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I believe in the God and Father
of providence

Rev. Dennis Lee

Reformed theology's commentary
on the pandemic of 2020

Prof. Barrett Gritters

Mind

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Metal ores and the
purification process

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The lingering smoke

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Meditation

Rev. Dennis Lee, pastor of Bethel Protestant Reformed Church in Roselle, Illinois

I believe in the God and Father of providence

Q. 27. What dost thou mean by the providence of God?

A. The almighty and everywhere present power of God, whereby, as it were by His hand, He upholds and governs heaven, earth, and all creatures; so that herbs and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, meat and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, yea, and all things come, not by chance, but by His fatherly hand.

Q. 28. What advantage is it to us to know that God has created, and by His providence doth still uphold all things?

A. That we may be patient in adversity; thankful in prosperity; and that in all things which may hereafter befall us, we place our firm trust in our faithful God and Father, that nothing shall separate us from His love; since all creatures are so in His hand, that without His will they cannot so much as move.

Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 10.

Up! Up into heaven! That is the certain direction and sure destination of every believer, of everyone who has been bought by the precious blood of Christ! However, the reality of the child of God on his earthly pilgrimage is such that he does, at times, feel down—very down.

Dear reader, does that not describe your experience from time to time, and especially during a time when you find yourself in the midst of a global pandemic? Perhaps you feel down because you are isolated and lonely. You feel down because you are suffering from the economic fallout and from the threat of a highly infectious and deadly virus. You feel down because you are fearful of the future. Most of all, you feel down because you are unable to join the multitude that kept holy day and that had gone into the house of God with the voice of joy and praise (cf. Ps. 42:4). You feel down. You need to be lifted up! You need peace, comfort, and hope to fill your heart and mind and flood your soul! How are you going to experience this? Scripture's answer is that our thoughts and attention be directed away from our earthly circumstances and towards God. "The LORD is my light and my salvation!" (Ps. 27:1). "God is our refuge and strength!" (Ps. 46:1). "O Zion...behold

your God!" (Is. 40:9). Following the wise and faithful counsel of Scripture, the authors of the Heidelberg Catechism point us to our heavenly Father and God in Lord's Day 10, and call us to confess and cry out anew, "I believe in the God and Father of providence!"

The confession points us to God without delay. God! The only living and true God! The all-glorious, triune God! The great and almighty God who made heaven and earth, who calls us to lift up our heads and to behold Him and His greatness (cf. Is. 40:9)! Behold Him who measured the waters in the hollow of His hand, who comprehended the dust of the earth in a measure, and before whom the nations are as a drop of a bucket (cf. Is. 40:13, 15). Behold your incomparable God (cf. Is. 40:18)! What an infinitely great and mighty God He is!

A most astounding truth it is that this great God is also our heavenly Father for Christ's sake! No, He is not Father of all men. But He is the heavenly Father of all for whom Christ shed His precious blood to redeem and save. Our adoption papers into the heavenly family of God have been signed by Christ's blood, and we have been sealed with His Spirit (cf. Eph. 1:13)! It is by that same Spirit that we, the children of the living God, fly to and cry out to Him, "Abba Father." (Rom. 8:15). No one may say that but His child. You say that, don't you, dear reader?

Through the Word of God and the indwelling Spirit of Christ operating within us, we experience anew the wonderful truth that He is the God and Father of providence. The truth of providence consists of two parts. First, God our Father upholds all things by His power. This means that there is no creature or life that does not depend completely on Him and His power. Apart from Him and His power all creaturely life would cease to be. For in Him we live, and move, and have our being (cf. Acts 17:28)! Second, our Father in heaven governs and directs all things according to His eternal counsel or plan, a Christ-centered plan that is purposed for His glory and our good. All things that come to pass in time and history are according to His plan. This means that

there truly are no accidents in our lives. This means that nothing frustrates the execution of His plan. The heathen rage and the rulers and kings of the earth plot and purpose to rebel against Him, but He shall have them in derision (cf. Ps. 2:1-4). Our God who is in the heavens does His good pleasure (cf. Ps. 115:3). Always! Without fail! He is absolutely sovereign! And all things work together for good to all who love Him, for the called according to His purpose (cf. Rom. 8:28)! And if that be the case, child of God, you should know that all things are *for* you and *not against* you.

You know that, don't you? You who know that will cry out by the gift of faith wrought within you, "I believe!" "I believe!" in days of sorrow and sadness. "I believe!" in days of trial and trouble. "I believe!" in days of earthly joy and prosperity. "I believe in the God and Father of providence!"

The ground of such a confession and cry is unshakable.

For it is the invincible power of God, a power fitly spoken of by our Catechism instructors as *the almighty and everywhere present power of God*. What an awesome power this is! This is the awesome power that was demonstrated at creation by the great Creator God. "By the word of the LORD were the heavens made; and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth. Let all the earth fear the LORD...for he spake and it was done; he commanded, and it stood fast" (Ps. 33:6-9). Even more, this is the invincible power that was supremely demonstrated by God when He raised up Jesus Christ, His only-begotten Son and our Savior, from the dead and set Him at His own right hand in heavenly places (cf. Eph. 1:19-20).

This same unshakable ground is also described with biblical, pastoral warmth by the use of a figure: Father's *hand*. Behold this hand of your heavenly Father! This is a hand of almighty firmness that will never let us go! In Father's hand we are safe and secure! No one shall be able to pluck us out of His hand (cf. John 10:28). Further, this is a hand that holds and is in control of everything! Nothing eludes its grasp! Not one molecule! Not a single virus! By this hand, all things come! All things come to us not by chance, but by His fatherly hand! Finally, this is a hand that works and directs all

things for our good. It makes all evil He sends us turn out to our advantage and makes all things subservient to our salvation (cf. Lord's Days 1 and 9)! All things work together for our good (cf. Rom. 8:28)!

Are you weary of all the burdens and troubles of life that have come your way? God's counsel to you is that you humble yourself under this mighty hand of His, and cast all your care upon Him, for He cares for you (cf. I Pet. 5:6-7). In Him who alone is the great God of our salvation and of providence do we have a faithful Father who cares for us at every point, at every turn, and in every strait of our earthly pilgrimage!

And so, we say, "What a comfort!" What a comfort it is to say from within the depths of our hearts, "I believe in the God and Father of providence!"

This comfort speaks to our present circumstances. For those who are enjoying happy times, this comfort we enjoy is such that we are *thankful in prosperity*.

And for the vast majority of us, the comfort we feel in our hearts during these uncertain times of a global pandemic is such that we are *patient in adversity*. Though circumstances may be very difficult for us, believing in the almighty, great God and Father of providence, we do not despair. Rather, we enjoy precious peace and wonderful comfort. So, rest in Him. Wait on Him. Do so "forever trusting in [the Lord],

tak[ing] heed to do His will; so shalt thou dwell within the land; and He thy needs shall fill" (Psalter 100:1).

But there is more. The comfort we enjoy by faith is also such that with respect to our future, we *place our firm trust in our faithful God and Father, that nothing shall separate us from His love since all creatures are so in His hand, that without His will they cannot so much as move*.

What comfort it is to know that all of our earthly lives fall under the loving care of our God and Father of providence!

Praise God from whom all blessings flow!

And for the vast majority of us, the comfort we feel in our hearts during these uncertain times of a global pandemic is such that we are "patient in adversity." Though circumstances may be very difficult for us, believing in the almighty, great God and Father of providence, we do not despair. Rather, we enjoy precious peace and wonderful comfort.



Editorial

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

Reformed theology's commentary on the pandemic of 2020

In the almost 100 years of the PRCA's existence we have endured trials, but none quite like the present pandemic and the consequences. For nine weeks now (May 15), churches have been unable to assemble for public worship. The initial shock has worn off, giving way to discouragement for some, frustration and sometimes anger for others. The pandemic has forced consistories to face difficult questions, not the least of which is whether this is a question of obeying God ("Assemble for worship on my Lord's Day") rather than man ("Stay home!"). God leads us on very unusual paths.

We may be very thankful for the care of our pastors, elders, and deacons, who have in these most difficult times given careful thought to our spiritual wellbeing. They encourage us by phone calls, visit the sick and troubled saints, determine how to meet as councils and consistories to do their work, and even engage in the essential work of discipline, which is trying in the best of times. We may be especially thankful for the elders' calls to the minister to 'preach the word' in this 'season' (II Tim. 4:2). Connecting to the Internet's livestream on the Sabbath is not the kind of assembly we want, but it is a kind of assembly. It's not the fellowship we desire, but it is a kind of fellowship. It's not the communication of the gospel that we would describe as the regular preaching of the word, but when it is commissioned and overseen by the elders, it is the administration of the Word that has been a powerful means of grace. Thankful as we may be for this, only the most deep-seated introvert is not grieved by it all.

What is written about the pandemic in the secular press these days is a mix of helpful comment and some very noxious propaganda. What is written in the Christian press is sometimes more helpful and is what this editorial wishes to be. Here, I propose that Reformed believers can look at the present crisis in the light of Reformed theology and take lessons from all six 'chapters' of Reformed doctrine. Let the breadth of our Reformed faith form our thinking about, and govern our reaction to, the present distresses.

Theology (the doctrine of God): sovereignty and justice

First, God is *sovereign* over His creation and His providential power brought about this pandemic. All things come by God's fatherly hand, including diseases (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 10). It was not by chance that the new virus began where and when it did and spread as it did, so that the whole world comes almost to a halt, with economies ready to deflate, even collapse. Our God has "done his will...among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can say unto him, What doest thou?" (Dan. 4:35), a testimony that unbelieving Nebuchadnezzar knew to make. God even controls the hearts of men, of kings and princes, even when they "act unjustly" as Guido deBrès confessed when he was wickedly imprisoned (Belgic Confession, Art. 12). If deBrès could confess that regarding unjust imprisonment, we may confess that God turns governor's hearts as He turns the rivers in their courses (Prov. 21:1), even when they decree: "No public gatherings!"

