

The Standard Bearer

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Guided by our Shepherd

Rev. Michael DeVries

Herman Witsius: Still relevant (5)

Rev. Kenneth Koole

The Abraham Kuyper prize

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Alloys: Enhanced mixtures

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Meditation

Rev. Michael DeVries, minister emeritus in the Protestant Reformed Churches

Guided by our Shepherd

He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Psalm 23:3

The twenty-third Psalm is a psalm of amazing comfort for the child of God. Our lives in the midst of this world are filled with cares, trials, and tribulations. But this psalm brings peace and quiet trust to the souls of God's children. In the midst of all of the storms of life we behold our Shepherd, Jehovah God. He provides for our every need: "I shall not want," we confess in verse 1. He cares for us, constantly alert to our welfare. He makes provision for our rest: "He maketh me to lie down in green pastures" (v. 2). It is His desire to see us, as the sheep of His pasture, content, refreshed, well fed, safe, and flourishing.

This third verse emphasizes another aspect of our Shepherd's care. Our faithful Shepherd guides us day by day in all our pilgrim way. A commonly held but serious misconception concerning sheep is that they can just "get along anywhere." The reality is just the opposite. No other type of livestock requires more guidance, more detailed direction than sheep do. No doubt David knew this from his personal experience as a shepherd. He knew beyond dispute that, if the flock was to flourish, the sheep had to be under the shepherd's meticulous control and guidance.

The same is true for us, as the spiritual sheep of Jehovah our Shepherd. We do not like to admit that. We like to think that we are independent and self-sufficient. We like to suppose that we can take care of ourselves and make our own way. But that simply is not so. We need a guide, a guide who leads us in the paths of righteousness. That guide we have in Jehovah our Shepherd!

Yes, sheep need the guidance and direction of a shepherd. If sheep are on a farm or ranch and the shepherd neglects this aspect of his calling, he will have very serious problems. On the one hand, sheep are notorious creatures of habit. If left to themselves, they will follow the same trails until they become ruts. They will graze the same hills until they are a barren wasteland. They will pollute their own ground until it is rife with disease and parasites. Fine sheep ranges around the world have

been ruined by over-grazing and poor management due to negligent or ignorant shepherds. The sheep, instead of being led and guided by their shepherd, had been left to shift for themselves, left to the whims of their own destructive habits. And the pastures are ruined while the sheep become thin and sickly.

The conscientious shepherd is aware of all of this. For the welfare of his flock and his land he takes the necessary precautions to safeguard against these adverse traits of sheep. He leads and guides his flock. He leads them according to a planned rotation from one pasture area to another. That prevents over-grazing of the grass and avoids the rutting of trails and erosion. It forestalls the infestation of the sheep with internal parasites or disease.

On a more individual level, this guidance is also necessary. An individual sheep or a small group of sheep can get in very serious trouble without the guidance of the shepherd. A sheep may wander from the flock and become lost in the hills. It would need the leading of the shepherd to make its way back to the flock. In various ways a sheep could endanger itself. A sheep may get its head stuck in the wire fencing as it tries to nibble at the grass on the other side of the fence. It may become entrapped in the soft mud at the edge of a pond. All of this points to the necessity of the guidance and leadership of the shepherd.

Much of this has its parallel with us. It is no mere whim on God's part to call His people "sheep." Our nature and behavior patterns are so much like those of sheep that it is almost embarrassing. Scripture declares that by nature we too are a stiff-necked and stubborn lot. We are inclined to follow our own fancies and to turn to our own ways. The prophet Isaiah tells us, "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way" (53:6).

And this we do deliberately, repeatedly, even to our own folly. How foolish, how wayward, how rebellious we can be! In our pride and self-assertion we insist that we know what is best for ourselves, that we can take care of ourselves, though the consequences may be obvious. We foolishly endanger ourselves, walking close to the edge of the cliff, wandering from the security of the flock. We can do that in spite of every warning! We

read in Proverbs 14:12, “There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death.” When we think of the temptations we face, the allurements of the world, and when we contemplate the reality of our own natural weakness and foolishness, we would almost despair!

But, thanks be to God, we have a faithful Shepherd who leads us in paths of righteousness! Jehovah, our Shepherd, is righteous in Himself. Righteousness, as a virtue of God, means that God, in all He is, says, and does is in harmony with the highest good, and that is His own Being. The psalmist declares that his shepherd leads him in paths of righteousness. These paths of righteousness are the ways that God has determined from all eternity for His people, the sheep of His pasture. These paths are the ways ordained by God that we, His sheep, should walk in. They are ways pleasing to Him, in harmony with His will, paths of righteousness.

Certainly our righteousness from a judicial, legal perspective, as it is imputed to the elect sinner, is the gift of God’s grace realized in Christ alone, through His death and resurrection. It is bestowed upon us through faith. But there is also a principle of righteousness granted in our regeneration that is manifest in our conversion and sanctification. Through the working of the grace and Spirit of Christ within us we “put on the new man, which after God is created in *righteousness* and true holiness” (Eph. 4:24). Our Shepherd leads us in paths of righteousness.

Oh, it is for us but a small beginning! We are yet inclined to go our own way. We often think that we can find the best paths. But, though we can be so foolish and wayward, Jehovah our Shepherd leads us in paths of righteousness. By His grace we submit to His leadership and we follow His leading. As Jesus said in John 10:27, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.”

And the result is that our souls are restored: “He restoreth my soul.” Literally, it is restored, brought back, turned about. What does this mean? Perhaps once you were very sick. But in the providence of God, through the means of the doctor and medications, the sickness departed. You were *restored* to health. So our Shepherd restores the weary souls of His sheep. In Psalm 42:11 the psalmist cries out, “Why art thou cast down, O my soul? And why art thou disquieted within me? Hope thou in God....” A sheep that is lost, hurt, or helpless often simply gives up. So too, it is easy for us to despair when we find ourselves in time of trouble. We worry and fear; we have no peace.

But just as when a shepherd comes and sets free the trapped or helpless sheep, and it dashes away to rejoin

the flock, delivered from its fears and frustrations, so our Shepherd comes to our aid. He leads us in paths of righteousness, restoring our souls. Christ Jesus, the good Shepherd, is touched with the feeling of our infirmities (Heb. 4:15). He came to seek, to save, to restore His sheep.

Why? For what reason does our Shepherd lead us in paths of righteousness? Is it perhaps because we are so deserving, such noble sheep? Oh, no! We are sheep, still inclined to be foolish and wayward. “He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness *for his name’s sake*.” His name is Jehovah! Do we not confess, “The LORD (Jehovah) is my shepherd; I shall not want”? And remember, God *is* His name. As Jehovah, He is the I AM THAT I AM, the perfectly independent, sovereign Creator and Lord of all.

But here the name Jehovah emphasizes especially that He is our faithful covenant God. His faithfulness shines forth! Jehovah will never leave or forsake His sheep. He cannot fail to fulfill His promises. For the sake of His own name He leads us in paths of righteousness. This is our Shepherd. We are guided by the God of our salvation in Jesus Christ our Lord! As our faithful Shepherd, He knows all the troubles and dangers we will encounter, every hour of suffering, sorrow, and tribulation. He faithfully guides us, even through the valley of the shadow of death. Yea, He causes all these things to work together for our good.

For His name’s sake He leads us. There is no way too steep for us to climb, for His strong hand upholds us and lifts us up. There is no darkness so thick and black that His light is not sufficient to lead us on. There is no ravine so deep that, should we stumble and fall, His might could not save us. There is no enemy so strong that He is not able to protect us. All the assaults of hell and the devil are vain with Jehovah as our Shepherd!

And further, for His name’s sake, He loves His sheep with a sovereign and eternal love in Christ. That love was manifest when He sent His only begotten Son into this world to be the good Shepherd who would lay down His life for His sheep. That love He sheds abroad in our hearts so that we love Him. Well may we be assured that we can press close to His side, committing our way unto our faithful Guide. And may we ever testify, “He restoreth my soul: he leadeth love me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.”

Do you hear His voice? Jesus said, “My sheep hear my voice.” Do you follow His leading? Jesus says, “...I know them, and they follow me.” Seek His grace that more and more you might find your delight in His paths of righteousness. For it is by grace alone that we hear His voice and follow Him. It is our faithful Shepherd

who enables us to confess with the psalmist, also as we continue on in the year that lies before us, “For this

God is our God for ever and ever; he will be our guide even unto death” (Ps. 48:14).



Editorial

Rev. Kenneth Koole, minister emeritus in the Protestant Reformed Churches

Herman Witsius: Still relevant (5)

As indicated when we ended our previous editorial (Jan. 1, 2021), we intended in this editorial to quote Witsius' conclusion to his book *Antinomians and Neonomians*. It is a conclusion worth quoting in full, one written in an irenic spirit but with firmness, laying down what must characterize Reformed theology in the interests of gospel preaching if it is to remain fully biblical.

Witsius has deep insight into what must be preserved and insisted upon if the gospel of grace is to be fully preached, which means not neglecting the exhortations unto godliness (commands unto all good works) that must accompany gospel preaching. To be sure, the gospel of doctrinal truth with its promises is to be preached, but so is the call to godliness and the sanctified life, with its incentives.

Good works as the fruit and evidence of thankfulness for so great a redemption is to be emphasized. When it comes to reasons for and incentives unto godliness, gratitude leads the list. That no one denies. But in the interests of incentives for the child of God to walk in ways of obedience, Scripture lays out more than the wonder of one's redemption. Recognition of that, and not finding fault with preaching that emphasizes that when it is the text, is the antidote to antinomianism. This was Witsius' conviction. That we sought to make plain from the quotes lifted from Witsius' book.

