

The Standard Bearer

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Numbering our days

Rev. James Slopsema

What shall we say about AD 2020?

Rev. Kenneth Koole

A new secular America

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Elders' work of oversight: Overseeing the offices

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Reformed versus Arminian missions: Different methods

Rev. Daniel Kleyn



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Meditation

Rev. James Slopsema, minister emeritus in the Protestant Reformed Churches

Numbering our days

So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.

Psalm 90:12

Are you numbering your days?

We must number the days of our lives already lived. How old are you? How many days has that been? And what has filled those day?

We must also number the days that we can reasonably expect to live yet on the earth.

It is good to do this that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.

What it means to number or count our days will become clear only in light of what has already been said in this Psalm concerning the life of man. This Psalm was written by Moses as Israel wandered in the wilderness under the chastening wrath of God. The theme of this Psalm is the frailty and brevity of human life. How short and harsh is man's life.

Moses describes the brevity of human life in different ways. Man is carried away as in a flood, emphasizing the abrupt ending of man's life. Man's life is as a sleep, emphasizing that it is very short and fleeting. How quickly the night passes when we sleep! Man is as the grass so that he flourishes only for a short while. The grass grows up in the morning and flourishes; in the evening it is cut down and withers.

This brevity of life is due to God's wrath upon sinners. God has set our iniquities before Him. He even sees our secret sins that are known only to us. And God's wrath is upon us for those sins. In His wrath He brings trouble and sorrow. All our days are passed away in God's wrath. The days of our years are seventy in number, and if we are strong, eighty. Yet even the strength of those years, which is the best part of our years, is trouble and sorrow. We are soon cut off and fly away.

To whom does this all apply?

It certainly applies to the world in general that lives in unbelief. The world of natural man is depraved and

wicked. God has set their iniquities before Him. And in His wrath God punishes them. In wrath He not only brings a quick and abrupt end to their life but also brings them trouble and sorrow in that life. This is only a preparation for the eternal punishment of hell.

What Moses wrote in this Psalm applied primarily to the nation of Israel whom Moses was leading through the wilderness.

Israel was very rebellious against the Lord during their wilderness wanderings. They rebelled against Him at Mt. Sinai by worshiping the golden calf. They rebelled against Him at Kadish-Barnea by believing the report of the ten spies, and thus were sent to wander in the wilderness under the sentence that all those over twenty years of age would die in the wilderness. They continued their sinful rebellion throughout their wilderness wanderings. They served idols, committed fornication, all the while murmuring against Moses and against God. The result was that God destroyed many of them with plagues, fire, and serpents. Indeed, Israel felt the sting of God's wrath upon them for their sins.

Only we must bear in mind that Israel was the church and not the world, so that God's dealings with Israel were different from His dealings with the world. In Israel there was a large carnal, reprobate element. The harsh and brief life they experienced in the wilderness was God's wrath to punish and destroy them for their sin. But the heart of the nation was the elect of God. For them the harsh and brief life of the wilderness was the wrath of God to chasten and correct so that the nation might enter the promised land.

What was true for Israel is also true for the church of all ages. Bear in mind that Israel wandering through the wilderness of the Sinai peninsula was a type of the church of all ages wandering through the wilderness of this world. Also in the church of the ages are a twofold seed, as in Israel. There is the carnal, reprobate seed that live only in sin. But there is also the elect remnant, who in weakness also often rebels against God, wandering away into idolatry as Israel of old did.

And the church's sins are ever before God so that

she also lives under the wrath of God, as did Israel. In the case of the reprobate, this wrath is the punishment of God designed to destroy. In the case of the elect, this wrath is chastisement designed to correct and save. Even the holiest of men have only a small beginning of obedience. Sin follows and taints their lives daily. And their sins anger the Lord. Out of love He corrects them with the rod of chastisement. Certainly not all that they suffer is the direct result of some sin they have committed. God also sends suffering for them to grow spiritually. But every child of God suffers under the chastening wrath of God for sin. According to Hebrews 12:6, 8 the Lord chastens and scourges every son whom He loves and receives. Those who are without chastisement are not His sons.

In this context the Word of God speaks of numbering or counting our days.

To number your days means, first, that you count the days that you have lived. How old are you? How many days is that? Included in counting your days is that you take note of the trouble and sorrow that comes on account of sin.

Consider the sins of the fallen world in which we live and the terrible judgments of God's wrath upon them. How our society has developed in sin over the past several decades! What terrible punishment God's wrath has brought upon this sin! The cases of depression and numbers of suicides are growing at an alarming rate. Countless lives are ruined through addiction. Disease spreads through sexual promiscuity. Interestingly, God also punishes sin with greater sin, sin that brings greater and greater misery to sinful man. Marriages fail, homes are broken up, war between the races and nations breaks out and, worst of all, God brings man to the great shame of abounding in homosexuality. As we number our days, we must take note of how the Lord punishes the sins of the world in His wrath.

But in our numbering of days, we must above all consider how the Lord has chastened us for our own sins. It is necessary for the Lord to bring His chastening rod on all of us. And sometimes to teach us the seriousness of sin that chastening continues for a lifetime. Think how God chastened David for his sin against Bathsheba and her husband Uriah. The sword never departed from his house to remind David not to take sin lightly. In the numbering of our days we must take all these things into account.

But to count our days also means that you count how many days you probably have left in your life. The Lord can take our life at any time. But the norm is 70 to 80 years. How many of these years do you have left? As we count these, we see that our life is short and quickly

cut off. And soon we will stand before the Judge of heaven and earth.

We must number our days that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.

Wisdom is the ability to act according to reality so that we prosper. This is in distinction from foolishness, which is to ignore reality so that we flounder.

But we must be more specific. The reality with which we are confronted in this Psalm is God's wrath, which manifests itself in the brevity and misery of life. In that situation wisdom is to live in daily repentance, turning from sin unto God in Jesus Christ. This repentance involves a humble recognition of our sinfulness. Then there is a godly sorrow over sin, a sorrow that sin has offended God and done injury to the neighbor. Repentance also includes a confession of sin to God and seeking forgiveness in the blood of the cross. And finally, there is a life of grateful obedience to God in the power of Jesus Christ. This is wisdom. This is living in harmony with the reality of God's dealing with sin. This is the only way to escape God's wrath on our sins and enjoy the riches of His gracious blessing.

Foolishness is the opposite of this. Foolishness is to continue in sin without repentance, with the result that we either perish under God's wrath, which is the case with the reprobate, or we receive more stripes of chastisement until finally we turn from sin unto God.

Moses speaks of applying our hearts unto wisdom. More literally he speaks of having or obtaining a heart of wisdom. A heart of wisdom is a wise heart, a heart full of wisdom. Such a heart leads one to act wisely, turning from sin unto God in Jesus Christ. Do you have such a heart of wisdom?

The purpose of numbering our days is to obtain such a heart of wisdom.

We are so inclined to foolishness or a foolish heart. We live daily with the reality of God's wrath on mankind for its sin and God's anger with our own sin. Yet so often we are inclined to ignore it all to continue blissfully in our sinful ways. In verse 11 Moses points to this tendency, "Who knoweth the power of God's anger?" By the power of God's anger is meant God's anger as it brings misery to man's life and destroys him in death after only a few years. This is a rhetorical question. It emphasizes that very few see the connection between the brevity of life and God's anger on sin. They find trouble and sorrow. They experience the fleeting character of life. But foolishly they refuse to see this as God's wrath and judgment upon sin. And so the majority blissfully continue in their sinful way.

This is true also for many believers who stagger under the chastisement of God! The unbelief that every true believer still retains tends to blind him from seeing this reality. The chastening rod of God's love has laid many strips upon his back to correct him. But he will not acknowledge what God is doing. Instead of humbling himself before God in repentance, he may even rebel against God's dealing with him so that he increases in sin. What folly!

And so Moses instructs us to count our days so that we will obtain a heart of wisdom. To acquire a heart of wisdom requires that we count the days of our past, paying attention to the wrath of God upon the world and even upon us in His chastisement of our own sins. It also requires us to consider the days of our future. How few they are in number. And soon we will be required to give account of ourselves before the Judge of heaven and earth.

Teach us to number our days.

This is a prayer that the Lord teach us to number our days in such a way that we obtain a heart of wisdom. This was Moses' prayer for Israel. It must be the prayer of each of us for the church and for self.

To number our days correctly is something that the Lord must teach us. He teaches us through His Word. This is the Word brought faithfully from the pulpit on the Lord's Day. It is the Word brought to covenant youth in their homes and Christian schools. It is the Word that the elderly saints have come to know by experience and that they share with those less experienced in the church.