It is grievous to hear Christians deny the sovereign control of God over the pandemic. As one young writer recently pointed out on the Young Calvinists blog (<https://youngcalvinists.org>), world-renown theologian, N.T. Wright, mocks the confession that Reformed believers make of the sovereign God who does His pleasure (Is. 46:10) in the pandemic. Wright belittles "some Christians" who "like to think of God as above all that...in charge of everything.... That's not the picture we get in the Bible." Rev. Wright does not believe the Scriptures, for "our God is in the heavens, he hath done whatsoever he hath pleased." Wright cannot subscribe to our Belgic Confession that "nothing happens in this world without his [God's] appointment" (Art. 12). Guilty as he is of the "damnable error of the Epicureans, who say that God regards nothing, but leaves all things to chance," Wright does not have the "unspeakable consolation" that we Reformed Christians have. We confess that this sovereign God watches over us "with a paternal care."

So are we patient in today's adversity? If we, Reformed believers, confess that in adversity the doctrine of prov-

idence makes us patient (Lord's Day 10), are we being patient these days? Are we praying for patience? Are we "letting patience having her perfect work" (James 1:4)?

Second, God is the *righteous judge*, bringing judgment upon the world's unbelief and other sins. If nominal Christians have difficulty testifying God's sovereign control over the virus and its repercussions, they will find it impossible to confess that the troubles are God's *judgments* upon the wicked world. But the Reformed faith confesses that God is "terribly displeased with" man's disobedience and rebellion, and punishes them "temporally and eternally" (Heidelberg Catechism, LD 4). Pandemics and foolish rulers are some of them.

Unprotected by the blood of Christ, unbelievers *know* these troubles are God's heavy hand of judgment against them, and precursors of worse to come in hell. They know this, for "the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness" (Rom. 1:18). But protected as we are by the blood of our Redeemer, we see these troubles as the correction of a benevolent Father. We are sure that viruses and governors are not against us, but for us.

Are we humbled by, and submitting to, these corrections? Pandemics force us to stand before the judgment seat of God. Do we see ourselves as *deserving* the judgments of God? Do we see ourselves as guilty or innocent? If we are innocent in Christ, are we confessing that all things are ours, because we are Christ's (I Cor. 3:21-23)? Why the complaints?

Anthropology (the doctrine of man): frail and fallen

It is not difficult in these days when a microorganism can bring a strong man to the intensive care unit and perhaps to the morgue to hear that humans are frail, like the grass, quickly and easily cut down. "In the morning it flourisheth, and groweth up; in the evening it is cut down, and withereth" (Ps. 90:6). "All flesh *is* grass.... The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the LORD bloweth upon it: surely the people *is* grass" (Is. 40:6-8). If our sovereign God can bring the human race to its knees with a little virus, surely man is frail. Our God is great.

How we frail creatures of the dust, even Christians at times, like to boast of strength, of advancements, of the wisdom of humans! And how God, so effortlessly, humbles sinful pride.

None of these troubles would be among us except for our fall into sin and the resulting curse that still blankets creation. Reformed believers admit that "by sin [man] separated himself from God, who was his true

life, having corrupted his whole nature; whereby he made himself liable to *corporal* [in the body]...death" (Belgic Confession, Art. 14). The suffering and death we endure today are the result of our fall in our first father, Adam. In him, we are to blame. "...in Adam all die" (I Cor. 15:22).

So our hope is not in medicine, which can at best prolong our life a few extra years, but in the forgiveness of sins and the gracious redemption of our bodies. United to Jesus Christ, these weak, dying bodies will be made like unto the glorious body of our Lord Jesus Christ. This corruption must put on incorruption and this mortal, immortality. Death will be swallowed up in victory! (I Cor. 15:53, 54).

Are we duly humbled by our own frailty, our own sinfulness, our own undeservedness? Do we so love our Lord Jesus that we want to be like Him in His glorified state?

Soteriology (the doctrine of salvation): sanctification and hope

As are all afflictions, this present affliction is for our profit. By our present suffering, God works grace in us. For "though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day" (II Cor. 4:16). This pandemic will last "but for a moment" (thus, we do not "faint" when burdens pile up), and while it does, it works in us "a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory."

So the Reformed faith confesses in Lord's Day 9, that God "will make whatever evils He sends upon me, in this valley of tears, turn out to my advantage; for He is able to do it, being Almighty God, and willing, being a faithful Father." At every baptism, Reformed believers confess in the Form for Baptism that our Father "averts all evil or turns it to our profit."

One great profit is God's sanctification of us. More and more we loosen our grip on earthly things and cling to God and heavenly things, think less of this life and more of the life to come, hate the sins that plague church and world and love truth and right. Less and less we have aspirations for this side of the grave; more and more we hope for heaven. In the body we groan, waiting for our final adoption, the redemption of our bodies. "We believe...the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting!"

Are you living in that hope? Have I expressed that hope to others, to help them?

"Merciful God, quicken our Christian hope and purify us through these troubles!"

Ecclesiology (the doctrine of the church)

What is worship? and what is the relationship between the church and the state? are two crucial questions the people of God have been asking recently.

Regarding worship, the churches have learned that, although we have pretty definite opinions, we have not clearly codified what specifically constitutes the public worship God requires. An elder contacted me recently about this question and I responded by saying that the churches have never formally declared either all of the elements that are required in every worship service, or what conditions must be met for a service to be “official” worship. The Heidelberg Catechism indicates that on the Sabbath we have prayer, singing, preaching, sacraments and offerings; but nowhere are mandated the benedictions, doxologies, Apostles’ Creed or reading of the law.¹ As to the conditions to make worship official, we have assumed that they would include 1) it is a public gathering of believers; 2) it is a call to worship by the elders; 3) there is oversight of these elders; 4) with a minister who preaches the gospel at the commission of the elders. Neither have Reformed documents made this clear. But we have been pondering these questions, and that’s for our profit.

Even harder is the question whether the church, as an institution independent of the civil government, must comply with a government’s orders not to assemble, when the reason for the order is public safety, the physical protection of the citizens. In the relation of church to the state, the Reformed faith gives good instruction. On the one hand, when the government commands the church to disobey God, she must obey God rather than man (Acts 5:29). The Church Order is clear: the church “may never suffer the royal government of Christ over His church to be in the least infringed upon” by the civil authorities. On the other hand, the Reformed faith has a long history of distinguishing herself from the Anabaptists and revolutionaries, confessing that Reformed believers honor the king (I Pet. 2:17), are subject to the “higher powers” that are “ordained of God” (Rom. 13:1, 2), and pray for them (I Tim. 2:2). We submit

even to ungodly authorities, patiently bearing with their weaknesses, because it pleases God to govern us by their hand (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 39). The Belgic Confession’s last article says, “Wherefore we detest the error of the Anabaptists and other seditious people, and in general all those who reject the higher powers and magistrates...and confound that decency and good order which God hath established among men.”

How to apply these principles is very difficult when the government forbids public gatherings *for the sake of public health*. No one may lightly disobey the government’s orders when they profess to be acting for the public good. So we have been praying for wisdom for our consistories, and we submit to their rule, too, for “it pleases God to govern us by their hand.” If our consistories make judgments to assemble, *in the face of apparent orders to the contrary*, may they make very clear to their members why they have so decided. Is it 1)

Even harder is the question whether the church, as an institution independent of the civil government, must comply with a government’s orders not to assemble, when the reason for the order is public safety, the physical protection of the citizens. In the relation of church to the state, the Reformed faith gives good instruction.

that in fact the law does *not* forbid churches to assemble? or, 2) that the law does not *clearly* forbid churches to assemble, even if it may appear to do so? or, 3) that the law *does* forbid our assemblies, but we must disobey a law that forbids worship? In this case, may consistories be very clear in their instructions to their members why, when the government

forbids assemblies *for public protection*, they must still disobey. The people of God need these good explanations, with careful distinctions and, likely, an appeal to what God’s people have done in such circumstances in the past. This is especially important so that the people of God learn how to behave in the days ahead, when antichristian powers will oppress the church severely.

Which is the subject of eschatology. But space requires an end at this point. I write in the middle of May 2020. The next editorial will appear, God willing, in July. Perhaps at that point, matters will be clearer for the church. God permitting, I will write about *Eschatology* (the doctrine of the end times—the Antichrist) and *Christology* (the wonderful reality of our compassionate Christ on His throne).

¹ Until 2001, the PRC’s Church Order did not even use the expression “official worship service.” And one of the formal decisions our synod made was that the reading of the law and reciting the creed were not “essential.”



Search the Scriptures

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

Remembering our Creator

Ecclesiastes 12:1-8

Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them (Eccl. 12:1).

The preceding verses contained an exhortation to those in the days of youth. Our text continues that thought and completes it. The calling is to “remember,” not in the sense of looking at what is past, which belongs to the elderly, but in the sense of holding in mind. Hold in mind, as constantly before your mind, thy Creator. Do so now, in the present, and daily, while you are yet young. In all the youthful activity of life and joy as it unfolds before you, consider Him who made you and in whose creation you walk and whose works your eyes behold. Do so knowing that “for all these things God will bring thee into judgment. Therefore remove sorrow from thy heart, and put away evil from thy flesh: for childhood and youth are vanity” (Eccl. 11:9b, 10).

Childhood and youth are vanity, a fleeting transitory state or phase of life ‘under the sun.’ They do not endure. Days will come that are evil, full of trial, affliction, and chastening from the Lord. Thus Moses prays in Psalm 90: “Make us glad according to the days wherein thou hast afflicted us, and the years wherein we have seen evil” (Ps. 90:15).

The days come when the joys of life fade, because of the infirmities of age and its increasing limitations. What follows in the text is the contrast between youth and old age, which further explains, “when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them.” The purpose is to underscore the reason for the exhortation given, “Rejoice, O young man in thy youth.” Old age comes with its limitations but also a looking back at that which is past, a remembrance of days gone by. Remembering our Creator in the days of our youth keeps one from sins of youth, which are a burden in old age. The psalmist prays: “Remember not the sins of my youth, nor my transgressions: according to thy mercy remember thou me for thy goodness’ sake, O LORD” (Ps. 25:7).

In harmony with the viewpoint of Ecclesiastes, the

text focuses on the physical infirmities of age, when one says of his days, “I have no pleasure in them.” The delights and physical joys of seeing and hearing, the activities of taste and sound fade away.

While the sun, or the light, or the moon, or the stars be not darkened, nor the clouds return after the rain (Eccl. 12:2).