Now, take note that Witsius underscores this in his God-glorifying, grace-magnifying conclusion:

CONCLUSION: Thus far we have disputed concerning these things. From which I draw the following inferences: That it will be our best, if leaving the dangerous precipices of opinions, we walk on the easy, the plain, and safe way of scripture, the simplicity of which is vastly preferable to all the sublimity of high-swollen science [knowledge]: if we are not afraid to say what scripture says, foolishly hoping, by our more convenient phrases, to polish those which seem somewhat rugged; and do not by expressions, rigid, stubborn, hyperbolic, and unusual to the Holy Spirit, sharpen the moderate language of scripture, giving none occasion to the adversary to speak reproachfully:

If finding that some things incautious have dropped from us, we candidly and generously cancel, correct, or retract them; and what things have unwillingly fallen from others, provided it appear they were not from an evil design, let us rather assist these with a favourable interpretation than torture them with a rigid [interpretation]: if we so assert the free grace of God, that no pretext be given to the licentiousness of the flesh; so extol free justification, that nothing be derogated from sanctification; so inculcate the one righteousness of Christ, which only can stand before the Divine tribunal, that neither the utility nor the reward, which scripture assigns it, be denied to our piety; in fine, so preach the saving grace of the gospel, that the most holy law may still have its place and its use. [!]

If on both sides we sincerely do these things, by the goodness of God, it shall follow, that instead of the quibbles of obscure controversy, the clear day shall begin to shine, and the day star arise in our hearts: instead of the briars and brambles of thorny disputation, righteousness and peace shall spring out of the earth; and banishing the contentions of unhappy differences, we shall all, as with one voice, celebrate the glorious grace of God, in Christ, and with united strength, eagerly adorn the chaste bride, the Lamb's wife, with the embroidered garments of the beauty of holiness, and with the golden chain of Christian virtues.

With which benefit, through the unsearchable riches of his free grace, may we be graciously honoured by the blessed God, the only Potentate, the King of kings, the Lord of lords, who only hath immortality, dwelling in light inaccessible, whom no man hath seen, nor can see: to whom be honour and power everlasting. Amen (pp. 192-93).

In his second paragraph, Witsius lists a number of things that all must agree upon if antinomianism in its various shades is to be avoided.

As Witsius acknowledges, grace is to be magnified as “free grace,” but warns that such is not truly magnified if, in its name, “pretext” (flimsy excuse) is given for “licentiousness of the flesh.”

This is antinomianism in its basic form.

Says such a fellow, “We are really still totally depraved, are we not? So what can one expect? But I grieve over my depravity and feeding my carnal appetites. I ask for forgiveness. Surely, I am forgiven. After all, it is all of grace, is it not, not salvation based on either merit, works, or worth. What will greater godliness ever gain me? I am a believer. That’s the essential thing, is it not? Comfort me, preacher! That is why I, chief of sinners, come to church. Not to be exhorted where there should be improvements in my life and progress in holiness. And not to have my lack of spirituality in various aspects pointed out, afflicting my conscience, as if that puts into question my salvation and whether I am saved. I have faith. I am justified. What more does one need? You say I need more? How can that be comforting gospel truth for me?”

Witsius will have none of this.

In the first place, to be born again (regenerated) means one is no longer totally depraved, that is, as Scripture describes it, “dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1, 2). To be sure, the born-again child of God has an old man that remains completely corrupt, what Paul refers to as “my flesh, [in which] dwelleth no good thing” (Rom. 7:18). And to be sure, that remaining depravity with its inherited carnal appetites for “forbidden fruits” remains ever so susceptible to temptation. But that remaining depravity no longer rules the regenerated man in the totality of his life (Heidelberg Catechism, L.D. 3, Q&A 8). From that “total” bondage the power of grace has set one free. It is this new life and freedom that enables a man to repent and believe.

This should be clear. When the Arminians’ contended that natural, unsaved man has a free will by which he also can will the good and believe, what the Reformed charged them with was a denial of natural man’s total depravity. Supposedly the natural man, though spiritually dead in sins, still retains spiritual abilities.

A contraction in terms.

By necessary inference, according to Reformed doctrine, if one is now able to will the good and can and does believe, this can only imply one thing—one must no longer be totally depraved, not as the Canons define it in III/IV, 3. If one remained such a totally depraved person, one would not be able to repent in sincerity and believe. It is exactly from that total depravity with its spiritual inabilities that irresistible grace saves and frees one.

Let that be established.

When a confessing member seeks to blame his persisting in a way of sin by pleading his “total depravity,” either he is seeking to justify his pursuing “forbidden fruit” with the most mistaken and flimsiest of excuses (like so many fig leaves); or, it just might be, that such

a one still is as totally depraved as he says, still dead in trespasses and sins, and not actually alive spiritually (as such persons yet also want to claim).

Which is it? It is either-or.

Elders, when confronted by those who persist in ways of sin and seek to justify their walk with such an appeal, have every right to respond, “You know what, brother, we begin to think you are right. Your life gives no real evidence of the power of grace, which has everything to do with hearkening to the commandments of God. For all your claims of faith and expressions of remorse, we see no evidence of sincerity of repentance with its ‘eschewing of evil.’ You very well may yet be totally depraved, as you claim, and so, not ‘born again.’ It is time to read with you Lord’s Day 32, Q&A 87, which reads as follows....”

As the Lord Christ Himself declared, “By their fruits ye shall know them” (Matt. 7:20).

In that connection, as Witsius points out, Reformed truth asserts “free grace,” but not a “free grace” that allows a man to claim to be a believer—a saved, forgiven sinner—while at the same time refusing to leave ways of sin that so satisfy one’s baser appetites.

Why not?

Because such is not “free grace” in its fullness.

Free grace is not only that which grants God’s approval and favor contrary to what a sinner deserves, saving one from sin’s guilt, but free grace is also that according to which almighty God sets a sinner free from the rule and dominating power of sin.

Saving grace is based on the blood and sacrifice of Christ crucified. That atoning blood and its grace not only provide payment for sin and sinners, saving us from sin’s condemnation (justification), but are also the power according to which the Holy Spirit works in the elect and sets them free from sin’s bondage. And being made alive, one begins to walk in the ways of righteousness again (sanctification).

If that second aspect of Christ’s grace does not show itself in deeds of godliness and love for the neighbor, one can claim to be a believer all one wants, but such a one has not been truly “graced.” Such a claim to being a believer and having faith cannot be “justified.” As James declares, the Devil has that kind of ‘faith,’ a ‘faith’ that is devoid of godly fruit as evidence. Such a faith without accompanying works is “dead”(James 2:17-22).

This is so because true faith is the work of life-transforming grace, which is to say, of Christ’s life-giving Spirit. And such a spiritual life, under the preaching and, if need be, under sharp admonitions such as found in James, will show itself in “graces,” in spiritual virtues and deeds of godliness. If you will, in good works!

Not meritorious or perfect, but good and pleasing to God for all that, as our Father recognizes the fruit of His own saving, life-transforming grace, and graciously blesses them accordingly.

If the life of one professing to be a Christian is devoid of such, dominated by some carnal appetite, one may claim to be a believer all one wants, but one's claim is empty. "Shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works" says James (2:18). Because where free grace works, holiness is infused, and works of godliness and love will show themselves. Christ, by His Holy Spirit, will have it no other way.

This is the fullness of free grace the Reformed creeds assert. A whole salvation, not a partial.

And a truly Reformed man will not object to preaching that expects such to display itself, demands such, and reproves its hearers where such is absent.

Further, Witsius exhorts, unity in truth can be found only where the controverting parties "...so extol free justification, that nothing be derogated from sanctification."

In other words, it is not biblical and Reformed to so focus on the wonder of justification that the wonder of and call to sanctification (a holy life, obedience to the law, to God's ordinances and commandments) is minimized or all but set aside. As if that somehow magnifies 'salvation all of grace.' As if the doctrine of faith laying hold on free, undeserved justification magnifies salvation all of grace, but the call to holiness of life and the evidence of that holiness in the believer does not. Because, they say, a holy life and walking in the ways of uprightness has to do with man's doings and works. Therefore, such is to be minimized, not needing to be emphasized, in Reformed, biblical preaching.

As if that is true piety.

Not so!

To be sure, God's wonder of justification and His way of justifying the ungodly is the hinge on which the gospel of grace swings. But, do not forget, the *goal* of Christ's great saving work is *not only* justification, so that sinners are only counted as righteous, forgiven, and spared God's wrath.

And leave it there?

God forbid!

The *goal* and ultimate purpose of Christ coming into the world is to restore a people to the life lost in Adam, to restore a life in them so that they begin to walk again in the ways of righteousness in this life already, and so live as the friends of God—like Enoch, like Abraham, like Job, and more. Which is to say, *sanctification* is the goal of Christ's saving work. And the call to that life is not to be minimized. Nor is its evidence.

When, under the exhortations and admonitions of

the preaching, holiness of life shows itself, a sinner responding willingly in obedience, something is magnified. And that something is not the redeemed man's works! Rather, it is God Triune's sovereign grace miraculously restoring spiritual life to heretofore spiritually dead, rotten corpses. It is a grace that enables a heart and a will to hear and obey once again. Which is to say, this too brings glory not to man, the benefactor of God's restoring work, but to the wonder-working God and His grace alone.

Not to see that, not to acknowledge that, is to insult the Holy Spirit and what He graciously is able to make of men and women such as ourselves. He brings that to expression not only under the preaching of the gospel with its promises, but also of His holy law.

Such is Witsius' point when he writes, "...in fine, so preach the saving grace of the gospel, that the most holy law may still have its place and its use."

Such preaching must not be averse to promoting the call to godliness by reminding believers of the "utility and reward" of good works, of living the life of true conversion. The Holy Spirit Himself moved men to write such incentives to godliness for the encouragement of God's children. Where such biblically based preaching is rebuked and forbidden, shades of antinomianism are sure to follow.

As Witsius in his conclusion reminds the disputing parties, the utility and reward of the life of godliness also is the fruit of Christ's righteous work on the cross. It is Christ who earned for the elect the right to be restored to godliness again. It is Christ who by His Spirit restores the image of Himself in sinners. It is Christ who has laid up the reward of righteousness for His own. And it is Christ's righteousness and blood that purges the unrighteousness from our imperfect works.

Therefore, grace is not minimized when the call to godliness and good works and their necessary practice in the Christian life is preached. Rather, saving grace in its fullness is magnified.

