Lord’s coming. Because Jesus did not come back as soon as they anticipated, the young Christians of Peter’s day began to question what they had been taught about Jesus’ return. They were beginning to be very fearful. Peter assured them of two things: 1) the importance of remembering what they knew and had learned from the apostles (1:12-

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15; 3:1, 2); and 2), the fact that history shows that God knows how to deliver the godly and to reserve the unjust for punishment (2:9).

Second, the need to be steadfast arises from the fact that Christians of every age must deal with the pernicious influence of false teachers and scoffers (2:1; 3:3). The “error of the wicked” that Peter speaks of in our text discourages and weakens believers.

Finally, we are always in need of the admonition to be steadfast, given our natural instability (the depravity of our old man of sin). We can be very energetic and diligent when it comes to material things, but unstable and lazy with regard to spiritual matters. We are easily distracted from setting our affections on the things above and the inheritance to come, focusing instead on the things that are here and now. We can read the Bible and fail to grow in the fear of God. We can easily sing the words of Scripture without understanding. We can have knowledge in pride and without love (I Cor. 8:1, 2; 13:8).

As we begin a new year, let us have no doubt that we need the admonition to be steadfast!



How do we resist constant temptations in light of natural weakness, and how do we remain steadfast and firm? Read the Scriptures! Know what they say. As we live and walk in the midst of this present evil age, we ought not listen to what men have to say. Rather we ought to go to the Scriptures, to see the truth presented and expounded there, and then to hold it for truth and walk in the light of it.

For the saints of Peter’s day the “scriptures” consisted of the Old Testament writings. Every Christian believer held that the “other scriptures” were uniquely inspired by God and given by Him. Now notice that Peter is inspired to urge these Christians to read also Paul’s epistles as well, and he words this in such a way that Paul’s epistles are said to be of authority equal to that of “the other (Old Testament) scriptures.” And notice further that Peter is writing in such a way to commend to Christians his own epistle, as having an equally authoritative source of right knowledge. He began this letter by identifying himself as “an apostle of Jesus Christ” (1:1), to whom right knowledge had been given (1:12-21). Peter gave an explanation of history

that took place 2,500 years earlier. In and of himself he had no knowledge or understanding of this history. But he spoke of the flood and of the future destruction of this world as one who had been given wisdom from above, just as Paul spoke “according to the wisdom given unto him” (15). No wonder Peter wrote that he, and Paul, were not following cunningly devised fables (1:16), or human views and philosophies, but divine inspiration (given wisdom).

The writings of Paul and Peter are to be viewed as equally inspired and trustworthy. Right knowledge is to be learned from them as well as from the “other scriptures.” And this right knowledge is what equipped the saints of Peter’s day, and equips the saints of our day to be able to stand, and to withstand all the fiery darts of the wicked one.

Because we believe the Scriptures are divinely inspired, we ought to base our life on them. They are to determine what we believe—both what we believe to be true and what we believe to be false. These Scriptures are also to determine how we live. They will correctly identify sin and good works, the person and deity of Jesus Christ, His work of salvation, etc.

We either believe and accept the Scriptures as a revelation from God, or we trust in human ideas and draw our own conclusions. No other book in all the world is like the Old and New Testament Scriptures. Nothing else gives so much satisfactory knowledge and understanding. The Scriptures’ divine inspiration makes them qualified to be the basis for what we believe and how we live. They give to us full information. All we need to know concerning faith and life is found in them. These are the only writings that help us interpret the past, enable us to deal with the present, and equip us for the future. They foretell perilous times, false teachers, and very great deceptions. They explain the apparent delay of Jesus’ return. They explain that God has a purpose in it all, and they give a glimpse of the glory to come. They tell us of our security in Jesus, even in the face of the burning of everything of this life (world).



Our text gives us reason to be very grateful that we have an infallible guide as we walk through the shadowed valley of this life. However, this valuable gift and tool

must be handled in the right way and with great care. It is not enough just to read the Scriptures, or to know their contents. Some mishandle them. Some mishandle especially the hard to understand parts, and when they do so it leads to their own destruction. Just because the Scriptures are the Word of God Himself, if they are not handled properly, then this mishandling results in the destruction of the reader. To show how serious this is, let us realize that the same word translated “destruction” in verse 16 is translated “perdition” in verse 7. The reference is to eternal misery in hell. The wrong handling of the Scriptures can be most serious.

There are some examples that demonstrate this harsh reality. There were some men, for instance, who took the doctrine of gracious justification as a license to sin (Rom. 6:1; I Pet. 2:16). Others took the instruction concerning the soon return of Jesus to give them the right to cease their daily employment (II Thess. 2:2, 3 and 3:11).

Read and understand the Scriptures carefully. The care that must be used when handling the Holy Scriptures is “with all readiness of mind” (Acts 17:11). This is a willingness to learn that is always accompanied with humility. This readiness of mind to learn is with the understanding that by itself “knowledge puffeth up” and that “if any man think that he knoweth any thing, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know it” (I Cor. 8:1, 2). Readiness of mind does not approach the Bible in order to support one’s own

ideas, but reads and hears the Word always willing to be taught new depths and better perspectives.

The right and careful reading of the Scriptures is in the awareness that the Scriptures have been handled by the church of the past, which church has summarized their understanding of the Scriptures in the creeds of the church. Anyone reading the divine Scriptures in the twenty-first century should be aware whether his understanding of a Scripture teaching conflicts with the understanding of the church of the past.

The right and careful reading of the Scriptures requires that the Scriptures be taken as a whole, with every part being understood in light of the rest. A passage may not be taken out of its immediate context, nor out of the context of the whole of the Scriptures. The proper reading of the Scriptures takes into consideration that they form a beautiful whole.



As we begin a new year, let us be constantly aware of threats to move us into the error of the wicked. Let us strive constantly to be steadfast. And let us realize that this steadfastness comes from the Scriptures, God’s holy Word. Let us be aware that these Scriptures can be easily mishandled, which can lead to one’s destruction. So let us resolve again to handle the Holy Scriptures with care, that is, with all readiness of mind! 

EDITORIAL

PROF. BARRETT GRITTERS

Namibia: Two Books, Two Believers, and Six Small Churches (2)

Our delightful journey to beautiful Namibia in Africa last summer took place because of the PRCA’s

Previous editorial in this series: December 15, 2010, p.125.

commitment to *manifest* the unity of Christ’s holy, catholic church. In the providence of God, two books written by PRC ministers, and two believers (a husband and wife wanting to witness to their faith) influenced six

small churches in Namibia to invite the PRCA to visit Africa to inform them of the faith and practice of our churches. For that story and a summary of our journeys, see my editorial of December 15, 2010.

The Contact Committee responded with a decision to send a delegation, with the mandate to inform these churches about our doctrine, worship, history, etc., and to learn the same about them. Included in the mandate was to discuss the “four points of their request,” namely: 1) “our common confession,” 2) the “background of events that led to the current situation in these churches in Namibia,” 3) the “churches’ unique circumstances and needs relating to ministry and our calling to be church of our Lord Jesus Christ,” and 4) “other issues relating to ministry.” This fourth point was explained later in their letter: “...unscriptural decisions regarding protests against new rendering of the Psalms, the admission of women in the office, the way of celebrating the Lord’s Supper, and the different ways wherein Scripture is interpreted... (and) preaching Christ from the Old Testament.”



I promised last time to give a preliminary evaluation of the visit and contacts. No one supposes that a three-week visit to two ministers and six churches spread over a country twice the size of California, intense as the visit may have been, is sufficient time to get to know the people or the churches well. Yet a preliminary report is possible as well as beneficial, if only to avoid either the overly optimistic view of future relations some may be tempted to adopt, or a pessimistic view toward which others might lean. In fact, the Contact Com-

mittee instructed our delegation to publicize the visit among the SB readership for just those reasons.

One way to introduce the saints in Namibia is to let these Afrikaners speak for themselves. In his opening remarks at our major meeting, the chairman, speaking for his fellow Namibians, said soberly but with emotion that was moving:

In gratitude to the Lord it is noted the wonder of the way God, as expressed in Lord’s Day 21 of the Heidelberg Catechism, gathers, defends, and preserves a church chosen to everlasting life, agreeing in true faith. That is the reason we are all here today—to rejoice in the fact that, although everything is changing in this world in which we live, *one* thing never changes: the love of Christ for His elect, His church. It is also our calling to put into practice this love for each other, and *that* is the reason for us being together here today. Therefore we want to warmly welcome in our midst Prof. Dykstra and Prof. Gritters particularly. We also want to thank the PRCA, which has sent them here, for their love shown to us in the way of having them in our presence. We ask you to please communicate the sincere appreciation and gratitude of our churches here to the Contact Committee of the PRCA, the PRCA as a whole, and also to your families.... We thank God for this, and may He be honored for His love so distinctly visible in the realisation of this occasion. (For the rest of his opening remarks, see the “Sidebar” in blue.)

