

The Standard Bearer

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Dreadful distresses

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about synod’s decisions?”

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and moral revolution

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Meditation

Rev. Steven Key, pastor of the Protestant Reformed Church of Loveland, Colorado

Dreadful distresses

Fools because of their transgression, and because of their iniquities, are afflicted. Their soul abhorreth all manner of meat; and they draw near to the gates of death. Then they cry unto the LORD in their trouble, and he saveth them out of their distresses. He sent his word, and healed them, and delivered them from their destructions. Oh that men would praise the LORD for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men! And let them sacrifice the sacrifices of thanksgiving, and declare his works with rejoicing.

Psalm 107:17-22

God speaks to us in our present trials. God gives us instruction we have to hear. The lessons He would teach us are necessary for us. This text directs our attention to the reason behind the dreadful distresses we face in life, but also unfolds the wonderful solution to those dreadful distresses.

The horrible reality

Psalm 107:17-20 speaks of a horrible reality, of dreadful distresses. Psalm 107, from the opening verse, is a call to praise, a call to “give thanks unto the LORD, for he is good: for his mercy endureth for ever.” But it is also a recognition of the sad reality that not only does the world not bow before Him as the God who must be worshiped and praised, but that also we His people do not give thanks to Him as we ought.

So the history of Israel is recounted in the Psalm, a history at the same time wonderful and yet very sad. It was wonderful in revealing the Lord’s merciful dealings with His people, His faithfulness to them, the wonderful works by which He revealed Himself as the God who alone saves His people, all the while pointing them to their Savior, the Messiah who was to come. But it was a sad history for the spiritual blindness of so many in Israel, the hardness of heart, the rejection of God’s Word and the failure to thank and praise Him even in the face of His wonderful works. And so throughout the Psalm is found the lament, “Oh that men would praise the LORD for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men!”

The Lord repeatedly brought chastisement upon His people, and revealed His wrath in the world that rejected Him. Those chastisements of His people moved them to cry unto Him in their trouble, “and he delivered them out of their distresses.” That is the wonderful gospel of salvation—Jehovah, the unchangeably faithful covenant God, delivering His people out of their distresses.

But, in verses 17-22 of Psalm 107, we are immediately called to face our dreadful distresses. We are called to face those distresses in order that we might be brought to the thankfulness God requires of us, and that we might declare His wonderful works with rejoicing (v. 22).

We live in a world starkly reminded of death and chaos. We who are Christ’s interpret these events in the light of Revelation 6 and many other passages of Holy Scripture. That hand of the holy God, directing the four horses and their riders, including the one named Death, unfolds the signs that Christ is on the way, returning to execute judgment in the earth and to deliver His people. The human race is alarmed. Many who listen to the fearmongering of the news media are in a panic.

But we who are the children of God, redeemed by Christ, and who therefore look for our Lord’s return, also realize that God speaks in the present distresses. Shall we hear Him?

The text would have us see the dreadfulness of our distresses. Listen: “Fools because of their transgression, and because of their iniquities, are afflicted. Their soul abhorreth all manner of meat; and they draw near unto the gates of death.” The terms used in verse 18 are graphic. The affliction described has brought the person to the gates of death. He feels as if his lungs are in a vice being tightened. There is no joy evident, only misery.

Verse 18 shows that this affliction is also characterized by a loss of appetite. In fact, they cannot stand the sight or smell of food. So desperate is their condition that “they draw near unto the gates of death,” a healthy color being replaced by the pale color of one no longer getting the necessary oxygen, the very organs of the body beginning to fail. The situation by all appearances is hopeless. And the picture, you well understand, is one of the dreadful effects of sin.

The dreadful reason

The text itself brings out the dreadful reason for this horrible reality that we also observe and that affects every one of us. Affliction, these dreadful distresses, are consequences of transgression and of iniquities! The word *transgression* speaks of rebellion, deliberately going against what God has shown as His will for us and His way with us.

God, the eternal I AM, created us to praise Him. In His own good pleasure He even formed a people set apart unto Himself. He provided for them their every need daily. He protected them. He revealed His goodness to them beyond what they ever would dare ask or think. He performed many wonderful works, revealing that He alone is God. In everything He pointed to Christ, the One who would come to save them. He gave every reason for His people to thank Him, to praise Him, to live to His glory. He came down to their level to speak to them. He gave them His Word.

Now consider the history recounted in this Psalm. Repeatedly the children of Israel, the church, held the counsel of the Most High in contempt. They did not want His Word. They refused to live to His glory. They took for granted everything He gave them, even lived as if He owed them. And that rebellion against the living God came to expression in a multitude of iniquities. Man has become an offender, guilty of crimes against the eternal I AM. Guilt has consequences. That is what is described here as the reason for the horrible reality of our dreadful distresses.

Notice as well how those bearing these dreadful distresses are described—*fools*: “Fools because of their transgression, and because of their iniquities, are afflicted.” God Himself describes them as fools because in the pathway they have chosen and in the way of their iniquities they are afflicted. The emphasis, you see, is not on God’s execution of justice—though that is certainly expressed. But the emphasis is on the fact that fools bring upon themselves their dreadful distresses. That is why they are called *fools*. They embrace that which destroys them!

It is important in our present calamities to understand this too. Men have always struggled with the concept of suffering. How can God allow suffering? That is really the wrong question. The question is: Why do men and women willingly choose a pathway the consequences of which are death? God says, love Me. And we have chosen our own way, a way of transgression, of rebellion. The most hardened criminal knows there are consequences for his actions. Romans 2 tells us that every person has the works of the law written in his or her heart. Their consciences bear witness that

there are consequences to wrongdoing. Why is there suffering in the world? The Bible’s answer is direct: We have brought it upon ourselves. “Fools because of their transgression, and because of their iniquities, are afflicted.”

Fallen human beings hate to be confronted with that. We all like to point the finger, find someone else to blame. We do not like to face our own rebellion against God. We despise being called *fools*. Should someone stand before you and call you a fool, you would like to punch him in the mouth. The same rebellion of our hearts comes to expression against God when He exposes us for what He sees in us. We all think we know better than God. We think we can circumvent God’s way and sin without consequences. Fools we are.

Should we be surprised if God shows Himself as God alone in the execution of His judgment throughout the world? Who is praising Him for His goodness and for His wonderful works to the children of men? How many in the whole human race are worshipping Him and glorifying Him and walking in His ways? How many rather are not walking in open rebellion against Him? How many infants have been sacrificed on the altar to the goddess of abortion rights? Human beings, formed by God in the womb, His wonderful handiwork, murdered by the millions! And shall there be no consequences? The creation ordinance of marriage, between one man and one woman until death parts them—that ordinance established by God in perfection; the calling God gives husbands and wives to serve one another faithfully—and should there be no consequences when men and women shake their fists at God and reject that holy ordinance of marriage for their own self-serving purposes and pleasures?

The calling to praise the Lord for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men, which requires us to consider His goodness and to study His wonderful works—what have we done with that calling? The Word that He has given us, the opportunity to worship Him that we have so taken for granted—how have we responded? “Because they rebelled against the words of God, and contemned the counsel of the most High: Therefore he brought down their heart with labour; they fell down, and there was none to help” (vv. 11-12). Are we receiving the Word with thankful hearts, humbling ourselves before the face of God in true repentance and faith?

Suffering in any form is not a matter of fate. Trouble—even in churches—is not a matter of fate. Our troubles are self-inflicted. That’s the text. It is a powerful indictment of us. Are you able to hear it?

The folly of sin must be faced. The call to repentance

must be heard. There must be a turning from sin. Sin is subtle. We see sin as promising good things and fun times. Who sets out deliberately to afflict himself? We say, “I am doing what is best for me; I enjoy this; I’m only having fun, not hurting anyone.” Sin always robs us. It promises and never delivers. Sin comes to us as the best friend we could possibly have in this world, and then inflicts us with despair. It’s like alcohol being abused. A man says, “It makes me feel good. It stimulates me.” But alcohol is a depressant. Rather than stimulate you and enlighten your understanding, it robs you of clear thinking and removes the control your mind has over your sinful nature, leading to devastating results. Such is sin. It has robbed us of innocence and removed our peace.

The wonderful deliverance

But listen now to the rest of the text. Revealed here is a wonderful deliverance, deliverance from our folly, from our transgression and iniquities, from the bondage into which we have fallen. God mercifully sets before us that deliverance in verses 19 and 20: “Then they cry unto the LORD in their trouble, and he saveth them out of their distresses. He sent his word, and healed them, and delivered them from their destruction.”

The great Physician is present! We need to notice that. “Then they cry unto the LORD in their trouble.” He did not enter because they cried. He is present. They cry because they have been given an awareness that He is near. The Holy One stands in the midst, the great

and glorious God who is God alone! He has given *life*. Whenever a person truly cries unto God, God has given that person life, enabling him or her to cry unto Him. You do not need to teach your children how to cry. It’s the first thing a newborn does, the first expression of life. And the cry noted here is clearly a cry of desperation from a lost sinner. It’s a cry of repentance, of sorrow—not for the affliction, but for the horrible reality of the dreadfulness of our distresses, for being fools who have rebelled against God and who have grievously sinned against Him. It’s the pouring out of one’s heart before Him who alone can deliver.

“And he saveth them out of their distresses.” How He does that immediately follows in verse 20: “He sent his word, and healed them, and delivered them from their destructions.” He sends the gospel, the gospel of Jesus Christ, who alone removes our guilt, who washes away the poison of sin that had brought us into such distresses, who gives life, relationships, joy and peace. The faithful I AM, Jehovah, sends the incarnate Word, powerful to save. He heals, making us new creatures!

So we hear the call of verses 21 and 22: “Oh that men would praise the LORD for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men! And let them sacrifice the sacrifices of thanksgiving, and declare his works with rejoicing.”

Let us offer our praise to Him with thankful hearts and with lives that are consecrated to serving Him. And as we declare His works with rejoicing, may others join us in the joy of our deliverance.