To say it is not, would be to truncate biblical and Reformed preaching. And that can only result in deficiencies in the Christian life.

We conclude by reiterating words quoted previously, letting Witsius have the last word, as is only proper:

And banishing the contentions of unhappy differences, we shall all, as with one voice, celebrate the glorious grace of God, in Christ, and with united strength, eagerly adorn the chaste bride, the Lamb's wife, with the embroidered garments of the beauty of holiness, and with the golden chain of Christian virtues.

May God so grant.

Next time, reflections on the year past, 2020, D.V.



All around us

Rev. Clayton Spronk, pastor of Faith Protestant Reformed Church in Jenison, Michigan

The Abraham Kuyper prize

A centennial anniversary

“What Kuyper Can Teach Us 100 Years Later” is the title of a November 6, 2020 *ChristianityToday.com* article by Jordan J. Ballor, a member of the Acton Institute. The article reminds us that Dutch Calvinist Abraham Kuyper died 100 years ago on November 8, 1920. Kuyper is well known to the readers of the *Standard Bearer*, and it is no surprise to us that the 100th anniversary of his death would receive attention from a popular Christian institution such as *Christianity Today*. The article mentions another fairly prominent Christian institution, Calvin University in Grand Rapids, MI, that annually honors the memory of Kuyper by awarding an individual with the Abraham Kuyper Prize for Excellence in Reformed Theology and Public Life, which comes with a \$10,000 award.

On November 16, 2020 a ceremony was held to present the award to *New York Times* columnist David Brooks. The selection of Brooks for this award in 2020 indeed tells us much about what we can learn from Abraham Kuyper, especially about the evil fruit of the theory of common grace, which has sadly but perhaps deservedly, proved to be the most prominent legacy of his life and work.

The silenced Kuyper

Abraham Kuyper was, as the award’s name indicates, a Reformed theologian, but this is hardly mentioned and is downplayed by those who want to commemorate him today. Ballor lists the common ways Kuyper is described: “theologian, pastor, professor, journalist, politician.” But Ballor prefers to identify Kuyper as “an institution-building—or what we [stuffy intellectuals?] often today call a ‘social entrepreneur’—par excellence.” Calvin University President, Michael Le Roy, also notes a list of things that Kuyper was known for: “scholar, politician...religious leader...journalist.” In their estimation, Kuyper’s work as a Reformed theologian or religious leader is merely one of many other important things he did in his life, and it certainly was not the most important. So no mention is made of Kuyper’s

commitment to teach and defend the truths of Scripture as they are formulated in our Reformed confessions. No mention is made of Kuyper’s teaching that God’s grace is sovereign (unconditional and unfailing in its saving power) and particular (for the elect only). Certainly no mention is made of Kuyper’s emphasis on the doctrine of the antithesis, the spiritual difference—yea, the spiritual warfare—between faith and unbelief.

Admittedly, Kuyper is to blame for the fact that the work he did as a Reformed theologian—work that he himself saw as very important—is overlooked today. In the Protestant Reformed Churches we have always noted the great contradiction between Abraham Kuyper as a theologian of Reformed, biblical truth and as the theologian of common grace (a general and supposedly non-saving grace of God for all men). We have always noted and explained that common grace is not a biblical doctrine consistent with the Reformed faith. Rather, it is a man-made theory, that may not have originated with Abraham Kuyper but was most fully developed by him. Beginning with Herman Hoeksema, Henry Danhof, and George Ophoff, the PRC has been warning that Reformed theology and common grace cannot live together in peace. Because there is a conflict between Reformed truth and common grace, one must gain the ascendancy and the other must be silenced. And if common grace is not rejected, the inevitable outcome is that common grace will triumph and silence Reformed truth.

100 years after his death, the Abraham Kuyper of sovereign, particular grace and the antithesis is silent as far as many who celebrate the Kuyper of common grace are concerned. For if Calvin University’s Kuyper Prize were awarded for contributions to Reformed theology, David Brooks could not be its recipient.

An unbelieving recipient

The criteria for awarding the Kuyper Prize is explained by Calvin University’s press release. It explains “The Kuyper Prize...is awarded each year to a scholar or community leader whose outstanding contribution to their chosen sphere reflects the ideas and values characteristic of the Neo-Calvinist vision of religious

engagement in matters of social, political, and cultural significance in one or more of the ‘spheres’ of society.” The selection of Brooks for the prize is explained by President Le Roy: “We see in David Brooks’ work as a journalist and a political commentator that he has worked tirelessly to promote civil discourse in polarizing political landscapes, something that characterized Kuyper’s public life as well.” David Brooks was selected for this prize, not to commemorate the Kuyper of Reformed theology but the Kuyper of common grace (public life).

It hardly needs to be proved that David Brooks’s selection had nothing to do with Reformed theology. David Brooks is not a Reformed Christian, indeed he is not a Christian at all. His religious views are described in a very strange article on *ChristianityToday.com* entitled “How David Brooks Meandered Toward God.” Brooks is described as having made “a slow but certain movement to some measure of Christian identity and faith.” But “he has hardly abandoned his Jewish heritage. If anything, his Christian pilgrimage has only intensified his identification with Judaism.”

Through interactions with Christians, Brooks has moved from atheism to theism. But belief in a god is not Christianity. Nor is Christianity something someone can have a small measure of in combination with another false religion such as Judaism. Christianity is the religion in which regenerated believers confess to believe in the triune God and His Son Jesus Christ with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength. In the great creeds of the Reformation Reformed Christians identify the God and Savior in whom they place their faith. Brooks does not identify with the Reformed creeds or with Reformed believers. He distances himself from them and criticizes them. “Indeed, he sometimes faults evangelicals [the article identifies evangelicals as Protestant Christians] for nursing a disproportionate victim mentality and for living with an unfortunate hostility toward secular society.”

A significant recipient

Let’s consider the reasons why Calvin University would select a non-Reformed, non-Christian man to receive the Kuyper Prize. The explanation partly has to do with a twisting of what it means to be Reformed.

Ballor speaks of the “comprehensive corruption introduced by the fall into sin.” It almost sounds as if he is referring to the Reformed doctrine of total depravity, but he is not. He does not believe that fallen human beings are dead in sin so that they totally corrupt every “sphere” of life. He believes in common grace. He believes that grace, “whether preserving (common) or

saving (special), reaches all of life.” Ballor does not say it explicitly, but the teaching of common grace is that by this common grace God preserves something good in man and in the culture and institutions of the world. Because of common grace, it is legitimate and even the calling of Christians to work to redeem/reform all of society and its institutions. So the Reformed doctrine of the antithesis, of believers living *in* the world but being spiritually separate *from* the world, is replaced with the calling to cooperate with the people of the world to make this world a better place, to Christianize the institutions of society. One can easily detect in the language of Ballor and Le Roy a desire to sound Reformed as they speak about sin and grace and the gospel. But their language cannot hide the fact that they are promoting nothing more than the unbiblical idea that Christians are to try to have an “impact” on the world, to “redeem” culture, to seek social justice, to make this present world a better place.

Hence, the Kuyper Prize is not about Reformed theology at all; it is all about ‘public life.’ It is about being a mover and shaker in the world. It is about promoting some kind of religious reform (even if it is not Christian) for the common good of man. It is about making an “impact” in the world. It is about being politically, economically, or socially significant.

David Brooks fits the bill. The Calvin press release highlights an impressive resume for Mr. Brooks: “In addition to Brooks’ work with the *NY Times*, he is also a commentator on ‘PBS NewsHour,’ NPR’s ‘All Things Considered,’ and NBC’s ‘Meet the Press.’” And he more recently published *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life*. According to Calvin Seminary’s President, Jul Medenblik, Brooks “models a very Kuyperian way of thinking about humanity, culture, and civil institutions,” even though Brooks is not a Christian. The important thing is that Brooks “provides valuable guidance in challenging the way we view ourselves as image bearers and the development of our character within our society.” Brooks promotes man’s engagement in society.

One hundred years after his death, the Kuyper of common grace is commemorated by Calvin University doing what it has always done, selecting a relatively famous person for its award. The Calvin press release highlights the impressive fame and status of its former recipients. “Brooks joins an esteemed group of past winners of the award, which includes a Pulitzer Prize-winning writer, Templeton Prize-winning philosopher, a prime minister, and a pair of U.S. ambassadors, to name a few.” For the world these Kuyper Prize recipients are significant and important. And there is little doubt Calvin University

enjoys the attention it receives when it presents its award to these “movers and shakers.”

One wonders whether Abraham Kuyper, if he knew about it, would really be honored that an award bearing his name was given to all these recipients. We will never know, of course. But the awarding of the Kuyper Prize to David Brooks and others like him clearly demonstrates that the philosophy of common grace leads to compromise with the world and to a distraction from the church’s calling to promote the gospel of Jesus Christ and a life of true godliness that is antithetically opposed to the world.

Truly honoring Kuyper

Although Kuyper is responsible for leaving behind the legacy of common grace, we should reject the weaknesses

and errors of Kuyper and magnify his strengths, with a spirit of grace that should be characteristic of Reformed believers who know they have received salvation by free grace. This how we honor others of our Reformed fathers. The writings of Martin Luther and John Calvin contain what is sometimes called “dross.” There is also much gold. It would dishonor these men to ignore the gold and magnify the dross. We honor them by mining and magnifying the gold in their writings. This is how we ought to honor Abraham Kuyper. His theory of common grace ought to be rejected and then ignored and never allowed to compromise the church. And where we find the Abraham Kuyper who faithfully taught the Reformed truth that is according to Scripture, let us continue to learn and grow from him.



Search the Scriptures

Rev. Ronald Hanko, minister emeritus in the Protestant Reformed Churches

Jonah's storm

But the LORD sent out a great wind into the sea, and there was a mighty tempest in the sea, so that the ship was like to be broken. Then the mariners were afraid, and cried every man unto his god, and cast forth the wares that were in the ship into the sea, to lighten it of them. But Jonah was gone down into the sides of the ship; and he lay, and was fast asleep. So the shipmaster came to him, and said unto him, What meanest thou, O sleeper? arise, call upon thy God, if so be that God will think upon us, that we perish not.