Pray to be taught.

In prayer turn to the instruction of God's Word.

In the power of God's Word so number your days that you may apply your heart unto wisdom.



Editorial

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

What shall we say about AD 2020?

It is better to trust in the LORD than to put confidence in man. It is better trust in the LORD than to put confidence in princes.

Psalm 118:8, 9

The year of our Lord 2020 was quite a year.

Momentous.

It was that politically.

It was that socially.

It was that ecclesiastically.

For many, 2020 was momentous in a very personal way.

Politically—in light of the presidential election, and what the results portend for the foreseeable future.

Socially—in light of the effects of the coronavirus upon life and society, with its resulting edicts of governors and bureaucrats touching every aspect of life from travel, to buying and selling, to the life of the church and worship itself.

Ecclesiastically—in light of the controversy stirring within our own churches and the disruption of unity

and oneness of mind on various issues, including doctrine. Issues and charges spilling over into our broader assemblies, issues that must be settled if we are to go forward in unity and at peace internally. And if not...?

And then there was the personal aspect affecting the lives of so many in 2020, the number of deaths of loved ones that touched the lives of many families in our churches this past year. Perhaps not so large an increase over former years, and yet it seems that way. A number of our emeritus clergy and wives taken to glory; in other instances, a number of beloved family members taken before their threescore years and ten; and seemingly, what remained of a generation of aged saints whose beginnings go back to the very birth of our denomination over ninety years ago. As my beloved widowed father-in-law, who marked his 90th birthday this year, stated recently, "All my friends are gone. All those with whom I served in consistory, all those with whom I was close here in the rest home. I am weary. It is time for me to go home too. Lord, give me the patience to wait."

Quite a year. Momentous. I think we all sense that. Where shall we start? Politics?

Facing the inauguration of a new administration (which, as time goes on, might better be labeled a ‘regime’), it is little wonder that we are uneasy as Christians—as biblically-committed Christians—a people committed to “We will obey God rather than men (and certain women in high places, as well),” that is, when righteousness requires it of us. Those newly elected into power, now controlling the whole of the U.S. Congress, show no sympathy to any biblical form of Christianity, nothing that magnifies any word of authority or Lordship over theirs.

A spineless, compliant Christianity they will tolerate and even use. We speak of a Christianity that is governed by the mantra, “Can we not all just get along, and be nice to each other? And we, as Christians, will show you how.” As if love for the neighbor is this: No one voices any disapproval of anyone else, but rather expresses approval, no matter what the lifestyle. “Of anyone else,” that is, except those who prick their consciences. Calling something evil or ungodly and unbiblical (displeasing to God) must cease. “We love you too much to express disapproval or warn you of the judgments of God on any behavior or unrighteous deeds and laws. After all, we all recognize that such behavior and desires are the inevitable results of genetics and environment. We are but helpless products of such.”

It is a ‘Christianity’ that knows nothing of a love for the neighbor rooted in a love of righteousness, which is to say, a love for God. Of biblical righteousness, and of warnings against unrighteousness that can only destroy a nation, a family, or an individual, this ‘love’ knows nothing. It is a love rooted in love for self and the approval of men, a being spared their scorn and animosity. The praise of those with status amongst the ungodly is what this self-love lives for and seeks, and that in the name of Christianity.

Such a compliant ‘Christianity’ those of the anti-Christian ‘spirit’ can approve and even use. And they will. It is much like the liberal news media and Democrats and how they behaved this past year. Every time a Republican voiced criticism of certain decisions of his party or with the President’s behavior, it was trumpeted on the headlines. Implying? “See, even these Republicans justify our agenda (basically a lawless one) and our despising of and hatred of this present administration and all that it stands for constitutionally. Anyone with any understanding and worth sees it our way.”

It is clear, a certain brand of Christianity will be tolerated and even publicly ‘eulogized.’ (I use the word purposely, because such a Christianity is ‘dead’ while

it speaks.) But the Christianity that dares continue to practice ‘discrimination’ will be publicly shamed and, in time, bullied into silence and more.

The word ‘discrimination’ looms large in our politically volatile society. It has become an evil word, like prejudice, bigotry, or racism—words of last resort to smear another when all other arguments and ability to refute the plain truth fail. For example, the fact that there was widespread ballot stuffing and irregularities in the swing states this past election, backed with video evidence, was dismissed with the charge of ‘racism.’ Because, those who dare challenge the legality of the election tabulations are obviously against the new truth: “minorities rule.” All such challenges are charged with being racially motivated. And then no matter what the evidence, what is ‘truth’ no longer has any bearing. Society has no place for such ‘racists.’

So with the word *discrimination*. Truth be told, it is a good word, and the simple truth is, we as believers are to discriminate. We are to assess right from wrong, truth from error, good from evil. And like Job of old we are to discriminate against the evil, against that which is unrighteous and those who promote it. As God pointed out to Satan, “Hast thou considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God and *esheweth* evil” (Job 1:8). “Esheweth” means to assess something as evil and displeasing to God, and then to shun it or avoid it. Something to be refused and condemned.

We have in mind the homosexual lifestyle, the gay-liberation movement, which, these days, is all the rage. And ‘rage’ is what governs the movement. They have been ‘discriminated’ against long enough. And they are straining at the leash to be loosed on the hunt for all and sundry that condemn their lifestyle. Especially for that brand of Christianity that insists on teaching their children that such behavior is wrong, sinful, falling under the judgment of God as visited upon Sodom and Gomorrah (and Pompeii).

We are called to discriminate against those who engage in or justify such a lifestyle. Not against their civil rights in society (as will be the charge), but in the way of condemning their lifestyle (and persons, if they will not repent) and forbidding them from membership in our churches or teaching in our schools.

In the name of righteousness we discriminate against such behavior and practitioners.

So far, that has been allowed and judicially upheld.

2020 indicates those days are coming to an end, not necessarily in 2021, but in the not-so-distant future. What 2020 made plain is that this rage of the LGBT movement now has the backing of the entertainment

and news medias. The media has become the “power behind the throne.” If it refuses to disapprove or condemn something—be it rioters and looters loose in the streets—but rather justifies them, the civil authorities themselves are rendered powerless to exercise authority to so much as protect property or prevent assault.

The news and social media has become the leviathan of evil. The LGBT movement has its full backing. Those who call their lifestyle ‘sin’ discriminate against them.

And we do. We, after all, will not even permit them to rent our sanctuaries for their ‘weddings’ and receptions.

Where does that leave those who would practice biblical Christianity?

As those guilty of discrimination, which today, by definition, is declared to be injustice and evil.

And add to that that this past year Rome’s pontiff, Francis I, went on record as informing his church (with the news media in attendance) it was time to begin approving same-sex “civil unions” and embracing these long-estranged ‘sons and daughters’ of the church. When that church which represents the Great Whore goes on record as officially approving the practice of homosexuality, the news media will trumpet it forth. And all other brands of Christianity will be condemned and denied any religious freedom or right of conscience. If even Rome sides with godless society on this matter, all other brands of Christianity have lost their legitimacy and claims of conscience.

When one reads how the Democrat party and the media have worked hand in glove over this past year, one sees ‘the handwriting upon the wall.’

Only in this instance it is the finger (the mark) of the Evil One, in imitation of the hand of the Holy One, pointing to the inevitable coming of the Antichrist and doom upon the righteous who remain upon the earth.

“Look upon my works, ye Mighty, and despair!” (*Ozymandias*, P. Shelly).

Indeed, when one looks at the anti-Christian forces coming to power these days, one could well despair. Those who are brazenly committed to unrighteousness and calling evil “good,” and good “evil” are having it all their way.

This past year’s election was a ‘watershed’ election.

When one considers that the whole academic world, whose universities produce those who teach the next generation, are solidly on board with this anti-Christian, anti-righteous spirit, there does not appear to be any hope of turning this Titanic around. The numbers of that “other” perspective continue to swell.

Politically, even the Southern states of the Bible-belt, are turning “blue.” For religious freedoms, that does not bode well.

What to do?

Well, the best advice I can give is, turn to Scripture and read a text like Psalm 118:8, 9 (above).

It is a most significant text. Simple, fundamental, and central.

Whether you are aware of it or not, by *seeming* coincidence, Psalm 118 and then verses 8 and 9 lie at the very center of our translated Bible as it is divided into chapters and verses.

There are 1,189 chapters in the King James. Psalm 118 is the 595th chapter. 594 precede it, 594 follow it.