Editorial

Prof. Barrett Gritters, professor of Practical Theology in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary

“What do you think about Synod’s decisions?” The Reformed prohibition of agitating

After each meeting of synod, faithful members of the churches are interested in the decisions synod took. Although some decisions may be what we label routine, others are of great magnitude. Considered routine may be approval of a budget for the mission field, or a decision to print more catechism books. Of great magnitude are synod’s call of a new seminary professor; synod’s answers to protests and appeals; or synod’s decision to establish sister-church relations, to open a

new mission field, or to declare a man candidate for the ministry of the Word. These are weighty matters. These decisions determine the life of, and indicate the health of, a denomination.

Synod’s decisions have everything to do with the very *life* of Jesus Christ that the churches live together.

In non-Reformed churches, there may not even be a synod. These churches are congregational in their church polity. If there is some annual ‘assembly’ of

all these churches (sometimes even called ‘synod’), the assembly’s decisions are not binding upon the member churches, but only recommendations. In a Reformed denomination, where churches labor together in many important areas and where synod’s decisions are binding, the members are greatly interested.

The PRCA’s 2020 Acts of Synod—soon to be published and distributed to every family in the PRCA—should be read from cover to cover. Certainly the minutes of synod should be carefully perused. These ‘minutes’ are synod’s official decisions along with synod’s reasons for its decisions. To give some perspective on the Acts, the 2019 Acts of Synod is over 300 pages, but only about 60 pages are the minutes. For 2018, the book is about 470 pages and the minutes only 90 of those. Most of the Acts is comprised of two other things: the supplements, which give background information for the decisions; and the denominational Yearbook, which lists correspondence addresses, synodical committees, information on our ministers (active, retired, and deceased), congregational and classical statistics, financial information, etc. Also these are good to read; but the minutes themselves are the official decisions of synod.

So it would not be overstating the case to say that, in a denomination where there is little interest in the synodical decisions, hope for that denomination’s future is not bright. The next generation just may yet remain a part of the denomination, but probably only because they were born in it, not because they know it and are able to love it.

Attitudes and actions

Being a Reformed church member implies interest in synodical decisions. It also demands a certain kind of attitude toward them. Not *any* kind of attitude is proper. Some attitudes are improper.

What is first required of a Reformed church member is the recognition that these decisions are *settled and binding*. “Settled and binding” are the words used in the Church Order (Art. 31) to describe the nature of ecclesiastical (consistory, classis, or synod) decisions. “Settled” means that the matter is finished. “Binding” means that the decision is legally *in* force, may be *enforced* or applied, and must be honored and submitted to by all parties. Even if someone disagrees with a decision, he is still required to submit, to acquiesce. He may claim freedom of conscience in the matter, but he is forbidden to agitate against the decision. He may not propagate his contrary views. This is a strong and important principle in Reformed church government.

For this reason, a church order risks cutting the nerve of Article 31 if it merely uses the word *respect* to de-

scribe members’ attitude toward ecclesiastical decisions. Only *respect* is too weak, unless the *respect* is the kind of respect children have of their parents. Someone may claim to respect a decision without submitting to it. He respects it but will oppose it. This is not Reformed church order.

Ecclesiastical decisions are *binding* upon the members of the churches.

When they make confession of faith, young people understand this—they promise to *submit* to church government. Among the three questions they answer is: “Do you promise to submit to church government?” No one makes confession of faith without agreeing to submit, and no one comes to a consistory to make confession of faith without having been taught that agitation or militancy is sin. They understand that church decisions—of consistory, classis, and synod—are binding upon them.

Why? Because they are the rule of Jesus Christ over him. To militate would be to militate against Christ Himself.

None of this means, of course, that a person has no recourse when he objects to a decision. The principles of Reformed church government have always shown that: 1) Assemblies can err, and have, because they are comprised of sinful men. Contrary to Roman Catholic church polity, which teaches that the church cannot err, Reformed churches teach the real possibility of it. 2) Believers have the right to protest erroneous decisions, because they hold the ‘office of all believers.’ Contrary to Roman Catholic polity, which gives voice only to the *special* officebearers, Reformed churches recognize the right of every believer to speak and object if necessary. But, 3) until Scripture, the confessions, or the church order convince the assemblies to change their decision, the protestant submits, because Article 31 calls the decisions “settled and binding.” This is the “decency and order” Scripture and the Reformed churches demand.

Important especially these days

These days, a spirit of disobedience and dishonor runs rampant in society. The disrespect and lawlessness that the Word predicts for the last days grows. The men Paul describes in Romans 1 and II Timothy 3 multiply. They are “full of...debate [strife, wrangling], deceit, malignity [evil subtlety]; whisperers [secret slanderers], backbiters...despiteful [full of arrogant insults], proud...disobedient to parents [and all authority]...implacable [cannot be persuaded to live in peace]....” They are “lovers of their own selves...boasters, proud...false accusers, incontinent [without self-control], fierce...heady [reckless, rash], highminded [blind with pride]....” One need only watch their protests, read their placards,

hear their comments, to understand the lawlessness and the increasing chaos in our societies.

This same spirit works powerfully in the church world. Because this evil spirit finds a kindred spirit in the Christian's sinful nature, we must be on our guard against this same sin in ourselves. One way this spirit manifests itself is in a revolutionary attitude toward officebearers and the assemblies. Then there is strife, wrangling, evil subtlety, secret slanders, and proud insults made without self-control. When these evils are not checked, soon the chaos we see in society will permeate the church of Jesus Christ.

There can be no *denominational* unity without this proper submission to broader assemblies' decisions, any more than there can be *congregational* unity without submission to consistory decisions. A revolutionary attitude towards classis or synod is the same as revolution against the elders in the local church. That revolution would cause a congregation to disintegrate. It will splinter a denomination. So important is Article 31 of the Church Order.

The Reformed consensus

For all the history of the PRCA, this has been the strong view and unanimous opinion of our ministers and consistories. This view of assemblies' decisions Prof. R. Decker taught me in seminary some 40 years ago. This view I have taught to my students for 17 years.

These notes are from the first edition of my class lectures in Church Polity:

What are his attitude and actions toward the decisions (and toward the assemblies) while the appeal is being considered and after the decision has been taken? (Toward the *consistory* and its decision which he is appealing to classis, and toward the classis and its decision he is appealing to synod—etc.)? May he oppose that decision? Publicly? Privately? May he walk contrary to it?... The decision is binding. Binding means that the decision...(esp!) must be honored and submitted to by all parties, *esp* the appellant (who does not like it). The aggrieved party acquiesces! NEG: He does not have to agree, for no assembly may bind his conscience. POS: But he must acquiesce, i.e., a) SUBMIT! b) NOT AGITATE, or PROPAGATE HIS VIEWS. [In the margin of these lecture notes, I have written the word "EXAM" surrounded by large stars, reminding me to assure the students that this point will be brought up in their synodical examination because the churches want to know how ministers will respond to decisions they may not like.]

In his "Notes on the Church Order" and his "Believer's Manual for Church Order," Prof. H. Hanko says in connection with Article 31:

By 'settled' is meant that the matter is no longer a proper subject for discussion and debate...[it means] that *any agitation and propaganda* against the decision is improper in the church.... To assume any other position would lead to *anarchy* and chaos in the church.... [H]e will *not militate* against it *publicly*. [When men are confronted with the reality that the churches disagree with them]: There are, for a man of *integrity*, two possible courses of action. One thing he may not do is make *propaganda* for his position *publicly* and privately within the churches. Article 31 is explicit on the point. All decisions must be considered settled and binding. That is, the matters which prompted the decisions are finished, and the decisions themselves are binding upon all. A man who disagrees with certain decisions retains the liberty of his conscience by holding his inward convictions, but he must keep the matter to himself and may not do anything which would give the impression that he is acting contrary to them.... [H]e *never agitates* against synodical decisions.... If a believer discovers that the church which he loves is threatened by a decision taken by an assembly, he must seek to correct that error. If he considers the matter so wrong that he feels compelled to *talk with other of his fellow saints* about it, it is important enough to protest.... He cannot stand on the sidelines, bemoaning error to his compatriots, but refusing to do anything about it. This is *irresponsible*, and a *violation of the ninth commandment* (emphasis added).

The description is not too strong: "anarchy, chaos, irresponsible, violation of the ninth commandment." The minister or elder who has been 'around the block' a few times understands the importance of this. He will also understand why Prof. Hanko concluded that section by emphasizing the evil of decisions made in "the court of public opinion." One would read with profit his entire chapter 2, "Matters to the Assemblies." (The reader can find this work at prca.org under 'resources' and 'books'.)

Prof. Hanko does not stand alone as the voice of PRC tradition. In an editorial almost 30 years ago, Prof. D. Engelsma emphasized the same points: "Consistories and individuals submit to decisions of synod with which they themselves are in disagreement. It is accepted that synod's decisions will be considered settled and binding by all the consistories and by all the members." "Synodical decisions put an end to debate on controversial issues in the churches. There may not be continued agitation against the decisions." "...[A]gitation against synodical decisions (is) radically un-reformed...." It is "sin against the unity of the church." Un-reformed. Sin.

The fundamental issue: church unity

If Reformed ecclesiastical assemblies were anything other

than the manifestation of the *unity* of the church of Christ, and of the actual rule of Jesus Christ, agitating against these assemblies might not be so serious. But Reformed church polity has always understood that the *unity* of Christ's beloved church *requires* broader assemblies, and that in these assemblies Christ Himself rules. Just as the unity of the local congregation requires submission to the local elders, so also denominational unity requires submission to the elders' rule in the broader assemblies. Breaking the bond of denominational unity by agitating against the denomination's decisions is like breaking the bonds of congregational unity by agitating in the congregation against a consistory's decisions. Against such agitation a consistory will act quickly and decisively.

What would have happened in the early church had Judas and Silas, commissioned to deliver the decrees of the Jerusalem council (Acts 15) to the churches, instead gathered a group to criticize the decisions? What would have been the result in Corinth had the apostle John written a letter to agitate against Paul's decree that women keep silent in the churches (I Cor. 14:34), or in the church at Thessalonica if someone promoted the view that "you don't *really* have to work if you want to eat" (see II Thess. 3:10-12)? The unity of the churches would have been destroyed.

And for this reason, the church fathers have described agitation and militating as *schism*.

Schism, by definition, is dividing what ought to be united.