Jonah 1:4-6

In the title of this article, I have called the storm that came on the sea while Jonah traveled to Joppa, “Jonah’s storm,” and with good reason. To our knowledge never in the history of the world or in sacred history has any storm been sent for one man only. The storm of Jonah 1:4 was sent for the salvation and obedience of one man, Jonah. It served the repentance and salvation of the mariners as well, but as Jonah himself confessed: “I know that for my sake this great tempest is upon you.” In that sense, the wind and tempest was Jonah’s storm.

It was not Jonah’s storm alone, however, but Jehovah’s storm. Sent by Him as the great God of providence, it was controlled and directed by Him and used

by Him for a very specific purpose, the conversion of one wayward sinner.

We know that God is present in every storm. He is, as Jonah confessed, “the God of heaven, which hath made the sea and the dry land” (Jonah 1:9). Psalm 18:9, 10 reminds us that, “Forth through the storm Jehovah flies as on the wings of cherubim” (Psalter #34, stanza 5), and so does Jonah 1:4: “But the LORD sent out a great wind into the sea, and there was a mighty tempest in the sea, so that the ship was like to be broken.” His winds blow and His waves are stirred up and His sea is tempestuous. This storm was part of God’s providential work in seas and oceans.

Psalm 18 reminds us, too, that God’s providence is always directed to the good of His people and of His church, for the storm described in the opening verses of that Psalm was for the deliverance of the Psalm’s writer: “He sent from above, he took me, he drew me out of many waters” (v. 16). In that sense the storm was not just God’s storm but Jehovah’s storm, a storm sent by the covenant God of His people.

The storm that Jehovah sent after Jonah is a unique illustration of that truth, not only because it came on the sea for Jonah’s sake but also because it lasted only as long as was necessary to bring Jonah to his senses.

When Jonah was thrown overboard, the storm ceased as abruptly as it began.

God will do whatever is necessary for the salvation of those whom He has loved, chosen, and redeemed both as the God of grace and as the God of providence. That is a fearful truth when we are disobedient and rebellious as Jonah was, but a comforting truth when we, like Jonah, have been brought to our spiritual senses.

So it is that these few verses of Jonah 1 begin with the words, “But the LORD....” Jonah had fled from God’s presence and word. Foolishly, he had thought he could escape his commission to Nineveh by leaving the land of Israel where God revealed Himself and gave His word. He intended to get as far away from Nineveh and from the word of the Lord as he possibly could. He rose up to flee. He went to Joppa. He found a ship. He paid the fare. He went down into the ship. He fell asleep.

“But the LORD” had other plans. God had commanded the preaching of the word in Nineveh; He had determined the salvation of His own there. He had chosen Jonah himself to preach to Nineveh and, though Jonah had refused his commission and forsaken God, God would not let one of His own perish. He, controlling and directing all things according to the counsel of His own will, followed Jonah to Joppa and out on to the sea, called the storm down on Jonah and the ship, frustrated Jonah’s intentions, brought him to repentance and back to obedience, and in the process worked another part of His will in the salvation of the mariners.

Jonah had found a ship bound for Tarshish and had sailed on it, not for any interest in Tarshish, wherever it was, but to get away from his God, the God who in the Old Testament revealed Himself exclusively in Israel. He forgot, however, that the God who revealed Himself in Israel as Jehovah was the God of land and sea, the everywhere-present God, whose reach extended far beyond the furthest bounds of the sea on which Jonah sailed, the Mediterranean Sea.

The storm must have been an unusual storm, like the storms that came on the sea of Galilee during the ministry of Jesus while He was there with His disciples. The mariners not only confessed that the ship was in danger of being broken up, but also that their own efforts were useless in the face of such a storm. They not only “cried every man unto his god, and cast forth the wares that were in the ship into the sea” (v. 5), but the shipmaster also waked Jonah and demanded that he, too, cry to his God: “What meanest thou, O sleeper? arise, call upon thy God, if so be that God will think upon us, that we perish not” (v. 6).

That the mariners recognized the unusual character of the storm is evident not only from their heathen

prayers—each of them to his god—but also from their casting lots, believing that one of them was the cause of the storm. When Jonah insisted that his God, the God of the sea and land, had sent the storm because of him, they believed him, though they were still unsaved men. Indeed, the unusual fury of the storm was a means to their salvation, but that is the subject of another article.

Jonah’s sleep (for he “was gone down into the sides of [inside] the ship; and he lay, and was fast asleep,” v. 5) was not the sleep of the just, but the sleep of a man exhausted in his disobedient efforts to escape the Word of the Lord. He must have been exhausted, for the fury of the storm did not waken him. Only the shipmaster was finally able to do so. It is a wonderful thing when the righteous are able to sleep peacefully in the confidence that they are right with God, for then “He giveth his beloved sleep.” It is not so wonderful when the disobedient and ungodly are able to sleep, for their sleep is evidence of a conscience that has so hardened itself against God that even a quiet night is possible.

Jonah’s sleep may even be the sleep of one who thinks his way, though wicked, has been successful. We are too often like Jonah in thinking that, because we prosper in disobedience, God does not mind or does not see. This is especially true when we have made up our minds to do something that is clearly forbidden in the Word of God but which we want desperately. Perhaps we want to marry an unbeliever, thinking we love him or her. Maybe we are having marital difficulties and things look better elsewhere. Perhaps we want to go along with those who have given themselves to drunken revelry. Maybe we wish to forsake our place and calling in family or church to follow a career or way of life that is more profitable or self-pleasing. We are no different from Jonah if we think that being allowed to go our own way represents God’s approval and blessing or His indifference.

You may resolve to disobey; you may rise up and flee; you may find your way to Joppa; you may find the ship ready there; you may find the mariners make no objection to your company and are ready to receive the fare. You may crown all, and think the day is gained, when you go down into the ship. How successful has your scheme been! Not a single step of it has misgiven. The whole project thrives.... You think it is all right now, and your plan is safe and your project sure. The last move has been all that you could wish it to be.

Yes, but that last move is your move into the very prison in which God holds you now under lock and key, and will hold you, till He either cast you out for execution, or bring you to repentance.¹

1 Hugh Martin, *Jonah* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982), 66.

Jonah was not only asleep physically, but spiritually. He had closed his eyes and mind to the Word and call of God. He was in a spiritual slumber no different from the unbelief of the mariners who were “asleep” to the knowledge of the true God and, as the ungodly, would have fallen asleep forever if God, through the storm and the mariners, had not wakened him.

What a terrible thing it is to be in such a state of spiritual slumber! Living sinfully, we have our eyes closed to the danger of our way, for sin’s ways are the ways of death. Hardened in sin, we sit in church, hear the Scriptures read, and even read them ourselves, listen to the Word preached, but are as insensitive as a man asleep. We neither hear nor are aware of our danger and, if God does not waken us, we will never wake again.

Jonah was not allowed to progress very far in his disobedience. Any progress in sin, however, is progress towards destruction. Psalm 1:1 describes this progress in sin as first walking in it, then standing, and finally sitting in it. The ungodly make such progress to their own destruction. God’s children are, in the wisdom of God, allowed to go only so far as to teach them the danger of sin. What a hard lesson that is when it is necessary for God to teach us in that way.

Jonah’s lesson was not quite finished. He still needed three days’ instruction in the belly of the fish, but in the purpose and good pleasure of God he was needed, reluctant though he was, in Nineveh, and so God almost immediately stopped Jonah’s wicked way.

The Canons of Dordt in chapter 5 sum up this part of the story of Jonah thus:

Article 4. Although the weakness of the flesh cannot prevail against the power of God, who confirms and preserves true believers in a state of grace, yet converts

are not always so influenced and actuated by the Spirit of God, as not in some particular instances sinfully to deviate from the guidance of divine grace, so as to be seduced by and to comply with the lusts of the flesh; they must, therefore, be constant in watching and in prayer, that they be not led into temptation. When these are neglected, they are not only liable to be drawn into great and heinous sins by Satan, the world, and the flesh, but sometimes by the righteous permission of God actually fall into these evils. This, the lamentable fall of David, Peter, and other saints described in Holy Scripture demonstrates.

Article 5. By such enormous sins, however, they very highly offend God, incur a deadly guilt, grieve the Holy Spirit, interrupt the exercise of faith, very grievously wound their consciences, and sometimes lose the sense of God’s favor for a time, until, on their returning into the right way of serious repentance, the light of God’s fatherly countenance again shines upon them.

Article 6. But God, who is rich in mercy, according to His unchangeable purpose of election, does not wholly withdraw the Holy Spirit from His own people, even in their melancholy falls; nor suffers them to proceed so far as to lose the grace of adoption, and forfeit the state of justification, or to commit the sin unto death; nor does He permit them to be totally deserted, and to plunge themselves into everlasting destruction.

Article 7. For, in the first place, in these falls He preserves in them the incorruptible seed of regeneration from perishing, or being totally lost; and again, by His Word and Spirit, certainly and effectually renews them to repentance, to a sincere and godly sorrow for their sins, that they may seek and obtain remission in the blood of the Mediator, may again experience the favor of a reconciled God, through faith adore His mercies, and henceforward more diligently work out their own salvation with fear and trembling.



Pillar and ground of truth

Prof. Douglas Kuiper, professor of Church History and New Testament in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary

The Council of Constantinople (AD 381): The meeting

Previous article in this series: December 1, 2020, p. 112.

We have now explained why the second ecumenical council in Constantinople (381) was necessary. Although the first ecumenical council in Nicea (325) had condemned Arianism (which denied that Christ is God), that heresy continued to hold influence and semi-Arianism (which said that Christ is *similar* to

God, although *not* God) had developed. Some who opposed Arianism developed other wrong views of Christ. In addition, the question arose how the Holy Spirit related to the Father and Son. To address these matters, Emperor Theodosius I called the Council of Constantinople.