The meeting in which these words were spoken took place toward the end of our three-week visit. We

After reading from I John 5, and singing “*Skrifberyming 27:1 en 5*” the chairman of our meeting exhorted the gathering:

Beloved brothers,

You and I and all of us together here today have something in common. Something caused each of us to record this day as such an important day in our diaries, that no effort, time, distance or money were spared to be here together. [Remember, these men gathered in their capital city from many miles around for our meeting. Ed.] But what is it that brought us together with our brothers from USA here today? Compared to the great gatherings in the world such as the big sporting events of our times where people in the thousands come together [we met during, and just north of, the great World Cup Soccer games. Ed.], this seems like an unimportant and small gathering in vain. And yet, despite our small numbers we are here for a reason...a reason to rejoice in much greater joy than any of the joys that this life can afford.

Beloved, just imagine this meeting today...without Jesus Christ. Imagine this life with all the work and effort to earn money, the reality of illness, pain, suffering, and violence which inevitably leads to death..., if we haven’t had faith in the love of God. Think how different the joys of each day would have been if we haven’t had faith in the promise of eternal life.

“Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity” (Eccl. 1:1).

But now: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).

And: “He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life. These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and

that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God" (I John 5:12, 13).

Do you believe in the Name of the Son of God, Jesus Christ? Do you "love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might"? Then you are born of God and then you have eternal life. And then you also love them that were born of God—your fellow brothers and sisters in faith.

This is the reason why we gathered here today.

This is the faith which we have in common. It draws us towards each other and binds us together in one community.

This is predestinated by the grace of God. This is a gift from heaven.

I want to end with the words of Ef. 6:23-24 which sums it up:

Vrede vir die broeders en liefde, met geloof, van God die Vader en die Here Jesus Christus! Die genade sy met almal wat onse Here Jesus Christus in onverganklikheid liefget! Amen.

Peace be to the brethren, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace be with all them that love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity. Amen.

What Can SB readers do?

■ Rejoice in the spiritual unity of all God's people in the truth, and in the presence of believers worldwide—like a little second-grader who rejoiced after I showed the pictures to 400 children in one of our grade schools. She wrote me after the presentation: "If you ever go to another missionary journey tell them that even a little girl in Zeeland loves God too."

■ Pray that God will provide pastors for these churches. The saints in Namibia are in a unique situation because pastors would normally come from South Africa,

had already driven hundreds of miles with the two ministers. At times, after talking for hours, we thought to ourselves: "I cannot believe that there are Reformed people who worship and believe so much like the PRCA." When we verbalized these sentiments, the Afrikaner's response was the same—as though they had just discovered that a thought-to-be-extinct species was in fact yet alive: "We had no idea there were Reformed believers in the US like us." Now, on the heels of those experiences came these opening words from an elder we did not yet know well. But he knew from reading our books that, although differences would certainly appear, we were beginning with significant unity.

The similarities between the PRCA and the Reformed believers in Namibia—wonderful to behold—include their staunch commitment to the Three Forms of Unity. These believers hold the creeds officially. They also use and love them. The chairman's opening statement appealed to the Heidelberg Catechism to explain the reason for our meeting. More importantly, their public worship includes *preaching* the Catechism, because of their unwavering maintenance of the 86 articles of Dordt's Church Order. And when we spoke, opposing common grace and the conditional covenant, they listened very sympathetically because they understand and cherish the doctrines of sovereign grace taught in the creeds.

Among the similarities between our churches is a comparable worship—including singing the Psalms faithfully versified. They have official-

ly protested a modern translation of the Psalter that takes Christ out of the Old Testament. They have no patience for modern innovations in worship; have no choirs or special numbers; stand (males do) while the pastor prays; and make preaching central.

No women serve in the offices there. In a question and answer time after a morning worship, we were grateful to hear an elderly lady ask, "Do your churches allow women to serve as deacons?" She would have been satisfied with nothing less than a firm "No." We learned later that her daughter was serving in office in another Reformed church.

As we observed one Sunday morning when a new elder was installed, the men who serve in office sign the Formula of Subscription, which binds them to the Reformed creeds.

The marks of the true church, as the Belgic Confession spells them out, are dear to them, with special emphasis given to the proper administration of the sacraments. I will explain that further in a moment. They hold to the old Afrikaans Bible translation, so the PRCA's use of the King James meant something to them. And, although we must check further, it appears that even their "minor creeds" (the forms for Baptism, the Lord's Supper, discipline, etc.) are the old Dutch forms we have inherited from the Netherlands.

So much is their tradition our tradition, that one Sunday morning after baptism, to our delight, the congregation automatically sang the fourth and fifth stanzas of

Psalter #425. That is not how they announced it, of course; but it is what they sang from their Afrikaans *Psalmboek*. Their response to the covenant sacrament of baptism is the confession, "Jehovah's truth shall stand forever, His covenant bonds He will not sever..." On one 80-minute drive to church on another Sunday morning, I had a five-year-old girl on my lap in the front seat because the Land Cruiser was crowded. This family's practice is to sing Psalms on the long drive to church. When the little girl, Isabella, was told to "sing Psalm 105 for Oom Barry and Oom Russell," she sang it—even with the same melody that we use in Psalter number 425—by heart. At five years old. I have most of it on video. Some of you have seen it already in our presentation in the churches.

It is hard to imagine a body of believers closer to us than these six small churches in Namibia.

And I would be remiss if I failed to mention the losses these believers have suffered for their commitment to the Reformed faith and life. They have not merely held the traditions, they have had to fight to retain them. They have been criticized and ostracized, suffered financially, and are threatened and belittled. Their following Christ has come with a price. By grace, they have "counted the cost" and have been willing to pay.

Whatever may come of our relationship with these churches, let us hold these believers before God. "O Lord of the church, keep these saints in the faith. Preserve the congregations in the truth.

Give wisdom to their officebearers. Watch their covenant children for good." They love the Lord.



The differences between us stem partly from existing in a country with a very different history than the Reformed faith has had in America. More, they are the result of membership in a denomination that has been in decline for some decades. These differences will be laid on the table and openly discussed in future meetings.

As a Reformed church, they hold to the traditional Reformed view of divorce and remarriage. We discussed this with some of the officebearers and left literature with them explaining the PRC's view. This was new to most of them and they need to ponder the matter further as they study our writings. But we were grateful that they were willing to hear us.

Because they read and speak mostly Afrikaans, most had not read our literature describing our view of particular grace and the unconditional covenant. They listened with interest, as I mentioned; did not oppose the instruction; but must be given time to reflect and respond. These things do not happen overnight, or even in a year.

Other differences will appear, too. The Contact Committee will not wink at any of them. How to deal with each of them is the hard work of the committee. It takes wisdom and grace.

The Namibians will also want to talk about weaknesses they may see in us. We do not want *them* to wink at anything either. First on

where their seminary is, but Namibia is very slow to grant permission to South Africans to take jobs from Namibians. Also, pray that a particular member of the northern churches, a man not too many years from a normal retirement age, could become an "article-8 minister." See our Church Order for a definition of an "article-8 minister."

■ Pray for the ministers and elders to make good decisions about whether they may remain in their denomination, even if they have joined a more conservative classis.

■ Consider supporting the translation efforts of Rev. Prinsloo in Namibia (*Doctrine According to Godliness*) and Rev. LeCornu in South Africa (*Saved By Grace*). The folks we met commented repeatedly on how clear and helpful these books were. A definite figure is not known at present, but upwards of \$10,000 will be needed for translating and printing. If any readers are fluent in Afrikaans, they may be able to help in the translation. For donations or translation assistance, please contact the secretary of our Contact Committee, Rev. Garrett Eriks, garryeriks@sbcglobal.net.

■ If you travel to South Africa or Namibia to hunt or sightsee, please make contact with the believers there. I will be glad to give you their contact information. Write me at the seminary, or e-mail gritters@prca.org.

their agenda would be the proper administration of the Lord's Supper. Their history includes a lengthy battle over the common cup in the Supper. So they were disappointed to hear that we use *kelkies*—"little cups," individual cups. They have a thorough exegetical and historical defense of the common cup as a very important biblical symbol of the *unity* of those who partake. We heard them explain it, though not at length, and asked them to translate

their paper on the matter that they had presented to their synod. We must ponder and respond to this carefully. The common cup over against the *kelkies* is more serious to them than would be a proposal among us to substitute grape juice for wine.

Given their love for singing Psalms, and their battle against a new Psalter with a looser versification of God's Word, they may have questions about our Psalter.

Will there be more things about

each other that we will discover? We must talk openly.