The unity of the church is the issue.

To militate against church assemblies, and then to

gather others to join in the militancy, is to attempt to rule and change the church by an unauthorized mob. Schism is the inevitable result.

In *society*, where mobs attempt to overrule the 'powers that be' ("ministers of God"!), they must be quickly stopped, or life in that society will not be possible. Where such is found in the *church*, if not quickly stopped, the congregation or denomination cannot survive intact.

Understanding proper church government—and abiding by it—is essential for the existence of a denomination. Thus, the insight of Theodore Beza during Reformation times is profound: Satan thinks it easier to destroy the church by overthrowing its *government* than by overthrowing its doctrinal foundation.

So, when the Acts of Synod 2020 comes out soon, please read with interest the decisions that were taken. Maybe even take the time to read the decisions from the past few years. Encourage family members and friends to have an interest in denominational life. Discuss it with discernment, with the possible conclusion (although not relishing the possibility) that you disagree. But when you read, remember that you are a Reformed believer who considers himself *bound* by these decisions. If you cannot abide one of them but must criticize it, the "man of integrity" will not agitate, but protest. The unity of the church of Jesus Christ requires this.

May God give Christ's church peace through the understanding of this.



All around us

Rev. Nathan Decker, pastor of Grandville Protestant Reformed Church in Grandville, Michigan

Media coverage and COVID-19

Preparing to write for the rubric "All Around Us" requires searching the papers, scrolling through blogs, flipping through periodicals, and watching the news to identify that which would be edifying to reflect on and write about. As I did this over the last few months, there has been one event that has dominated the news: the spread of COVID-19. The title of this rubric is "All Around Us," and unquestionably over the course of the past few months what has been "all around us"—what seems like the only thing to be "all around us"—is news and analysis concerning this coronavirus. The purpose

of this article is not to reflect on any particular subject related to COVID-19. Many are the themes that could profitably be explored from current events relating to the spread of and response to this virus: the place of and submission to God-ordained authority, the lessons God is teaching His people, the certain sign of the coming of Jesus Christ, and many others beside. Rather, the intent of this article is to reflect generally on the overwhelming nature of the media coverage of this coronavirus. In the course of this article, I will explain why this is, from a biblical perspective, worthy of our attention.

What has occurred in the news with COVID-19 is the predictable response of the media to significant national events. Any major event—a presidential election, a mass shooting, a devastating natural disaster—receives immediate and incessant media coverage from the national and local outlets pushed out over many different mediums: television, Internet, social media, radio, print. Journalists examine, analyze, and report on the event from every imaginable perspective. And then, after a while, the coverage of the major event dies off, only for intense coverage to be resurrected again with the next noteworthy story. There is, however, something unique about the coverage of COVID-19, it seems to me. I write as a thirty-four-year old. Never in my adult life has one event so dominated the media like that of this coronavirus. I can only imagine the number of articles, sound bites, news clips, and posts that have been published concerning COVID-19.

This is not surprising though. The effects of COVID-19 touch every sphere of society: political, social, economic, and religious. Due to the executive orders of government officials, the pandemic has radically altered the daily lives of every citizen of the country. Schools are shut down. Jobs have been lost. The economy is plummeting. Gathering and visiting are prohibited. Sickness and death have touched many families. And a pandemic is not a “here today, gone tomorrow” reality. For good reason, therefore, media coverage continues to be centered on this coronavirus, and such will likely continue for the foreseeable future.

But we live in unprecedented times as it relates to the ability to consume this media. And therein lies the concern, and the reason this is worthy of our reflection as Christians. What is unique today is not the constant and drawn-out coverage of major national and world events. What is unique today is our ability to access that media coverage in any amount, at whatever time, and in any form. Consider the stark contrast between the days of the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic and the times we are living in during the outbreak of COVID-19. A person’s knowledge of all things related to the Spanish flu pandemic would have been limited to what was reported in the daily newspapers and weekly periodicals. That is it. One could read about the pandemic only so much. Today is fundamentally different. There is no limit to consuming media related to this coronavirus. Literally sunup to sundown one could read and listen to media on COVID-19 and not even come close to consuming it all.

It is this unlimited access on a whole range of platforms to the flood of coverage that poses real dangers to Christians individually and in their lives together as

bodies of believers. Let us consider a few noteworthy points in this regard.

In the first place, undisciplined media consumption can result in poor stewardship of our God-given time. In this connection we consider the careful balance between being informed and being overtaken by the desire to know what is going on in the world. We must be informed citizens and Christians, men and women who understand the times we live in as viewed through the lens of Scripture. Ignorance concerning COVID-19 and the major developments arising out of it could possibly result, for example, in a Christian’s failure to submit to and honor the God-ordained authorities, or in a failure longingly to hope for the coming of our Savior as we see a clear sign of His return. It is imperative to be informed as Christians. It requires, however, sanctified wisdom to know when enough is enough, so that, as we are constantly flooded with media coverage, we do not abuse but redeem the time God has given us. May God give us such wisdom.

Second, it is good for us to remember that one’s media consumption regarding COVID-19 potentially influences one’s godly or ungodly response to the pandemic. Consider the fact that there is a wide range of responses to these events that would be categorized as out of harmony with the will of God. Do you battle anxiety on account of potentially getting COVID-19 or because of the financial hardship that was caused by the shutdown of the economy? One must be wise in what media is consumed if that is the case. Constantly examining the spread of the virus or incessantly examining the economic fallout in the news will not help to alleviate such worry, but only serve to heighten the concern as one’s mind is more and more fixated on the cause of anxiety. Do you fight against anger and bitterness toward the God-ordained elected officials because of their executive orders that limit private activity and shut down work life? Again, a discerning consumption of media is required in this instance. Repeatedly turning to the articles and watching the news clips that ridicule the governors and point out the problems with their mandates will not serve to put down and put out that anger and bitterness, but only fuel such sinful responses. The examples in this regard could be multiplied. And oftentimes the one who struggles with these sinful responses is not cognizant of how what is consumed affects his/her heart. All of this is to say how important it is to be discerning and careful regarding what and how much media is consumed.

In this regard, we must also remember the positive truth, which is this: think upon the things of God! Philippians 4:8 speaks to the point: “Finally, brethren,

whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, *think* on these things” (emphasis added). In the face of the constant barrage of information concerning COVID-19 that we have experienced and may continue to experience, we are reminded of just how important it is continually to set our mind upon God and His truth. As we read the articles and watch the news, we must consciously do so through the lens of the truth, so that our response is more and more one of living unto God in and through the circumstances of COVID-19.

Last, the sheer amount of information that has been reported on this coronavirus has created a potentially

divisive atmosphere. I suppose this is true concerning any event. However, I believe this is heightened on account of how the life of the believer and the church is directly affected by COVID-19. The situation is one in which every person is able to “site their source” to support their position on everything related to COVID-19, such as the seriousness of the virus or the proper response to it. COVID-19 is potentially very polarizing, and we know that the Devil will use any and all means to drive believers apart. And so we are reminded again of that in which our unity lies: not in our outlook on the spreading virus, but in the cross of Jesus Christ and the truth of the gospel! May God preserve us in this unity through these uncertain times.



Search the Scriptures

Rev. Thomas Miersma, minister emeritus in the Protestant Reformed Churches

Word of truth

Ecclesiastes 12:8-11

The Word of God in Ecclesiastes now moves to the conclusion of the book. But first it sets before us the objective theme and the inspiration of the book. That theme is:

Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher; all is vanity (Eccl. 12:8).

The transitory character of life under the sun has been the object of contemplation. We labor and toil under the sun. The world presents itself as rich and beautiful, for God made it and His handiwork is revealed by the things that are made. But that world also lies under the curse and judgment of God upon sin, which has subjected the whole creation to vanity. “For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope” (Rom. 8:20). The result is that all things under the sun wear away, decay, and decline in corruption. The works of man crumble and fall. Man himself ages and decays unto death and the grave.

The fool in Ecclesiastes, the unbeliever, as we have seen, strives with that reality of vanity, seeking to find his treasure and joy in this life. The result is the folly of sin, the heaping and gathering of the wicked to his own

hurt. The preacher, Solomon, has sought to set before us the truth of the matter for the spiritual instruction of God’s believing people, that we might see with the eye of faith the world and its vanity, and thus understand what is good and profitable for a child of God under the sun. This purpose he now sets before us as the book draws to a close.

And moreover, because the preacher was wise, he still taught the people knowledge; yea, he gave good heed, and sought out, and set in order many proverbs (Eccl. 12:9).

The course of the book has been one of a serious, discerning study of things under the sun, to know their meaning, purpose, and value. He “gave good heed and sought out” wisdom. The book of Proverbs, with its gathering of observations of the world and resulting wisdom, was the same endeavor. Ecclesiastes, forming as it were an appendix to Proverbs, builds on the wisdom found there. Solomon, laying hold of the wisdom God gave him, sets in order many proverbs, not only in the book of Proverbs but in this book as well. The design of a proverb, as well as this material in Ecclesiastes, is that we take up that Word of God in our minds, reflecting upon it as we live our day-to-day lives, contemplating

what it means for us in every situation of life. That Word is like a search light shining upon the world around us to give spiritual understanding of the various states of life and their meaning. It is intended to warn and guard us from the way of sin and its folly.

With that purpose in view, the preacher calls to mind the gift of wisdom given him. Wisdom is both the gift of discernment and the ability or skill to put that knowledge to use. Having that wisdom, Solomon walked in the calling to teach knowledge and wisdom to the people. That the text is in the third person, as speaking about the preacher rather than as the preacher directly, does not necessarily mean we have a different writer though that is not impossible. God used Solomon to write. He also used other men by His Spirit to collect and set in order that which was written by divine inspiration. Thus we read in Proverbs 25: “These are also the proverbs of Solomon, which the men of Hezekiah king of Judah copied out” (v. 1). Solomon’s purpose is rather to call to mind God’s work in him and the grace of wisdom that he received. We have been dealing with a work of God and His word by Solomon. The wisdom in Ecclesiastes and Proverbs is not the natural fruit of a gifted human mind but a work of divine inspiration in Solomon.