In youth the sight of the eyes is clear and bright; with aging comes a decline in vision. The purpose in this description is not to introduce some hidden symbolic figures, but to describe the infirmities of age in contrast to youth. The time comes when vision is blurred and dimmed. Cataracts, for example, the clouding of vision, dim the light, and in Solomon’s days some surgical relief was not to be found. The decline does not stand still. Clouds return after the rain; so it is to one whose vision is clouded, and to one who goes through successive trials like rain. The point is that these infirmities do not yet touch the young, but they follow in the course of life. The result is old age.

In the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble, and strong men shall bow themselves, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those that look out of the windows be darkened (Eccl. 12:3).

The picture, while figurative, is not difficult. The body wears out, arms and legs lose their strength; they tremble and bow. The strength of youth is gone and that which was once strong bows and becomes weak. The grinders, that is, the teeth, cease; they fall out or have to be removed because of decay. The windows, the eyes, become darkened, so that one slowly becomes blind. We have canes, walkers, hip-replacement surgery, dental care, dentures, glasses, eye surgery, and other means to compensate for the decline of old age, though it is only an easing of the decline, not a cure. Solomon had more limited means in his time.

Similarly:

And the doors shall be shut in the streets, when the

sound of the grinding is low, and he shall rise up at the voice of the voice of the bird, and all the daughters of musick shall be brought low (Eccl. 12:4).

The picture in the verse is essentially one of old age hearing loss. The doors of the ears are shut; they cannot any longer hear the sound of the street or from the kitchen the sound of grinding the flour for a meal. Conversation, therefore, becomes difficult. Yet, the higher pitch sound of a bird is still heard and awakens one or, at the same time, causes one to rise early as sleep departs. The pleasure of rest in sleep diminishes as a result. Music and its enjoyment likewise depart because the hearing can no longer distinguish its sound and melody. Solomon had both singers and instruments in his court; it was part of the splendor of his kingdom (Eccl. 2:8). Yet in old age he tells us indirectly, “I have no pleasure in them.” This affects the joy of life and fellowship with others at the same time; it isolates the elderly.

Also when they shall be afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way, and the almond tree shall flourish, and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail: because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets (Eccl. 12:5).

With the infirmities of age and a loss of strength come also fears of heights and of walking, unknown when one is young. But one’s grip, balance, strength to stand and walk are not the same. The limbs are stiff, the strength and balance are not there. One totters and needs support.

The almond tree blooms white or a pinkish white. Here, the flourishing of the tree aptly represents the hair turning white with age, the hoary head. The figure of the grasshopper or locust, is probably to be understood of the insect when it crawls along, rather than hops or flies. Its creeping motion represents, then, the burden of movement in old age. The picture is that of the fading of the powers of life and the slow decay of the body that age brings. “And desire shall fail.” The same decline is found internally in wanting and willing, the natural desires for the things of this life fade.

The cause is set before us: this decline is unto death and the grave. The grave and death, the long or eternal home awaits and claims the life of a man or a woman putting to an end his/her place in this world. We die, and the mourners go about in the street; we would say the funeral procession goes by. Such is the lot of all men under the sun.

Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be

broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern. Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it (Eccl. 12: 6, 7).

The pictures or series of them in verse six are intended to present a pattern of death as a sudden separation: the cord is loosed, and the bowl, or possibly that of a lamp, falls to the ground and is broken. The bowl hangs by a silver chain that slips off and the bowl falls, spilling its contents, and perhaps the light it once gave is extinguished. It is broken, damaged. The precious silver and gold are loosed. So also is the life of man, precious in our days ‘under the sun,’ but suddenly cut off by death, and the beauty and glory depart.

The pitcher and the wheel present a similar idea. The pitcher of clay is fragile. It is suddenly shattered to pieces at the fountain and can hold no more water. Its place and use—its life—is done. The wheel that drew water out of the cistern collapses. Worn out and weakened, it falls and is broken; it will draw water no more.

Death comes suddenly, irreversibly, as far as this world is concerned, and takes us from this life. The point is too, remember thy Creator now, especially in thy youth or ever, or before, this comes, this death and separation from the things of this life ‘under the sun.’ For “God will bring thee into judgment” (Eccl. 11:9).

Death itself is the judgment of God upon sin; old age is the expression of the working of God’s curse upon fallen man. “For dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return” (Gen 3:19). Man is dust; such is the meaning of the name Adam or man. From the dust he was formed from the earth and at death the dust shall return to the earth as it was (Eccl. 12:7). The word for dust used here is slightly different from the word used in Genesis. It is a synonym that emphasizes the earthy character of that dust as a clod of earth. Man is of the earth, earthy. He has no power over death, nor can he by his activity that is earthly find an answer to it. The spirit or breath of life that God breathed in him also returns to God who gave it. Thus the Word of God returns to the basic observation of the book:

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

Vanity, a transitory thing that does not abide or endure, is empty in itself, a passing moment ‘under the sun.’ Such ‘under the sun’ is the life of man, and man himself dies. Man has no power to retain the spirit. Only in God, the Creator who in Christ is God our Redeemer, is there an answer. That requires the work of grace from above. It cannot arise from man who is of the earth below and returns to his earth.



A word fitly spoken

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Mind

In days of pestilence and its resulting trouble, warranted is the apostle's admonition that we "be not soon shaken in mind" (II Thess. 2:2). When tempted to broadcast our opinions on said pestilence and its effects, the caution of Proverbs 29:11 is also in order: "A fool uttereth all his mind: but a wise man keepeth it in till afterwards." Fear and turmoil will fill the soul of the man whose nose is fixed to his newsfeed. "Perfect peace" is the blessing for the man, woman, or child "whose mind is stayed on thee" (Is. 26:3).

The mind is a complex feature of human nature. Next to the heart, soul, and strength, the distinguishing characteristic of the mind is the capacity to think. When a man is possessed by a legion of devils, in his unstable mind he will sit among the tombs crying and cutting himself with stones (Mark 5:5). When the same man is delivered by Jesus, he will be found at the feet of the Lord "sitting, and clothed, and in his right mind" (Mark 5:15). The noble Bereans used their minds to search the Scriptures daily to see whether the things Paul taught were so. But what made them more noble than the riotous Thessalonians is "they received the word with all readiness of mind" (Acts 17:11).

We make a mistake if we conflate the mind with the brain, even though the two are mysteriously related like the soul to the body. Where the *brain* has no more capacity for right or wrong than a stone, with *all his mind* a man is called to love the Lord his God (Matt. 22:37). Where the *brain* may be treated with medicine and surgery, the *mind* can only be healed by the covenant God who promises, "I will put my laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts" (Heb. 8:10). It is *only* when thus renewed that the mind will begin to serve the law of God (Rom. 7:25). But we ought not discount the potency of the spiritual mind, for not in vain is the believer admonished, "be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Rom. 12:2).

After what pattern is the spiritual mind renewed? After the mind of the Lord, of course! Not even a prophet of Moses' stature (Num. 16:28), much less a false prophet like Balaam, may "go beyond the commandment of the LORD, to do either good or bad of

[his] own mind" (Num. 24:13). It was unspeakable wickedness when Jerusalem sent her sons through the fires of human sacrifice, about which Jehovah said, "I commanded not, nor spake it, neither came it into my mind" (Jer. 19:5). So full of wrath was Jehovah in those days He declared, "Though Moses and Samuel stood before me, yet my mind could not be toward this people" (Jer. 15:1). Hopeless, it seemed, for had God not once promised from the mouth of that very same Samuel, "I will raise me up a faithful priest, that shall do according to that which is...in my mind" (I Sam. 2:35)? That priest would also be a king, like David, in whose mind it was to build a house to the name of Jehovah his God (I Chron. 22:7).

But what *sort* of mind would this priest-king have? Would it be a mind hardened in pride like King Nebuchadnezzar who boasted of his golden city (Dan. 5:20)? Would it be a mind vainly puffed up after the rudiments of the world and the ordinances of men (Col. 2:18)? A mind that seeks after earthly things (Phil. 3:19)? A mind of the flesh (Rom. 8:5)?

On the contrary, it is *this* mind: that, though He "thought it not robbery to be equal with God," He "took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross" (Phil. 2:6-8). His was a mind of willing suffering, so much so that He cried out with the psalmist, "I am forgotten as a dead man out of mind..." (Ps. 31:12). His was the mind of the elect of God, which more than bowels of mercies, kindness, meekness, and longsuffering includes "humbleness of mind" (Col. 3:18). The mind we are describing, of course, is *the mind of Christ Jesus*, on account of which mind "God also hath highly exalted him" (Phil. 2:9). By this mind the sovereign God accomplishes His loving purpose toward all His elect people! No wonder the Scriptures burst out in praise, "Who hath known the mind of the Lord? Or who hath been his counselor?" (Rom. 11:34).

It is therefore on solid *gospel* grounds that the apostle exhorts all Christians, "let this mind be *in you*"

(Phil. 2:5). And how shall this mind be in you? When “in lowliness of mind...each esteem(s) other better than themselves” (Phil. 2:3). When, following the example of Paul, you are found “serving the Lord with all humility of mind, and with many tears” (Acts 20:19). When such humility characterizes your mind, more and more in the church we shall “be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind” (Phil. 2:2). After all, to be *of one mind* is the great goal of all teaching concerning the mind of Christ, which is why the church is repeatedly exhorted to “be of one mind” (II Cor. 13:11), “be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment” (I Cor. 1:10), “be of the same mind one toward another” (Rom. 12:16), and “be ye all of one mind” (I Pet. 3:8). Yes, when it comes to the adiaphora of Christian liberty, each must be “fully persuaded in his own mind” (Rom. 14:5). But when it comes to gospel truth and love for the brother, “with one mind and one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 15:6).

What a contrast with the kings of the world who also

“have one mind, and shall give their power and strength unto the beast” (Rev. 17:13)! And yet so far is their mind from the mind of Christ that it is a “reprobate mind,” whereby they do “not like to retain God in their knowledge” (Rom. 1:28). Even if such a one brings a sacrifice, it is only ever with a “wicked mind,” and is thus an abomination to the Lord (Prov. 21:27). For those with such a carnal mind, which exhibits neither unity with Christ nor with His people but rather “enmity against God,” there is only death (Rom. 8:6, 7).