History

In His perfect timing, God had raised up Theodosius for this purpose. A previous emperor, Julian the Apostate, had favored paganism. Other previous emperors supported Arianism. By contrast, Theodosius defended orthodox Christianity as Nicea had set it forth. One way that he promoted Christianity was by forbidding idolatrous worship and practices. And he was concerned that dissension in the church would undermine the unity of the empire. In short, he called the Council as one who loved the Christian faith, though he was also politically motivated.

In May 381, 186 bishops gathered for this Council. Thirty-six of them denied that the Holy Spirit was God, refused to assent to the Nicene Creed, and were denied a seat at the council. 150 remained—a small number, in comparison to the attendance at other councils. The Council met into July of that year.

All these bishops were from the eastern part of the empire. The pope sent no representatives. Rome would later ratify the main doctrinal decision of the Council and the creed it produced, but would not ratify all of its decisions—especially those that we will examine in the next article.

Decisions

The Council made four significant decisions, the first of which is the most significant doctrinally. It said: “The faith of the three hundred and eighteen fathers assembled at Nice in Bithynia shall not be set aside, but shall remain firm. And every heresy shall be anathematized, particularly that of the Eunomians or Eudoxians, and that of the Semi-Arians or Pneumatomachi, and that of the Sabellians, and that of the Marcellians, and that of the Photinians, and that of the Apollinarians.”¹

The significance of the Council of Constantinople, then, is twofold. First, it decisively established the doctrine of the Trinity. It did so by upholding the decisions of the Council of Nicea, by rejecting Arianism and semi-Arianism, and by asserting that the Holy Spirit is God. The church would continue to grow in her understanding of these doctrines, but what she believed about

God as Triune was clear. When heretics later denied the Trinity (think of Michael Servetus, in John Calvin’s day, for instance), the Christian church would have no trouble rejecting these denials as heresy.

Second, the Council began to lay the foundation for a right doctrine of Christ—a correct Christology. Having declared Him to be God, and having rejected Apollinarianism’s denial that Christ had a complete human nature, the Council began leading the church into a right understanding of the person and natures of Jesus Christ. It was only a beginning; the next several ecumenical councils would continue to address this matter. However, the Council of Constantinople made a right beginning.

Creed

These doctrinal developments the Council codified in its creed. We commonly call this the “Nicene Creed,” but it could more accurately be called the “Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed.” The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed incorporates the first part of the creed drawn up at Nicea, which set forth the positive statement of the Trinity. However, the version of 381 is distinct from the version of 325 in four ways.

First, the later version adds words and phrases to its confession regarding Christ in order to underscore that Christ is both truly God and truly man. Second, the earlier version led the church to confess faith “in the Holy Spirit” without saying anything more about that aspect of her faith. The version of 381 elaborates on the confession regarding the Holy Spirit, emphasizing that He is divine. Third, the later version adds the confession regarding Christ’s church, the remission of sins, and our hope for the resurrection of the body and life in the world to come. Finally, the later version drops the anathemas found in the version of 325.

This creed is foundational to orthodox Christianity, even as developed in the Reformed faith. The Belgic Confession (Art. 9) indicates that Reformed believers willingly receive what is taught in this creed. This creed is the lasting legacy of the Council of Constantinople and the enduring gift of God to His church of all ages.



Council of Constantinople, AD 381

¹ “Canons” as found in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, Volume 14: *The Seven Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1988), 172.



Taking heed to the doctrine

Prof. Ronald Cammenga, rector and professor of Dogmatics and Old Testament in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary

Good works and assurance (2)

Assurance of the essence of faith

Previous article in this series: October 15, 2020, p. 36.

Assurance of the essence of faith

Assurance is of the essence of faith. This is the historic and confessionally Reformed view of assurance, as it is the teaching of Scripture. The Heidelberg Catechism teaches that assurance is of the essence of faith in its classic description of faith in Lord's Day 7, Q&A 21. There the Heidelberg Catechism describes faith as both knowledge and *confidence*. Confidence is just another word for assurance. Although faith is knowledge and confidence, it may be said that of the two elements of faith, the confidence of faith stands on the foreground in Answer 21. The knowledge of faith, according to the Catechism, is a "*certain* knowledge." By speaking of the knowledge of faith as "certain," the authors of the Catechism are underscoring the assurance of faith. When they come to describe faith's confidence, they speak of that confidence as an "assured confidence." That is really a redundancy. An assured confidence is a "confident confidence." That redundancy serves to underscore the truth that assurance is of the essence of faith.

In its teaching that assurance is of the essence of faith, the Heidelberg Catechism is only reflecting the teaching of Scripture. Paul's glorious confession shortly before his martyr's death was, "For the which cause I also suffer these things: nevertheless I am not ashamed: for I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day" (II Tim. 1:12). Paul *knows* whom he has believed. That is certainty—unwavering certainty. Further, he is *persuaded* that the One in whom he has believed will preserve him unto the day of his death and the coming of his Lord. That persuasion chases away every doubt and fear. Persuasion is confidence.

In Hebrews 10:22, the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews exhorts the saints, "Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water." The exhortation calls the saints to draw near to God, whether in worship or in prayer, with "a true heart," that is, in sincerity, and "in [the]

full assurance of faith." That he speaks of the full assurance of faith indicates that assurance is of the essence of faith. Faith is not faith without assurance.

John 6 contains Jesus' instruction that He is the Bread of life, whose body must be eaten and whose blood must be drunk. The eating and drinking to which Jesus refers is the activity of faith—believing on Jesus, as He makes plain in John 6:29 and 35. The outcome of Jesus' teaching was that "[f]rom that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him" (v. 66). It was at that point that Jesus put the question to His twelve disciples, "Will ye also go away?" (v. 67). In response to Jesus' searching question, Simon Peter, speaking on behalf of the twelve, made his glorious confession of faith: "Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe *and are sure* that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God" (vv. 68-69). The idea of Peter's statement is, "we believe and *therefore* we are sure." The Holy Spirit inspired Peter to word his confession just as he did exactly because assurance is of the essence of faith. The believer is sure of what he believes and the One in whom he believes.

The apostle Paul celebrates the exaltation of Christ in the context of his own sufferings for Christ in Ephesians 3. In the opening verse of the chapter, the apostle refers to himself as "Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles." Because he had faithfully and boldly preached the gospel, Paul was a prisoner in Rome at the time he wrote the epistle to the Ephesians. In the gospel that he preached, Paul proclaimed not only the sufferings of Jesus Christ but also His glorification for the church, the members of which include both Jews and Gentiles (v. 6). God's purpose in Christ's exaltation is that in Him "might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God" (v. 10). Paul goes on to refer to Christ's great work of intercession on behalf of His church as our heavenly High Priest, on whose account "we have boldness and access with confidence by the faith of him" (v. 12). Because of Christ's high-priestly work, we have the right, privilege, and calling to draw

near to God. Here, too, the apostle speaks of the confidence of faith. Faith is confidence: “with confidence by the faith of him.” When the apostle speaks of “the faith of him,” he is referring to faith in Christ. Christ is the “Him” upon whom faith rests. Part and parcel of faith in Christ is confidence. The confidence of faith is sure inasmuch as the confidence of faith is in the risen and exalted Lord Jesus Christ. The confidence of faith rests not in those who believe, but in the One who works faith and is the object of faith.

Romans 4 celebrates the faith of the Old Testament patriarch Abraham. Abraham believed the promise of God concerning the seed that would come from him. He believed the promise of God when it looked as though it was impossible that the promise could be fulfilled. “And being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sara’s womb” (v. 19). Verses 20 and 21 continue, “He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; and being *fully persuaded* that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform.” In the strength of his faith, Abraham was “fully persuaded” of the promise of God. That language expresses the certainty of faith.

Faith is assurance. Assurance is of the essence of faith.

Denials of assurance

The Reformed faith teaches that assurance is of the essence of faith. Various false teachings deny that faith is assurance.

Roman Catholicism has always denied that assurance is of the essence of faith. This was a critical issue at the time of the Reformation. The Reformation really began as the result of Luther’s quest for the assurance of his salvation. The church of Luther’s day denied the very possibility of assurance. That was due to Rome’s teaching of free will and works-righteousness. No matter the good works that Luther performed, or his reliance on the storehouse of the good works of others, he could not enjoy peace with God and the assurance of his salvation. It was only when Luther came to depend, not on his own works, but on the perfect work of Christ alone, that Luther came to experience assurance of salvation. Through faith in Christ, the doubts and fears that troubled him were chased away as the morning mist before the rising sun.

Arminianism, too, denies the possibility of the assurance of salvation. At the time of the Synod of Dordrecht this was the position of the Arminians. They taught that only those who received a special revelation from

God could possess the assurance of salvation. This is indicated in Canons V, 10, which denies that assurance is “produced by any peculiar revelation contrary to, or independent of the Word of God.” What the article rejects was exactly the teaching of the Arminians. The “Rejection of Errors” section of the Fifth Head of Doctrine of the Canons also repudiates the Arminian teaching concerning assurance. The Synod rejected those who taught that “without a special revelation we can have no certainty of future perseverance in this life.” The article goes on to teach that “by this doctrine the sure comfort of the true believers is taken away in this life, and the doubts of the papist [Roman Catholic Church] are again introduced into the church.”

Besides those who deny the possibility of assurance, there are those whose teaching of assurance is fatally flawed.

There have always been those in the Reformed camp who have taught that assurance of salvation depends on some sort of mystical experience. There have been and are today those of this viewpoint in the Dutch Reformed churches, as well as the Scotch-Irish Presbyterians. This mystical group is represented by the Netherlands Reformed Congregations in the United States and Canada. The evidence of this false view of assurance is that even in large congregations only a small handful of members, not even all the members of the consistory, partake of the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper.

These people often view the Christian life as one of perpetual doubt and fear. There have been those who lived and died in what seems to be a proud lack of assurance of salvation. They, at least, are not like so many Christians who take their salvation for granted. Oh, no! It must be given. And if you do not have this assurance, it is not your fault, and there is nothing that you can do but wait for it to be given. For some, you may safely live like the devil and sow your wild oats, until finally God gives you the sign or experience upon which you can then ground the assurance of your salvation.