Inspiration of the Scriptures is an organic work of God in which the prophet or preacher, in this case, is who he is, with the gifts given him and led by the Spirit of God to speak and teach not his own human wisdom but the Word of God. “Holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Spirit” (II Pet. 2:21). The result is that Scripture is of “no private interpretation” or opinion (II Pet. 2:20). The Bible is not a human document of human philosophy or of worldly discernment and wisdom. Ecclesiastes is here laying a claim to divine inspiration for it and for the book of Proverbs to which it is joined. This is necessary. There was then and still are many books of wisdom written by men, with advice, common sense, and human thought. Divinely inspired wisdom, God’s wisdom ministered to us by the Preacher, is in a wholly different category. Hence the argument continues:

The preacher sought to find out acceptable words: and that which was written was upright, even words of truth (Eccl. 12:10).

Under that inspiration and by means of the gift of wisdom, the work of God in inspiration extended even to the *words* chosen and used. That holy men spake as they were moved by the Spirit of God means more than just that the concepts and observations were of God. The work of God extends to the very words chosen and set down in the Scriptures. The Word of God,

also in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, is *verbally* inspired. Therefore, “that which was written was upright, even words of truth.” What is given, therefore, is upright as to its moral character, it is the holy Word of God. As Jesus said of the Scriptures, “Thy word is truth,” (John 17:17). This is the same declaration given here; what is written are “even words of truth.” In this and in the other Scriptures is God’s own counsel and instruction. Receiving it by faith, we may rely upon it as truth, a light in a world darkened by sin and unbelief.

The words of the wise are as goads, and as nails fastened by the masters of assemblies, which are given from one shepherd (Eccl. 12:11).

The text broadens its scope further in its consideration of the Scriptures and their divine inspiration. “The words of the wise” and the “masters of assemblies” belong together as parallel thoughts. The word “assemblies” can have the idea of that which assembled or collected together. The reference would then be to “the words of the wise,” the men by whom God gave His Word, such as Solomon and the authoritative gathering of that Word, the collection under the leading of the Spirit by the church. The men of Hezekiah’s kingdom gathering the proverbs of Solomon into the book of inspired Scripture would be an example of this. The gathering, collection, and preservation of the Word was also a work of God by men. One finds a similar process when Baruch must transcribe the Word of God revealed to Jeremiah and set it down in writing. (Jer. 36:27-28, 32; Jer. 45). The New Testament epistles were likewise spoken by Paul but written and set down by others as scribes.

The point is that that Word, spoken and set down in writing, has only one source: God as the God of our salvation in Jesus Christ. It is from one Shepherd, the Lord. While the process of revelation involves the activity of men, its organic character both of writing and of gathering it together is of the Lord. The Bible is God’s divinely inspired and infallibly written Word, the Word of God in every part.

That word is described as coming to us as goads and nails fastened. A goad is a pointed stick or pole used to prod cattle. Its function is to rouse a sluggish ox and keep it moving. It also serves to direct and keep in the way one who wanders out of the path. The Word of God has the same spiritual function for a believer, to keep him in the way, and to lead and move us along in the way we should go.

At the same time the figure of a fixed nail, fastened, which does not move, sets before us the reliability and certainty of the Word of God. It is truth, not of man’s speculations but of God’s own Word to us. Truth is not

relative, a matter of my opinion and your opinion, which is how the world views it. We are given to know the truth, possess it, and rest upon it in our life. The au-

thority and trustworthiness of the Scriptures are thereby underscored including its assessment of life set forth in the book of Ecclesiastes. It is “even the words of truth.”



Previous article in this series: May 15 2020, p. 378.

Taking heed to the doctrine

Prof. Brian Huizinga, professor of Dogmatics and Old Testament in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary

As to our good works (6)

Relating good works and justification (b)

Last time we explained that justification—including the assurance and experience of justification—is by faith and not by works. Although we made fine distinctions among justification, the assurance of it, and the experience of it, they are all fundamentally one. The experience and assurance of justification in one’s consciousness is justification.

Justification is a forensic or legal concept that takes us into the courtroom—not an earthly courtroom of man, but the divine courtroom of heaven, where everything speaks of perfect righteousness. Come, now, into the august courtroom of God and it will become even clearer that our good works are of no account toward our justification, and therefore, we do not look to our good works to find assurance that we are righteous before God.

The Judge

The most impressive sight in the courtroom is God the righteous Judge. The earth shakes, the foundations of the hills are moved, and thick smoke and devouring fire break forth before Him (Psalter 34, stanza 4). The holy angels catch a glimpse of the glory of God’s stunning majesty and they cover their eyes with their wings and cry, “Holy, Holy, Holy,” (Is. 6:3). When an angel departs from the immediate presence of God and visits a man on earth, that messenger come down from heaven must always declare “Fear not!” for even the holiest of men is troubled and feels exposed before that mere creature that reflects only a little of the glory of God’s holiness (Luke 1:8-13). Sinners tremble before angels! But angels are not the ones with whom we have to do. God is. The God of infinite holiness and unbending justice is the One who judges us. No wonder Isaiah cried, after beholding the King of heaven, “Woe is me! For I

am undone...” (Is. 6:5), and the guilt-stricken publican dared not lift his eyes toward heaven but cried for mercy (Luke 18:13), and Job exclaimed, “If I be wicked, woe unto me, and if I be righteous, yet will I not lift up my head” (Job. 10:15). No one can answer to God’s perfect righteousness. Not for one moment can anyone in the courtroom keep God out of his thoughts. Each sinner stands trembling in his sins and sinfulness, shielding his eyes from the awesome and blinding brilliance of the Holy One.

The law

Next, there is the law of God as the standard according to which God judges every man and renders a verdict. The law requires perfect righteousness, so that those who are under it must conform perfectly to its every demand in their very nature and in every thought, word, and deed. The law demands love (Matt. 22:37), and the courtroom reverberates with that demand, “Give to God an absolutely perfect heart and life so that every imagination of your heart, every desire of your soul, every thought of your mind, every word that proceeds out of your mouth, and every action you perform is perfectly devoted unto God in love.” With the law, God searches out the sinner in His courtroom and probes deeply into the inner recesses of the heart, drawing forth even the secret things unknown to the sinner himself (Ps. 19:12). For those who have perfect righteousness and are in harmony with the law, it declares “Blessed!” But for the slightest moral taint of nature or for the slightest inclination contrary to God’s will, the law declares, “Guilty and cursed!” (Gal. 3:10). Justice demands that every transgression committed against God’s most high majesty be punished with extreme, that is, with everlasting punishment of

body and soul in hell (Gen. 2:17; Rom. 6:23; Matt. 25:31-46, Heid. Cat., LD 4, Q&A 11).

The sinner

Now look at yourself. As far as justification goes, all who stand in the courtroom of perfect righteousness—believers and unbelievers alike—are ungodly (Rom. 4:5). There is no man of righteousness, man of goodness, man of excellence, man of virtue, or man of obedience. There are no holy works that are of any value to the offending party, for “all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags” (Is. 64:6). There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, a worshiper of Jehovah and a worshiper of Belial, a murderous Cain and an obedient Abel, a profane Herod and a pious John, a shameless heretic and a faithful pastor. *All* are ungodly, and all are convicted in their conscience that they are ungodly and “have grossly transgressed all the commandments of God” (Heid. Cat., LD 23, Q&A 60). You, in the courtroom of justification, are far from being perfect. You are ungodly and with all men stand condemned (Rom. 3:19-23).

The Lamb

For the believing sinner, who is ungodly in himself and stands guilty in the divine courtroom, there can be no more blessed and reassuring sight than the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ. *He* is perfectly righteousness; His name is “THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS” (Jer. 23:6). *He* is “holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens (Heb. 7:26). *His* nature is “without blemish and without spot” (I Pet. 1:19). *His* blood is precious (I Pet. 1:19), because it justifies (Rom. 5:9), washes away sin (I John 1:7; Rev. 1:7), purges the conscience (Heb. 9:14), makes white (Rev. 7:14), redeems (Col. 1:14, Rev. 5:9), and makes a way into the presence of God (Eph. 2:13; Heb. 10:19). *His* death is a once for all offering to bear away sins (Heb. 9:28) and reconcile ungodly sinners unto God (Rom. 5:6-10). *His* curse that He bore, He bore for His own and bore it away (Gal. 3:13). *His* life, lived under the law (Gal. 4:4), was a life of perfect works (Heb. 10:7) that fulfilled every jot and tittle of the law (Matt. 5:17-18). *His* obedience is perfect and by it many are constituted as righteous (Rom. 5:19). *His* righteousness, it is the righteousness of God that avails before God for the deliverance of the whole world of elect mankind (II Cor. 5:21, John 1:29). *His* heart, it is a perfect heart of perfect love for God, even in the darkest hour of utter desolation on the cross (Matt. 27:46). All who are arrayed in the righteousness of the Lamb have no fear of death or hell (Heb. 2:9-15), and no one in the universe can lay anything to their charge (Rom. 8:33-34).

The pronouncement

In justification, God the Judge pronounces the gracious verdict and it is received by the believer in true faith. No word could be sweeter. “Righteous!” The absolutely perfect righteousness of Christ, namely, His perfect obedience in fulfilling the will of God and suffering the penalty of God’s law, is imputed to the believer (Rom. 4:22-24). On the ground of that perfect righteousness, the believer, who is ungodly in himself, is pronounced righteous. He is free from the curse of the law. He is entitled to everlasting life with God. By faith, the believing, ungodly sinner in the courtroom looks away from himself and all his works that he accounts as dung (Phil. 3:8). By faith, he sees Jesus (Heb. 2:9) and looks only to Jesus, who is not only the Author and Finisher of his faith (Heb. 12:2) but also his righteousness before God (Rom. 3:22). In Jesus, God is able “to present us faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy” (Jude 1:24).

And, now, a question

How could anyone find or dare to attempt to find their justification—which includes the *assurance* of their justification—in their good works, in the worthiness of their faith, in the principle of holiness within their heart, or in anything else in them?