I counsel both the PRCA and the Namibian churches, as I have always counseled prospective new members of the congregations I served: "Proceed slowly. Ask good questions openly and prayerfully. There must be no surprises for either party." Church unity and ecclesiastical relationships demand our utmost care before the Lord.



The Trinity

Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 8

Question 24. How are these articles divided?

Answer. Into three parts: the first is of God the Father and our creation; the second of God the Son and our redemption; the third of God the Holy Ghost and our sanctification.

Question 25. Since there is but one only divine essence, why speakest thou of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost?

Answer. Because God hath so revealed Himself in His Word, that these three distinct persons are the one only true and eternal God.

A Foundational Truth

Among all the religions of the world, the Christian faith is unique. Every other religion has a god or gods who are the product of human imagination, and are therefore limited, but the God of the Bible is infinite in every way, and far beyond our comprehension as men. Our knowledge of who God is comes from God Himself. It is

especially the doctrine of the Trinity that sets Christianity apart and that shows the greatness of our God.

The doctrine of the Trinity is basic and central to all other Christian doctrines. This is evident in the Apostles' Creed, which is divided into three parts according to the three persons of the Godhead. Under these three divisions the Creed treats all the essential teachings of the Bible that every true Christian believes. The Heidelberg Catechism attributes the whole of our existence and salvation to the triune God (God the Father and our creation, God the Son and our redemption, and God the Holy Spirit and our sanctification).

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Previous article in this series: November 15, 2010, p. 92.

In its early history, the church laid the foundation for all subsequent development and understanding of doctrine by struggling with and clearly defining the biblical doctrine of the Trinity. The key issue at stake in these early controversies was the question of salvation. As we saw in Lord's Days 5 and 6, our salvation is possible only if the Mediator is true God, a real man, and yet sinless. The doctrine of the Trinity affirms the divinity of Christ. Thus, the doctrine of the Trinity is central to the gospel and essential for our salvation.

The Trinity in the Bible

The doctrine of the Trinity is progressively revealed in the Scripture. That is, God did not reveal everything about Himself as triune God immediately in Genesis 1, but over a long period of time, as men grew in their understanding of God, He gave a greater and more full revelation of Himself. The Bible puts it like this, "God who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in times past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son" (Heb. 1:1-2).

This is not to say that the doctrine of the Trinity is not taught in the Old Testament. In fact, from our New Testament perspective, we even see it in God's conversation with Himself in Genesis 1:26, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness." And there are many other things that show God as triune—for example, the appearances of "the Angel of the LORD," who is identified as God, yet distinct from God. However, in the Old Testament, while the church on earth was still in its infant years, God emphasized that He is the only God; then later He came in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ; and still later, as He brings the church to maturity, He comes in the person of the Holy Spirit.

The word "Trinity" is not found in the Bible but is, nevertheless, an accurate description of what the Bible teaches. It is simply the compound of two words: "tri," which means three, and "unity," which refers to oneness.

There are three elements to this truth.

First, the Bible teaches that there is only one being that we may call God. There is only one God. Deuteronomy 6:4: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one Lord." Isaiah 43:10: "Before me there was no God formed, neither shall there be after me." And then in the New

Testament (Gal. 3:20): "God is one." Jehovah exclusively has the right to be called God.

Second, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are distinct from one another. We say that each of them is a person, that is, each of them has characteristics and activities unique to Himself, in distinction from the others. In the being of God, the Father begets the Son, the Son is begotten of the Father, and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. They are also distinct in their revelation outside of the being of God. Only of the Son can it be said that He became flesh, not of the Father and Spirit. The Spirit's unique work is to regenerate and save the elect children of God. The Bible shows their distinctness from one another at the baptism of Jesus, when the Father spoke from heaven, the Son who had become man was baptized, and the Holy Spirit descended in the form of a dove.

Third, each of the three are identified in Scripture as God, and so the three together form the one being of God.

That the Father is God is the plain teaching of Scripture and has rarely been disputed.

Romans 9:5 says that Jesus who came in the flesh "is over all, God blessed for ever, Amen." Hebrews 1:8 says of Him, "Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever." John 1 identifies Him as the eternal Word, who was God and who made the worlds, and who became flesh.

To the Spirit are ascribed divine characteristics. In Hebrews 9:14 He is referred to as "the eternal Spirit." The Spirit was the person of the Godhead who effected the conception of Jesus in the womb of the virgin Mary (Luke 1:35). And Peter tells Ananias that his lie was "to the Holy Ghost...not...unto men, but unto God" (Acts 5:3-4).

These three persons constitute the one being who is God. These three agree in one. There is a perfect harmony in the Godhead. The will and work of the three are always harmonious. The Son does not have a different purpose than the Father, nor does the Spirit than the Son.

There is mystery here, but not contradiction. God is not one in the same way that He is three, but He is one in being and three in persons. The mystery of the Trinity is this, that God is beyond our comprehension and searching. We know Him only through His revelation, and we believe His revelation only by faith.

The Importance of the Trinity

Often we do not appreciate this important doctrine as we should. It can seem complicated and abstract, and so we spend little time meditating on it, and praising God as triune. However, if we really think about it, this truth is the foundation for all our praise of God, and it is very practical for our lives.

For example, the doctrine of the Trinity helps us with our worship of God. It teaches us the uniqueness of our God, and that He alone must be worshiped. It shows us the depth and incomprehensibility of God. It shows us that we owe a constant and eternal debt of praise to Him. It ought to humble us as we realize our limitations before Him. This doctrine also shows us what worship is. In the Trinity, God enjoys a rich and perfectly harmonious life of covenant friendship. In worship, God draws us into fellowship with Himself.

This doctrine also shows us that in God we have all that we need for salvation. God is our Father in heaven on whom we can depend as His children, and who will hear us when we pray. Jesus is our Savior who, as God, has paid the infinite debt of our sin, but who also is now an understanding and sympathetic King and Ruler over all things for our sakes. The Holy Spirit is the one who comes and works in our hearts and lives, and by His irresistible power saves us to the uttermost.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the covenant life of God as Trinity shows us how rich and warm He is as God. There is a diversity of persons, yet a perfect unity. The Son dwells eternally in the bosom of the Father (John 1:18). God is a family God. And in salvation, He brings us into His own family, so that we are the "household" of God. This becomes the foundation for our living together, in the church as well as in our Christian families, in harmony and love.

Do you believe in God triune? "Whosoever denieth the Son, the same hath not the Father: but he that acknowledgeth the Son hath the Father also" (1 John 2:23). Those who do not know and believe in this triune God do not have and know God but only an idol of their imagination. The way of salvation is to believe in God and believe also in His Son, who is God, the only way to the Father.

Questions for Discussion

1. How many Gods are there? Prove this from Scripture. What does this mean for worship?
2. Who are the three persons of the Godhead?
3. Give some evidence of the triune nature of God from the Old Testament. Do you think the saints of the Old Testament could understand this?
4. What does the baptism formula of Matthew 28:19 teach us about each of the persons of the Trinity?
5. From Scripture, prove the divinity of the Son.
6. Why is it important that we confess that Jesus is God?
7. Why did the Jews want to kill Jesus, according to John 5:18 and John 10:30-33?
8. How would you answer a Jehovah's Witness or a Unitarian, who say that the doctrine of the Trinity is a contradiction, and so therefore must be false?
9. Use the Bible to prove that the Holy Spirit is God.
10. How does the harmony of the Trinity show the error of Pentecostalism, which separates the Spirit's work from the work of Jesus? (See John 16:13-14.)
11. Can we say that *Jesus* loves all men, but the *Father* does not? How does the doctrine of the Trinity help to answer this question?
12. How does the doctrine of the Trinity show the warmth of the being of God? What implications does this have for salvation, for worship, for family, and for life in the church?
13. If someone does not believe in the Trinity, what kind of god are they worshipping? 

The Creation and Fall of Man (2)

The Righteous and Holy Imagebearer

Only God's children bear His image. All others bear the image of their father, the devil. That this is so comes out more clearly when we consider what it means to bear God's image.

To bear God's image is to know God personally and to be righteous and holy. Those who bear God's image know Him and are like Him. They are righteous and holy, shining forth the glory of the God who created them in Christ.

But how do we know that this is what it means to bear God's image? We know this from the passages of Scripture that speak of what characterizes us in the new man. It is in the new man that believers bear God's image. In our old man we are like the devil. It is in the new man that we are like God. So, not suprisingly, it is the passages that speak of what we are like in the new man that we find a description of the image of God.

One who bears God's image is righteous and holy

One passage that describes those who bear God's image is Ephesians 4:24, which reads:

And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness.

Here we are told that to bear God's image is to be righteous and holy. That, of course, should not surprise us. God is righteous and holy. Therefore one who bears God's image must also be righteous and holy.