And there are 31,174 verses in the Bible. Verses 8 and 9 of Psalm 118 are the 15,587th and 15,588th verses. Which is to say, the middle two. They repeat the same simple, but oh, such fundamental truth for the faithful while living on earth.

Better to trust in the LORD, than *any* man or prince you care to name.

Luther considered Psalm 118 his favorite Psalm. It was the Psalm he turned to most often in difficult times, when it seemed the whole of

Europe with its pope, prelates, and princes was against him, when it seemed that surely the small fire of the Reformation with its faithful remnant was going to be extinguished and stamped out.

Wrote Luther,

I fell in love with this Psalm especially. Therefore, I call it my own. When emperors and kings, the wise and the learned, and even saints could not aid me, this Psalm proved a friend and helped me out of many great troubles. As a result, it is dearer to me than all the wealth, honor, and power of the pope, the Turk, and the emperor. I would be most unwilling to trade this Psalm for all of them.¹

When that church which represents the Great Whore goes on record as officially approving the practice of homosexuality, the news media will trumpet it forth. And all other brands of Christianity will be condemned and denied any religious freedom or right of conscience. If even Rome sides with godless society on this matter, all other brands of Christianity have lost their legitimacy and claims of conscience.

¹ *Luther’s Works*, vol. 14, *Selected Psalms* III, Jaroslav Pelikan, ed. (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1968), 45.

Indeed, there are times when, despite our most valiant efforts, the ways of God seem to give wickedness and the unrighteous the upper hand. Why press on and expend all this energy? With all these forces arrayed against righteousness, and growing in power day by day, it seems for naught.

If only Trump had been voted into office again. Or at least, a Republican majority in the Senate. Then, all would be well. Or at least not so hopeless.

Would it? Perhaps it would have meant a few more years of keeping the ascendancy of unrighteousness in all its “Hideous Strength” at bay. But does the ultimate victory of righteousness and the defeat of evil and the forces of unrighteousness hinge on a man, on more men? On some “prince” of power and influence?

Think again. Not even if that man were another prince like King David. How often when confronted by Babylon, or Persia, and finally by Rome the remnant must have thought, “If we only had King David once again enthroned. Then Jerusalem could be restored as the seat of power, and the righteous would be protected and peace would once more rule.”

Not so. Do not forget it was exactly the sins of David the warrior and of Solomon the wise that brought about the division of the kingdom and the loss of even its earthly glory.

Put not your trust in man, nor any prince of men, no matter how powerful and influential they may seem. Not even the best of men.

No man can defeat and at last destroy all evil and give the everlasting victory to the Kingdom of eternal righteousness. And that is what we long for.

Put your trust in the LORD, which is to say Jehovah. He is the God of vow and promise, who, in an astonishing grace and in covenantal mercy has bound the glory of His Name to the salvation of His people and the triumph of His cause as it embraces His church, His Son’s beloved bride.

To forget His promises to us His people would be to deny Himself. It cannot be.

Trust Him. He is a God of His word. Take Him at His word, and go forward.

His ways are not our ways, but they are the path and course that will lead both to the ultimate defeat of the unrighteous and all their evil, culminating in the victory of righteousness.

Consider! The Red Sea is before Israel. Canyon walls are on either side. And Pharaoh with all his mighty host with naught but mischief in his heart comes thundering behind.

What was the LORD thinking? What indeed!

The sea opens before His Israel. They pass between the walls of water, trusting God to keep them walled. Which Pharaoh assaying to do was drowned. Egypt’s defeat, Israel’s safety and victory, all in one fell swoop.

Deep are the ways of God. They are like currents in the sea. Unfathomed and unknown (to man). But known to God are His will and works since the foundation of time and history.

Better to trust in Jehovah God than any man, don’t you think?

When has He and His ways ever failed His people and His cause of righteousness and truth?

He is not about to start now.

Righteousness will prevail for the righteous in the end.

The triumph of righteousness has been signed at the Cross. It has been sealed by the earthshaking event of our Lord’s resurrection.

And that no political party, no media, no puny man nor woman can alter, try as they might.

Facing 2021, let us take Psalm 118:8, 9, so central to Scripture and fundamental to the faith, and go forward without fear.

After all, consider who is in control.

Put your trust in the LORD, which is to say Jehovah. He is the God of vow and promise, who, in an astonishing grace and in covenantal mercy has bound the glory of His Name to the salvation of His people and the triumph of His cause as it embraces His church, His Son’s beloved bride.

To forget His promises to us His people would be to deny Himself. It cannot be.

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All around us

Rev. Martyn McGeown, pastor-elect of Providence PRC in Hudsonville, MI, currently missionary-pastor of the Covenant Protestant Reformed Church in Northern Ireland, stationed in Limerick, Republic of Ireland

A new secular America

Religious liberty under Trump

President Trump was and is certainly a controversial figure in the USA and across the world. However, what cannot be denied is his promotion of religious liberty. Whatever Trump's personal religious convictions might be (he grew up in liberal Presbyterianism under the ministry of Norman Vincent Peale, and has among his spiritual advisors prosperity-preacher charlatans such as Paula White), politically he favoured a robust defense of the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment.

One of his most significant Executive Orders was EO 13798, titled, "Promoting Free Speech and Religious Liberty." In that order, signed on May 4, 2017, President Trump directed federal agencies "to vigorously enforce Federal law's robust protections for religious freedom," stating that "all executive departments and agencies shall, to the greatest extent practicable and to the extent permitted by law, respect and protect the freedom of persons and organizations to engage in religious and political speech."

In response to EO 13798, then U.S. Attorney General (AG), Jeff Sessions, issued a "Memorandum for all Executive Departments and Agencies" on October 6, 2017. Former AG Sessions writes, "Except in the narrowest circumstances, no one should be forced to choose between living out his or her faith and complying with the law," elaborating on that fundamental principle in twenty subsections. For example, "the free exercise of religion includes the right to act or abstain from action in accordance with one's religious beliefs"; "the freedom of religion extends to persons and organizations"; "Americans do not give up their freedom of religion by participating in the marketplace, partaking of the public square, or interacting with the government"; "government may not target religious individuals or entities through discriminatory enforcement of neutral, generally applicable laws"; "government may not officially favor or disfavor particular religious groups"; and "government may not interfere with the autonomy of a religious organization." Sessions explains, "In general, a government action that *bans* an aspect of an adher-

ent's religious observance or practice, *compels an act inconsistent with* that observance or practice, or *substantially pressures the adherent to modify* such observance or practice, will qualify as a substantial burden on the exercise of religion," which, according to the memorandum, should be avoided. In addition, Sessions writes, "Once a religious adherent has identified a substantial burden on his or her religious belief, the federal government can impose that burden on the adherent *only if it is the least restrictive means* of achieving a compelling governmental interest."

Those principles were applied during Trump's presidential term. For example, the Trump Justice Department filed amicus briefs in defense of individuals and organizations. One example is Jack Philips, a Coloradan baker whom the authorities attempted to compel to make a cake celebrating a same-sex union. The "Little Sisters of the Poor," a Roman Catholic religious order, also benefited from EO 13798, for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) issued a rule on October 6, 2017, to grant religious exemptions to religious non-profit organizations and not only to churches. The Sisters were being sued under the Affordable Care Act, passed under the Obama administration in 2010, which required them (as employers) to provide health insurance that paid for contraception, which (as Roman Catholic nuns) violated their conscience. The Sisters faced a penalty of millions of dollars for non-compliance. When the case was finally settled at the U.S. Supreme Court on July 8, 2020, the Court decided that the HHS did have the authority to grant religious and moral exemptions, something that the State of Pennsylvania had vehemently opposed. In short, under Obama *nuns* were sued for not providing contraceptives to their employees, who are also nuns, while under Trump religious exemptions were made and applied.

A secular vision for Biden-Harris?

But what will a new administration—a Biden-Harris administration—do? Joe Biden is a Roman Catholic, while Kamala Harris is a member of the Third Baptist

Church of San Francisco (where Amos C. Brown, a liberal, civil rights and LGBTQ rights activist, has been the pastor since 1976). The issue, however, is not the personal religious convictions of politicians but their policy agendas. Neither Biden nor Harris have shown in the past any amendment of their liberal, legislative priorities because of religious scruples. Biden, for example, is personally pro-life, but aggressively pro-abortion and pro-LGBTQ rights in his politics. Harris seems aggressively pro-abortion and pro-LGBTQ rights both personally and politically.