So, people of God, do not live as children of wrath as you did before, when in times past you fulfilled “the desires of the flesh and of the mind” (Eph. 2:3). Do not mind “high things” or be “wise in your own conceits” (Rom. 12:16). Neither be of a “doubtful mind” concerning the care God will provide for you in unsettling times for the sake of Christ His Son (Luke 12:29). Rather, remembering that it is of the LORD’s mercies we are not consumed, and that His mercies are new every morning, say with Jeremiah, “*This* I recall to my mind, therefore have I hope” (Lam. 3:21).



Believing and confessing

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Of free will, and thus of human powers (Second Helvetic Confession, 9b)

Previous article in this series: April 15, 2020, p. 327.

Man Is Not Capable of Good Per Se

In regard to goodness and virtue man’s reason does not judge rightly of itself concerning divine things. For the evangelical and apostolic Scripture requires regeneration of whoever among us wishes to be saved. Hence our first birth from Adam contributes nothing to our salvation. Paul says: “The unspiritual man does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God” (I Cor. 2:14). And in another place he denies that we of ourselves are capable of thinking anything good (II Cor. 3:5). Now it is known that the mind or intellect is the guide of the will, and when the guide is blind, it is obvious how far the will reaches. Wherefore, man not yet regenerate has no free will for good, no strength to perform what is good. The Lord says in the Gospel: “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin” (John 8:34). And the apostle Paul says: “The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law, indeed it cannot” (Rom. 8:7). Yet in regard to earthly things, fallen man is not entirely lacking in understanding.

In chapter 9 of the Second Helvetic Confession, Heinrich Bullinger sets forth the Reformation’s rejection of free will. In doing so, he adds his voice to that of Martin Luther and John Calvin, as well as to other confessions in the Reformed creedal tradition. The Reformed faith rejected root and branch the false teaching of free will,

which was defended by the Roman Catholic Church and its theologians, most notably Desiderius Erasmus. Behind Rome’s teaching of the meritorious value of human works was the teaching that the natural man, with some divine assistance, was capable of that which was good—truly good in the sight of God. Rome based

this error on the teaching of free will. Rome taught that man in himself, by virtue of his own free will, is at the very least capable of desiring and choosing that which is good. More than that, he can do that which is truly good—good in the sight of God. This false doctrine, which stood at the foundation of the whole superstructure of Roman Catholicism, was unanimously rejected by the Reformers.

In this paragraph and in those that follow, the SHC strikes the sharpest of contrasts. On the one hand, the confession speaks of “our first birth from Adam” and that of which “man not yet regenerate” is capable according to his natural birth. On the other hand, the confession contrasts our natural birth with the new birth, or “regeneration.” Some ten times in this and the following paragraphs of chapter 9, the SHC refers to regeneration, insisting on the necessity of regeneration if man is to desire and do that which is good in the eyes of God. This paragraph of chapter 9 echoes the teaching of the Heidelberg Catechism in Lord’s Day 3, Q&A 8: “Are we then so corrupt that we are wholly incapable of doing any good, and inclined to all wickedness? Indeed, we are, except we are regenerated by the Spirit of God.” Regeneration is necessary, absolutely necessary. Apart from regeneration, man cannot do that which is truly good.

In this paragraph, Bullinger insists that “the evangelical and apostolic Scripture requires regeneration,” since “our first birth from Adam contributes nothing to our salvation.” Hence, “man not yet regenerated has no free will for good, no strength to perform what is good.” From a spiritual point of view, man’s will is not free, but bound. Over against the heresy of free will, the SHC insists on the biblical truth of the bondage of the will of natural man.

In his rejection of free will, Bullinger and the other Reformers were reflecting the teaching of Scripture. The rejection of free will is not only the necessary implication of the Bible’s teaching concerning the Fall and its consequences, although it certainly is. But the rejection of free will is grounded in the express teaching of sacred Scripture. Scripture is the authority, the only authority in the church. That conviction of the Reformers was no more clearly exhibited than in their rejection of free will. In this third paragraph of chapter 9, Bullinger appeals to four passages of Scripture as the basis for his rejection of free will: I Corinthians 2:14; II Corinthians 3:5; John 8:34; and Romans 8:7. The collective testimony of these four passages of Scripture is not only that the natural man *does not* do that which is right and pleasing to God. They teach that the natural man *cannot* do that which is right and good. The issue concerns

man’s *ability*. In himself, apart from the regenerating grace of God, “man is not capable of good *per se*,” as the title of this paragraph states.

Understanding of the Arts

For God in his mercy has permitted the powers of the intellect to remain, though differing greatly from what was in man before the fall. God commands us to cultivate our natural talents, and meanwhile adds both gifts and success. And it is obvious that we make no progress in all the arts without God’s blessing. In any case, Scripture refers all the arts to God; and, indeed, the heathen trace the origin of the arts to the gods who invented them.

Frequently throughout history, the proponents of free will, rather than submit to the testimony of Scripture, appeal to extra-biblical “evidence” for the goodness of natural man. By extension they apply that goodness to include the will of fallen man. One of the main extra-biblical proofs is appeal to the products of culture. The monuments of culture, they argue, prove that the natural man is capable of good—much good. The fourth paragraph of chapter 9 anticipates the appeal to culture as an indication that fallen man is able to produce that which is truly good, good in the eyes of God, apart from grace. The paragraph speaks of “the powers of intellect” that fallen man possesses. It further refers to “natural talents” that fallen man possesses, to which God “adds both gifts and success.” It alleges “progress in all the arts [with] God’s blessing.” And it “refers all the arts to God,” adding that even “the heathen trace the origin of the arts to the gods who invented them.”

Bullinger’s discussion of the arts and culture helps to qualify what the Reformed mean and what they do not mean by their denial of the freedom of the will of the natural man. When the Reformers insisted on the total depravity of fallen man, they were denying that after the Fall man possesses any spiritual goodness, any spiritual life, and any capacity to please God. They did not deny that fallen man remained a man. They taught, on the contrary, that he was as fully man after the Fall as he was prior to it. He did not become a beast or a demon, but he continued to possess everything that belonged to his humanity. To be sure, the Fall impacted even man’s natural and intellectual abilities. Even in these respects, he was not the man he had been prior to the Fall. Nevertheless, he remained a man, a rational, moral, thinking, and willing creature—the highest of all the creatures God had made.

This explains the accomplishments in the arts and the development of culture. The sciences, literature,

music, architecture, painting, sculpting, crafts of all sorts, inventions, learning, advances in the area of medicine, engineering, and technology are all due to the abilities that remained in man even after his fall into sin. Man's capacity for cultural development after the Fall is indicated by what we read of the sons of wicked Lamech in Genesis 4:19-24: Jabel the herdsman, Jubal the musician, and Tubal-Cain the artificer in metals.

After the Fall man retained his natural capacities. Only now, in his fallen state, all that man produces, all his inventions, all his cultural advances are placed in the service of sin. Culture is driven by the goal of the glory of man and the exaltation of the human race. The very fact that Scripture records that the great cultural advances took place in the generations of godless Cain is indicative of this fact. Fallen man retains his natural capacities, but his use of them is not driven by the glory of his Creator God. Rather, his abilities, whether intellectual, physical, or creative, are pressed into the service of man. Ultimately, they are pressed into the service of the kingdom of antichrist.

In the fourth paragraph of chapter 9 of the SHC, Bullinger speaks of man's retention of his powers of intellect as due to "God in his mercy." He also speaks of progress in the arts as something that could not have taken place "without God's blessing." We ought rightly to fault Bullinger for using language that is not biblically precise. He was not the only Reformer who was guilty of this. Calvin, too, at times spoke of God's gifts to natural man as due to His "general grace." Although not biblically precise language, neither Calvin nor Bullinger intended to give support to the erroneous teaching of common grace that arose much later in the history of the Reformed churches. This was not at all the Reformers' intent as they sought to account for the good gifts that God gives even to ungodly men.

It is worth noting that Bullinger calls upon Reformed Christians to develop the talents that God has given them: "God commands us to cultivate our natural talents, and meanwhile adds both gifts and success." Implied is the truth that each of us has been given certain talents. Everyone of us is called to "cultivate" the talents that God has given to us. At the same time, God promises to crown the use of our talents with His blessing.

Of What Kind Are the Powers of the Regenerate, and in What Way Their Wills Are Free

Finally, we must see whether the regenerate have free wills, and to what extent. In regeneration the understanding is illumined by the Holy Spirit in order that it may understand both the mysteries and the will of God. And the will itself is not only changed

by the Spirit, but it is equipped with faculties so that it wills and is able to do the good of its own accord (Rom. 8:1 ff.). Unless we grant this, we will deny Christian liberty and introduce a legal bondage. But the prophet has God saying: "I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts" (Jer. 31:33; Ezek. 36:26 ff.). The Lord also says in the Gospel: "If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36). Paul also writes to the Philippians: "It has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him, but also suffer for his sake" (Phil. 1:29). Again: "I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (v. 6). Also: "God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (ch. 2:13).

The first paragraph of chapter 9 of the SHC spoke of "a threefold condition or state of man." The first state of man was his state by virtue of his good creation by God. The second state of man was his state after his fall into sin. These first two states have been treated in the opening paragraphs of chapter 9. With the fifth paragraph, Bullinger comes to the third "condition or state of man." The third state of man is his state after grace—after the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. Before regeneration the will of man is enslaved to sin. It is a bound, not a free will. In regeneration "the will itself is not only changed by the Spirit, but it is also equipped with faculties so that it wills and is able to do the good of its own accord." The result of regeneration is the setting free of that which was bound. That which was enslaved to sin and Satan is now liberated so that "it wills and is able to do the good."

The regenerated child of God has the freedom of his will restored. By virtue of regeneration he again desires that which is good. As regenerated, he wants to please God. Out of the new life he chooses that which is right. This is the fruit of regeneration. At the same time, since this is the fruit of regeneration, this is how we may know that we are regenerated. The child of God wonders about this sometime. Am I a regenerated child of God? Does the Holy Spirit dwell in me? Do I possess the new life of Christ? The answer to these questions may be found in the answer to other questions: Do I want to do that which is right? Do I want to please God? Do I want to live a life of obedience to God's commandments? If you desire to do that which is right, that which pleases God and that which He commands, be assured that you are a regenerated child of God. The regenerating Spirit of Jesus Christ has liberated that which was bound. You are no longer the slave of

sin, but the willing servant of Christ. By the Spirit, God works in us both to will and to do His good pleasure, as Paul teaches in Philippians 2:13.