But if that is the case, then obviously the unregenerate do not bear God's image. An unbeliever is not righteous and holy. He is unrighteous and unholy. So how could an unrighteous and unholy person be said to bear the image of the righteous and holy God? Such a person is not like God. He is like the devil, whose image he bears.

One who bears God's image knows God

A second passage on the new man is Colossians 3:10.

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Previous article in this series: December 15, 2010, p. 136.

In this passage we see that to bear God's image is to know God personally:

And have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him.

In the new man we are "renewed in knowledge" after God's image. That means that in the new man we know God, love Him, and long to enjoy more intimate fellowship with Him.

This serves to bring out again that only God's children bear His image. The unbeliever does not know and love God. He knows things about God, but He does not know God personally. It is only the regenerated believer who in the new man knows God, and longs to have fellowship with Him.

Our creedal position on the image of God

That this is the Reformed position on the image of God is brought out in question six of the Heidelberg Catechism, which says that:

God created man good, and after His own image, in true righteousness and holiness, that he might rightly know God his Creator, heartily love Him, and live with Him in eternal happiness to glorify and praise Him.

The catechism in describing the image of God bases its description on the passages that we have quoted, and says that it consists of being righteous and holy, and of rightly knowing God our Creator.

Note that this answer also states the relationship between being righteous and holy and knowing God. Only the righteous and holy will know God. A wicked person cannot possibly know and have fellowship with the holy God. When man fell into sin, he was removed from the fellowship of God. So likewise all those today who are walking in sin are unable to commune with God.

In Christ, however, we have obtained a righteousness and holiness that we can never lose. Forever we shall be righteous and holy, and forever we shall know Jehovah to be our Father, and "will live with Him in eternal happiness to glorify and praise Him." 

The Anatomy of Flight

The seemingly effortless activity of a bird in flight fascinates us. From the graceful soaring of the larger birds to the darting antics of the smaller, we as creatures of the land stand in amazement. Pausing to listen to the movement of the air as a flock of geese flies directly overhead, we are reminded of their united efforts to reach their destination. Darting here and there in our backyard, two finches seemingly play tag. Hovering in midair next to the nectar feeder, the hummingbird takes a few sips and speedily takes off again. Soaring gracefully in the heavens an eagle immediately captures our attention. Scripture often references the eagle in regards to flight. Deuteronomy 28:49 and Jeremiah 4:13 speak of the swiftness of an eagle in flight. In Proverbs 30:18, 19 the writer, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, speaks of the “way of an eagle in the air” as being “too wonderful for me.” Truly bird flight is an awe-inspiring creation of God.

Without a doubt, the ability of a bird to fly is to us a marvelous revelation of the beauty and wisdom of our God. We stand amazed at the ability of birds to perform their wide range of aeronautical feats—all of which are possible because of the intricate and wise design of the Creator. “Doth the hawk fly by thy wisdom?” or “Doth the eagle mount up at thy command?” (Job 39:26, 27). Obviously God’s word to us is emphatically, “No”; for it occurs only by His wisdom and command. How foolish of man (and of our own sinful natures) to propose and believe that the many anatomical features of a bird that contribute to its ability to fly have evolved over time from some other anatomical feature of some ancient ancestor. Great will be the condemnation of those who have deliberately denied the wonders of God in the creation. We

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are humbled and truly thankful to God for calling us out of such folly and showing us His greatness. To God be all glory given.

Bird Anatomy—All for Flight!

Man recognizes the wealth of knowledge and power to be garnered from the creation and often mimics the creatures of God to further his technological advancement. (Incidentally, this is partly why man purposely attributes God’s wise designs in creation to some evolutionary process. By doing so, he deliberately directs all glory for the technological advancements to himself, rather than to God. For if there is no wise creator—only evolutionary processes—then there is none to whom credit is due other than man who aptly applied the designs of nature.)

This mimicking of creation was clearly evident in the development of modern aviation. Published over 120 years ago, Otto Lilienthal’s book, *Bird Flight as a Basis for Aviation*, was a key resource in leading Orville and Wilbur Wright to design and successfully fly the first engine-powered airplane. One of the key principles of flight is the principle of “lift”—a principle easily learned by a brief observation of birds. To fly, a bird must be able to exert an upward force greater than the downward force of gravity, and thus obtain “lift.” To accomplish such is no simple feat, as man quickly learned. Birds’ flying ability is a clear indication of the wisdom of our Creator. Our great God gave birds two particularly unique characteristics in order to fly—a light-weight body and a specially designed wing that promotes “lift.”

The downward force of gravity on an object is directly related to its mass. The greater the mass of an object, the greater the force of gravity that is upon that object. So the greater the mass, the harder it is to get that object off the ground and into the air. In order to fly, a bird must be able to overcome the force of gravity that acts on it. This requires an upward force greater than the downward force of gravity. This can be accomplished if the creature

is strong enough and yet light enough to “lift” itself. Since it was God’s delight and law of life for the birds that their domain be the sky, He created them with this unique ability—an ability most other creatures do not share. To serve the goal of flight, God gave birds a light-weight body design and specially-designed wings. We see here a clear example of the truth that God gave to all creatures their particular “being, shape, form, and several offices” in order that they might carry out their God-given calling (Belgic Confession, Art. 12).

First, let us examine their body design. Consider God’s design of the bird’s skeletal system. The bones themselves are generally hollow and contain a minimum amount of material. One would think that such bones would be weaker, but they are, relatively speaking, very strong, being masterfully crafted with distinct “truss” and “strut” members that stiffen and strengthen the bones. In addition, many joints are eliminated—bones are merely fused together. This eliminates the need for extra joint tissue and tendons and ligaments. Finally, the “wishbone” of the bird’s chest is very flexible—acting like a spring that pulls the wings back to their original position, without the need of large and weighty muscles. The entire skeletal system is clearly designed for flight.

However, skeletal structure alone is not sufficient to reduce a bird’s mass to allow for easy flight. God also equips the birds with light-weight alternative body structures in contrast to what one might find in other warm-blooded creatures. For example, God created birds to cool off by means of panting rather than by the use of sweat glands. Sweat glands would only add weight, hindering flight. A bird also lacks the heavy teeth and jaw muscles that many organisms have in order to chew and digest their food. Instead of having heavy digestive organs, a bird is equipped with a gizzard—a light-weight sac that is responsible for breaking down a bird’s food. This organ was deliberately placed towards the center of the bird, for a more balanced distribution of weight in flight. In addition to this, birds have a very rapid rate of digestion, making it possible for them to rid themselves quickly of unwanted wastes, rather than carrying any extra load for an extended period of time. Birds also have relatively small brains compared to other warm-blooded creatures, in part due to the smaller lobes of the brain for the sense of smell. To make up for this lack of smell, the bird has been given excellent vision.

Relatively speaking, a bird has large eyes, but it lacks the ability to move the eyes around and must turn its head in order to see at various angles. This reduces the amount, and thereby the weight, of muscle and attaching fibers normally needed to move the eyes. Thus, we clearly see the wise design of our God and Creator. He gave to birds the exact anatomical structures they would need in order to fly, thus accomplishing the task for which they were created. We give God all glory for such a rich and detailed design.

In addition to, and intimately related to, the bird’s light-weight body structure, there is also the unique feather and wing design. Each feather is an aerodynamic wonder. Wing feathers consist of a main hollow shaft called the rachis. On either side of the rachis are side branches called barbs, which collectively form a vane. Each barb of a vane has many side branches, called barbules, which have very tiny hooks on them. These hooks link with the barbules of a neighboring barb, effectively linking or zipping all the barbs of a vane together to make a “solid” feather. Without the ability to link together, the individual barbs would not serve the bird for flight. The fact that they can link together and create a solid “airfoil” is key to flight. Not only do the individual barbs of a feather work together to create a solid feather, but all the feathers work together in such a way that they form a wing—a unique anatomical structure designed perfectly for flight.

All for the Glory of God

O the majesty and wisdom of God! Who can be compared to Him? His wisdom in the intricate design of every aspect of a bird’s anatomy is so clearly shown, as it is with all other creatures, that we stand in utter awe of our Creator. God created. He spoke and it stood fast. What folly we see in the world that teaches that the ability of a bird to fly is the result of some evolutionary process. God forbid that we should allow any of His glory to be “stolen” by such vain teachings. May we be faithful to reject such a repugnant philosophy and give Him all the glory due His name.

What engenders the feeling of freedom more than a bird in the air? What remarkable strength is revealed by the powerful wing strokes of an eagle? Scripture gives us that sense, particularly of freedom and strength, in

its references to the wings of a bird. “But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint” (Is. 40:31). Revelation 12:14 illustrates the means of escape that is afforded the church from her enemy, the serpent, by saying “and to the woman (the church) were given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness, into her place, where she is nourished for a time, and times, and half a time, from the face of the serpent.” In that regard, we sing with the psalmist, “O that I had wings like a dove, For then I would fly far away, And seek for the rest that I love, Where troubles no more could dismay” (Psalter 150—versification of Ps. 55:6). Give God all glory for His creation of birds, which leads us to

contemplate God’s care, safety, and deliverance from all our spiritual enemies.