One document, “Secular Democrats of America: Restoring Constitutional Secularism and Patriotic Pluralism in the White House,” presented to the Biden-Harris Transition Team by the Congressional Free Thought Caucus, gives us a possible clue as to their legislative stance. That document seeks a repeal of EO 13798, the dismantling of the DOJ Religious Liberty Task Force and the HHS Conscience and Religious Freedom Division (enacted under Trump), and the rescinding and replacing of the aforementioned DOJ memorandum, which, it is claimed, permitted too many religious exemptions to individuals and organizations from federal laws and regulations.

Instead, the document envisions a different, secular, pluralist America:

It is no longer enough just to champion the rights of minorities and marginalized communities or to promote inclusion and equality. We urge you to champion America’s original constitutional secularism and the separation of church and state as core governing principles that protect religious freedom for people of all faiths—and none at all. We implore you to help educate the American public by reasonably defining what religious freedom really means: that every American has a right to practice his or her religion without interference, but no religious group can impose religious dogma or orthodoxy on other citizens and other faiths and belief systems.

Perhaps that sounds good and reasonable in theory, but what does it mean in practice? First, the document opposes religious exemptions. Bills passed by the Congress should, write the Secular Democrats, “[demon-

strate] clearly the compelling government interest involved, and the damage to that interest that will occur if exemptions are granted.” In other words, bills should be litigation-proof so that religious people cannot claim exemptions from them. In keeping with this, former AG Sessions’ memorandum should be replaced with “a memorandum instructing all executive agencies to interpret religious freedom in such a way that protects

the separation of religion and government, prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion, and prohibits government funding of explicitly religious activities.” No longer should religious groups get the “benefit of the doubt.” For example, the Secular Democrats urge “the [appointment of] an attorney general to the Department of Justice who will support governors whose emergency declarations and/or executive orders require even handed universal re-

strictions on indoor gatherings, including at houses of worship, to help prevent the spread of COVID-19.”

Second, the document opposes the granting of funding to supposedly discriminatory organizations:

Taxpayer dollars should not be funnelled either to contractors or grantees that discriminate on the basis of religion, or to programs that promote a sectarian agenda, such as private religious schools, crisis pregnancy centers, and abstinence-only sex education.... The federal government should not do business with organizations or contractors that will use government funds to advance a sectarian agenda or discriminate against its employees or program beneficiaries on the basis of religion. If performing the duties of a government contract comes into conflict with the requesting grantee or contractor’s sincerely held religious beliefs, it can and should seek funding elsewhere.

When federal funding is made available to community or faith-based organizations to provide healthcare, that funding should go to organizations that will provide the services required, not organizations that will deliberately choose not to provide the full spectrum of services intended by the program and that will not serve all program beneficiaries equally.

Reverse all executive orders, rules, memoranda, and other actions that exempt faith-based organizations

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contracting with the federal government from non-discrimination requirements that apply to secular organizations, including employment discrimination.

Third, if federal funding is given to private religious entities, they must comply with the ethos of the (secular) federal government:

Any private schools receiving taxpayer funding, whether directly or indirectly, should be held to the same non-discrimination and accommodation requirements of public schools and expected to meet curriculum standards for secular subjects, including science and history.... If receiving government funds, religious schools should be required to teach curricula in accordance with national secular standards, particularly in areas such as the teaching of science.

An example of proposed legislation is HR 3114, “The Every Child Deserves a Family Act,” which would prohibit any child welfare agency receiving federal funding from discriminating against any potential foster or adoptive family on the basis of religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, or marital status. In other words, the federal government should aggressively enforce the rights of same-sex couples to adopt children, even if a religious group objects on religious and moral grounds.

Fourth, the Secular Democrats take aim at the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA), signed into law by President Bill Clinton in 1993:

While RFRA was intended as a shield for religious practice, it has become a sword to impose religious based prejudice. It has moved from permitting an individual to smoke peyote as part of a religious ceremony, to permitting a corporation with annual revenues in excess of half a billion dollars to deny female employees access to insurance that includes contraception. RFRA fundamentally privileges putatively “religious” actions over nonreligious ones.

The reference is to Hobby Lobby, a business owned by Christians, which successfully sued the federal government to gain an exemption from providing abortifacient drugs in its health insurance plans. “While the rights of Americans to worship freely is protected,

religion [should not be] treated as a license for corporations to burden the rights and lives of innocent third parties,” argue the Secular Democrats. They ask the incoming administration to work for the appeal of RFRA or, if not feasible, the passage of HR 1450, “The Do No Harm Act,” which would make it more difficult for a religious group to claim exemption from certain “non-discrimination” standards, such as employment, provision of goods and services, and the like.

Fifth, the document pushes for a more “inclusive” America: “[protect students from public] school-sponsored proselytizing,” “[teach an] accurate, evidence-based, secular curriculum rather than creationism in the schools;” “ensure that humanist and non-theist chaplains serve in each branch of the military;” practice a “judicious use of symbolism [in which the president and his administration] strive to lift up the values of pluralism and inclusion;” avoid the motto, “in God we trust,” in favor of the more inclusive *E Pluribus Unum*; and “[work] with Congress and Governors to advance a secular agenda at all levels of government, taking into account the current makeup of the federal courts and new, unfavorable precedents that [the new] administration will have to contend with,” for the Secular Democrats recognize that Trump

has transformed the federal judiciary in favor of constitutional conservatism.

In summary, it should come as no surprise that an influential section of the U.S. political class is hostile to religion. Even those who are religious, with a “private religious faith and a public constitutional faith,” as the Secular Democrats put it, make little effort to allow their faith and moral values to inform their legislative agenda. What secular humanists view as compassion, fair treatment, and even virtue (such as evolutionism, same-sex relationships, transgenderism, abortion, and the like), we Christians view as the promotion of wickedness. Inevitably, then, there will be a clash of worldviews. We must expect our Christian faith increasingly to clash with “the powers that be,” as the Antichristian kingdom draws nigh. That, too, should quicken our hope in the coming of Jesus Christ, our perfectly righteous King.

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When thou sittest in thine house

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

God's chastening and COVID-19

How is God chastening us during this time of the plague of COVID-19?

These are days of great spiritual lessons that we must soberly consider. It is amazing that this plague is worldwide. God is punishing the world for its ungodliness. What is the great sin of this world for which it is being so severely judged? The trouble with much of modern-day Christianity is that it does not even know what sin is any more. What is the greatest evil of this world? It is its ungodliness. This alone makes this world worthy of the just and holy judgment of God. Knowing God, the world does not acknowledge God, neither is thankful to God. Because of this, the wrath of God has come and continues to be poured out on this ungodly world (Rom. 1:18ff.). God will not allow this world to go without punishment.

COVID-19 is a sign of this wrath of God. Ungodliness is a very serious evil in the sight of God. No amount of so-called humanitarianism or human goodness is going to make up for the great wickedness of this world. The education, culture, and modernity of this ungodly world will not allow this world to escape. God is angry with the world because it openly and brazenly lives as if there were no God. God is angry with this world because of its pride, lawlessness, and covetousness (which the Word of God calls idolatry). God is angry with the world because of its adultery and fornication. God is angry with the world because of its destruction of God's holy institution of marriage. God is angry with the materialism of the world and all its boasting in riches. These sins and many more make the world worthy of God's judgment. If the world does not repent of these great and terrible sins, it will finally be destroyed in the great day of God's judgment. Even before the final judgment that will come upon this world, there are already now signs of His coming judgment. The wrath of God is already being poured out upon all of the ungodliness of this world. COVID-19 is a sign of the fierce and holy wrath that is being poured out on this ungodly world, a wrath that will lead to its eternal destruction.

With the same events by which God judges the ungodly world He also chastens His people. We are all in need of this chastisement. It is not true that those who are children of God will not be afflicted with the plague that is ravaging the whole world. This is a false teaching promoted by some churches in our land. Christians will suffer the judgments of God coming on this world. Some of us may even die because of COVID-19. There is a great difference between the judgment of the ungodly world and the chastisement of His beloved church. Judgment is for the destruction of this ungodly world. God chastens His people in love as our heavenly Father for our correction and salvation. "Whom the Father loveth he chasteneth" (Heb. 12:5, 6). Chastisement is often very painful. But it will not continue forever; it is but for a short time. Chastisement will serve for our eternal good and salvation. Therefore, we must submit to the Lord's chastening and be humbly ready to be corrected by it. We must believe in God's loving purpose in chastisement and learn the spiritual lessons God is teaching us by His chastisement. We fear and tremble before God's work in the world.