Others have taught that assurance must be sought. Only after rigorous efforts throughout most of one’s life, usually at the very end of life, is assurance finally achieved. Ministers in these churches aim in their preaching to create doubt among their members. Rather than to comfort the people of God, they do all in their power to undermine their comfort.

The charismatics and Pentecostals also corrupt the truth concerning the assurance of salvation. This has to do with their characteristic doctrine of the second work of the Holy Spirit. The Pentecostals distinguish between the ordinary and the extraordinary work of the Holy Spirit. By virtue of the Spirit’s work of re-

generation and faith, all believers have the Holy Spirit. But in addition to this ordinary work of the Holy Spirit, there is a second work of the Spirit, the baptism *in* or *with* the Spirit. This second work of the Holy Spirit is sometimes referred to as “being filled with the Spirit,” or “the sealing of the Spirit.” By virtue of this Spirit baptism, the Spirit-filled believer receives the *charismata*, the special gifts of the Spirit, especially the gifts of speaking in tongues and faith healing. At the same time, it is only those who have received this second blessing who possess the assurance of salvation. The ordinary believer, though regenerated and possessing the gift of faith, does not enjoy the “full assurance” of faith, which includes the assurance of salvation and perseverance in salvation. The teaching of the Pentecostals is a direct broadside against the Reformed faith. Between the two there is and can be no agreement—none whatsoever!

Assurance the work of the Holy Spirit

Assurance is of the essence of faith. But the question is, “How does the Christian enjoy this assurance, the full assurance of faith?” The answer is that just as faith is the gift and work of God, so also is the assurance of faith God’s gift and work. We must not suppose that God saves us, but that we accomplish the assurance of our salvation. We must not think that God bestows the gift of faith, but we manufacture the assurance of faith. We must not have the idea that there are certain steps to follow, certain levers to pull, certain buttons to push and, ‘presto,’ the Christian has the assurance of his salvation. The church cannot give the assurance of salvation; the preacher cannot give assurance; a person cannot give himself the assurance of salvation.

God the Holy Spirit works assurance in the heart of the believer. As it is the Spirit who bestows the gift of faith, so it is the Spirit who causes the believer to enjoy the assurance of faith and salvation. This is Paul’s teaching in Romans 8:16: “The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of

God.” In Galatians 4:6 the same apostle teaches that “because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father.” The fruit of the work of the Spirit in the child of God is that he is assured that God is his loving heavenly Father and, therefore, he cries out, “Abba, Father.”

As always, God is a God of means. Although it is the Holy Spirit who works assurance in the Christian, He does so through the preaching of the gospel. Through the Word as it is faithfully preached in

the church, the Holy Spirit works and the Holy Spirit strengthens the assurance of salvation. Under the word of the gospel, the Spirit dispels our doubts and puts our fears to rest. He testifies to elect believers that they are God’s precious children and that His Son has died for them.

Here is where God’s people must go with their doubts and fears. Under the preaching of the cross of Jesus Christ, His doing and dying, believers enjoy the assurance of their salvation. And under the same preaching of the cross of Christ, the Holy Spirit strengthens us in our assurance.

How foolish and fatal to cut one’s self off from the preaching of the gospel!

Apart from the preaching of the gospel—the truth of the gospel—there is no possibility of the assurance of faith. Church membership, membership in a true church of Jesus Christ, is of the greatest importance for the assurance of faith. For the enjoyment of assurance, for ourselves and for our children, the necessity of faithful church membership cannot be overstated.

But the question is, “How does the Christian enjoy this assurance, the full assurance of faith?” The answer is that just as faith is the gift and work of God, so also is the assurance of faith God’s gift and work. We must not suppose that God saves us, but that we accomplish the assurance of our salvation. We must not think that God bestows the gift of faith, but we manufacture the assurance of faith. We must not have the idea that there are certain steps to follow, certain levers to pull, certain buttons to push and, ‘presto,’ the Christian has the assurance of his salvation. The church cannot give the assurance of salvation; the preacher cannot give assurance; a person cannot give himself the assurance of salvation. God the Holy Spirit works assurance in the heart of the believer.



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

Alloys: Enhanced mixtures

Two are better than one...for if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up.... And a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

Since the time of Tubal-cain, “an instructor of every artificer in brass and iron” (Gen. 4:22), humans have seen the benefit of mixing metals to form better substances. Today we call such substances alloys—materials that have unique properties, often much different than the properties of the original metals from which they are formed. Generally, we consider these new properties to be “improvements” or “enhancements.” This seems, however, to contradict our previous article in this rubric—“Metal Ores and the Purification Process”—where we demonstrated that foreign substances mixed in with metals “make for weak and brittle products” (SB June 2020, p. 407). How can that seeming contradiction be explained?

Why is it that when certain metals are mixed together they make for weaker products, while other metals can be mixed together and result in new materials with beneficial properties? As we shall further explain later, the fundamental difference is that in an alloy the added substance is properly incorporated into the very structure of the host metal rather than simply being alongside of it.

I find that to be a fascinating concept when considered from a spiritual point of view. The mixed multitude within Israel caused much trouble for her; they weakened the nation as a whole, and were never truly a part of her. However, the strength and beauty of the body of believers is realized in her remarkably diverse “mixture,” but only as the members live incorporated together in the one life of Jesus Christ. (That two things are *mixed* together does not necessarily mean they will *unite* together, though they will certainly have an effect on one another.) The common bond with Christ is the basis for how different saints can and do assist and strengthen one another. “From whom [Christ] the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the mea-

sure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love” (Eph. 4:16). Let us examine alloys as a tool to help us consider the mutual benefit of saints united in Christ.

Alloy examples

Bronze is, perhaps, the alloy with which readers are most familiar. Bronze—the alloy with the oldest tradition—is a mixture of copper and tin. While the Bible makes reference to “brass,” the biblical substance is likely what we call bronze today. Bronze is an alloy of copper and tin; while brass (circa 500 BC) is an alloy of copper and zinc. The presence of tin with copper is what gives a bronze bell the pleasant tone that it has. Also, the higher the tin content in the alloy, the harder the bronze will be. Unfortunately, the increased level of tin also makes the alloy more brittle. Consequently, the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia has a large crack due to excess levels of tin in the bronze. Today, bronze is used throughout various industries, particularly as bushings and bearings, to capitalize on its low level of friction. Bronze’s prominent place in history is due to its numerous qualities—hardness, low friction, good conductor of heat and electricity, very malleable, and resistant to corrosion.

In modern society, however, steel alloys dominate. Steel, an alloy of iron and carbon, is commonly used, in part because of the properties of its main constituent—iron. Iron is abundant, relatively cheap, readily combines with many different substances to form unique alloys, and can be welded, cast, machined, and hardened like no other metal. As good as iron is alone, it is made stronger when alloyed with carbon.

Other fascinating and useful alloys are ALNICO (aluminum, nickel, and cobalt mixture), which is an alloy with superior magnetic properties; NITINOL (nickel and titanium mixture), which is a “shape-memory” alloy used in various medical applications and orthodontics; and Nichrome (nickel and chromium alloy), which is a heat-resistant alloy used in electrical heating elements.

Beneficial properties

Alloys differ significantly from impure metals, which we considered in our last article. Metals that have impurities in them are *weaker* than the original metal because the impurities collect in distinct regions or “grains.” Generally speaking, these grains form because the atomic structure of the impurities is such that the impurities do not become part of the host metal’s crystal structure, but are rather ‘alongside’ the crystal structure, creating boundary grains. The mixture, necessarily then, is weak and tends to crack or sheer along those lines of impurities.

In an alloy, however, the added elements are distributed evenly throughout the host metal and become part of the host metal’s crystal structure. Metallurgists can cause this even distribution to occur in the alloy by intensely heating the element until it melts into its liquid form, and then carefully mixing another metal into the molten mass. As the two metals are mixed, the atoms of the minor element are slowly dispersed throughout the material. Careful cooling of the mixture ensures that the crystal structures form properly. In situations where the atoms of the minor element are approximately the same size as the atoms of the host metal, the minor element’s atoms displace the host element’s atoms in the crystal structure. However, when the minor element is much smaller than the host element, it will nicely ‘fit’ into the empty spaces within the crystal structure of the host element. In each of those situations, the atoms of the minor element are incorporated into the crystal structure and few grains or deformations are formed.

Due to the presence of the minor element within the crystal structure of the original element, the new alloy has unique properties. One of the main properties metallurgists desire to find in an alloy is an increase of strength. This new strength is due to the fact that the presence of the minor element makes it more difficult for the crystal lattice of the original element to shift, slide, or bend. Consequently, the new alloy is stronger. In other alloys, the presence of the minor element within the host element gives the new alloy an increased ability to resist corrosion, or an increased ability to conduct heat and electricity, or it makes the new alloy lighter in weight. Metallurgists’ careful combination of metals will determine the particular beneficial properties that the new alloy will have.

Spiritual lessons

When considering alloys and their various properties, I see in them a figure of the biblical truth that true unity is found only as the church is bound together as one

in Jesus Christ, and a figure of the mutual benefit of the various members that arises from that union. The basic principle for this mutual benefit rests in the unity God’s people have in their Head, Jesus Christ. Only as we are united in Christ, and as we live out of the same Spirit of Christ, are we of any spiritual benefit to one another (I Cor. 12:4-6). As the minor element and host element are incorporated into one common crystal structure, so the different saints are knit together by the Spirit of Christ into the one body of Christ, with Christ as their Head. When two things are mixed and simply occur alongside each other, there is no strength in that, as pictured in the iron and clay mixture in Daniel 2:43. But when two or more things exist together in such a way that they are one, there is strength and beauty. And that is the truth of Scripture concerning the church, the body of believers—different individuals sharing the one life of the triune God through Jesus Christ. This truth is illustrated and demonstrated in our marriages and in our church life, both as members and as officebearers.