Finally, God’s glory is manifested in that He equips all creatures for the calling that He gives them. God has given to the birds a unique calling to live freely in the heavens, and therefore equips them in that regard. God, in fact, has a unique calling for *all* His creatures, including us—and for that calling He wisely equips each and every one. May we give serious consideration to this precious and comforting truth. God always equips us with the physical and spiritual gifts necessary to do that which He calls us to do. So, as we marvel at God’s word to the bird to prosper and inhabit the sky, may we also flourish in God’s Word of life to us, knowing that He equips us in our callings and says to us, “Live” (Ezek. 16). 

MINISTERING TO THE SAINTS

REV. DOUGLAS KUIPER

The Nature of the Office of Elder (1)

The Office of Rule

Having concluded our treatment of the office of deacon, we will examine various aspects of the office of elder, as God permits. My goal is not to treat every aspect of the office of elder in as much detail as I did the office of deacon, but to focus more particularly on various aspects of the work of the elders.

We begin by noting the nature of the office of elder: it is the office of rule in the church of Jesus Christ.

Scriptural testimony

That the office of elder in the church of Jesus Christ is one of rule, Scripture indicates in two ways. The first is by the words that the Holy Spirit used to refer to this office.

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The first word is “elder,” which refers to a person who is advanced in age. Actually, in the Old Testament, the English word “elder” translates three different Hebrew words. Listed in order of most common to least common usage, they mean “old one,” “great,” and “gray headed.” Clearly, all refer to one who is advanced in age. In the New Testament, the word translates the Greek word *presbuteros*, meaning “aged one,” from which we get our word “presbytery,” referring to the session of elders.

Strikingly, this word is used most often in Scripture, not to refer to aged people generally, but rather to the office of ruler in the church of Jesus Christ. In the Old Testament the word usually refers to those who had the rule in Israel; in the gospel accounts and in Acts, to those who were joined with the chief priests in ruling the Jews; and in the epistles, to the office of elder in the New Testament church. As instances of this latter, we read that Paul and Barnabas “ordained them *elders* in every church” (Acts

14:23); that the apostles and *elders* gathered in Jerusalem to decide the question about circumcision (Acts 15); and that Paul called for the *elders* of the church at Ephesus to meet him in Miletus (Acts 20:17).

Why would the Holy Spirit use a word that literally indicates advanced age, to refer to the office of elder? To underscore that rulers in the church ought to be mature men in all respects; and maturity comes with age. Some of the gifts necessary to rule well are natural gifts, which a man might have while young; but God also uses life's experiences and the process of sanctification to develop these gifts, in preparing a man for the office of elder. Wisdom, patience, and self-control are just some of the gifts that are developed over time. An instance of this is clearly seen in the wise counsel that the old men gave the new king Rehoboam, in contrast to the foolish counsel of the men his own age (I Kings 12:1-11).

Without placing this qualification in terms of a specific age, God does require that elders in the New Testament church be men who are mature in the faith: "not a novice" (I Tim. 3:6).

The second word, which makes even more clear that the office is one of rule, is the word translated "bishop" (Phil. 1:1; I Tim. 3:1; Titus 1:7) or "overseer" (Acts 20:28). It is the word *episkopos*, from which we get our word "episcopal." While our King James Version more often translates the word "bishop" than it does "overseer," the idea of oversight is the more literal meaning. A bishop is one to whom is entrusted the spiritual oversight of others.

Once in Scripture, these two words are used in the same context to indicate that they refer to the same office. To the elders at Ephesus, Paul said, "the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers" (Acts 20:28).

The second way in which Scripture indicates the office of elder to be one of rule is by explicit teaching in several New Testament passages.

One such is Acts 20:28: "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood." To take heed, to oversee, and to feed, all involve rule.

Romans 12:8 speaks of an office in the body of Christ when it says, "he that ruleth, with diligence." The apostle had just spoken in verses 7 and 8a of the office of the

teaching ministry, and spoken also in verse 8 of the office of deacon. To the office of elder he refers by the words, "he that ruleth."

In his first epistle to Timothy, the inspired apostle makes plain that the office of elder is one of rule. A qualification for the office is that the bishop rule well his own house, "For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?" (I Tim. 3:5). And I Timothy 5:17: "Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honor..."

And the writer to the Hebrews refers to the elders when he exhorts the believers, "Remember them which have the rule over you..." and "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves; for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account..." (Heb. 13:7, 17).

Indications from the Reformed confessions

Our Reformed confessions support the thesis that the nature of the office of elder in Christ's church is one of rule.

The Belgic Confession, Article 30, indicates that the work of the elders is to punish and restrain transgressors by spiritual means. This work of judgment is an aspect of rule.

Two articles of our Church Order indicate this as well. Article 16, speaking particularly of the office of minister, indicates that it is his duty, "with the elders, to exercise church discipline and see to it that everything is done decently and in good order." This article specifies that the rule involves oversight and administering discipline. And Article 23 reads:

The office of elders, in addition to what was said in Article 16 to be their duty in common with the minister of the Word, is to take heed that the ministers, together with their fellow-elders and the deacons, faithfully discharge their office, and both before and after the Lord's Supper, as time and circumstances may demand, for the edification of the churches, to visit the families of the congregation, in order particularly to comfort and instruct the members, and also to exhort others in respect to the Christian religion.

This article indicates that the elders have the rule over fellow officebearers, and broadens the idea of rule to include comfort and instruction.

Finally, the Form for Ordination of Elders and Deacons indicates this to be the nature of the office of elder. After having observed that the word is applied to two offices in the church—that of pastor and elder—the Form speaks particularly of the latter:

...the others, who did not labor in the Word, and still did serve in the church, bore a particular office, namely, they had the oversight of the church and ruled the same with the ministers of the Word. For Paul (Rom. 12)...speaketh...particularly of this office, saying, *He that ruleth, let him do it with diligence*; likewise, in another place he counts government among the gifts and offices which God hath instituted in the church (I Cor. 12)....

Then, in setting forth the duties of the office of elder, the Form mentions that elders are

to take the oversight of the church which is committed to them, and diligently to look whether every one properly deports himself in his confession and conversation; to admonish those who behave themselves disorderly, and to prevent, as much as possible, the sacraments from being profaned; also to act (according to the Christian discipline) against the impenitent, and to receive the penitent again into the bosom of the church....

The minister then asks the elders to vow that they will faithfully take up their work “in the government of the church,” and after they have so vowed, exhorts them to “be diligent in the government of the church which is committed to you.”

The church’s need for such rule

The church of Jesus Christ needs this rule; she needs the office of elder in her midst.

Proof enough that she needs this office and rule is the fact that Christ Himself placed the office in the church, and prescribed its basic function. Christ gives His church nothing that she does not need.

Reformed churches recognize the need for this rule by insisting that the office of elder be present in every congregation. Reformed churches further insist that every group of believers who, for whatever reason, desire to gather for worship and fellowship but cannot have their own elders, be placed under the care of the elders

of another church. This is Article 39 of our Church Order: “Places where as yet no consistory can be constituted shall be placed under the care of a neighboring consistory.” When the consistories of existing churches become too small to function as a consistory (when there is only one elder able to serve), or when we designate a group of believers to be the object of our mission work, we implement this article.

With this need for office, some might take exception. Are not these sinners saints? Does not God work in each by His Holy Spirit?

This was essentially the argument of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, who said to Moses and Aaron: “Ye take too much upon you, seeing all the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them: wherefore then lift ye up yourselves above the congregation of the LORD?” Jehovah answered their objection decisively, reminding us that in the day of judgment He will destroy those who despised His officebearers.

For any who ask why the office of elder is necessary, not because they despise the office but because they truly desire to be instructed, the answer is this: while God works in each by His Spirit, and sanctifies His elect, all Christians still stand in need of government. Not every member of the church on earth is sanctified; in the church is a carnal element. Not every sanctified member of the church always lives as though he is sanctified; some give themselves over for a time to a life of sin. And even godly believers find that the work of the elders is a gracious means of God to help us battle against sin in our hearts.

Why, specifically, does the church need elders? Following are some scriptural reasons.

The church needs elders to promote decency and order. The apostle’s admonition “Let all things be done decently and in order” (I Cor. 14:40) requires not only willing believers, but also godly elders, to implement.

For this reason, government is necessary—whether in the church, home, or civil sphere. Government in the church is a creation ordinance, instituted already in the state of righteousness: Adam was created to be the head of Eve in things spiritual, as well as earthly.