What are the spiritual lessons God is teaching us through the chastisement of COVID-19? God is teaching us that we must not glory in material things. We must not make material things the idols of our lives and let the pursuit of them consume all our time and energies. This is an insult to God who alone deserves our worship and service of thanksgiving. The things of this world will soon all pass away. They will not endure forever. Naked came we into this world and it is sure that we can take nothing with us out of this world (Job 1:21). If because of COVID-19 we lose our material things, perhaps our jobs and material possessions, we must not fear. God is teaching us by this plague to be ready to let go of the things of this world. If it is God's will that we lose even our lives, we need not fear nor despair but rather trust in God and glory in Him who is the hope of our salvation. God has prepared for us an eternal inheritance in heaven after we leave this present world. So many passages of Scripture admonish us

not to glory in riches. We must be delivered from the evil and foolishness of covetousness so that our hearts may be set on the eternal and glorious inheritance that Christ Jesus has prepared for us through His death on the cross and by His resurrection and exaltation.

We must not have an unholy fear about COVID-19. We must believe that our crucified and risen Savior is now exalted at the right hand of God. He is ruling over all things. Even the judgments that come upon this ungodly world are under His control. They cannot and will not hurt and destroy God's children. Christ rules over all these judgments for the realization of His kingdom and for our great good and salvation. The events of this world should not disturb us and cause us to be afraid. We must trust in and hope in our Lord now enthroned in the heavens and coming in glory for our final salvation.

When we experience God's judgments on the world, we must hear His call to be separate from this world and live holy lives in devotion and consecration to God,

so that we are not partakers of the judgments that He sends on this ungodly world for all its wickedness. The book of Revelation speaks of the plagues that God will send upon the earth before the end of this world. COVID-19 is very clearly one of these plagues. This should be obvious to all of us.

Our response to COVID-19 should be that we lift up our hearts, for our redemption is drawing ever nearer, nearer even than when we first believed (Rom. 13:11). God is chastening us as His people to teach us to be more eager and zealous in looking for the coming of the Lord. The Bible repeatedly exhorts us to do this. The Lord will not tarry forever. Rejoice with hope and longing for the blessed, glorious coming of our God and Savior for the final salvation of His church.

Could this blessed and glorious event take place even in our own lifetime, even before we close our eyes in death? Let us pray together with the true church of Jesus Christ: *Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly.*



Ministering to the saints

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

The elders' work of oversight: (3) Overseeing the offices

That the elders are called to oversee the worship services of the church we have noted. We turn now to another aspect of their work of oversight, namely, to oversee the ecclesiastical offices.

Election to office

The elders' oversight of the offices includes the choice of who may be in office and the work of putting them into office.

Our Church Order (CO) makes this clear in several places. Referring to the calling of a minister who has not yet been in office, Article 4 requires the minister to be elected (chosen) "by the consistory and the deacons." Article 5 says that "Ministers already in the ministry of

the Word, who are called to another congregation, shall likewise be called in the aforesaid manner by the consistory and the deacons." Article 22 reads, "The elders shall be chosen by the judgment of the consistory and the deacons." And Article 24 states, "The deacons shall be chosen, approved, and installed in the same manner as was stated concerning the elders."

The elders are not to carry out this aspect of their work alone. First, because the minister is an elder, he will be involved in this work with them. Second, the Church Order articles require the deacons to be involved also. The deacons are not only involved in choosing the deacons, but also in choosing the elders and ministers. Also not to be overlooked is the role of the congrega-

tion, which is permitted to choose its officebearers from a nomination that the consistory and deacons have together prepared.

Yet the Church Order emphasizes that this is particularly the work of the elders, for it speaks of the “consistory, with the deacons,” rather than the “deacons, with the consistory.” The office of rule does not act alone or independently of the other offices, but it does lead the way.

Two things belong to this aspect of the work of the body of elders with the deacons, according to Articles 4, 5, 22, and 24. First is the *election* (when the consistory presents a single slate to the congregation for its approval) or *nomination* (when the consistory presents a double slate from which the congregation elects) of the officebearers. Because officebearers must be “suitable persons” (Art. 22), and “faithful men...chosen according to the rule prescribed by St. Paul in his epistle to Timothy” (Belgic Confession, Art. 30), someone in the church must judge that the men nominated or chosen are qualified for office. The body of elders with the deacons is the body to make this judgment.

Members of the congregation still have a say in three respects. First, they may direct the elders’ attention to suitable persons (CO, Art. 22). Second, they may protest a nomination when a member believes a nominee is not qualified. Third, they must and do “approve” (the word of the CO) the elders’ choice and nomination. This approval is usually *tacit*, that is, silent. By not protesting the nomination, and by voting from the nomination, the congregation has approved it. But although the congregation approves, the elders have led the way in the matter.

Second, the elders oversee the *installation* of the officebearers. In part, they oversee it because it happens at a public worship service. More particularly, they oversee it by ensuring that the installation is conducted properly, that a fitting word of exhortation is given to officebearers and to congregation (so the CO refers to “the form for this purpose,” Arts.

4 and 22), and that the new officebearers take their vows with sincerity and reverence.

This aspect of the work of elders, with the deacons, often takes place only once a year. But it remains an

essential aspect of the elders work. As watchmen on the walls of Zion, they are to ensure that all who serve in office are faithful men.

This aspect of the elders’ work is an advance over the work of their Old Testament counterparts, the kings of Israel. The kings did not choose who would be kings or priests; God specified that the kings must be from the tribe of Judah and the sons of David. God stipulated that the priests must be Levites and the high priest a descendant of Aaron. And God raised up prophets, apart from the kings’ choosing. The kings did expel unfaithful men from office (I Kings 2:27), but did not choose who would be in office.

Two New Testament realities explain why the elders lead the way in an area in which the kings did not. First, in the New Testament God does not clearly specify which particular men are to hold office in Christ’s church. Rather, He specifies which *kind* of men. The church, led by the elders, is to determine exactly which men are that kind. Second, Christ is now exalted at God’s right hand; He rules His church by ruling in and through the church. So He assigns the church the calling to put her own men into office. The calling comes to the entire congregation. The elders, representing both the congregation and the ruling work of Christ, lead the way.

Work of the offices

Another aspect of the elders’ oversight of the offices involves overseeing the *work* that these do. Article 23 of the Church Order reads: “The office of the elders... is to take heed that the ministers, together with their fellow-elders and the deacons, faithfully discharge their office.”

First, this means ensuring that the officebearers *take up* their work, including every essential aspect of that work. Any officebearer who neglects his work, or any essential aspect of it, the elders must admonish. If the minister, though busy in his work, neglects or refuses to do some aspect of the work, he must be admonished. If the deacons collect the alms but refuse to meet with any who are in need, the elders must admonish them. And if any elder or elders do not

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Second, this includes judging that the officebearers do their work *well*; the Church Order refers to the *faithful* discharge of one's office. It is possible for any officebearer to be busy in his work, even in every aspect of the work, but not do that work well. Then also, the elders must admonish.

In overseeing the work of the offices, the elders may advise both pastor, fellow elders, and deacons regarding how to do their work better or more faithfully. When the elders consider an officebearer not to be doing his work faithfully, and have evidence of it, the elders may even “put teeth” in their advice. One who has not been in any way incapacitated but neglects the duty of his office, after repeated admonition, is worthy of deposition.

Two errors the elders must guard against as they oversee the work of the offices. First, they must not confuse the *oversight* of the work of the offices with the *doing* of the work of the other offices. In other words, if the elders judge any body of officebearers not to have done its work well, the elders may not *do* that work in place of the other. They are instead to insist that the other do his work better.

Second, the elders must understand the difference between “oversight” and “micromanaging.” To approve the work of the minister, deacons, and fellow-elders does not require the body of elders to agree with every word the officebearers ever said, every action taken, and every reason used. True, the elders may point out what they consider to be unwise actions or comments, and what they judge to be mistakes that other officebearers made. But the oversight of the work primarily means that the elders judge that the men have been busy in their work and done it faithfully.

One way, but not the primary way, in which the elders carry out this aspect of their work is by conducting *censura morem* (that is, mutual examination) before the Lord's Supper, as required by Article 81 of the Church Order. At this occasion, officebearers have opportunity to “exercise Christian censure among themselves, and in a friendly spirit admonish one another with regard to the discharge of their office.” Consequently, *censura morem* must be viewed and practiced not just as a formality, but as a significant and weighty event. However, that the deacons join in at *censura morem* indicates that this is not the primary way by which elders oversee the offices.