First, to look to our works for justification—which includes the *assurance* of justification—is not only a haughty act of pride, but it is to give to good works a function they do not and cannot have. To make good works any part of the ground upon which we stand for our confidence before God and His law is to heap upon good works an impossible task that those poor works were never designed to accomplish. It is like building a house on a foundation of watermelons instead of rocks. Fruits are good. In salvation also, fruits are good and have many good purposes, but they are not designed to be the ground of or part of what supports our assurance that we are faultless in the presence of God’s glory.

Second, should we look to our works for justification—which includes the *assurance* of justification—we look away from Christ, who is the end of the law for righteousness (Rom. 10:4). When we look away from Christ to our works, we do so exactly at that moment when God in the gospel sets forth Christ in all of His matchless beauty as our propitiation and righteousness through faith in His blood (Rom. 3:25-26). How provoking to God when sinners look to establish their own righteousness, not submitting to His (Rom. 10:3).

Third, to look to our works for justification—which includes the *assurance* of our justification—is at best a se-

rious (hopefully ignorant) minimization of, and at worst a deadly and intentional assault upon the glorious reality of justification itself. There is nothing like justification. There is reason that the apostle Paul anathematizes those who pervert this doctrine (Gal. 1:6-9), that the whole sixteenth-century Reformation turned on this doctrine, and that the saints respond with vigorous objections when this doctrine is subverted in the least. Justification, which is the heart of the gospel, is simply astounding! When God justifies me, the ungodly sinner, He declares that I am absolutely perfect before His law so that He finds no fault in me! In justification, it is “as if I never had had nor committed any sin, yea, as if I had fully accomplished all that obedience which Christ has accomplished for me” (Heid. Cat., LD 23, Q&A 60)! Good works can help assure me of my status before God if justification is some measly inconsequential favor, such as God’s pronouncement that I am decent, basically good, or not quite so ungodly. But that is not justification! Justification is God’s legal pronouncement: “As to your legal status, you are perfect—absolutely perfect.” You and I will never come to that most astonishing conclusion of the gospel when we stand exposed before the awesome

and penetrating gaze of the Judge in the courtroom and look at our works, even the very best of our works. Our only assurance of that blessed reality of our justification is found in the Lamb of God.

Fourth, to look to our works for justification—which includes the *assurance* of justification—is to lose assurance. To teach that good works are of no account toward our justification but yet they function to *assure* the believer of his justification is to deny justification exactly where it is most precious. In the hour of temptation, when my standing before God is called into question, how can I boldly say to the accuser of the brethren, “Who shall lay anything to my charge?” when I look to my works? In the hour of temptation, when I frantically look at myself and what is within me in hopes of quieting my raging conscience, I cannot find anything to clear and soothe my conscience, much less, satisfy the God who is greater than my heart and knows all things. My peace is in Christ, the Beloved in whom I am accepted.

Justification is by faith alone.

But does not the Heidelberg Catechism connect assurance and good works in Lord’s Day 32? To that we turn next time.



Go ye into all the world

Rev. Richard Smit, missionary of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America, stationed in Manila, Philippines

The three-self formula and PRCA foreign missions (1)

Among various things one can consider in foreign missions, there is this significant question: “What is the goal of missions?” Many, varied, and sometimes erroneous are the answers to that question in books about missions.

Prof. Robert D. Decker, now emeritus professor of Practical Theology in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary, gave an answer to that question in an article at the conclusion of his thorough series on “Missionary Methods” in the *Standard Bearer* in April 1985. He wrote that “certainly in all mission work the goal must be the gathering of the elect out of the nations into the Body of our Lord Jesus Christ as the Body of Christ comes to manifestation in the church institute.”¹ In the same article, he repeated his answer that “our goal must

be to organize believers and their children into manifestations of the Body of Christ.”²

What then constitutes a newly established gathering of believers and their seed as a church institute? Prof. Decker wrote that “according to Scripture...‘church’ means believers and their children under the three-fold office of Christ.... In such a church is a gathering of believers and their children under the care of Christ through the pastor, elders, and deacons; manifesting the marks of the true church....”³

This echoes the Belgic Confession in Article 30, where it sets forth what constitutes a church institute, which is the goal of missions:

We believe that this true church must be governed by

1 Robert D. Decker, “Missionary Methods (28),” *Standard Bearer*, vol. 61 (April 15, 1985), 327.

2 Decker, “Missionary Methods,” 329.

3 Decker, 328.

that spiritual policy which our Lord hath taught us in His Word; namely, that there must be ministers or pastors to preach the Word of God, and to administer the sacraments; also elders and deacons, who, together with the pastors, form the council of the Church: that by these means the true religion may be preserved, and the true doctrine everywhere propagated, likewise transgressors punished and restrained by spiritual means: also that the poor and distressed may be relieved and comforted, according to their necessities.

In agreement with that goal of missions and with what constitutes the Christian church institute, an experienced Presbyterian missionary, Dr. John M. L. Young, further described the character of that newly formed church institute. He wrote that the goal of missions is “is to establish churches with converts in their communities, organizing them under the oversight of their officers.... The new churches...must grow as self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating indigenous institutions.”⁴ This description of the goal of missions is not unique to Dr. Young, but is one illustration among many of the growing understanding among Reformed and Presbyterian churches through the last century to the present of the “three-self formula” in foreign missions.

This is the same understanding that our PRCA has developed in many decades of foreign mission work, and which our PRCA missionary in the Philippines, Rev. Daniel Kleyn, expressed previously in a series of articles in the *Standard Bearer* about the practical application of the three-self formula. Concerning the goal of foreign missions and the three-self formula, Rev. Kleyn explained that the goal is the

establishing of indigenous churches.... From the very outset, we should strive to lay the groundwork for churches that can be independent and are able to stand alone. In a word, our goal is churches that are self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating.⁵

In response to this, there may be a concern about whether this three-self formula of self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating is actually valid, especially in cross-cultural and cross-economic settings. Is the PRCA in her foreign mission work embracing something just because others with more mission experience have embraced it? Has the PRCA followed this three-self formula in a negative reaction to frustrations or bad experiences in past foreign mission work? Or, is there biblical and confessional warrant to the three-self formula that demands that the PRCA continue to em-

brace it and, accordingly, to conform her mission methods, goals, and labors?

In another series of articles on this important subject of the three-self formula, we will consider first some historical examples of a commitment to this three-self formula in Reformed missions, including the PRCA; second, an explanation of what we have come to understand by the three-self formula; third, an explanation of the biblical and confessional validity of the three-self formula; and, finally, some implications of the three-self formula for the method of mission work and for newly established, indigenous churches and their membership.

The three-self formula came into ecclesiastical discussion and understanding in the Protestant church world in the late 1800s and early 1900s. This was the result of the mission labors of Rufus Anderson, a Congregationalist, and Henry Venn, an Anglican. While church historians do not agree about which one of the two was the first to coin and to teach the three-self formula, they do agree that the two were equally instrumental in bringing this formula into the ecclesiastical consciousness of Protestant churches, para-church foreign mission societies, and missionaries engaged in foreign mission work.

Henry Venn understood the three-self formula as self-governing, self-supporting, and self-extending. Venn, in application of the three self-formula to missions, emphasized that missionaries need to understand that they are temporary, not permanent, workers in their respective fields. Missionaries were encouraged to labor diligently toward the goal of indigenous churches carrying on the work of the church on their own.

Similarly, Rufus Anderson in his book *Foreign Missions: Their Relations and Claims* (1869) emphasized the same three-self formula and its practical implications, except that he used the term “self-propagating” instead of Venn’s “self-extending.”

In support of the pioneering thought of Venn and Anderson, John L. Nevius explained the importance of three-self formula understanding in foreign missions through his book *Planting and Development of Missionary Churches*, which was originally a series of articles in the periodical “Chinese Recorder” in 1885. His book asserted that the principle of the three-self formula must be implemented in missions over against the methods and resulting problems and paternalism that characterized the “old system” of foreign mission work in the 1800s.

Then, Roland Allen, an Anglican missionary in China and in Kenya, wrote his influential books on missions—*Missionary Methods: St. Paul’s or Ours* (1912), *Missionary Principles* (1913), and *The Spontaneous*

4 John M. L. Young, *Missions: The Biblical Aim and Motive*, (Pittsburgh: Crown & Covenant Publications, 2007), 117.

5 Daniel Kleyn, “A Goal in the Philippines: Self-Governing Churches,” *Standard Bearer*, vol. 88 (Nov. 15, 2011), 90.

Expansion of the Church (1927). By these publications he also examined the common methods of foreign missions and concluded that faithful missions needs to embrace the three-self formula for the growth and health of indigenous churches.

While Venn, Anderson, Nevius, and Allen explained and promoted the three-self formula broadly among

all Protestant churches engaged in foreign missions, it appears that Reformed and Presbyterian churches also saw the wisdom of the three-self formula and implemented it in their foreign missions.

In the next article, we will begin to look at a few examples.



All Thy works shall praise Thee

Dr. Brendan Looyenga, Professor of Chemistry and Biochemistry at Calvin College and member of Zion Protestant Reformed Church in Hudsonville, Michigan

Born this way (1) Genetic determinism and moral revolution

“Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.”

Psalm 51:5

The last two decades of social development in western nations has seen an almost incomprehensible shift in moral reasoning that is so vast in its reach that it has been rightly called a “moral revolution.” Rather than a gradual slide in private morality, this revolution has come in the virtual blink of an eye and within plain view. What was once taboo—especially in the sphere of human sexuality—is not only permitted but glorified as an embrace of diversity and a vindication of the vulnerable in our society.

One simple statistic is sufficient to make this point. In 2004, the Pew Research Center—a respected polling institution—reported that roughly 60% of Americans were opposed to gay marriage. In 2019, the same poll showed that opinions had been almost perfectly inverted, with about 60% of Americans now supporting gay marriage.¹ That is a massive shift in public opinion in the space of only fifteen years.

How did this happen? And why did it seem to happen so fast?