Sin makes the need for such government all the more urgent. Sinners do not seek decency and order; by nature we seek ourselves, and are willing to violate God’s law if that serves our own advantage. Decency and order, in

the way of following God's law, the elders enforce in the church.

The church needs elders to guard her from her enemies. Within and without, the church battles against the forces of sin. So the apostle Paul exhorted the elders of Ephesus to diligence in taking heed to themselves and to the flock, because grievous wolves would enter in; even some who were elders would divide the congregation by their perverse words (Acts 20:28-29). Godly elders take the lead in this battle.

The church needs elders to administer the law and rule of God. The work of the elders is not primarily to make laws—God has made the laws; rather, the work of the elders is to administer those laws—to see that they

are being kept in the congregation. Such was the duty not only of the king in the Old Testament, but also of the many judges whom the kings appointed. So also the writer to the Hebrews exhorts them to “Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves; for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account...” (Heb. 13:17).

Finally, the church needs elders to show her that Jesus Christ does, by His Spirit and Word, rule in His church. For these elders rule in the authority of Christ; and administer the rule of Christ Himself.

Let us thank God for the presence of this office in our midst! ∞

By Common Consent

“These articles, relating to the lawful order of the church, have been so drafted and adopted by common consent that they (if the profit of the churches demand otherwise) may and ought to be altered, augmented, or diminished. However, no particular congregation or classis shall be at liberty to do so, but they shall show all diligence in observing them, until it be otherwise ordained by the general synod.”

Church Order, Article 86.

The Lawful Order of the Church

This final article marks a fitting conclusion to the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches. In it the churches are reminded of the purpose of the Church Order. The purpose of the Church Order is not to add law upon law in order to restrict the freedom of the individual congregations. The purpose of the Church Order is not the imposition of rules that aim at producing congregations that are clones of each other.

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But the purpose of the Church Order is that the life of the congregations will be characterized by decency and good order (I Cor. 14:40), and thus the proper unity of the church of Christ maintained, as well as the peace of the congregations.

The purpose is the “lawful order of the church.” The aim of the Church Order is the lawful order of the local congregation, first of all. With a view to that lawful order, the duties of the officebearers have been set forth, including regulations for their election and ordination. With a view to that lawful order of the local congregation, regulations regarding Christian discipline have been included. With a view to that lawful order, the

Church Order has mandated catechetical instruction of the youth, regular family visitation by the elders, and various stipulations relating to the administration of the sacraments.

The aim of the Church Order is also the lawful order of the broader assemblies of the church. A very important concern of the Church Order has been the work of the classes and the synod. The Church Order has carefully circumscribed the lawful jurisdiction of the broader assemblies, which jurisdiction extends to matters that could not be finished in the minor assemblies and those matters that concern the churches in common. Guidelines have been set forth for the meetings of both the classis and the synod. The work of the classical church visitors and the synodical delegates *ad examina* has been carefully defined.

Setting forth the lawful order of the churches has included a careful defense of the rights of the office of all believers. Those rights, in connection with the election of officebearers at congregational meetings, and as regards church membership have been carefully defended. Additionally, the all-important right of the member of the church to protest and appeal has been carefully set forth—the believer’s recourse when he believes that he has been wronged by decisions of the consistory, classis, or synod.

All these articles relating to the lawful order of the church have been set forth in the Church Order. Order, order in the church, order in the local congregation, and order in the assemblies—this is the purpose of the Church Order.

Order in the church—because God, the God who is worshiped by the church, is a God of order, not a God of confusion. Order in the church glorifies God and serves the right worship of God. Order because the work of the church depends upon it. Without order the church cannot carry out her calling, either with respect to herself or with respect to the world outside the church. The work of the church—as work in any sphere of life—can be accomplished only when there is order. The work of the home cannot be accomplished, the work of rearing covenant children, when disorder and chaos characterize family life. Even more so the work of the church of Jesus Christ.

Precious heritage from Dordt! Not only from Dordt,

but also from the Dutch Reformed churches since their earliest days. A study of the Church Order impresses that fact on us. What we have in the Church Order has been passed down to us from the Reformed churches of the Lowlands from the very beginning of their existence. A veritable treasure of ecclesiastical wisdom! Those churches are fools who have in the past and who do today disdain this wisdom. May the Lord preserve the Protestant Reformed Churches from such ecclesiastical folly!

This lawful order set down in the Church Order is binding upon the churches of the denomination. “By common consent” the churches have agreed to bind themselves to this order. The Church Order was not imposed upon the churches in a hierarchical fashion. Rather, the articles of the Church Order arose out of the organic life of the church and were mutually agreed upon by the churches. Any congregation that joins the federation, either through establishment of a “daughter” congregation or through mission work, must consent to be bound by the stipulations of the Church Order.

In particular, the officebearers of the church bind themselves to the provisions of the Church Order. As has been recently demonstrated in a series of editorials in the *Standard Bearer*,¹ subscription to the Church Order is included in the Formula of Subscription. Every officebearer in the Protestant Reformed Churches who signs the Formula of Subscription agrees to abide by and uphold the provisions of the Church Order. We expect this of our officebearers. We demand this!

Possibility of Revision of the Church Order

This does not preclude the possibility of revision of the Church Order. The Church Order may be revised, and, indeed, if its provisions be shown to conflict with the Word of God, they must be revised. The Church Order is not on a par with Scripture. It is subservient to Scripture and stands in the service of Scripture. Its articles, therefore, “may and ought to be altered, augmented, or diminished,” if they can be shown to contradict Scripture. The possibility of the revision of the Church Order raised in Article 86 is grounded in the Reformation’s confession of the sole authority of Scripture.

Revision of the Church Order is also possible, if the “profit of the churches demand otherwise.” Certainly the

¹ Vol. 86, pp. 148, 172, 196, 220, 245.

adopted regulations of the Church Order exist for the sake of the churches, and not the churches for the sake of the regulations. The Church Order stands in the service of the churches. It is intended to be a tool promoting the welfare of the churches, a means designed for the blessing of the life of the churches in common. When it can be demonstrated that the profit of the churches is served by a revision of the Church Order, it ought to be revised.

All along the course of its development, the Church Order has undergone revision. And all along the way, the synods of the Dutch Reformed churches manifested an openness to the possibility of revision of the Church Order. The Synod of Middleburg, 1581, made this openness explicit in the last article of the Church Order it adopted. The Synod of the Hague, 1586, reaffirmed the possibility of revision. And the great Synod of Dordt, 1618-19, gave this article its place at the end of the Church Order that it adopted, which Church Order is virtually the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches.

There are, of course, in the Church Order, differences among the kinds of articles that are included. This observation bears on the whole subject of revision. There are those articles that reflect the timeless principles of the Word of God. They may not be revised. Sadly, a number of Reformed churches who share our heritage in the Church Order of Dordt, have done this very thing. They have changed the Church Order, for example, to allow for women to serve in the offices of the church. Even though Scripture clearly forbids such a thing, they have revised the Church Order to make this allowance. Article 86 does not approve such revision. Although the Church Order may be revised, the biblical principles upon which its stipulations are based may never be altered.

But there are also those articles in the Church Order that reflect time and circumstance. They are articles of a more practical nature. How frequently the classes and the synod meet, how often the Lord's Supper is administered, certain aspects of the election of officebearers—these are examples of provisions of the Church Order that are practical and therefore are subject to revision. The last significant revision of our Church Order took place at Synod 2000 of the Protestant Reformed Churches. In response to an overture from one of the congregations, an overture approved by classis, Synod

1999 appointed a Church Order study committee. The recommendations of this study committee were treated by Synod 2000 and revisions and updating of the Church Order took place.

Although revision is possible, Article 86 requires that such revision must serve “the profit of the churches.” Not the profit of one church or of a few churches, but the profit of the “churches,” that is, of the denomination, must be the reason for revising the Church Order. The Church Order has been drafted by the common consent of the churches, for the good of the churches. It must therefore be the profit of the churches as a whole that justifies any revision of the Church Order.

Procedure for Revision of the Church Order

Revision of the Church Order must take place in an orderly way. Although not spelled out in Article 86, the proper way of revision is clearly implied. Revision is to take place “by common consent.” And “no particular congregation or classis shall be at liberty” to revise the church on its own.

Any recommendation for revision ought to originate by way of overture from a local congregation. After careful consideration by the consistory of that congregation, the overture ought to pass from the consistory to the classis. After classical consideration, the overture for revision ought to be brought before the synod. Only the broadest assembly, the synod, may approve any revision of the Church Order. A proposed revision, before it actually is adopted and implemented, ought also to be reported to our sister churches for their advice. This was the procedure followed by the Synod of 2000. Only after considering the reaction of our sister churches ought the synod to proceed with revision of the Church Order.