The elders must face the question concretely and regularly in their meetings. Pastor's report, elder committee reports, and reports of the deacons' meeting come to the monthly consistory meetings. Approving the work of the officebearers when they report it is an opportunity to manifest this

oversight. But every several months or so it is good to step back and look at the big picture, and to evaluate if in any respect the pastor, elders, and deacons can do their work more faithfully.

Taking this aspect of their work seriously, the elders will evaluate themselves. They oversee not only the other offices but their own as well. Pastors and deacons will be encouraged to heed the admonitions of the elders in this regard, when they see that the elders diligently oversee themselves as well.

It is not possible that the elders oversee the offices without also overseeing the officebearers directly and personally. This part of the elders' work we will examine next time.

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Go ye into all the world

Rev. Daniel Kleyn, missionary of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America, stationed in Manila, Philippines

Reformed versus Arminian missions (3) Different Methods

Previous article in this series: May 15, 2020, p. 384.

In previous articles we considered two significant differences between Reformed and Arminian missions, namely, the differences regarding the *objects* of mission work and regarding the *goals* of mission work. We now consider a third, namely, differences in missionary *methods*.

Arminians are generally results-oriented in missions. They are interested in numbers. Their purpose is to persuade as many individuals as possible to accept Christ. They view it as their duty to stop sinners in their tracks, turn them around, and thus keep them from ending up in hell. I have often spoken with such missionaries, and it does not take long for their focus on numbers to come to the fore. They very quickly speak of how many individuals have been converted, how many churches have been planted, and so on.

This goal directly affects their methods. Basically, they will do whatever it takes to get people to accept Christ. For that reason, moral persuasion occupies a prominent place in their methods. The unbeliever must be persuaded to give his life to Christ. And because they view conversion as man's work, man is able to persuade and man is able to be persuaded.

In order to persuade someone to choose Christ, Arminians use human methods rather than God-ordained, biblical methods. Anything goes: eloquent and passionate speeches, the testimonies of worldly celebrities, emotionally stirring songs, powerful music, artistic shows, dramatic performances, and whatever else will move a person. If these are successful in drawing crowds and in convincing men and women to choose Christ, the methods are perfectly legitimate. But if these methods do not work well, then it is time to look for and try a different one. The basis for determining and judging the validity of any missionary method is simply its effectiveness. The end justifies the means.

The missiologist, John M. L. Young, rejects this idea when he states:

But we must remember that the door to the kingdom of God is not opened by the power and persuasion of

human reasoning alone, nor by any other human effort. ... [M]en are not argued into the kingdom of God; they are born into it.¹

A driving force behind this Arminian approach is their idea that the missionary (and also the individual believer in witnessing) is responsible for the salvation of those to whom he speaks. But this puts missionaries (and believers) under duress. They must be the ones to persuade people to believe in Christ so they are saved. And if the person to whom one speaks does not believe and is not saved, it is the fault of the missionary. He is now guilty before God if that person goes to hell.

One of the terrible consequences of this Arminian approach is that the missionary and the church members live with the guilt of failing to save certain people. This is something I have personally witnessed in those who have come from an Arminian background—until, of course, the Reformed truth delivers them from that bondage. But until they are delivered from this lie, they carry and live with an unbearable burden.

Another serious consequence is the effect that this approach has on worship. Because the focus is to draw crowds and to stir people emotionally to heed the altar call, anything at all is acceptable in worship. Any semblance of true worship is hard to find, and true preaching of the Word is usually nonexistent.

But what about Reformed missionary methods?

In contrast to the above, the Reformed method is simply this: preach the gospel. The Scriptures call us to do so. In obedience to that, we faithfully declare the Word of God on the mission field and in all our evangelism labors.

Cornelius Hanko summarizes it in these words:

Never can it be emphasized too strongly that mission work is preaching of the Word. Never may it be replaced by anything else. So often, emphasis is laid upon

¹ John M. L. Young, *Missions: The Biblical Motive and Aim* (Pittsburgh, PA: Crown and Covenant Publications, 2007), 24.

hospitals and clinics and schools rather than on the preaching. And that is definitely wrong. True enough, the needy must be helped, the sick must be cared for, and the children must be taught. But this is all secondary and must supplement the preaching rather than replace it.²

Reformed churches and missionaries are not (should not be) interested in numbers, nor in methods that will supposedly produce great results. We are simply interested in obedience to the command of Christ. He requires that missions be the preaching of His Word to all the nations of the earth. We therefore preach Christ and Him crucified. We glory in nothing else but the cross of Christ. That cross is the only hope of salvation, and thus the preaching of that cross is the only hope of any positive fruit in missions. We preach Christ, and in that preaching we set forth the call of the gospel, “Repent and believe.”

The Scriptures are perfectly clear concerning this. Those who are called and ordained to the work of a minister or missionary must go out into all the world and preach the gospel (Matt. 28:18-20). They are charged to preach the Word (II Tim. 4:1-2). They are to preach nothing but Jesus Christ and Him crucified (I Cor. 2:2, 9:16). They must be unashamed of the gospel, for the preaching of that gospel is the power of God unto salvation (Rom. 1:15-16).

And this is all that we need to do—simply proclaim the truth. We leave the rest to God, for He is the One who saves. We do not have to convince people to become believers and to become saved. We do not have to persuade anyone to accept Christ. For it is not of man who runs or wills, but of God who shows mercy (Rom. 9:16). We simply plant the seed, and God uses it to gather His elect.

Concerning missionary methods, Prof. D. Engelsma states it well when he says:

There is a great concern today over methods of evangelism. Men try to discover what will make evangelism effective. The danger is not only that they resort to unbiblical methods, but also that they fall back, in the matter of missions, upon their own resources—their own wisdom, their own strength, their own inventions. The method of evangelism is preaching Jesus Christ and Him crucified; and that which makes this effective is the Holy Spirit.³

As far as method is concerned, therefore, the Reformed church and her missionaries understand and keep always in mind that we are simply instruments in the hands of God. We do not need to convert people. We do not have to change any hearts. We do not need to come up with persuasive methods to accomplish any of this.

This does not mean we may do the work of preaching and missions carelessly. Certainly not. We must be very careful in handling the Word of God and in declaring it to others. We must preach and teach the Word clearly, understandably and effectively, and apply it wisely to the people in their God-given situations in life. But that is all we need to do. Whether on the mission field, or in our worship services, or in our daily interaction with others, the Reformed method is simply to speak the Word of the gospel of God.

As we faithfully do so, God is pleased to use it, by His sovereign power, to bring His elect to conscious faith and salvation in Christ. He sees to it that the Word is effective. He, by His Spirit, uses it to bring the elect (usually as families) into covenant fellowship with Himself. He does what He alone can do. Salvation is accomplished, not by human might or power, but by the Spirit of Jehovah (Zech. 4:6). The power of mission work is not man (not the missionary), but the Holy Spirit.

Our mission work must be done without concern for numbers. The Reformed church ought simply to continue spreading the gospel regardless of the amount of fruit. “So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase” (I Cor. 3:7). Reformed missions is not man-centered, but God-centered—both in its theology and in its practice.

Our mission work must also be done in humility, for we are but weak and sinful means whom God is pleased to use to fulfill His will to save His chosen.

Our mission work must be done in confidence. We may do it with the assurance that God will have the victory and, thus, also all the glory. He will gather unto Himself every member of Christ. God knows exactly for whom Christ died, and where each of them is. He therefore directs His church in the spread of the gospel.⁴ The result will be that all who are ordained unto eternal life will indeed believe, be saved, and be glorified—not by men, but by God. We can therefore engage in this work with the confidence of victory.

The Scriptures give us a powerful incentive for faith-

2 Cornelius Hanko, *Missions, or I will Build My Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Sunday School Mission Publishing Society of the First Protestant Reformed Church), 19-20.

3 David J. Engelsma, *Evangelism and the Reformed Faith* (South Holland, IL: Evangelism Committee of the Protestant Reformed Church, 1994), 18.

4 See Canons of Dordrecht, Head I, Article 3 and Head II, Article 5.

ful mission work. It is this: when the gospel of the kingdom has been preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations, then the end will come (Matt. 24:14). Missions is the great task of the church that God uses to bring about the return of Christ. “We cannot change the appointed day, but our work is necessary as the appointed means to fulfill the requirement to take the gospel to all His elect before He returns.”⁵ And when all

the elect have been saved, then the mission task of the church will be finished and Christ will appear in clouds of glory to take us home.

What an incentive! May it spur us on to carry out this work faithfully, and even sacrificially, with a view to the salvation of God’s covenant people and the glorious return of our Savior.