This is true freedom! True freedom is not to live as we please, but to live as God pleases. True freedom is not to do what we want, but to do what He commands. True freedom is not to live a reckless, abandoned life, fulfilling every lust of the flesh. But true freedom is to live to the glory of His grace in obedience to the law of God.

At the same time, this is also the blessed and fulfilled life. That is not the attitude of the world. The world glamorizes a life of sin and debauchery, the life of doing as we please. If it feels good, do it. No matter what the law of God says, divorce your wife and marry that other woman with whom you have fallen in love. No matter that God's Word condemns drunkenness and drug addiction, so long as you do not harm anyone, drink yourself drunk and escape into the world of those who are drug addicted. No matter that the will of God calls us to live morally pure lives, whether as singles or as married persons, indulge yourself in pornography. No matter that God commands that male and female should be joined in marriage, if you are attracted to someone of the same sex, do not deny who and what you are. If you are in love, who can condemn true love?

But it is the lie of the devil that they who live contrary to God's will enjoy happiness. True happiness is experienced only by those who conform their wills to the will of God. "Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. But his delight is in the law of the LORD; and in his law doth he meditate day and night" (Psalm 1:1, 2). All who choose sin, foolishly forfeit true and lasting joy. Real joy is experienced only by those who "delight in the law of the LORD."

Although the fruit of regeneration is that our enslaved wills are set free, so long as we are in this life we are not perfectly free. The fruit of regeneration is that God sweetly inclines our will so that we will His will. Nevertheless, so long as we remain in this sin-cursed world, and so long as the old man of sin remains in us, we will never perfectly will the will of God. Although chapter 9 of the SHC speaks of three states or conditions of man, there is in reality a fourth state. That fourth state is the state of man in glory. Only in glory will we perfectly will the will of God. Then we will not be able to will that which is contrary to God's will. And then, at last, we will enjoy the true freedom of our will.



I believe

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How do we know the Bible is the Word of God? (5) The scope of the whole

Previous article in this series: February 15, 2020, p. 227.

Introduction

Picture a husband locked out of his home. He calls to his wife to open the door. She responds, "How do I know it's not an intruder pretending to be my husband?" What will show her that the person is in fact her husband? First, it will be the *way* he says what he says, the tone of his voice, his way of speaking. Second, it will be the *content* of what he says to her, things that perhaps only her husband would say.

In a similar way the Scriptures are self-authenticating. They show that they are the voice of God by virtue of the *way* they speak and by virtue of *what* they say.

Just like the wife, the church recognizes this is the voice of her husband.

In this series of articles, we first examined two *ways* in which God speaks in Scripture that reveal this book can only be from Him. We saw that in the course of revealing Himself in Scripture God repeatedly declares things about the future that then come to pass. We recognize this as the voice of an omniscient God, for whom the end is as the beginning. We saw, too, that in the course of revealing Himself, God brings into unity such an amount of diversity, that it can only be explained by divine origin. This is a fingerprint of the God who is

Himself a diversity of persons in one being, and who in omnipotence has orchestrated a book reflecting His own unity in diversity. These two examples are part of the *way* God speaks in Scripture showing it is His voice.

In our previous article, we began looking at the *content* of the Bible, *what* the Bible says, as an indication that its origin could only be from God. God is described in the Bible as uniquely excellent and powerful. If He is speaking in Scripture, we would expect His voice to be likewise excellent and powerful. We saw last time that indeed it is.

In this article, we round off our brief examination of *what* God says in Scripture by seeing that the whole purpose of the book is to display the glory of God. This too is a powerful proof that the Bible is from Him.

Calvin and the glory of God

As we have with each article to this point, we take our lead once more from John Calvin. Calvin regarded the glory of God known in Scripture as the chief way God makes known to us the Bible is from Him. “We believe, neither by our own, nor by anyone else’s judgment that Scripture is from God; but above human judgment we affirm with utter certainty, just as if [through it] we were gazing on the *majesty* of God Himself, that it has flowed to us from the very mouth of God by the use of men”¹ (emphasis added). By virtue of the fact that Scripture’s chief purpose is to open a window through which we gaze upon a glorious God, we can only conclude that the true and living God is speaking to us in these words.

Turretin, following Calvin, makes this one of the great evidences that Scripture is from God: “The Bible also proves itself divine...from the marks which God has impressed upon the scriptures and which furnish indubitable proof of divinity...with regard to the end [goal]: the direction of all things to the glory of God alone.”² Similarly, the Westminster Confession of Faith puts this purpose of Scripture forward as one of the great proofs of the divine origin of Scripture: “We may be moved and induced...to an high and reverent esteem of the Holy Scripture [by]... *the scope of the whole, which is to give all glory to God.*”³

Everything Scripture reveals is for this purpose: that we might behold the glory of God. For example,

it reveals predestination ultimately so that we might behold God’s glory (Eph. 1:5-6; Rom. 9:22). It tells us God has established His covenant and also keeps that covenant that His glory might be displayed (Jer. 4:21). Scripture reveals God as the God of creation that we might know His glory (Is. 43:6-7; Ps 19:1). Scripture reveals our salvation unto the end that God’s glory might be known (Is. 48:9-11; Ps. 25:11). Our life of God-worked obedience is for the purpose of God’s glory being seen by others (Matt. 5:16; I Pet. 2:12; 4:11; I Cor. 10:31). Scripture says we are brought to heaven in order that we might behold God’s glory (John 17:24). Indeed, Scripture tells us God’s glory will lighten all the new heavens and new earth that we might see it and by it see everything else rightly (Rev. 21:23). Finally, Scripture reveals to us that all things—all things revealed in the Word and all things that happen in the world—are for the manifestation of His glory (Rom. 11:36).

Glory to God as evidence of Scripture’s origin

How exactly does this show that the Scriptures are from God? In three ways. First, because God is revealed as so glorious on the pages of Scripture, it is fitting that the same Scriptures also reveal that all things serve to manifest that glory.

Second, because as we see the creation around us, we are forced to conclude that whoever made all things must be glorious with at least the same glory He has revealed of Himself in creation. The Scriptures alone reveal such a God.

Romans 1:18-21 make clear that in the creation we see in a limited way revelation of God Himself. Specifically, we see his “eternal power and Godhead.” We see He is *eternal*, for His creation that is in time and space must be distinct from Him. We see His *power*, in that such a creation requires a being with astounding power to create it. We see His *Godhead* (divinity) in the fact that only God could be eternal and have this much power. Romans 1:18 also says we see He is a God of just *wrath* through creation, for that “wrath is revealed against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men” in the curse upon the world. Furthermore, the Scriptures state that we see God’s *goodness* in His provision for His creation (Acts 14:16-17; Ps. 104). In Psalm 104:24 we are told we see His *wisdom* in what He created and in His sustenance of His creation. In addition, in the fact that marriage is a creation ordinance and relationship is woven into all His creation, we see He is a God of *fellowship* (Gen. 1:16-18; 2:24).

1 Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.7.5.

2 Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elentic Theology*, vol. 1, George Giger, tr., James T. Dennison, ed. (Phillipburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992), 63-64.

3 Westminster Confession of Faith, 1.5. See also Richard Muller *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 274, and Herman Bavinck *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, 346-349.

All men see these things.⁴ Yet, the gods of the heathen revealed in their supposed holy books have no glory that accords with what we see revealed of God in creation. For example, the idol god of Islam spoken of in the Quran is one-dimensional. Allah has no glory that matches what is revealed of God in creation. Only the God revealed in Scripture has a glory that matches and then far exceeds the glory revealed in creation.

Third, there is evidence of the Bible's divine origin here because no sinful man or collection of sinful men would ever produce a book for the purpose of making known *God's* glory. Romans 1 informs us that men by nature suppress the truth of God that they see in creation and twist the truth concerning God into an image more appealing to them (Rom. 1:18; 21-23). They want nothing to do with that glory when they see it. They want to erase it for the ease of their own conscience. Every man is turned inward upon himself in sin. Man seeks his own glory. This is confirmed by the display all men put on in their deeds and their writings (including their "holy" books). In fact, even the holiest of *God's people* have a self-seeking nature remaining powerfully in them. So that, you see, if the forty human instruments alone, though *regenerated*, wrote the sixty-six books of the Bible, *apart from* the inspiration of the Spirit, there is no way the scope of the whole of this book would be the glory of God. Perhaps they would have arrived at it here and there, but never would it have been the purpose of the whole.

Neither is there any way that *un*-inspired men would have uncovered that, when man sees God in all His glory, bows to His glory, and seeks His glory in heart, mind, soul, and strength, he finds ultimate peace and joy and satisfaction. Uninspired men would never have discovered that our hearts are restless until they rest in seeing and seeking the glory of God. Never would it have occurred to self-seeking men that only in the way of giving up the pursuit of the glory of self

and giving oneself over to the glory of God will true happiness come. All this could only be revealed by the true God.

The glory of God and the covenant

The Scriptures are the unfolding of God's covenant. Given what we have said in this article, that means the purpose of God's covenant, too, is ultimately the display of His glory. And this is not opposed to God's purpose in the covenant of bringing His people into His fellowship. He has tied the two together. He has created us as the kind of beings who can only find true joy and peace in seeing and seeking His glory. And yet one cannot desire that glory except new life is in him. This new life is the life of Christ Himself. A life (because it's His) that seeks God and His glory as Christ Himself does (John 12:28). It is a life (because it's His) that

knows the highest experience for man is to seek and find God in His glory. And it is a life (because it's His) that knows the highest sight and experience of that glory is in a relationship of fellowship and friendship with this God. All His attributes and all His works come home to us in this bond of intimacy in which we know His glory *relationally*.

In this relationship we know Him, yes, as the One who is "in heaven," but this One we know in heaven is "our Father." To know that the One who is so pure

He *must* cast me into hell for eternity for one sin against Him is yet the God who has taken my sin and borne it away that I might behold His glory while in relationship with Him is the highest life. And, in fact, there is no way that a creature can see or seek or ascribe more glory to Him than in such a relationship.

Having planted new life within, God uses the Word, which by the Spirit powerfully reveals all of this to heart and mind, for the purpose of bringing us consciously into that life, with the combined effect of the revelation of the glory of His own name and our eternal satisfaction.