It stands to reason that only the general synod of the churches, and no particular congregation or classis, can make revisions to the Church Order. The Church Order is the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches. Having been “drafted and adopted by common consent,” the articles of the Church Order can be “altered, augmented, or diminished” only by common consent. The common consent of the churches is the consent of the synod of the churches. Only synod, as representing all the churches, has the right to make

changes to the Church Order: “until it be otherwise ordained by the general synod.”

Since the Church Order has stood the test of time, any revision ought to be very seriously considered. We ought not to be too quick to make changes to a document that has served the churches so well for so many years. History proves that a good deal of change is in fact departure. May God keep our churches from the change that does represent departure! Also as regards the stipulations of the Church Order!

The purpose of the Church Order is the profit of the churches. That profit can only be served if the Church Order is *known*. Only if the Church Order is known can its stipulations actually be implemented in the life of the church. Only if the Church Order is known can its principles be followed.

With a view to a thorough knowledge of the Church Order, students in the Protestant Reformed Seminary receive an entire year of instruction in the Church Order. The class is called “Church Polity,” and is included in the

branch of “Practical Theology.” The oral examination of students before the synod includes examination in Church Polity. No student may be declared a candidate in the churches who does not possess a thorough knowledge of the Church Order. Every member of the churches, certainly every officebearer, ought to take the time to read through the Church Order at least once each year. A good time to re-read the Church Order is at the time of the installation of new elders and deacons. Only if we know the Church Order will we be able to “show all diligence in observing” its requirements. And only then will all things be done decently and in order in the churches.

God grant it in the Protestant Reformed Churches for many years to come!

And thus concludes our treatment together, over the past several years, of the articles of our beloved Church Order. It was very profitable for me. And I pray that it was also profitable for you, our readers.

Soli Deo Gloria! 

BRING THE BOOKS...

MR. CHUCK TERPSTRA

Who Made God? Searching for a Theory of Everything, Edgar Andrews. Evangelical Press, 304 pages, hardcover. \$17.95. Reviewed by Brendan Looyenga.

Atheistic humanism, with its twin gods of science and philosophy, rules the day in academic circles the world round. The cornerstone of this movement is logical skepticism, which has been largely directed at the question of God’s role in creating the material world, in an effort to undermine any need for His existence at all. Both this movement and its chief proponents are key targets of the book *Who Made God? Searching for a Theory of Everything*, written by English scientist and Christian apologist Edgar Andrews. While the author’s name may not be widely recognized in the United States, those who examine Dr. Andrews’ past

career will immediately notice his well-publicized debates in the UK with renowned atheist and scientist Richard Dawkins. Commenting on these and other encounters with the icons of atheism, Andrews states that “Dawkins and his fellow ‘new atheists’...wield it [skepticism] like a sword—drawn from the twin scabbards of science and philosophy.” This statement very appropriately captures the heart of a movement intended to decapitate God as the head of creation by reducing material existence to the random happenstance of physics and chemistry.

In large part, the atheist worldview continues to gain ground because modern society has ceded the rights to interpret scientific data to those who would use it to eliminate the need for a creator God. In both secular and (sadly) religious circles today, scientific evidence has been directed to understanding nature in terms that separate it entirely from the concept of creation. As the subtitle of the book points out, the vision of many contemporary scientists is to explain “everything” in a nicely wrapped

Mr. Looyenga is a member of the Faith Protestant Reformed Church in Jenison, Michigan.

package of well-studied theories and tidy mathematical formulas, entirely devoid of a sovereign God who creates and upholds these natural laws.

Starting with recent attempts to unify all of physics into a single “theory of everything,” and then proceeding through arguments based on cosmological phenomenon, sociology, natural law, and evolutionary theory, Andrews carefully dissects many of the leading arguments of the day that claim to have disproven the existence of God. *Who Made God?* is a delightful combination of Christian apologetics and insightful scientific commentary presented in a witty narrative of classic English humor that makes the book both informative and easy to read. Though Dr. Andrews is by training an engineer/physicist, his grasp of other relevant disciplines such as modern philosophy, sociology, and molecular biology—and his ability to explain them in comprehensible lay terms—is thoroughly satisfying.

While a number of the arguments that Andrews frames in his book may be familiar to those who are acquainted with the Intelligent Design (ID) movement, he is at pains to emphasize that he does not subscribe to this movement. Furthermore, Andrews goes so far as to express disappointment in a number of prominent ID authors, including Michael Behe, pointing out that the movement is not based on a desire to validate the biblical account of creation, but rather a rational critique of modern evolutionary theory. Though Reformed Christians can—and perhaps should—glean some important points from ID, it must be clear that this movement is neither inherently God-affirming nor solidly founded on scriptural principles of creation.

Among the different arguments that Andrews employs, the most engaging to read are his discussions on the nature of science and what it can actually tell us about origins of the physical world. In this discussion, he makes the following statement:

Far from explaining everything, science actually explains nothing. What science does is describe the world and its phenomenology in terms of its own specialized concepts and models—which provide immensely valuable insights but become increasingly non-intuitive as we dig ever deeper into the nature of physical reality...although scientific theories advance our understanding of the way things work in our universe, they seldom, if ever, trace

our experiences and observations back to *a priori* concepts that need no further explanation. Indeed, in their search for unification they often lead us to profound and inexplicable mysteries... (pp. 30-31).

These “mysteries” must certainly include some of the more arcane concepts of physics such as particle entanglement and space-time curvature, which readily attest to the non-intuitive character of what are now considered to be well-established, experimentally-sound facts. Andrews uses these examples to point out the hypocrisy of atheistic scientists who argue strenuously that God cannot exist because we cannot “sense” Him. These same scientists discount the possibility of a spiritual realm since it cannot be measured, though they readily accept the strange realities of modern physics that actually seem to run entirely counter to our five senses.

So what of science and its immensity of data? Can it be used in any way to answer the question of whether God really exists? Rather than starting from scratch and asking science or philosophy to provide a logical need for God, Andrews instead approaches these questions by beginning with the assumption that the God of the Bible does exist, and then asking whether the record of science is consistent with this “hypothesis of God.” The answer he ultimately comes to is that the record of science is more consistent with the predictions one would make based on Scripture—which assumes the existence of a true creator-God—than the predictions one would make based on the atheistic assumption that God does not exist.

While he readily admits that this approach may be dissatisfying to those who would insist that science must prove God’s existence *de novo* without any assumption that this is in fact true, Andrews makes no apologies for his insistence that a defense of God’s existence must start with a biblical definition of God. Those who are familiar with the doctrine of general revelation will immediately appreciate the value of Andrews’ arguments, as his approach is more consistent with this doctrine than other historical attempts to “prove God” by such luminaries as Thomas Aquinas and René Descartes, who both failed to recognize that God’s existence cannot be proven by philosophy or science apart from faith and God’s inspired Word.

While *Who Made God?* is theologically orthodox on most counts, it must be pointed out that Andrews does

not directly address the issue of the creation record in Genesis 1-2. Though this may raise flags for some readers, further research on this issue indicates that Andrews' omission was intended to avoid potentially distracting doctrinal discussions rather than to cast doubt on the authenticity of Scripture.¹ His opposition to non-literal interpretations of Genesis is underscored by unabashed critiques of the theistic evolutionary position held by

well-known Christian scientists including Dr. Francis Collins, who serves as the current director of the National Institutes of Health and recently authored the book *The Language of God*.² Because Collins' book has been widely lauded as *the* solution to reconciling the Christian faith with modern science, those interested in finding an alternative—and more biblically satisfying—answer are encouraged to read *Who Made God?* 

¹ Challies, Tim. *Who Made God: An Interview with Edgar Andrews*. Online posting, 23 Nov 2009. <http://www.challies.com/interviews/who-made-god-an-interview-with-edgar-andrews>.

² Collins, Francis S. *The Language of God: a Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief*. Simon and Schuster, 2006.

NEWS FROM OUR CHURCHES

MR. BENJAMIN WIGGER

Evangelism Activities

We include in this first issue of the “News” for 2011 the last of the Reformation Day lectures sponsored by our congregations back in October.

Rev. Carl Haak, pastor of the Georgetown PRC in Hudsonville, MI, was able to combine a Reformation Lecture and classical appointment while in the Wingham, Ontario PRC in late October. Rev. Haak spoke on October 29 on the subject “Unconditional Election.”

The Evangelism Committee of the Loveland, CO PRC invited their congregation, who in turn were encouraged to invite friends and neighbors, to a Reformation Day Lecture on October 29. Their pastor, Rev. Steven Key, spoke on the topic, “Restoring the Foundation for Christian Piety.”