Alloys and their beneficial properties present us with a picture of the ‘completeness’ that a wife brings to her husband. For the Lord God said “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him” (Gen. 2:18). Adam needed a helper. And God provided the perfect helper—perfectly fit for Adam’s needs. The wife is a good aid to her husband as she adds an element of wisdom and provides a good dose of tenderness that is often lacking in the husband. “She openeth her mouth with wisdom; and in her tongue is the law of kindness” (Prov 31:26). Our beautiful Reformed marriage form (Form for the Confirmation of Marriage Before the Church) points out the blessing of a marriage in Christ when it cites one of the benefits of the institution of the bond of marriage—“that each faithfully *assists* the other in all things that belong to this life and a better.” The strength of the marriage is found as husband and wife live together and for each other under the yoke of Christ.

Let us also consider the blessed reality that God has knit together believers into one holy, catholic church—the body of Christ. God knits many different members together—members with diverse gifts—into the one body of Christ (I Cor. 12). Whether we are Dutch or Chinese, rich or poor, elderly or young, afflicted with few or with many sicknesses, we are *needed* in the church of Jesus Christ. God has given each of us not only a place in His church but also gifts for the benefit of the church. We are called to use those gifts (meekness, steadfastness, longsuffering, etc.) for the advantage and salvation of the other members.

What a marvelous work of God that, in joining us

together, He “maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love” (Eph. 4:16). By the grace of God in us, we bear one another’s burdens (Gal. 6:2) and provoke one another unto love and good works (Heb. 10:24). With the Word we seek to restore, in a spirit of meekness, a brother who has been overtaken in a fault (Gal. 6:1) and we exhort, comfort, and charge every one to walk worthy of God (I Thess. 2:11-12). At other times, the Spirit uses us as the balm of Gilead to another as we pray for one another (James 5:16), comfort and edify one another (I Thess. 5:11), and forgive one another (Col. 3:13). As we use our gifts for the advantage and salvation of the other members of the body of Christ, we serve “to the edification of the brethren” (Belgic Confession, Art. 28). What a wonder work of God, who knits us together and uses us for the assistance and strengthening of fellow members as we together traverse our difficult pilgrim’s journey!

Alloys and their beneficial properties picture to us how the church is benefited by the spiritual gifts of others. This would include the leaders of the church. An elder or minister may be characterized by wisdom to rule the congregation (I Tim. 3:2-5), but he is benefited by the unique experiences, perspectives, and wisdom of a multitude of counselors found in the consistory (Prov.

11:14). The church fathers recognized the wisdom of broadening the group for difficult and weighty matters, such as before proceeding in discipline of a member or before suspending an officebearer. In such cases, the consistory must seek advice from an additional group of men—the neighboring consistory (Church Order, Arts. 76, 77, and 79). So at a time of year when broader assemblies gather as classes to discuss various ecclesiastical matters, may we give thanks to God for the gift of a multitude of counselors.

The example of the mixture of elements in an alloy affords us an opportunity to contemplate how, just as one element’s properties are enhanced by the presence of another element that is mixed with it, so the Bible describes many examples of how God uses fellow saints to be of benefit to each other, whether as spouses in marriage, as members together of the church, or as leaders of the church within a consistory. May we learn to view fellow saints as “necessary” to the well-being of the body of Christ (I Cor. 12:22) and truly learn to esteem others better than ourselves.

Praise be to God for the gift of the other members of the church and for His marvelous work of uniting us into one, in Christ, for the edification of one another and the glory of His name!



Strength of youth

Rev. Ryan Barnhill, pastor of Peace Protestant Reformed Church in Dyer, Indiana

Lessons from the Judges (2) From 32,000 to 300

Previous article in this series: October 15, 2020, p. 44.

The book of Judges brims with instruction for the church’s youth. Last time, we noticed the idea, “...every man did that which was right in his own eyes” (Judges 17:6). With this article, we continue drawing lessons from the book of Judges.

We find ourselves in the history of Gideon, following the deaths of judges Shamgar, Deborah, and Barak. Israel had again apostatized. As was repeatedly the case, God’s people slid into the sin of idolatry. Jehovah, in chastisement, sent the Midianites, Amalekites, and children of the East to oppress Israel. It is in this context that God called and equipped Gideon as judge.

The Midianites and their allies gathered to fight against Israel. Gideon and certain of Israel—much fewer in number than their opponent—also assembled for battle. Although Israel’s army was small to begin with, Jehovah reduced its size even more before delivering the Midianites into Gideon’s hand. We will draw out two main lessons from this size reduction.

The vast reduction

Two armies were ready for battle. One army was Gideon and Israel, encamped beside the well of Harod

in central northern Israel. The other army was the Midianites to the north of Gideon's troops, in a valley by the hill of Moreh. Gideon and his men stood on a higher elevation than the Midianites and could see below them the vastness of the Midianite army.

The Midianite troops were, indeed, exceedingly great in number. A careful reading of the context leads to the conclusion that the enemy host was 135,000 men strong. The stadium where Michigan college football is played has a seating capacity of over 115,000 people: imagine this stadium filled to capacity, plus 20,000 people, and you have the size of the Midianite fighting force. No wonder Judges 7:12 says "the Midianites and the Amalekites and all the children of the east lay along in the valley like grasshoppers for multitude; and their camels were without number, as the sand by the sea-side for multitude." This is what Israel saw when they looked down into that valley.

Israel's army, in comparison, was rather small. Doing a little math will tell you that Israel originally had 32,000 men. Thirty-two thousand men against more men than even a massive football stadium can hold!

But the Israelite army of 32,000 was too large.

Jehovah told Gideon that the army was too big and gave direction for how it must be reduced in size. God said plainly, "The people that are with thee are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hands, lest Israel vaunt themselves against me, saying, mine own hand hath saved me" (Judges 7:2). The number of men was shrunk in two ways. First, God told Gideon to proclaim in the ears of the people, that anyone who was fearful about the battle could return. Gideon said this to the people, with the result that 22,000 men left the army. Gideon's group consisted now of 10,000 soldiers. Second, God commanded Gideon to bring the remaining army down to the water, where He would try them. The men, having marched, were thirsty and would drink the water, but the question is *how* they would drink. Those who remained standing and lapped the water from their cupped hands would remain to go into battle. Those who placed themselves on their hands and knees and drank the water directly with their mouths would not go into battle but would leave. Gideon was left with 300 men.

A vast reduction! 32,000 to 300!

The essential lessons

While more could be said, we will limit ourselves to a couple of essential lessons that God was teaching Israel, and is teaching us, in this reduction of Israel's army. One lesson, negatively stated, is that Israel must not vaunt themselves against Jehovah, saying that their own hand

saved them. The other lesson, positively stated, is that Jehovah alone must be glorified for Israel's salvation.

First, God taught Israel in this vast reduction that they must not vaunt themselves against Him, saying that their own hand saved them. Judges 7:2 says, "And the LORD said unto Gideon, the people that are with thee are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hands, lest Israel vaunt themselves against [or "over"] me, saying, Mine own hand hath saved me." It is true that Israel had far fewer men than Midian. Even so, if Israel went into battle with thousands of men, they would still be tempted to vaunt themselves against God, as if by their own hand they were saved. Jehovah made the army smaller lest that happen. The lesson Jehovah was teaching is that Israel must not boast in herself.

This vaunting to which Israel was tempted was a boasting in themselves, and would sound like this: "We have saved ourselves from the Midianites, and the power to do so lay in the size of our army. The credit for the victory goes to us and our numbers!" Should Israel vaunt themselves, it would be a boasting *against* God: not merely a glorifying of themselves, but also hostility toward and despising of God. This boasting would also be *over* God, from their perspective, as if they climbed up to God's throne, took Him off it, sat on that throne, and claimed the glory for themselves. Should Israel make this boast in their own strength and numbers, it would be nothing less than ugly, stinking pride; but it would also be idolatry, for the people would be bowing the knee to self—the hands and strength of self.

The temptation to glory in themselves was intensely strong. Just how strong this temptation was for them, the Lord indicates when He says to Gideon, "The people that are with thee are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hands, lest Israel vaunt themselves..." (Judges 7:2). How striking! Any earthly army commander would say, "We need more men! We don't have enough soldiers to go fight against the enemy!" With the Lord, not so. The people that were with Gideon were *too many for the Lord to give the Midianites into their hands!* Just how strong this temptation was, God also shows when He reduces the size of Gideon's army not just once, but *twice*. God decreased the number of soldiers twice in order the more clearly to teach the lesson that this boasting was something to which Israel was so prone.

This vaunting is the common element in every erroneous system of teaching in church history up to today, whether that be Semi-Pelagianism, Arminianism, the well-meant offer of the gospel, Federal Vision, or others. Think of false teaching as if it were a hand with a glove over it. One heretical movement might vary from

another heretical movement in some ways—each wears a different “glove” of teaching. But no matter which glove is worn, always underneath it is the hand of flesh in which man boasts. It is important we understand this and fight against these grievous errors.

But what about *us*? Is this God-dishonoring, man-elevating, proud, and idolatrous vaunting found among *us*?

Think on a church level (after all, it was *Israel* that was tempted to vaunt themselves). A church evangelism committee advertises heavily for an event at church. The committee uses all its members, pools its resources, and works hard. Many people from the surrounding community end up attending that evangelism event, and some of them even become productive and flourishing members in the congregation. The success of the event starts to go to the head:

look what *we* did, what *we* accomplished by our numbers and resources! Such examples can be multiplied.

But application may be made also on a more personal level. Have you ever informally counseled someone in an emotionally or spiritually difficult spot and then taken the credit for their improvement? Have you ever found yourself free from the grip of an addiction and congratulated yourself on your own strength? Have you ever been in a position where you walked away from a sore temptation and thought highly of just how much resolve you had to do that? When you consider your regular devotional life, your decent outward behavior, your being Protestant Reformed, your spiritually-minded Facebook status update, your regular church attendance, your last name, your father’s influence in the church—has it ever crossed your mind that these things, in their great number, must somehow go toward your salvation? In these ways, and in many others, we boast in the hand of flesh.

Let us learn with Israel that we must not vaunt ourselves against God, saying, “Mine own hand hath saved me (or others).”

Second, in this shrinking down of the Israelite army, Jehovah made plain to His people that He alone must be glorified for their salvation. To be sure, even if God uses *many* as an instrument in His hand, it is still true that salvation belongs to Him and He must be glorified. But Jehovah often *impresses* upon us that He alone saves

and must be praised, and He impresses that upon us by using few, and not many, to accomplish His purposes.