As in so many other cases of moral change, there is no one simple answer to either of these questions, and certainly not one that we can adequately demonstrate in the space of three short articles. We can, however, point to and describe the role of one key component in this moral revolution—the field of genetic science. Be-

cause this area of science is at once both commonplace and mysterious to so many people in modern society, its methods and proper use within the Christian worldview are worth discussing in an article aimed at extolling the works of God in His creation. Our genetic composition is indeed a part of who we are as created beings and something that ought to direct our worship to the Creator. The great irony of human depravity, however, is that rather than rightly glorifying the Creator through this knowledge, our society has used the very evidence of His handiwork as a reason to deny His existence and moral authority over the creation (Rom. 1:18-23).

The foundation of genetic science can be most directly traced to the work of a small collection of researchers in the latter half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, starting about the same time that Charles Darwin first proposed his theory of evolution. The work of chemists and biologists during this time demonstrated that the newly discovered substance called DNA—or deoxyribonucleic acid—was the molecular blueprint for living organisms, and that it primarily functions as an information-storing chemical. This work shed important light on the findings of earlier scientists such as Gregor Mendel (the other famous German-speaking monk!), who had demonstrated the patterns by which pea plants transmitted their specific traits from one generation to another. The fields of biochemistry and heredity converged in the discovery of DNA’s structure in 1953, which opened the door to understanding how inheritance works at the molecular and cellular level. The decades of research since then have been largely devoted to two tasks: first, learning how DNA encodes the visible features in living organ-

¹ Pew Research Center, May 2019, “Majority of Public Favors Same-Sex Marriage, But Divisions Persist” (<https://www.pewforum.org/fact-sheet/changing-attitudes-on-gay-marriage/>).

isms; and, second, understanding the complexity and variation in genetic sequences across all living organisms. This includes the genetic variation among different species, but also the difference in DNA sequence within a single species, including humans.

Today we take for granted that most of our visible features are governed by the sequences of DNA that we inherited from our parents. Grade-school age children learn that the brown eyes, attached earlobes, and widow's peak they share with their mother or father were determined by which 'genes' they inherited. Alongside of this we are also aware that certain diseases, such as cancer or Alzheimer's disease, tend to run in families because there is a genetic component to these diseases. This understanding is especially clear in the case of cancer, since we know that exposure to DNA-damaging chemicals puts us at risk for developing the disease. A generation or two ago, most people probably realized that smoking was not great for their health. But today, almost everyone in modern western society knows that there is a significant risk of throat and lung cancer, among other diseases, that results from inhaling the toxic chemicals present in burning tobacco leaves. Many of these toxic chemicals irreparably damage the DNA in throat and lung cells, which subsequently accumulate enough genetic mutations to transform into cancer cells.

The twin concepts mentioned above—that genetics define many of our visible characteristics and that changes to our cellular DNA can cause disease—are the basis for much of our modern understanding of human *identity*. We accept without question that the genes we have inherited from our parents determine much about who we are, including our looks, our risk for disease, and even how we act. Who has not noticed, for instance, that many girls laugh just like their mothers or that many boys seem to have the same sense of humor that their fathers display? In the modern form of thinking it makes logical sense that these patterns of behavior have a genetic basis over which we have absolutely no control. We get the genes that we were given at conception, and that is just the way we are.

While this line of reasoning is certainly correct to a limited extent, there is a significant danger in becoming too comfortable with the idea of '*genetic determinism*,' which is the term that has been assigned to the idea that we are simply a product of our genes. Prior writers in the *Standard Bearer* and elsewhere have correctly pointed out that blind acceptance of genetic determinism played a large part in the early eugenics movement in Europe and the United States, and also provided support for the rac-

ist philosophy of the Third Reich in Germany.² Today, however, we are seeing a new use of this concept to justify sinful behavior, which we are told cannot be helped because it is simply a product of who we are genetically.

The specific aspect of genetic determinism that we are concerned with here is in the realm of human sexual behavior. Like other behaviors, sexual behavior is a complex trait that has a variety of components; these include our emotions (feelings), our cognition (thoughts), and our conscious decision-making process (will). All of these components are inseparably connected to the physical and chemical processes of the brain (neurology) and endocrine system (hormones), which together form the biological basis for human attraction (orientation) and sexual behavior. Despite the apparent confidence with which secular media outlets and popular writers present their opinions, the extent to which genetics shape sexual orientation and behavior is a matter of significant controversy in fields of psychology and neuroscience. In reality, the assertion that variations in human behavior are controlled by genetic differences between individuals has rather limited support from actual scientific studies. We will examine some of this scientific data in the next article, but for now we will simply trace the effect that blindly accepting genetic determinism has had on our culture.

The idea that *orientation* and *behavior* are two distinct aspects of human sexuality arose within the German intellectual tradition during the mid-nineteenth century, which roughly coincides with the rise of rationalism and secularism in academic institutions across continental Europe.³ It was during this time that psychology (which had previously been viewed as a branch of philosophy) was reclassified as a science related to human physiology based largely on the experimental work of Wilhelm Wundt. Wundt's theories laid the groundwork for the next generation of secular psychologists including the famous Sigmund Freud, who proposed a wide variety of

2 Cal Kalsbeek, "Ideas Have Consequences: The Cult of Charles Darwin (3)," *Standard Bearer* (April 15, 2012):163-166. And Siddhartha Mukherjee, *The Gene: An Intimate History* (New York: Scribner, 2016), 64-77; 119-132. The eugenics (Greek for "well born") movement was popularized by British scientist Francis Galton, a cousin of Charles Darwin. This movement argued that human reproduction should be controlled to maximize desirable characteristics and minimize undesirable characteristics in the human population.

3 These distinctions, along with a general defense of homosexuality, are usually attributed to Karl Heinrich Ulrichs (1825-1895). Ulrichs wrote in defense of his own homosexuality under a pseudonym, arguing that same-sex attraction is a natural and biological phenomenon. (K. H. Ulrichs, *The Riddle of Man-Manly Love*, trans. Michael Lombardi-Nash. Prometheus Books, 1994).

theories to explain human behavior in general and sexual behavior in particular. The common thread we trace from these men to our situation today is the separation of human *responsibility* from human *action*.

It has become popular in the field of psychology to make a distinction between sexual *orientation* and *behavior* by suggesting that orientation is something that is essentially programmed, whereas behavior is more of a conscious choice to act upon the emotional attractions.⁴ Whether sexual orientation is a product of environment, development, parenting, or genetics, the basic premise is that humans develop sexual attraction unconsciously and without their own participation. Even more significantly, it is posited that this programming of orientation cannot—and should not—be changed. Blind acceptance of this notion has played a critical role in shaping the misperceptions of sexual behavior that the majority of people now hold in modern developed countries. The central misperception is that because orientation is genetically programmed, no one is responsible for his or her sexual attractions. Again, the mantra: “It’s not my fault. I was born this way.”

The concept of ‘fault’ plays an especially important part in the massive shift in public opinion regarding homosexual behavior. The basic idea is that if ‘fault’ can be removed from a particular action, then it cannot be considered as sin. Furthermore, if fault can instead be assigned to something that is ‘natural’ or apart from the power of an individual to change—such as his or her genetics—then the guilt or accountability for any activities that result from that natural source must necessarily be removed from the individual as well. Such has become the case for homosexuality.

The blatant redefinition of sin to allow for homosexuality is becoming a prevalent error even in the Reformed community.⁵ This error posits that because the New Testament church has been freed from the judicial (that is, civil) and ceremonial laws of the Mosaic law and does not expect the state to enforce the first table of the law, only the second table of the law remains as a binding moral force in society. Because the second table is about sin committed against other people and not God, the functional purpose of the moral law is to respect creatures made in

God’s image. In this perspective, the act of sin is to violate the natural rights and freedom of another person. Or to put it in the negative: no victim, no sin. Assuming this logic is accepted, we can easily see the argument for supporting consensual homosexual relationships bound in marriage. Such relationships are described by mutual affection and may be characterized by monogamous union in which there is no ‘victim.’ This supposedly distinguishes it from pedophilia or other gross sexual deviancy where no consent can be given or monogamy is impossible.

As a justification for this position, the defense of genetic determinism is offered by Christians who support the normalization of homosexuality. Science, they say, demonstrates that homosexual orientation is a biological result of genetics and other external forces over which a believer has no control. We must allow for the variation in genetics among humans, which are simply a “creational variance” rather than a choice.⁶ In this line of reasoning, discriminating against homosexuals for their genetics is akin to racism and sexism. The real sin is in our treatment of people living within God’s good creation who simply differ from heterosexuals because of their genetic makeup and life experiences. Such reasoning, together with the redefinition of sin as victimization, has won the day in nominal Christian circles. When the 2015 Supreme Court decision on gay marriage was handed down (*Obergefell v. Hodges*), it truly represented the majority position in the country.

Ironically, it did not take long after this decision for supporters of LGBTQ rights to begin backing away from the bad science of genetic determinism due to its potential liability for the movement’s real goals.⁷ After all, one cannot have the freedom of choice in sexuality—which was the real goal all along—when constrained by genetic determinism. Concepts such as gender fluidity (woman one day, man the next) and bisexual attraction are somewhat hard to justify if sexual attraction is genetically hardwired into the human brain, but quite easy to accept if the language of “human rights” and “freedom of choice” are invoked. Genetic determinism had served its purpose and could be discarded on the pile of bad ideas in place of something newer, better, and more progressive.

But the damage was done, especially among nominally Christian Americans who had bought into the idea that people with homosexual attractions could not help themselves. They were just born that way.

4 This distinction is used in the current official CRC position on homosexuality (adopted in 2002), which distinguishes between same-sex attraction (“homosexual Christian”) and the practice of homosexual behavior (“homosexuality”). The former is proposed to be related to identity, while the latter is still considered sin. (https://www.crcna.org/sites/default/files/2002_report_care-forhomosexuals.pdf).

5 Gayla R. Postma, “Wolterstorff: Biblical Justice and Same-Sex Marriage,” *The Banner*, October 24, 2016.

6 Gwyneth Findlay, “Wolterstorff says “yes” to same-sex marriage,” *Chimes*, October 22, 2016.

7 Shamus Khan, “Not born this way.” *Aeon*, July 23, 2015 (<https://aeon.co/essays/why-should-gay-rights-depend-on-being-born-this-way>).

Or were they?