Rev. Thomas Miersma, pastor

Mr. Wigger is a member of the Protestant Reformed Church of Hudsonville, Michigan.

of the Immanuel PRC in Lacombe, AB, Canada, gave a Reformation Day lecture for his congregation and the surrounding community on October 29 on the topic, “The Reformation, Biblical Missions, and Evangelism.”

The South Holland PRC in Crete, IL was the site of a Reformation Day lecture on October 22. Rev. William Langerak, pastor of the Southeast PRC in Grand Rapids, MI, spoke on the subject, “Christian Liberty or Doctrine of Devils.”

By our count, there were sixteen different Reformation lectures given by various congregations or committees this Reformation season, with Prof. David Engelsma giving his lecture on the Federal Vision four times—once in Michigan, once in Iowa, once in Wisconsin, and once in Illinois. We should also add here that, in the question and answer period after the first lecture in Michigan, Prof. Engelsma was not able to answer all the submitted questions due to time constraints. He has therefore been

answering these questions at www.talkfederalvision.com, so if you have opportunity, check it out.

The Evangelism Committee of the First PRC in Grand Rapids, MI hosted a South Africa Presentation given by Professors Gritters and Dykstra on Sunday evening, November 28. They showed pictures and talked about their visit this past summer to six churches in Namibia.

Congregation Activities

After a year and a half of regular Sunday-morning Heidelberg Catechism preaching for our vacant Trinity PRC in Hudsonville, MI, Prof. Robert Decker asked to be relieved of that obligation. Sunday morning, November 28, marked his final regularly-scheduled service for Trinity. In gratitude to him for his labors, there was a time of appreciation for him after that morning service. Prof. Dykstra has agreed to take up that labor for Trinity.

The Choral Society of the Loveland, CO PRC presented their fall program on Sunday evening, December 5. A collection was taken for Loveland's organ fund.

The 4th to 7th grade catechism classes of the Georgetown PRC in Hudsonville, MI went caroling after their evening service on December 5, to the aged and some other members of their congregation. Then they returned to church for refreshments.

During the month of November, the congregations of the Georgetown and Hudsonville PRCs were given the opportunity to share what the Lord has given in a food-drive for others in their church family. Members were encouraged to bring non-perishable goods to their church kitchen by the end of the month, or, if they preferred, they could donate gift certificates. Items collected were distributed by the deacons in December.

The choir of the Hope PRC in Redlands, CA presented a program of thankfulness and praise to our heavenly Father in song on Sunday evening, November 28.

All children of Sunday School

age of the First PRC in Grand Rapids, MI were invited to attend a card-making party in late November.

The children of the Byron Center, MI PRC were invited to a cookie decorating night on December 1.

Sister-Church Activities

On Friday evening, December 3, Rev. Martyn McGeown, pastor of the Limerick Reformed Fellowship in Limerick, Republic of Ireland, spoke at the Rest Convalescent Home in Porthcawl, South Wales. Rev. McGeown spoke on the subject, "God Is Love." Then on December 7, Rev. McGeown spoke in Limerick, on behalf of the LRF, on the subject, "What Happened at the Cross?"

Young People's Activities

The Federation Board of the young people's societies hosted a Thanksgiving singspiration at the Hudsonville, MI PRC on Sunday evening, November 21.

On that same evening, the young people of the Calvary PRC in Hull, IA and the young people of the Lynden, WA PRC hosted Thanksgiving Singspirations, giving also those congregations an opportunity to

"give thanks unto the Lord and to sing praises unto thy name, O most High" (Ps. 92:1).

The Young People's Society of the First PRC in Edmonton, AB, Canada sponsored three bottle drives for November and December. A total of \$387 was raised during the first drive, to offset the cost of this year's convention.

School Activities

The Student Council of Covenant Christian High School in Grand Rapids, MI again this past month sponsored the Gift Certificate Drive to help those who have need in area PRCs. Those wishing to donate could send their gifts to Covenant, care of the Student Council.

Minister Activities

Rev. G. Eriks declined the call he was considering to serve as pastor of the Hope PRC in Walker, MI.

The Edgerton, MN PRC extended a call to Rev. C. Spronk to become their next pastor.

Rev. D. Overway received the call from the Wingham, Ontario, PRC. ☺

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Teacher Needed

■ The Protestant Reformed Christian School of Dyer, IN is accepting applications for lower grade teaching positions for the 2011/2012 school year. Interested applicants can send a letter of inquiry and resumé to the school. If you have questions regarding the positions, contact Ryan Van Overloop at 219-558-2660 (school) or 219-374-6547 (home).

Teacher Needed

■ Covenant Christian High School in Grand Rapids, Michigan is accepting applications for a full-time teaching position for the 2010-2011 school year. Applicants should be certified for Secondary Education in the areas of Mathematics or Spanish. Applications can be obtained by contacting Rick Noorman at 616-453-5048 or ricknoorman@gmail.com or Jeff Terpstra at 616-735-0775 or jeffterpstra@gmail.com.

Classis West

■ Classis West of the PRC will convene on March 2, 2011, 8:30 A.M., at the Protestant Reformed Church of Crete, IL. All material for the agenda of this meeting must be in the hands of the stated clerk by Monday, January 31, 2011.

Rev. Douglas Kuiper,
Stated Clerk

Wedding Anniversary

■ With thankfulness and gratitude to God, we rejoice with our parents and grandparents,

WILLIAM and THERESA HOFMAN,

as they celebrate 50 years of marriage, united as one with Christ, on January 19, 2011. We are grateful for their guidance, instruction, love, and support, which they have shown to us throughout our lives. Our earnest prayer is that God will continue to bless them with His love for years to come. "Keep yourself in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life" (Jude 21).

- * Bill and Joan Hofman
Katelyn, Jeff,
Jeremy and Jill Essenburg,
Michelle
- * Tom and Darla Hofman
Jacob, Emily
- * Doug and Melissa Looyenga
Stephanie, Justin, Nicholas, Ethan
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Resolution of Sympathy

■ The Council and congregation of the PRC in Crete, IL express sympathy to Mr. and Mrs. Philip VanBaren, Mr. and Mrs. Gysbert VanBaren, Mr. and Mrs. Randy Poortinga, and their families in the passing away of their mother and grandmother,

MRS. JEANETTE VAN BAREN.

We pray that they may receive strength and comfort in the words from II Corinthians 5:1, 8: "For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord."

Rev. Nathan Langerak, President
Ed Stouwie, Clerk

Wedding Anniversary

■ On January 28, 2011, our parents, **RODGER and SHARON MAATMAN,**

will celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary. With thankful hearts, we pray for continued blessings in their marriage, and the godly instruction and example in our lives as their children and grandchildren.

"I said, O my God, take me not away in the midst of my days: thy years [are] throughout all generations. Of old hast thou laid the foundation of the earth: and the heavens [are] the work of thy hands. They shall perish, but thou shalt endure: yea, all of them shall wax old like a garment; as a vesture shalt thou change them, and they shall be changed: But thou [art] the same, and thy years shall have no end. The children of thy servants shall continue, and their seed shall be established before thee" (Psalm 102: 24-28).

- * Todd and MaryKay Maatman
Chad and Kaitlin
- * Jim and Tammie Swan
Hayley, Dallas
Ryan and Paige (Swan) Worries
- * Troy and Rebecca Maatman
Lucas, Jacob, Caleb, Anna
- * Robin Maatman
- * Rodger and Cheryl Maatman
Madalyn
- * Larry and Roxanne Leoni
Payton, Mia, Gabrielle, Dominic
Leesburg, Indiana

Wedding anniversary

■ On January 10, 2011, our parents, **DAVE and LORI KUIPER,**

will celebrate their 35th wedding anniversary. We give thanks to God for their many years of faithful marriage and godly instruction to us. May our heavenly Father continue to bless them in their life together.

"Except the LORD build the house, they labour in vain that build it: except the LORD keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain. It is vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late, to eat the bread of sorrows: for so he giveth his beloved sleep. Lo, children are an heritage of the LORD: and the fruit of the womb is his reward" (Psalm 127:1-3).

- * Jeremy and Jill Thull
Jimmy, Brooke, Isabella, Charlie
- * Josh and Sara Lubbers
Kelly, Jacob, Nicholas, Alayna,
Lucas
- * Kelly Lynn Kuiper (in glory)
- * Joe and Kathleen Kuiper
Lyla
- * Tony and Michelle Gruppen
Jonathan, Allison, Grace
Grandville, Michigan

Reformed Witness Hour December 2010

Date	Topic	Text
January 2	"Confidence in Christ's Coming"	Hebrews 10:35-37
January 9	"Building a Christian Home"	Psalm 127:1
January 16	"Marriage As God Ordained It"	Genesis 2:21-25
January 23	"Husbands Who Love Their Wives"	Ephesians 5:25-33
January 30	"Wives Who Are Subject to Their Husbands"	Ephesians 5:22-24