5 J. Young, *Missions*, 13.



Church and state

Mr. Brian VanEngen, member of the Protestant Reformed Church of Hull, Iowa, is a practicing attorney

Supreme Court decision on gatherings during COVID-19 is a boost for religious liberty (1)

State and local governments have imposed restrictions on gatherings, including church and religious gatherings, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The regulations vary greatly from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, from suggestions for COVID-19 safety protocols to restrictions limiting the number of individuals who can gather to worship. Many have been concerned that the government has used the COVID-19 pandemic as a pretext for overreaching and violating the separation of Church and State, as well as infringing on the right to Free Exercise of Religion under the First Amendment to the United States Constitution.

The facts of the case

The State of New York is one of the jurisdictions that imposed harsh restrictions on those gathering to worship, and those restrictions were recently evaluated by the U.S. Supreme Court, in the case of *Roman Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn, New York v. Cuomo*.¹ The Supreme Court issued an injunction prohibiting the state from enforcing its restrictions. This case makes for very interesting study for a couple reasons. First, it provides an opportunity to review the current trend in constitutional law as it relates to the freedom of the church from state control, which has been a developing area of jurisprudence in recent years. Some commentators have

opined that this ruling is the most significant religious liberty ruling in 30 years.² Second, it provides useful instruction for our churches, both as we deal with restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic and as we deal with other issues of government regulation on our worship services, which are likely to become more and more frequent in the near future.

First, we will look briefly at the facts of the recent Supreme Court ruling. In response to the COVID-19 outbreak, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo issued an executive order restricting activities in certain “zones” within the state. In red zones, no more than 10 persons could attend a religious service, and in orange zones, the attendance was capped at 25. The Supreme Court case involved challenges to these restrictions brought in two separate cases, one by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn and another brought by Agudath Israel of America, which is an Orthodox Jewish community. These two religious groups challenged the restrictions, arguing that they violated the Free Exercise clause and imposed especially harsh restrictions on houses of worship compared to secular activities.

The Court found that the groups were entitled to injunctive relief, which is a court order barring the government from enforcing the restrictions. The Court noted that both religious groups had complied with all public health guidance, had implemented addition-

¹ *Roman Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn, New York v. Cuomo*, 592 U.S. ____ (2020).

² Ian Millhiser, “Religious Conservatives have won a revolutionary victory in the Supreme Court,” *Vox*, December 2, 2020.

al precautionary measures, and had operated without a single COVID-19 outbreak. The Court found that under these circumstances, the restrictions violated the “minimum requirement of neutrality” to religion. The court noted that in the “red zone,” churches were limited to 10 persons, while “essential businesses” could admit as many people as they wished. The Court noted that the disparate treatment was even more striking in the “orange zones,” where churches were limited to 25 persons, but even non-essential businesses could decide for themselves how many people to admit.

This decision was a 5-4 decision, with Chief Justice John Roberts siding with the Court’s liberal wing, but mostly on procedural grounds. Chief Justice Roberts reasoned that, by the time the injunction was issued, the zones had changed so that the parties in this case were no longer affected. Justice Breyer, joined by Justices Sotomayor and Kagan, dissented, arguing that there was no need for the “extraordinary remedy” of an injunction, since the Second Circuit Court of Appeals had not had an opportunity to rule on the issue yet.

The Court’s decision to provide immediate relief with an injunction demonstrates that the Court believed worshippers would suffer a serious infringement on rights if the ability to gather for worship were abridged for even a short time. The majority found that the public would suffer irreparable harm from the restrictions, stating that

If only 10 people are admitted to each service, the great majority of those who wish to attend [services] will be barred. And while those who are shut out may in some instances be able to watch services on television, such remote viewing is not the same as personal attendance.³

The Court acknowledged that the pandemic presented unprecedented issues, and responded by stating, “But even in a pandemic, the Constitution cannot be put away and forgotten.”⁴ The majority’s recognition of the importance of personal attendance at worship services is noteworthy. The majority clearly put a much higher value on the free exercise of religion than the minority, who were more concerned by the public health threat. Concurring opinions by Justices Neal Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh noted that the restrictions not only infringed upon religion, but also discriminated against religion in contrast to secular activities.

The legal framework

The *Brooklyn Diocese* case is a continuation of a trend in Supreme Court jurisprudence in recent years, and the changing composition of the Court seemingly served

to continue that trend. The decision likely would have been 5-4 in favor of the state of New York if Justice Amy Coney Barrett had not replaced liberal Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. The concurring opinions in support of injunctive relief by Justices Gorsuch and Kavanaugh demonstrate that these recent appointees also feel strongly about protecting religious freedom, and the freedom to worship in particular. Justice Kavanaugh replaced Justice Anthony Kennedy, who often voted with the liberal wing of the court.

Although the composition of the Court may have had an effect on this particular decision, the Court has been trending towards greater protection of religious liberty for several years, even before the recent changes in justices. Previously, in the case of *Sherbert v. Verner*, the Supreme Court had stated that the government could not enforce laws that imposed a “substantial infringement” on a person’s religious beliefs unless such infringement was justified by a “compelling state interest.” While the phrase “compelling state interest” is somewhat vague of itself, in legal parlance it generally meant the law was subject to strict scrutiny, and must be the “least restrictive means” to achieve an important government purpose. Laws discriminating based on race are subject to this standard, and most laws subject to such strict scrutiny are struck down.

However, the standard applied to free exercise cases did not seem to be as rigid as that applied to discrimination on other bases, such as race. Studies demonstrated that courts applying the strict scrutiny standard were much more likely to strike down laws limiting free speech or discriminating on bases such as race than they were laws putting burdens on religious exercise.⁵ Then in 1990, the Court issued its ruling in the case of *Employment Division v. Smith*,⁶ which held that “neutral laws of general applicability” were valid, even if they imposed on an individual’s religion. In other words, as long as a law applied equally to religious and secular entities, it would be upheld, even if it limited religious freedom. Members of both political parties were so concerned by this that Congress passed the Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993 (RFRA) to restore the strict scrutiny standard of *Sherbert*, at least with regard to federal laws. The RFRA did not apply to laws enacted by state governments, such as the COVID-19 gathering restrictions in the *Brooklyn Diocese* case.

5 Adam Winkler, “Fatal in Theory and Strict in Fact: An Empirical Analysis of Strict Scrutiny in the Federal Courts,” 59 Vand. L. Rev. 793 (2006).

6 *Employment Division, Department of Human Resources of Oregon v. Smith*, 494 U.S. 872 (1990).

3 *Roman Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn*, at 5.

4 *Roman Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn*, at 5.

While this line of jurisprudence developed in regard to individual religious freedom, a separate line of cases governed religious freedoms in the business context. The 1982 case of *United States v. Lee* held that “when followers of a religious sect enter into commercial activity as a matter of choice, the limits they accept on their own conduct as a matter of conscience and faith are not to be superimposed on the statutory schemes which are binding on others in that activity.”⁷ The general concept seemed to be that businesses and corporations do not have religious freedoms, and whatever beliefs the owners or managers of the business may have, any protection of those beliefs did not extend to the business.

This attitude towards business and religious freedoms changed dramatically with the landmark case of *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby*,⁸ which we have analyzed in greater detail previously.⁹ As we noted at that time, this case is significant in that it broadly recognized the exercise of religion as an activity that pervades all aspects of life, and also extended the protection of the

Religious Freedom Restoration Act to corporations and businesses. It should be noted that this still only provided protection from religious infringement by the federal government and federal laws.

This leads us up to the present day and the *Brooklyn Diocese* case. This case is a significant development in religious liberty law for two reasons. First, the Court granted an injunction prohibiting a State from enforcing its restrictions. This is significant because, as previously stated, the RFRA only applies to laws and actions of the federal government. The court also seemed to focus its attention on the fact that secular entities were exempted from the restrictions while churches were not. At first blush, this may seem to be similar to the “neutral laws of general applicability” standard of the *Smith* case, which is the position taken by Justice Breyer in voting to uphold the restrictions. However, the majority in the *Brooklyn Diocese* seemed to indicate that if there are any exemptions for secular entities, the burden is on the State to prove that religious organizations should not also be exempt. If this is, in fact, the majority’s position, it could have far-reaching effects, as many laws have exemptions of some sort.

In our next installment of this subject, we will look at the implications of this trend in religious liberty jurisprudence for our churches.

7 *United States v. Lee*, 455 U.S. 252, 261 (1982).

8 *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby*, 573 U.S. 682 (2014).