In the next article we will examine some of the more recent work on the genetics of sexual behavior and also reexamine the concept of genetic determinism from a theological perspective. We will focus on the biblical

term “flesh” as it relates to the Reformed doctrine of total depravity to understand how our genetics influence our behavior without removing responsibility for the actions we perform.



When thou sittest in thine house

Rev. Arie denHartog, minister emeritus in the Protestant Reformed Churches

COVID-19 and our Father's chastisement

We are living in fearful and unprecedented times. Awful events are taking place in the world in which we live. The things that are happening are like none most of us have ever experienced before. God's judgments are being poured out on an ungodly world. What do these events mean? These things are truly a serious trial for all of us.

COVID-19 is causing great misery and trials for us all. Worldwide deaths from this plague have numbered in the hundreds of thousands. The worldwide impact of these events is shocking. There is great sorrow and anguish in our nation and in the lives of many people personally. Initially, hospitals were full of sick people, so many that in some of them doctors and staff were completely overwhelmed. People were grievously sick with a disease that many were unable to survive. The disease itself is frightening, causing pain and suffering and overwhelming the body. Our body has no natural defenses against it. We are told that death from COVID-19 comes very swiftly, causing respiratory failure and the collapse of the heart. Because of the extremely contagious nature of this disease, loved ones cannot even gather at the bedside when people die. They face the terrors of death alone with little human sympathy.

The world's experts are trying to slow down the devastation of the plague and deliver mankind from its scourge. Every day there is a report of new cases and the tragic toll of the numbers that are dying is noted by the news media. Not even leading scientists and doctors can come up with a cure. For the first time we are hearing about the science of epidemiology and the shocking ways in which plagues spread, as they kill hundreds of thousands, paralyze whole nations, and change the world order. Those dying are mostly the elderly and already feeble. Countries and places in the world where there were already great human tragedies are now ex-

periencing greater misery and anguish. Those who are dying are beloved relatives, leaving families with much sorrows. Young people might imagine themselves to be safe. But also young people, and even children, are dying. What must we say about these fearful things? How can we keep ourselves from depression and despair in the midst of all of these events?

America has for centuries boasted of its great riches, its rapidly increasing knowledge and learning, its scientific achievements, and world-famous hospitals with amazing medical procedures. Suddenly, America is being deeply humbled by the mighty hand of God, by becoming the very epicenter of this pandemic, having more deaths than even underdeveloped countries. We who have been accustomed to live long in such prosperity and have come to expect that there will be a cure for our every bodily ailment are dying by the hundreds of thousands. Not even funerals for the many dead are possible. There is sorrow and despair, even a feeling of hopelessness everywhere. Who would ever have thought that this kind of thing was possible in our modern-day world! When is this all going to be over? How long will it last? When will we ever be able to get back to life as normal?

Many millions have lost their jobs and now have to live on unemployment insurance who never before had to do this. There are dire predictions of economic hardships yet to come that could affect our nations for years into the future. There could even be a depression in our land as bad as ever known in the history of the world. There could be starvation in parts of the world. Most of us will have to be prepared for much less prosperity and riches, ease and pleasure, educational success and achievement in the future.

We as Christians and as Protestant Reformed people must know how to understand this all. We and our

families are affected by this all. Tremendously significant for us is that even the public worship we are so blessed with from week to week was forbidden or severely restricted because of governmental orders. The government is ordering us how we must live and greatly limiting our freedoms. This is going on week after week. Even families were unable to visit with one another. We were told to remain in our homes and avoid any unnecessary trips. Little children are bewildered by it all. How can we explain all these things to them?

The rubric for which I am writing is called “When Thou Sittest in Thine House.” The themes of this rubric over the years address the urgent need for covenant parents to instruct their children in our home. Never before has there been such an urgent need for instruction, guidance, and encouragement from the institution of the family and from our covenant homes. God has in many cases given us a great amount of time to sit with our children in our homes. Fathers are home from work for long periods of time. Married couples have to learn to live as Christians in their marriages and families so as to be examples of faith and godliness to their children.

This is not a time for mere pious platitudes or hypocritical religion. Our own children are afraid, our young people are confused. In the world there is great increase in anxiety and depression. We are told that there is a great increase of suicide, even among young people, who are experiencing hard times in which they cannot have traditional graduation programs and other familiar events, so memorable in their personal lives. Opportunities for taking pictures of our children at important times in their lives will be missed. Sports programs have all but disappeared, which are so popular in our culture. It is likely that for a long time they will not be held. Opportunities for recreation, fun and laughter, vacations and more can no longer be held. Some of us may even have to sell our homes because we can no longer pay the mortgages. We need to instruct our children in the spiritual lessons and perspectives on life this presents to us. We must be sure that they are spiritually strong so they are able to endure these times. We need to be able to encourage our children and give them hope, teaching them the comfort of the great truths of our Christian faith. We have an added, urgent responsibility to instruct our children to be truly spiritually minded in these times.

We need to teach our children to be heavenly minded, calling them away from the covetous, materialism, and secularism of the world in which we live. We need to learn how to comfort our children and what it means to trust in the Lord.

We ought not expect that our children and young people can be rightly instructed in all these things by

our ungodly world and through worldly celebrities or human psychologists. There are many false teachers and deceivers in the world. While humanistic and practical advice is given by the world, and certain laws and rules are followed, this is not good enough for our covenant children. More than ever there is a great urgency for the godly and distinctive instruction of our own dear children in our covenant homes. Are we up to the challenges involved in doing this? Our families are being tried seriously; the bonds that we have together must be deepened, our homes havens of comfort, peace, and joy. We must provide stability for our children and guidance for their future. God has given us the time and opportunity; there is no excuse to say we are too busy for supposedly more important things.

I plan to continue to write on this subject for my contributions in the next few issues. There are many serious questions we are facing. We must teach our children that the COVID-19 pandemic involves the fearful work of God in our times, in our nation, and in our homes and families. The plague that is upon us did not come by mere chance. It did not come from some foreign source. It is not merely a natural phenomenon. God’s fearful hand of judgment is upon this ungodly world. The judgments of God reveal His absolute sovereignty and almighty power. No one shall finally be able to stand before His judgments. God is holy and just in all of His judgments. But God is God, He is indeed a God of all comfort and tender mercy towards His people. In Him is the blessed and sure hope and salvation. Does knowing Him give us the peace and comfort as we endure great trials and hardships in our lives personally? Are our children experiencing our godliness and the steadfastness of faith in their father and mother?

Our very thoughts of who God is and what He is doing in the world are being shaken. Is God truly a God of mercy and will He save us from this great evil that has come upon the world? There are so many questions that arise in our minds. We want to address some of these questions, not only theologically but also spiritually and practically. There is no doubt that God is chastening severely. What is our attitude toward this? Are we ready to endure the chastening of the Lord and submit to its purpose in our lives? Will we by faith benefit from this chastening of our God, so that we continue steadfast in our life in Christ, and faithful to confess His name and glory in Him as the God of our salvation? Have we kept ourselves from the great sin of despising our Father’s good chastisement and hindering His correction in our lives?

In our next articles we shall continue this important subject.



Bring the books...

Mr. Charles Terpstra, member of Faith Protestant Reformed Church in Jenison, Michigan and full-time librarian/registrar/archivist at the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary

The American Puritans, by Dustin Bengtson and Nate Pickowicz. Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2020. Pp xvi + 208. Paperback. \$18.00. Reviewed by Douglas J. Kuiper.

This book is not about Puritan theology but about seventeenth-century American church history. Each chapter sketches the life story of one prominent figure in early American Protestantism. Featured are two colonial governors (William Bradford and John Winthrop), six pastors (John Cotton, Thomas Hooker, Thomas Shepard, John Eliot, Samuel Willard, and Cotton Mather), and the poetess Anne Bradstreet. Anyone of high school age and older who is interested in church history during the American Colonial period will enjoy reading this book. I recommend it for several reasons.

1. It reminds us that the American Puritans were Englishmen who desired reform in all areas—doctrine, church government, and worship. The introduction, “Who Are the American Puritans?” gives an overview of the history of their times, as well as of their “nonconformity” to the hierarchy of the Church of England. Some books and authors use the word “Puritan” pejoratively; this book puts them in a good light.

2. It reminds us that the Puritans came to America because the English government and prominent members of the Church of England had sorely persecuted them in England. Eight of these nine (all except Cotton Mather) were born in England during the reigns of Queen Elizabeth or King James I. These monarchs defended Anglicanism and opposed non-conformity. God used this persecution to bring to America that part of His church that was in England.

3. It alludes to the role of the Netherlands in this history. Because the Netherlands tolerated various religions,

William Bradford and Thomas Hooker moved to the Netherlands for a time. Still persecuted, they finally left for the colonies. Although John Cotton did not move to the Netherlands, he did battle Arminianism’s inroads into England. Remember the time frame: the early 1600s.

4. It underscores the founding of English Puritanism in the colonies. The Dutch Reformed also arrived during this era, but the English Puritans became the more prominent representatives of Calvinistic theology. Notable aspects of Puritan influence include the founding of Harvard College and John Eliot’s mission work to the American Indians.

5. It opens up the struggles that the Puritans faced in the colonies: wars with the Indians (remember King Philip’s War?), the antinomian controversy begun by Anne Hutchinson, the Salem witch trials, the relationship of the Puritans to other religious groups (Roger Williams, for example), and the issue of which form of church government to adopt. In addition, many of these men lost one or more wives and children.

6. It reminds us that the Puritans were sinners saved by grace, in whom sin still manifested itself. The book presents these nine as godly, but it also reveals their warts. At least two of them were geographically separated from their wives for an extended period of time, and of one marriage the writers assert that the two were “unsuited for one another” (36). The lives of God’s saints gives us opportunity to remember that saints always battle against sin in this life, and to examine our own hearts and lives to see if we find these sins in ourselves.



News from our churches

Mr. Perry Van Egdom, member of the Protestant Reformed Church of Doon, Iowa

Trivia question

In what year was the Doon, IA PRC organized and who was its first pastor? Answer in the church profile section of this issue. More trivia next time.

Minister activities

First Edmonton PRC called Rev. N. Langerak. On July 12 he declined this call.