This new life is the life of Christ Himself. A life (because it's His) that seeks God and His glory as Christ Himself does (John 12:28). It is a life (because it's His) that knows the highest experience for man is to seek and find God in His glory. And it is a life (because it's His) that knows the highest sight and experience of that glory is in a relationship of fellowship and friendship with this God. All His attributes and all His works come home to us in this bond of intimacy in which we know His glory relationally.

⁴ Apart from the regenerating work of the Spirit all men suppress what they see and worship the creature instead, but all men see these things about the true God in creation.



Go ye into all the world

Rev. Wilbur Bruinsma, pastor of the Protestant Reformed Church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Protestant Reformed missions Missions threatened (1947-1953)—1 Years of trial

The minutes of the Mission Committee (MC) from 1947 through 1949 do not reveal the unrest that was developing in the Protestant Reformed Churches at that time. But there it was. There were various reasons for this unrest, but in the late 1940s much of it centered in a Dutch theologian by the name of Dr. Klaas Schilder. We took note in a previous article that Dr. Schilder made a visit to the United States in 1939. Already then he had become well known to the pastors and members of the PRC and the Christian Reformed Church (CRC). He gave lectures, preached, and even was instrumental in organizing a meeting of Protestant Reformed and Christian Reformed pastors in an attempt to discuss a possible reunion of these two denominations.

Klaas Schilder was born in 1890 and, with his parents, belonged to the national church of the Netherlands. While he was yet a child, his parents left the Hervormde Kerk and joined themselves to the Reformed Churches (Gereformeerde Kerken) of the Netherlands (GKN). In 1934 he was elected to the chair of Professor of Systematic Theology in the Theological University of the GKN in Kampen. Earlier, in 1920 Schilder was appointed co-editor of the periodical *De Reformatie* (*The Reformation*). Later, in 1935, he was to become the sole editor of this publication. This may not seem all that important to PRC missions at this point, but we must understand the close ties that the members of the PRC had with many in the Netherlands then. Gertrude Hoeksema comments on this in her history of the PRC:

During the decade of the thirties, the members of the Protestant Reformed Churches were still Netherlands-orientated. Many of these were first-generation immigrants, who were also leaders in the denomination. Because almost all of the members of the Protestant Reformed Churches at that time were of Dutch ancestry and had carried their ecclesiastical backgrounds with them across the ocean, they still had an interest and concern for the Reformed churches in their homeland across the sea.¹

Because this was true, people both in the Reformed churches in the Netherlands and in North America were “in the know” with what was transpiring in each other’s denominations. Information was constantly exchanged in the Reformed periodicals of that day. In fact, after 1939 Schilder used *De Reformatie* to voice his views regarding the error of common grace as developed in the CRC. By condemning this error Schilder immediately endeared himself to many in the PRC—including Rev. Herman Hoeksema.

Schilder also strongly opposed Abraham Kuyper’s view of presupposed regeneration, a view commonly accepted by a large share of the members and theologians in the GKN. This view taught that since the sacrament of baptism is a means of grace, God uses it to strengthen the faith of those to whom it is administered. This means that when children of the covenant are baptized, the church must presuppose faith in them if this sacrament is to be of any value as a means of grace. The regeneration of children born to believing parents, therefore, is to be assumed until which time our children may prove differently. The sacrament of baptism actually confers on that child baptized a certain baptismal grace. Schilder could not agree with this position of Kuyper. He used his influence as a professor in Kampen and his editorials in *De Reformatie* to argue against this highly favored position of Kuyper in the GKN.

Schilder maintained that, at the time of baptism, the children of believers received the promise of God *objectively*. If later in life they choose to believe, they receive those promises *subjectively*. In other words, each child of the church when baptized is *objectively* made a partaker of God’s covenant blessings, and it becomes his/hers *subjectively* on the condition that he/she believes. God’s relationship of fellowship that each baptized child is given by God to enjoy is realized later only when he or she accepts the promise and agrees to the covenant God offers to them.

The conditional covenant taught by Schilder was the threat that now confronted the PRC in their mission work. This transpired through a number of different events.

¹ Gertrude Hoeksema, *A Watered Garden: A Brief History of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America*, (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1992), 102.

First of all, the threat to PRC missions became a reality by means of the formation of the Liberated Churches in the Netherlands. Schilder had been a bold voice against the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands during World War II. For that reason, early on in the war he was imprisoned for a short time. Though released from prison for a few months, the threat of another imprisonment forced him into a long period of hiding. While he was in hiding, the synod of the GKN met in 1943 and officially adopted Kuyper's view of presupposed regeneration. Though hidden, Schilder made it publicly known to his large following that he was in sharp disagreement with this decision of synod. For that reason, without his presence, the synod of the GKN in March of 1944 suspended him from the office of professor at Kampen Theological School and as minister emeritus of the church in Delftshaven on the grounds of public schism. He was given several months before the GKN deposed him from office on August 5, 1944.

Schilder's deposition from the GKN resulted in the immediate formation of another denomination, which now called themselves the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands Liberated (LC). By the close of 1946 there were 216 Liberated churches in the Netherlands served by 152 ministers. The total members stood at 77,303—a sizeable denomination, at that!² This is the first event that would affect the mission work of the PRC.

The second event was the mass emigration of people from the Netherlands to Canada and the United States during the late 1940s and early 1950s. Gertrude Hoeksema comments:

The problems and results of this schism in The Netherlands were transported into the various Reformed Churches in America through the great post-war influx. Netherlands by the thousands emigrated in the late '40s and during the '50s. These immigrants came in great numbers both to Canada and the United States; and it was through this massive immigration that the Protestant Reformed Churches began to have close contact especially with members of the Liberated Churches of The Netherlands.³

The Dutch people of Reformed conviction had to find church homes in the U.S. and Canada once they had moved. The denomination of churches in which they would settle would depend in large part on the advice given them from their church leaders in the Netherlands. Reformed churches in the North America could stand to grow by hundreds if not thousands of members

by this influx of Reformed (conditional covenant) believers. Where would they find their church home?

The third event that threatened PRC missions was the visit of Schilder to the U.S. in the Fall of 1947. The PRC synod of 1947 gave Schilder the right to preach in our churches during his visit to our country.⁴ Schilder took full advantage of doing this. He preached in many of our churches both in the East as well as the West, lectured to large crowds, and spoke at several conferences. He also stayed in the homes of many of our ministers and, because of his pleasant personality, became friends with many of them. In his visits with the ministers he had opportunity to defend his position of a conditional covenant over against Hoeksema's position of an unconditional covenant that God establishes only with His elect people in Christ, including only the elect children of believers. As a result of this visit, many of our church leaders together with members of their churches were persuaded to follow Schilder in his error.

Though the differences between Schilder's and Hoeksema's views of God's covenant became sharply defined with this visit of Schilder to America, for some reason a sharp break between the PRC and the LC did not take place at that time. They did not part ways immediately, as should have been done. Perhaps this was true because Hoeksema and Schilder had developed a friendship with each other despite their differences. Perhaps it was because Schilder was so well liked among the ministers and members of our churches. Perhaps it was because, as one of our ministers who stood diametrically opposed to Schilder's view of the covenant nevertheless expressed in the *Standard Bearer* after the conferences held with Schilder,

However, we agree with Prof. Schilder, and also our Editor of the *Standard Bearer* has stressed this conviction, that we ought to become sister-churches, we ought to have ecclesiastical correspondence. Strictly speaking, there is no Reformed Covenant view. That is, there is not one Covenant view, be it Kuyperian, Heynsian, Schilderian or Hoeksemanian which is confessedly [confessionally—WGB] Reformed. There is for that reason room for friendly debate and exchange of ideas.⁵

Probably it was for all the above reasons. I believe there was truly a desire in 1947 on the part of all, with but a few exceptions, that there could be some kind of relationship with each other as denominations.

As was mentioned, the minutes of the MC make no mention of all this in the years between 1946 and early 1949. In fact, very little of the controversy that was

2 Rudolph Van Reest, *Schilder's Struggle for the Unity of the Church*, Theodore Plantinga, tr. (Inheritance Publications, Alberta, Canada, 1990), 344.

3 G. Hoeksema, *A Watered Garden*, 139, 140.

4 *Acts of Synod of the Protestant Reformed Churches* 1947, Arts. 75, 54.

5 Gerrit Vos, *Standard Bearer*, vol. 24, "The Schilder Conference," 101.

hotly waged in the PRC is reflected in the minutes of the MC, though there were several men on the committee who agreed with Schilder's error of the conditional covenant. Even though this was true, the controversy was brought to its head by the suggestion or request of the MC to the Synod of 1950. This request, however, will wait for a future article.

There was a precursor to this controversy that also originated with the MC. The Synod of 1947 decided in favor of calling two missionaries "to labor together in the work of home missions."⁶ By the end of the year two missionaries, Revs. Ed Knott and Wally Hofman were in place and laboring. Their first place of labor was Byron Center, Michigan. By March of 1948 these men concluded their work, for the most part, in Byron Center.

Now a new place of labor had to be determined by the MC and First PRC of Grand Rapids, the calling church. There were a few interested families in Lynden, Washington that had requested help, but the MC and First PRC for some reason balked at sending their missionaries to labor in this area. Perhaps the reason was that of the increased interest being shown in the PRC by the immigrants living in Ontario, Canada. It is difficult to determine, of course, but the minutes of the MC

do indicate a certain excitement over a possible mission work in Canada. Investigation of a possible work in Lynden was scant in comparison to the number of delegations sent to Canada. Since Schilder's visit in 1947, possible mission work among the Liberated people in Canada was certainly on the fore.

It was decided by Synod 1948 to send the two missionaries to Lynden to work. Soon after, however, the MC with the concurrence of First PRC decided to split the labors of the two missionaries, one in Lynden and the other in Ontario, Canada. This decision elicited a protest to First PRC, first of all from Missionary Ed Knott and, at the next meeting, from Prof. George Ophoff. Both of these men argued against splitting the labors of the missionaries between two different fields of labor. They believed synod had decided that the missionaries should "labor together" in their work. A major point in Ophoff's protest to First PRC was the doctrinal differences between the Liberated and the PRC. Although not explicitly stated, it is clear from Ophoff's protest that he was one of those wary of any kind of denominational unity with the Liberated Churches.