God made Israel’s army very small so that the salvation accomplished by His divine hand would be plainly demonstrated. If there were many thousands of men fighting in this army, God’s glory might have been obscured (from Israel’s point of view). Thus, God reduced the army size. Later on, God’s power radiated brilliantly in the victory over the 135,000 Midianites! How obvious it was that Israel’s salvation was of Jehovah, and not of themselves! God would have Israel boast in His power alone.

Jehovah teaches us this same lesson. Young person, the banner that hangs over your whole life is, “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast” (Eph. 2:8, 9). The daily confession on our lips should be, “Jesus...Savior...saveth us, and delivereth us from our sins...we ought not to seek, neither can find salvation in any other” (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 29). Consider what power God has, does, and will display in Jesus Christ. Boast in *Him*!

The Lord reminds His church that salvation be-

longs to Him, and He often reminds us of that by using a small “Gideon’s band.” In church history, when reform was needed, it was not usually (or ever) the *many* that God used, but the *few*—a small Gideon’s band. God showed the few, plainly, that credit went not to them but to Him. Perhaps you are part of a small congregation or denomination—a small Gideon’s band. The littleness is a reminder from God that you must not boast in your own hand, but boast in Him. Maybe you look at your work with others in the church, or your personal life, and you notice that the means God uses in His hand is rather small, insignificant, or weak. This is another unmistakably clear reminder that we are not to glory in ourselves, but in *Him*.

The comforting word

The comforting word that came to Gideon, when he was left with only the 300, was “by the three hundred men that lapped will I save you, and deliver the Midianites into thine hand...” (Judges 7:7). Imagine! Here was Gideon, standing with this tiny group, over against the

...in this shrinking down of the Israelite army, Jehovah made plain to His people that He alone must be glorified for their salvation. To be sure, even if God uses *many* as an instrument in His hand, it is still true that salvation belongs to Him and He must be glorified. But Jehovah often *impresses* upon us that He alone saves and must be praised, and He impresses that upon us by using few, and not many, to accomplish His purposes.

immense army of the foe. How comforting, therefore, was Jehovah's certain word that by the 300 He would save them.

Is that not a comforting word also for us? The enemies are many and strong, but we find that our numbers are small. Quickly we become discouraged. But God's Word comes to us, directing us to the finished

work of Jesus Christ. You have the victory in Him! You have the victory by God's hand! Regarding work in the church, God is pleased to use means—that is true. But these are means in *His hand*, and He will certainly accomplish what He wills. Be encouraged, little Gideon's band! Salvation is of the Lord!



News from our churches

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

Trivia question

Which of the PRCA churches was organized twice, the latter in 1983? See the church profile portion of this article for the answer. More trivia next time.

Minister activities

Prof. R. Dykstra and his wife Carol arrived in Singapore on December 16. They were then required to be quarantined in a government-designated facility before taking up their work there face to face. The plan is to fill the pulpit of the CERC, our sister congregation, for about the first half of 2021.

Rev. D. Holstege (PRC missionary to the Philippines) declined the call to Kalamazoo, MI PRC. Rev. A. Spriensma (PRC home missionary) accepted the call to Cornerstone PRC (Dyer, IN). Rev. J. Engelsma (Doon, IA PRC) declined the call to Wingham, ON PRC in Canada. Rev. C. Spronk (Faith, Jenison, MI PRC) declined the call to Hudsonville, MI PRC.

The internship of Seminarian Josiah Tan officially ended January 1 with him leading the service at First PRC of Grand Rapids, MI that New Year's morning. On December 27 after the evening service Sem. Tan gave a presentation, which was followed by a farewell for the Tan family.

School activities

This announcement appeared on the bulletins of the five Siouxland area churches:

Fifth Annual Pinewood Derby Event is scheduled to be held at Heritage PRC on February 27, 2021. A \$15 entry fee includes a standard class kit and lunch. Feel free to come to watch, have lunch, and fellowship as well. A freewill donation will be taken to help offset the costs for lunch and support the School Association. All proceeds will go to Sioux Falls Protestant Reformed Christian School. RSVP your entries to the school board via email: assocpredusf@gmail.com. Races begin at 11:00 A.M. with weigh-in starting at 10:00 A.M. An additional class with cars from previous years with more open rules may be held at the end for an additional fee. See the school's Facebook page for more details.

Congregational activities

The Young Adults' and Young People's Bible Studies of Covenant of Grace PRC in Spokane, WA met together to discuss "A Biblical Response to COVID-19." Discussion outlines were available.

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

Church profile—Byron Center PRC, MI

Did you know that the little country town of Byron Center, Michigan had a Protestant Reformed Church from 1926-1945? This small congregation began with

about 20 families and met in the Byron Township Hall. Rev. George M. Ophoff was the minister from 1929 until the church disbanded in 1945, while he was

also teaching in the PR Seminary with Rev. Herman Hoeksema. About 38 years later, in 1983, under the supervision of Hudsonville PRC and the guidance of Rev. G. Van Baren, a small group of 22 families and 2 individuals were given approval by Classis East to organize again as Byron Center PRC. This small congregation worshiped for about five years in the Byron Center Christian Junior High School. In 1988, the congregation of 41 families and 7 individuals moved into the current building on 84th St. This new building was built mostly by volunteer labor, which made the move from the junior high school to the new facility all the more personal and rewarding. The current parsonage was added in 1991.

In 2008, a 25-year celebration was held, and we were honored by two former pastors preaching for us—Prof. B. Gritters and Prof. D. J. Kuiper. Our congregation has conducted four Women's Retreats from 2006-2013 and a Men's Conference in 2013, which were all very well attended.

In 2016, the PRC Synod designated Byron Center to be the calling church for our denomination's

home missionary. In September of 2017, Rev. A. Spriensma accepted this call and currently works with the DMC and Byron Center's Council, searching for opportunities within the U.S. to spread the truth of the gospel.

In January 2018, Rev. A. Lanning, having labored for five years in Singapore, accepted our call to become the fifth minister of our congregation. Previous to Rev. Lanning, we were faithfully served by the above-mentioned professors, Rev. R. Van Overloop, and Rev. A. Spriensma.

Because God had blessed us with much growth, our church building became unable to accommodate the full membership. After much discussion and planning, our daughter church, Unity PRC, was established in 2019 and currently worships at Zion Christian High School in Byron Center. As these two congregations continue to grow under God's guiding hand and the faithful preaching of His Word, we give thanks for all that has been accomplished in our midst by the power of His grace. To God be all the glory!



Announcements

Resolution of sympathy

The Council and congregation of Georgetown PRC express their sincere sympathy to the family in the death of **Rev. Bernard and Frances Woudenberg**. We thank our heavenly Father for Rev. Woudenberg's 40 years of faithful service in the gospel ministry in our churches and for the zeal he showed throughout his ministry for the spread of the Reformed truths God has deposited in our denomination. We thank the Lord for Mrs. Woudenberg's faithfulness to her calling as a minister's wife, as a mother, and as a sister in Christ. We pray for the Lord's comfort to rest upon their family and loved ones. Machpelah was the name of the grave Abraham purchased for Sarah and himself (Gen. 23:19). It means "a couple." One in faith, one in life, one in death, one in hope.

Rev. Carl Haak, President
Mike Moelker, Clerk

Announcements continued

Teacher needed

The Edmonton PR Christian School is in need of a full-time teacher for the 2021-2022 school year. The school will be starting with grades 1-6 minus grade 5. Please contact Gord Tolsma at gr.tolsma@gmail.com or 780-777-5780 if interested.

Teacher needed

Covenant Christian High School is accepting applications from members of the Protestant Reformed Churches for teaching positions in the 2021-22 school year. There is a particular need in the areas of English and Mathematics but applications will be accepted from those with secondary certification in other subject areas. We are also in need of a full or part-time English teacher for the second semester of this year (2020-21). Those who are interested in either position are encouraged to contact Mr. Rick Noorman, Administrator at ricknoorman@gmail.com or call 616-453-5048 or Mr. John DeVries, Education Committee at westmichiganrealestate@gmail.com for more information.

PRC archives—Materials wanted!

The 100th anniversary of the PRC is rapidly approaching. With that in view, the PRC archives is looking for donations of anything and everything related to her history—personal (family), congregational, and denominational. We are interested in documents (official records, programs, bulletins, letters, etc.), photos of all kinds, and recordings in all forms. Large or small collections of materials are welcome! Please bring your items to the seminary, or call the seminary for pick up of your items. We look forward to seeing what you have!

Classis West

Classis West of the Protestant Reformed Churches will meet in Hope, Redlands, CA on Wednesday, March 3, 2021, at 8:30 A.M. the Lord willing. All material for the Agenda is to be in the hands of the stated clerk by February 2 (30 days before classis convenes). All delegates in need of lodging or transportation from the airport should notify the clerk of Hope's consistory.

Rev. J. Engelsma, Stated Clerk

Call to aspirants to the ministry

All young men desiring to begin studies in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary in the 2021-2022 academic year should make application at the March 18, 2021 meeting of the Theological School Committee.

A testimonial from the prospective student's Consistory that he is a member in full communion, sound in faith, and upright in walk, and exhibits the qualities and personality necessary for a gospel minister; a certificate of health from a reputable physician; and a college transcript must accompany the application. Before entering the seminary, all students must have earned a bachelor's degree and met all of the course requirements for entrance to the seminary. These entrance requirements are listed in the seminary catalog available from the school or on the Seminary's website (prcts.org).

All applicants must appear before the Theological School Committee for interview before admission is granted. In the event that a student cannot appear at the March 18 meeting, notification of this fact, along with a suggested interview date, must be given to the secretary of the Theological School Committee before this meeting.

All correspondence should be directed to the
Theological School Committee,
4949 Ivanrest Avenue SW
Wyoming, MI 49418
Bob Drnek, Secretary

The Protestant Reformed Seminary admits students of any race, color, and national or ethnic origin.