Rev. C. Haak declined the call from Kalamazoo, MI

PRC. They then formed a new trio of Rev. S. Key, R. Kleyn, and Spronk. On July 5 Rev. Spronk received this call.

Rev. R. Kleyn declined the call from Cornerstone PRC.

Unity PRC formed a new trio of Revs. G. Eriks, E. Guichelaar, C. Haak with Rev. Eriks receiving the call. On July 12 he accepted this call.

Grandville, MI PRC has decided to put on hold the calling of a minister-on-loan to Singapore due to the ongoing restrictions there. Their past trio has been dissolved.

Rev. J. Marcus and his family are living in West Michigan as he awaits a call within the PRC.

Rev. M. McGeown is making application to come to the States as he finishes his mission labors in Limerick, Ireland.



Rev. H. Bleyenbergh and his wife entered Canada on July 9 to take up his ministry in Immanuel PRC. After a two-week quarantine, he can be installed.

In the evening of July 3, Rev. Stephan Regnerus was united in marriage to Miss Tori Lynnae Mowery in the Hull, IA PRC with Tori's grandfather, Rev. W. Bruinsma, officiating.

Rev. Bruinsma spoke on Romans 15:6-7 and did so in a personal, grandfatherly way. Attendants consisted of the bride's five brothers and the groom's five sisters. We wish the couple God's blessings in their marriage and life in the Lynden congregation.

Young people's activities

The Young Calvinists will be holding a Virtual Young People's Gathering via Zoom on August 8 from 11 A.M.-5 P.M. As a small replacement for convention, this will feature a lecture on heaven by Prof. B. Gritters, mixer games, discussion groups and more! There will also be an outdoor Singspiration on Sunday, August 9 at 8 P.M. Follow the blog (youngcalvinists.org), Facebook, or Instagram for more upcoming details.

Singles conference

Save the date for a Singles' Conference! Lord willing, there will be another three-day event in the Grand Rapids area, September 25-27, for singles ages 25+. The weekend will include two speeches, a discussion group, and several social activities. Plan to attend and be encouraged and edified by other like-minded singles! Stay tuned for more details.

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

Church profile—Doon, IA PRC

The following was written by Doon member Vi DeBoer

Nestled quietly in the very northwest corner of the state of Iowa, which is in the north central part of the United States, is the small village of Doon. Not much to take note of by human standards, but home for 93 years to a small congregation of believers. The Doon Protestant Reformed Church was born out of the Christian Reformed Churches in the area in 1926. The Lord used the weak means of preaching by various Protestant Christian Reformed ministers to bring about the formation of the Doon Protestant Reformed Church. The organizational meeting was chaired by Rev. B. J. Danhof of the neighboring Hull congregation on March 17, 1926. The congregation numbered a mere fifty-two souls and organized with two elders and two deacons as their consistory. In November of 1926 the congregation took on the official name of Doon Protestant Reformed Church. The members were mostly farming families.

The Lord of the harvest sent Doon their first pastor when Rev. J. De Jong was installed on October 2, 1929. Three long years of vacancy finally ended! The congregation purchased a church building on upper Main

Street from a disbanded Baptist group. The building required continued stoking of the furnace to keep the parishioners' feet from freezing. The building was remodeled installing individual padded theater seats and improved heating in 1946, and this building served as their meeting place until 1975.

The years of the Great Depression hit the entire country and the Doon PRC members were not spared. Rev. G. Lubbers often had to take his "salary" in the form of meat, eggs, chickens, or fruit from the family gardens. To feed the furnace at church, the men of the congregation chopped wood from the nearby river's edge since coal was too costly.

Rev. H.C. Hoeksema (who would later be professor in the Protestant Reformed seminary) was Doon's pastor in the tumultuous years of 1949-1955. The conditional covenant issue devastated the numbers of the Protestant Reformed congregations throughout the country. Doon was one of the few congregations where the majority of the congregation stayed with the Protestant Reformed view denying the conditional covenant.

A young pastor, Rev. G. VanBaren, served the congre-



gation from 1956-1962, coming to Iowa saying he hoped to see “a good old-fashioned Iowa blizzard.” He got his wish. The winter of 1962 was so severe that many members were not able to attend church for weeks.

Rev. H. Hanko (later to be professor) served the congregation two short years (1963-1965). His “live-ly” preaching could be heard through the open church windows by the people having picnics in the park across the street.

Rev. R. Decker (later to be professor) came to Doon fresh out of seminary and saw the opening of the Northwest Iowa Protestant Reformed School during his pastorate. This school was the result of many years of school society work and the blessing of the Lord on that labor. The doors opened for grades 1-8 in the fall of 1967 with Mr. Fred Hanko, Sr. teaching the upper grades and Mrs. Jeanette Van Egdom teaching the lower. The students were driven in by their parents from the Hull and Doon PRC congregations. The school building has been added to and remodeled several times, but still functions as the school building today with 22 students.

After Rev. Decker left for the South Holland PRC, Doon was vacant two years.

In 1971, Rev. R. Moore became the ninth pastor of the Doon PRC. During this time the new church building was built in the northeast corner of town on a lot where the Roman Catholic Church once stood. The building still serves the needs of the congregation today with minimal changes being made.

The parsonage next door was finished while Rev. M. Kamps was the pastor (1976-1986).

Rev. R. Dykstra (later to be professor) was installed in Doon in 1986 and served the congregation until 1995. These years were the years of the “80s farm crisis” and several families moved from Iowa for new employment.

Rev. R. Smit took the call to Doon and was ordained in 1996. Rev. and his wife Tricia arrived in Doon with no children, but left in 2004 with five children to labor in Lacombe, Canada.

Rev. D. Overway left the PRC congregation in New Jersey to take up his labors in Doon in 2005.

Our present pastor, Rev. J. Engelsma arrived in 2014 and was ordained in the Doon PRC.

The Doon PRC congregation has had the privilege of overseeing mission work in Singapore with Rev. A. denHartog laboring as missionary and presently in the Philippines where there are three pastors and families laboring: Rev. R. Smit, Rev. D. Kleyn, and Rev. D. Holstege. The Lord has seen fit to bless these missionary labors so that the PRC now enjoy sister-church relationships with the denominations in both countries. To God be the glory!

At its formation, the Doon congregation was mainly comprised of farmers who worked with their families on the fertile Iowa soil. Today the congregation has very few farmers. Although corn and soybean field dominate the landscape as in years past, most of the families work in factories or are managers of agricultural-related industries. The younger generation is finding more and more positions in technology. The congregation enjoys peace and unity among its 210 souls. The Lord has blessed the congregation with several godly young couples and covenant births in the past few years so there are many little children once again in our midst.

Doon PRC has been blessed with faithful preaching of the Word in its history. Truly and thankfully we give all praise to God for the faithful servants He has provided, and we pray for that continued provision for our congregation and for all God’s people scattered throughout the earth.

Announcements

Classis East

Classis East will meet in regular session on Wednesday, September 9, 2020, at 8:00 A.M., in the Byron Center Protestant Reformed Church, Wyoming, Michigan. Material for this session must be in the hands of the stated clerk no later than August 10, 2019.

Rev. C. Spronk, Stated Clerk

RFPA annual meeting

RFPA Annual Meeting will be held at 7:30 P.M., on September 24, 2020, in Grace PRC. Prof. David Engelsma will speak on the topic: “Trusting in God’s Covenant Promises in the End Times.”

Announcements continued

Resolution of sympathy

The Council of Hope Protestant Reformed Church, Walker, Michigan, extends its sympathy to fellow officebearer Steve Langerak and his wife Brenda, as well as Barb Klamer and family in the death of their father-in-law, father and husband **Vern Klamer**. II Timothy 4: 7-8, "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing."

Pastor Jonathan Mahtani, Pres.
David Moelker, Clerk

Resolution of sympathy

The Council and congregation of Edgerton PRC express our Christian sympathy to Dave Buys, whose mother, **Verna Buys**, died on June 1 at the age of 94. May our covenant God comfort Dave with these words from Psalm 116:15: "Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints."

Rev. Matt DeBoer, President
Al Brummel, Clerk

Classis West

Classis West of the Protestant Reformed Churches will meet in Edgerton PRC on Wednesday, September 23, 2020, at 8:30 A.M., the Lord willing. All material for the agenda is to be in the hands of the stated clerk 30 days before classis convenes, that is, by August 24, 2019. All delegates in need of lodging or transportation from the airport should notify the clerk of Edgerton's consistory.

Rev. J. Engelsma, Stated Clerk

Wedding anniversary

On August 19, 2020, the Lord willing, our parents, **Rev. Arie and Sherry denHartog** will celebrate 50 years of marriage. We praise God for their godly marriage and for their example of faithfulness to Christ and His church. May God's continued blessing be upon their lives together. "Know therefore that the Lord thy God, he is God, the faithful God, which keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generation" (Deuteronomy 7:9).

Sara and Jeff Potjer
Jonathan and Ronda denHartog
Lisa and Russ Potjer
Amy and Darin Gritters

Tim and Carisa denHartog
Matt and Joy denHartog
Laura and Tony VanDonselaar
34 grandchildren

Hudsonville, Michigan

Wedding anniversary

With gratitude to our Lord and Savior, we offer congratulations to our parents and grandparents, **Rev. Thomas and Janice Miersma** on their 50th wedding anniversary the twenty-second day of August, 2020. We are thankful for their diligence in raising their family in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, as well as for their many years of labor in God's church and kingdom.

Christopher Miersma
Jonathan and Elizabeth Miersma
Gideon, Caleb, Abigail, Josiah, Deborah
Matthew Miersma

Ecclesiastes 9:9: "Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of the life of thy vanity, which he hath given thee under the sun, all the days of thy vanity: for that is thy portion in this life, and in thy labour which thou takest under the sun."

Gibbons, Alberta, Canada

Reformed Witness Hour

reformedwitnesshour.org

Rev. A. Spriensma

- August 2—"I Am Your God"
Genesis 17:7
- August 9—"Covenant Obligations, Not Conditions"
Genesis 17
- August 16—"The Kingdom of David's Seed Established Forever"
II Samuel 7:12, 13
- August 23—"The Unbreakable Covenant"
Psalm 89:3
- August 30—"Walking With God"
Amos 3:3