His protest finally prevailed, as we will find, but to no avail. Mission work among the Liberated people in Canada would soon become the focus of the MC and First PRC.

⁶ PRC Acts of Synod 1947, Art. 83.



Strength of youth

Rev. Jon Mahtani, pastor of the Hope Protestant Reformed Church in Walker, Michigan

The lingering smoke

Like that lingering smoke at the back door of church, a smelly stigma sticks to the Reformed, young and old alike. What are our well known indulgences? Drinking (see my previous article—March 1, 2020, p. 259) *and smoking*. What has generally become a socially unacceptable activity in the world seems to remain a norm in Reformed circles—a liberty to insist upon, along with orthodoxy. Therefore, though admittedly with some hesitation, I seek to unveil this altar of strange incense that few today dare to disparage.¹

What is the appeal of this smoke? For beginners, peer pressure and the rebel image are alluring. Afterwards, the smoke break allows an escape from work and stress. The "fresh air" provides a social environment. And the nicotine becomes a gripping addiction. It's not just the drug, but the nostalgia of the whole experience: the tamping of the pack, the removal of the cellophane, the breaking of the foil, the sight of fresh rolls sliding against each another, the sense of altruism in supplying a bum, the momentary dangle upon the lips, the sound of a match or lighter, the sucking of the flame, the feel of a thin cylinder between the fingers, the euphoria of the chemical cocktail permeating the air passages, brain, and lungs, and the nonchalant but satisfying exhale.

There is nothing inherently sinful about tobacco, nic-

¹ Back in 1979 and 1982, Rev. Gise VanBaren was the lone voice against smoking in the *Standard Bearer*. Professor Barry Gritters joined him in 1988. Rev. VanBaren wrote another article on the topic in 2003. Young and old would profit from looking up those articles in the SB archives at <http://standardbearer.rfpa.org>.

otine, and paper—or the thousands of other chemicals like arsenic, butane, and cyanide emanating from those tubes. Puffing on toxic fumes is not wicked of itself. Even the drugs' stimulating and sedating effects are not evil. Seriously.

But(t)... You saw it coming, but please don't dismissively flick this one away.

Addiction to any of the above is sin against the first and great commandment: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." As your pocket carries your pack, as your fingers clasp that cig, as your lips cradle that baby, and as your body craves another kick, what is your heart carrying, clasping, cradling, and craving? What is your comfort in life and in death, the companion you turn to for peace, relief, escape, and help? What do you long for, trust in, depend on, and look to? The first commandment cuts through the thick curtain of our ribs to reveal in the temple of the smoker's body not first and foremost damaged lungs but a soul bowing to an altar of strange incense. God commands us, "Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength," and yet our souls fall before the gods of self and smoke. Lord's Day 34 of our Heidelberg Catechism defines idolatry in this way: "Idolatry is, instead of, or besides that one true God who has manifested Himself in His word, to contrive, or have any other object, in which men place their trust." Herein we find the source of that lingering smoke.

When we impenitently continue in sin against the first commandment, we soon find ourselves breaking many other commandments along with it. The sixth commandment is the most obvious. Perhaps seventy years ago we could call habitual smoking a sin of ignorance, but with time proving smoking lethal, we must call it what it is: willful sin against the sixth commandment. As the smelly incense rises in our souls, the regular smoking frequently causes lung cancer, heart disease, constricting of vessels, and many more deadly maladies. It is fatal not only to the smokers themselves, but also to those we claim to love the most. We are murdering our spouse, friend, son, or daughter by transmitting to them both the second-hand smoke we exhale and the first-hand experience of our suicidal example. On the selfish altars of our hearts we burn not only tobacco but ourselves and others. The Heidelberg Catechism explains the words "Thou shalt not kill" in Lord's Day 40: "That neither in thoughts, nor words, nor gestures, much less in deeds, I dishonor, hate, wound, or kill my neighbor by myself or by another...also, that I hurt not myself, nor willfully expose myself to any danger." Dangerous developments in the smoking industry should make us more aware of how the lingering smoke kills. The deadly chemicals, which

at one time were funneled mainly through pipes, cigars, and cigarettes, now spout from an increasing number of devices like electronic cigarettes and other personal vaporizers. Once extolled as safer than cigarettes and as means to quit smoking, these gadgets are only proving to aggravate the problem. The young and restless puff more to get their high, and their dying bodies crave something stronger. Soon the nicotine siphoned by smoke or vapor becomes a gateway to other deadly drugs like the now-legalized marijuana. Refusing to perceive the smoking addiction as murder will only lead to the condoning of all kinds of deadly drugs.

With these idolatrous offerings, we not only kill but steal. The money we could offer in thanksgiving to God we spend on these smoking censers of covetousness. Lord's Day 42 explains that in the eighth commandment, God forbids "all covetousness, all abuse and waste of His gifts," and He requires "that [we] faithfully labor, so that [we] may be able to relieve the needy." The Lord Christ, the owner of every cent in our possession, commands us to be good stewards of His gifts, particularly in the financial support of our churches, families, schools, and the poor. But as these cancer sticks soar to approximately ten dollars a pack, we rob God and His kingdom by spending excessive amounts on our selfish oblations.

The smoking addiction is sin against the first, sixth, and eighth commandments. All who insist that it is not a sinful addiction but "just a harmless habit" also sin against the ninth commandment—"Thou shalt not bear false witness." Common in all kinds of addiction is lying to yourself and to others, and included among these lies are all kinds of smokescreens to excuse sin and obscure the problem. First, there is this claim: "There are other things far worse than smoking." And I answer: "Yes, but I don't see how other serious sins condone your deadly one." Second, there is this appeal: "Godly and respectable people in the past (for example, Herman Hoeksema) were smokers too." And I respond: "True, but as godly and correct as such men were in many respects, they are wrong when God's Word contradicts them." Third, there is this complaint: "It is legalism and an infringement upon our liberty to call smoking a sin." And I insist: "Correct, but I never condemned smoking itself, only the addiction to it. Now use not your liberty 'for a cloke of maliciousness, but as the servants of God'" (1 Pet. 2:16).

If we continue to abuse our freedom in Christ by excusing our sin, we tar not only our insides but our witness to the world. The heart and nose of the elect unbeliever find our "cloud of witnesses" an acrid deterrent to the doctrines of grace, and the reprobate mock our obvious inconsistencies. Should not the gospel of Christ

be a sweet savour (see II Cor. 2:14 and Eph. 5:2)? When Jesus commanded, “Let your light so shine before men,” He was clearly calling for a different “light”—“that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven” (Matt. 5:16).

The law’s unveiling of the idolatrous, murderous, covetous, and deceptive altar of strange fire within is meant to drive us outside the camp, away from our self-devoted smoking shrine, and instead towards His holy temple. Our High Priest’s sacrifice on the altar of the cross has torn the veil and granted us access to God

in spite of our sin. May the sweet smell of His intercession on our behalf draw us unto His grace. May the breath of His Spirit blow away that which clouds our minds so that we may clearly see our sin and the Savior whose passion earns our forgiveness and empowers us unto holiness. May our Father’s unconditional fellowship motivate you to thankful service; “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service” (Rom. 12:1).



All Thy works shall praise Thee

Mr. Joel Minderhoud, science teacher in Covenant Christian High School and a member of Hope Protestant Reformed Church in Walker, Michigan

Metal ores and the purification process

“Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations: that the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ.”

I Peter 1:6-7

In the wise and always perfect way of God, manifold trials and tribulations have touched us in the past several months. Some have watched their parent or spouse suffer and/or die from cancer. Others have dealt with the loss of a child, either in death or waywardness. Congregations have even been touched with strife. And we all suffer either from the effect of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) directly, or indirectly from the social and economic fallout of the governments’ responses to the pandemic. The Scriptures refer to such experiences as trials and tribulations, often using the example of purifying metal in a blazing hot furnace—a picture that was familiar to the people of that day—to teach us of the nature and goal of these trials. To help us appreciate the picture language in Scripture, we continue our examination of minerals through a short study of metal ores and their purification process.

Impure ores

Of the seven metals known to man prior to the Middle Ages, only gold was regularly found in its native form (unbonded to other substances). The other six metals

(copper, lead, silver, tin, iron, and mercury) were found as mineral ores, that is, as bound to other elements. These elements are called “native elements”—the rare elements that may be found in the creation uncombined with other elements. However, they also can be found to some degree, bonded with other elements and thus will need to be purified in order to extract the pure metal. As we examined in our previous article (Nov. 15, 2019, p. 96) in this rubric, two large classifications of minerals are the Sulfides and the Oxides, of which the vast majority of our ores are composed. Common examples of these mineral ores are galena (lead sulfide), pyrite (iron sulfide), and bauxite (aluminum oxide), from which we extract our important raw metals of lead, iron, and aluminum for industrial purposes.

Obtaining pure native or raw metals is difficult because the raw metals are permeated with impurities. It is first of all necessary to remove all rock debris and other minerals from the mineral ore. This debris, when removed, is called slag. Then the mineral ore itself must be purified to separate the desired native metal from the other elements that have bonded with it.

The reason a metallurgist desires to obtain the pure native metal, is that the pure metal is more valuable than the impure form. This is due to the fact that impurities present in the ore make for weak and brittle products. Besides this, the native metals are much more malleable (able to bend and shape) and ductile (able to stretch into wires) when in their pure form, making the pure form

much more useful in casting molds of specific tools and implements.

One famous example of how impurities in a metal weaken products is worthy of note. Metallurgical studies of the wreckage of the *Titanic* have revealed interesting information that may help explain, to some extent, why, from a scientific perspective, the “unsinkable” ship sank. Samples of rivets analyzed from the wreckage contained over 9% slag. Normal slag content in iron products is approximately 2%. Not only did these rivets contain a high level of impurity, but the slag was distributed within the metal in such a manner that it formed distinct lines of weakness. It is at these lines of weakness that the rivets sheared off when the *Titanic* side-swiped an iceberg. In addition, the ship’s steel hull contained a higher than typical level of sulfur. When exposed to frigid temperatures and violent impacts, steel with high levels of sulfur tends to experience “brittle fractures.” The side panels of the ship’s hull were, therefore, more easily gouged when it experienced the severe impact of hitting an iceberg.

The purification process

A likely contributing factor in the sinking of the *Titanic* was, therefore, the level of impurities in the metal ores from which those little rivets were made. Thus, the necessity of purification. The purification process of metal ores is often referred to as “smelting.” The technique of smelting ores has improved since those days when the *Titanic* was built. The techniques used today vary to some degree depending on the type of ore. As a rule, however, all smelting techniques have two things in common—intense heat and the addition of chemicals to aid in separating the pure metal from impurities.

In the case of metal carbonate ores and metal sulfide ores, the first stage of the smelting process is called “roasting.” When the minerals are “roasted” they are heated intensely (1100° F) in the presence of oxygen. (For reference sake, paper ignites spontaneously at 451° F, while Earth’s magma is approximately 2000° F.) When the metal ores are heated so intensely, chemical bonds are broken and carbon dioxide gas or sulfur dioxide gas is released into the atmosphere, leaving behind a metal oxide compound (iron oxide, for example).

These remaining metal oxide compounds now enter the second stage of the smelting process called “reduction.” The goal of this process is to remove the final oxygen atom from the native metal. This is accomplished by heating the metal oxide compound with charcoal (carbon) in an air-starved furnace. With minimal oxygen (from the air) in the furnace, the oxygen atoms that are bonded to the metal atoms are stripped away from the

metal. This process also requires extreme heat. Depending on the ore being refined, the fiery furnace is heated to temperatures up to 2000° F. When this process is complete, a pure metal element, such as iron, remains.

The spiritual picture

The purification process of metal ores is used as a picture in Scripture to illustrate the fiery trials God wisely and sovereignly brings to His beloved children. For example, Scripture refers to these circumstances as “tribulations” (I Thess. 3:4), which means “squeezed” or “put under intense pressure”—a concept in many ways very similar to the process of purifying ores.

In God’s just and perfect way for us we face “fiery trials” (I Pet. 4:12)—poverty, cancer, a life-changing injury, a wayward child, church controversy, pestilence, war, or a sudden loss of a loved one, to name but a few. In the midst of these circumstances, we can experience such oppressive sorrow that we groan under the weight of it. The trials are manifold. The pain, agony, and intensity of them are real. We feel squeezed and scorched.

Yet, in God’s elect children, the gift of faith endures. Nothing endures by our own effort. Never! We are nothing but dross by nature. By nature we are nothing but wretched sinners. But God! Marvelous grace! “Gold perishes;...faith endures forever and ever, world without end.”¹ As we, God’s elect children, pass through the furnace of affliction, we are stripped of all self-worth and earthly confidences. That which endures is faith. Nothing can scorch that which is genuine—the hope and joy we have by faith alone. With single-minded devotion we cling to Christ and the promises of God to us in Him. We are reminded, in the midst of our fiery trials, of the sure and blessed hope that is ours in Christ alone—of our everlasting joy (I Pet. 4:13). All honor, and glory, and thanks be to God!

This enduring of our faith, this demonstrating that our faith is genuine, is one of the purposes of God in sending us trials. The word “trial,” as in I Peter 1, has the meaning of “test,” “prove,” or “test the character.” Just as gold is tried (demonstrating its purity) in the smelting process, so our faith, in trials, is set forth as genuine. Only true and genuine faith finds joy and contentment where the eye of the body sees sorrow and suffering!! We stand in awe of God’s power to uphold, sustain, strengthen, and settle His people. This work of God’s grace—the amazing work of God’s Holy Spirit in our lives—is most beautiful and powerful! What a precious gift faith is! We rest in the certain knowledge of and hearty confidence in the goodness and wisdom of God’s ways!

¹ Herman Hanko, *A Pilgrim’s Manual: Commentary on I Peter* (Jenison, MI: RFPA, 2012), 35

In addition to demonstrating the genuineness of faith, God uses trials to strengthen our faith. When genuine faith “is put to the test, the result is that the believer is driven more closely to Christ, sinks his roots more deeply into Christ, flies more frequently to Christ for his refuge, and seeks from the work of his Savior the strength he needs to stand.”² We are of the earth, earthy. We are busy in good earthly labors (raising children, working to provide for the family and the causes of the kingdom, etc.). The focus and goal in all our earthly life should be the glory of our God. But we can easily become distracted. At times, we readily seek earthly goods and pleasures more than those things that are pleasing to God. Throughout our lives, the Lord continuously refocuses our attention on the reality that we are pilgrims and strangers on this earth. When we bite and devour each other, He promptly chastens us and leads us to care for each others’ needs. When we do not zealously love the truth or appreciate the manna or the portion He

sends us, He suddenly takes it away. In the midst of our constant weakness and lack of faith, God wisely chastens us so that we cling more fervently to Christ. What a glorious and wise Father who constantly directs us away from sin and carnality and draws us unto Himself!

“Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby” (Heb. 12:11). Thanks be to God for the grace given to us that enables us to see our trials in their proper perspective. Thanks be to God for the gift of faith, by which we trust in God during such trying times, confidently knowing that He has a wise purpose in all that He sovereignly brings us in this life. How humbling to see our sinfulness and lack of faith and the need for such trials in our lives.

As we deal with the circumstances of life in 2020 and throughout the whole of our life, may the trials we face teach us to long more for our heavenly home. And may we see, in all the trials of this life, God’s faithfulness in working all these things for our good and the glory of His name.

² Hanko, *A Pilgrim’s Manual*, 34.



News from our churches

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

Minister activities

Rev. J. Laning announced on April 19 that God had led him to decline the call extended to him from First PRC of Edmonton, AB, Canada.

Grandville PRC has a new trio for minister-on-loan to Singapore: Rev. G. Eriks (Hudsonville PRC), Rev. E. Guichelaar (Randolph PRC), and Rev. R. Kleyn (Covenant of Grace PRC).

Rev J. Mahtani received the calls from Kalamazoo PRC, Unity PRC, and Hope PRC (Grand Rapids, MI). On May 3 Rev. Mahtani announced he had been led by God to accept the call to Hope PRC and decline the other two calls. May God bless Rev. Mahtani and the Hope congregation in the times ahead. And may Kalamazoo and Unity remain confident that God will bring to them a pastor in His time.

On April 29 Rev. Joshua Engelsma, pastor at Doon, IA PRC celebrated his birthday. During this time, the governor of Iowa had forbidden gatherings exceeding 10 persons, so no party was held. But in addition to calls, texts,

emails, cards, and gifts—members of Doon held a birthday parade! A long line of cars, many decorated for the occasion, paraded past the parsonage with horns blaring and lights flashing. Once all were parked at the church parking lot a rousing chorus of “Happy Birthday” was sung, followed by selected verses from Psalter 400, and finally “God Be with You ’til We Meet Again!” The turnout was tremendous for this special occasion.



Sister-church activities

Sadly, given the uncertainty caused by the coronavirus (in God’s sovereign decree), the British Reformed Fellowship (BRF) Conference has been rescheduled to (basically) the same week next year. Thus the BRF Conference will not be taking place in 2020. Instead, it is rescheduled to July 10-17, 2021.

The rescheduled BRF Conference details:

New date: July 10-17, 2021

Same venue: Castlewellan Castle (<http://castlewellan-castle.org>)

Same theme: Union With Christ

Same speakers: Prof. D. Engelsma and Rev. A. Lanning (USA), with John Perkins (England) giving the special lecture. For more on the BRF, see <https://www.britishreformed.org>.

Here are some quotes from the Northern Ireland bulletin regarding materials they make available:

“Always a pleasure to talk with you on the phone. I’m enjoying the materials you kindly sent me. The *Standard Bearers* are always welcome. I pass them on to friends when I’ve read them. Praying for the CPRC in Ballymena that the Lord’s blessing would be upon you.”—*Lincolnshire, England*

“I was very blessed by *Christ’s Spiritual Kingdom* by Prof. Engelsma. I devoured it within the first week upon its arrival. I am looking forward to diving into *The Coming of Zion’s Redeemer* by Ronald Hanko sometime soon.”—*Norway*

“I visited the CPRC website and I studied Reformed

theology, recently and especially subjects such as common grace, the regulative principle of worship, and exclusive psalmody. The articles regarding these subjects on the site helped me in my understanding about several doctrines. I’m thankful to God for these Reformed and biblical materials.... I’m reading the articles and books available (‘Common Grace Considered’ by Herman Hanko, for example) and I have been deeply blessed through these texts. I ask my CPRC brothers to pray for me and my church. Pray that God will open their spiritual eyes and the Holy Spirit may shine and confirm the Word’s truth. If possible, send me more material or websites where I might read or buy books.”—*Brazil*

Mission activities

All of Manila remained shut down until at least May 15. Our missionaries are home-bound in their subdivision. They are leading worship services and teaching seminary classes via electronic means and it seems to be going quite well. Throughout the world God’s people benefit by today’s technology when even a generation ago that would not have been the case.

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

Announcements

Reminder

Remember that the *Standard Bearer* is published only once during the summer months: June, July, and August.

Reformed Witness Hour

reformedwitnesshour.org

Rev. A. Spriensma

June 7—“The God-Sent Ones”

John 17:18

June 14—“Enlarge the Place of Thy Tent”

Isaiah 54:1, 2

June 21—“Casting Bread upon the Waters”

Ecclesiastes 11:1

June 28—“O Zion, That Bringest Good Tidings”

Isaiah 40:9

Wedding anniversary

June 12 marks the 50th wedding anniversary of our dear parents, **Robert and Phyllis Brands**. We thank God for the gift He has given us in them, for their years of godly instruction and example, and for the covenant fellowship we continue to enjoy. “O magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt his name together. O taste and see that the LORD is good: blessed is the man that trusteth in him” (Psalm 34:3, 8).

From their loving children and grandchildren
Loveland, Colorado

Teacher needed

Reformed Heritage Christian School in Kalamazoo, Michigan, is seeking teachers to join our staff for 2020-21. Our growing Christian school is looking for a full-time JH/HS Math/Science teacher and a part-time JH/HS English/Language Arts teacher (additional options could make it a full-time position). A successful candidate should have a vibrant love for the Lord and be passionate about equipping students to love and serve God. To apply for either of these positions, please send your resume and cover letter to board@refhcs.org or Reformed Heritage Christian School, Attn: School Board, 700 N Fletcher Ave, Kalamazoo, MI 49006