9 Brian VanEngen, “The Supreme Court Says Corporations Can Exercise Religion,” *Standard Bearer*, October 1, 2014.

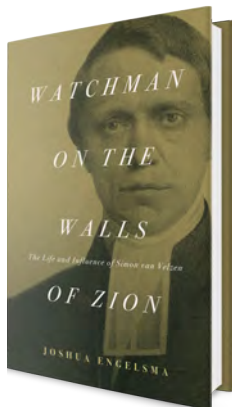


Bring the books...

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

Watchman on the Walls of Zion: The Life and Influence of Simon vanVelzen, by Rev. Joshua Engelsma. Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2021. 224 pages. \$26.50, hardcover. [Reviewed by Rev. Stephen Regnerus]

Simon vanVelzen. Who is the man? Many readers likely are unfamiliar with him, for the name Simon vanVelzen is not a household name. And if we should know the man, then how are we to view him?



Many historians consider him to be an imbalanced, even radical man, while few hold him up as a wise and balanced warrior. What ought our assessment to be? Was vanVelzen a courageous servant who is to be commended for his unbending defense of the truth, or was he a stubborn fellow who is to be criticized for continually arguing and refusing to heed advice from those around him?

Such are some of the difficulties one faces when writing a biography on a controversial historical figure; such difficulties Rev. Engelsma is to be commended for capably handling in his biography, *Watchman on the Walls of Zion: The Life and Influence of Simon vanVelzen*. The reader who was previously unaware of vanVelzen

should not be afraid to pick up and read the book; the book is neither daunting nor boring. You will find that Engelsma's recounting of vanVelzen's history is clear, engaging, and even moving at points. You will rejoice with vanVelzen as he graduates from seminary, receives a call into the ministry, and marries the love of his life. And you will weep with the man as he endures persecution, is rejected of his friends, and buries his wife after only a few years of marriage. You will become acquainted with a renowned preacher and affectionate seminary professor, and you will stand in awe of God's work of defending and developing the truth through the work of this Dutch patriarch.

Perhaps you are one who is already familiar with Simon vanVelzen, but who has dismissed the man as having an "inborn lust for polemics" and being "unyielding, obstinate, and domineering" (207). Then I encourage you to read the book with a spirit of humility and hear Engelsma's detailed and careful portrayal of this church father. The author recognizes that church history is oftentimes complex and controversial; it is not as "clear cut" as we might want it to be. But at the same time, Engelsma makes a compelling case that vanVelzen "was more balanced than most assume, and when he did enter the polemical arena, he did so out of a conviction for the truth and a love for the churches that he served. He was one of the most,

if not *the* most, influential leaders in [the] reformation movement" of the Netherlands (3).

I encourage you to read Engelsma's book, for it is a recounting of *your* history. If you are Dutch, this is your history because it is the story of what happened in the Netherlands. If you are Reformed, this is your history because it is the story of Calvinism as it was defended over against Arminianism. And if you are Protestant Reformed, this is your history because this is the story of the Afscheiding, from which you trace your spiritual heritage.

Finally, I urge you to read *Watchman on the Walls of Zion* because it is encouraging. I do not know that it was the specific purpose of the author to encourage the flock as he wrote this book, but it was my experience that I was nurtured and encouraged as I read through it. God's church is always reforming, and reformation can be painful, especially as God prunes sinfulness from among us. Engelsma's vivid retelling of the trials, persecution, and personal losses of Simon vanVelzen serves as a gentle reminder to us that this is not the first time that God's people have suffered for the sake of the truth. We suffer, but we suffer not alone. "Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses...let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith" (Heb. 12:1-2).



News from our churches

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

Trivia question

Of the ministers currently serving in the Protestant Reformed Churches, four have last names beginning with the letter "S." Can you name them? Answer later in this column.

Minister activities

Rev. D. Holstege (PRC missionary to the Philippines) received and considered the call to Kalamazoo PRC. Rev. Holstege announced on December 20 that God had led him to decline the call and to remain a foreign missionary to the Philippines. Rev. Holstege, along with his wife and children, left the Philippines Wednesday, December 16, for his missionary furlough in the U.S.

(until June 30, 2021). According to Doon's bulletin (calling church), "During this time they plan to live in the Grand Rapids, MI area while Rev. Holstege spends the bulk of his time preparing for future seminary courses he will teach." May the Lord grant them a time of refreshment while here. While Rev. Holstege and family are in furlough, Rev. J. Flores, Rev. V. Ibe, and Rev. L. Trinidad will fill the pulpit of Providence PRC along with Rev. D. Kleyn and Rev. R. Smit. Rev. D. Holstege will continue to teach catechism for Provident via Zoom.

Rev. A. Spriensma (PRC home missionary) received the call to Cornerstone PRC (Dyer, IN). On December 20 Rev. Spriensma announced his acceptance of that call. We are thankful with the congregation there that

God has supplied for them an undershepherd! Rev. J. Engelsma (Doon, IA) received and considered the call to Wingham PRC. On December 20, Rev. Engelsma announced that God had led him to decline that call and to remain in Doon.

Prof. R. Dykstra and his wife Carol arrived in Singapore in mid-December for their extended stay to assist our sister church there, Covenant ERCS. After arrival, they had to quarantine for two weeks. We pray that they might be used of the Lord for the good of our sister church.

From Northern Ireland and Ireland: Rev. A. Stewart continues to minister the Word to the saints in Ballymena after another recent lock-down. They are back to worshiping in person, for which they and we thank the Lord! Also, missionary-pastor M. McGeown continues to bring the gospel to the saints in Limerick.

A faithful servant of the Lord, Rev. Jason Kortering was taken by God to his eternal home on December 20. Rev. Kortering was ordained in 1960 and served congregations in Hull, IA (twice), Hope, Walker, MI, Hope in Redlands, CA, Loveland, CO, and Grandville, MI along with holding the position of minister-on-loan to Singapore. Rev. Kortering became emeritus in 2002 after 42 years of service in our churches.

Denominational activities

Classis East convened Wednesday, January 13 with a weighty agenda. Classis West will meet next in March, now at Peace PRC in Dyer, IN.

Young people's activities

The young people of Randolph, WI PRC hosted a singspiration on January 10. All were invited for an evening of praise to God through voice and instrument. A collection was taken to defray the cost for the young people of the congregation going to the upcoming PR YP's convention. Refreshments followed in the church basement.

Congregational news

A new boiler system was installed in Hudsonville, MI PRC in early January.

School activities

The Eastside Christian School online auction is scheduled for February 10.

Trivia answer

The four active ministers whose last name begins with the letter "S" are: Rev. Justin Smidstra (First PRC of Holland, MI), Rev. Richard Smit (missionary to the Philippines), Rev. Audred Spriensma (Cornerstone PRC of Dyer, IN), and Rev. Clayton Spronk (Faith PRC in Jenison, MI). And Rev. James Slopsema who is retired, but still very active too. More trivia next time.

Encouragement for the new year

And therefore our soul beats no retreat from fear at what is to come, even when presently the new century is ushered in, because our heart knows, that that same God who was King in the century that went by, shall also be what He is in the century that comes, and in that century too He shall reveal Himself as God Almighty. Years hasten on, centuries come and go, but our God remains the same, in whose hand the heart of kings is as the rivers of water, and with whom the nations are counted as small dust of the balance and as a drop of a bucket.

Abraham Kuyper, from "I Am That I Am,"
in *Keep Thy Solemn Feasts*

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

Announcements

Resolution of sympathy

The Council and congregation of Loveland PRC, Loveland, Colorado extend our Christian sympathies to Sharon and Dennis Griess and Joshua; Justin and Heidi Griess and their children; Derek and Ginelle Griess and their children; and Jaycen Klamer in the death of their father, grandfather and great grandfather, **Rev. Jason Kortering** who was taken home to see Jesus, and to join the triumphant church in glory, on Sunday, December 20, as the church here below was gathering for worship. We thank God for Rev. Kortering's many years of faithful labor, including the six years here as our pastor. May God comfort his wife and family in the words of our Savior promised to His faithful servants in Matthew 25:21: "Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy Lord."

Rev. Steven Key, President
Eric Solanyk, Clerk

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 in Grand Rapids, MI 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.

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.

Reformed Witness Hour

reformedwitnesshour.org

Rev. R. Kleyn

February 7—The Gospel According to Mark
Mark 1:1

February 14—The Voice Crying in the Wilderness
Mark 1:2-8

February 21—The Beginning of Jesus' Public Ministry
Mark 1:9-13

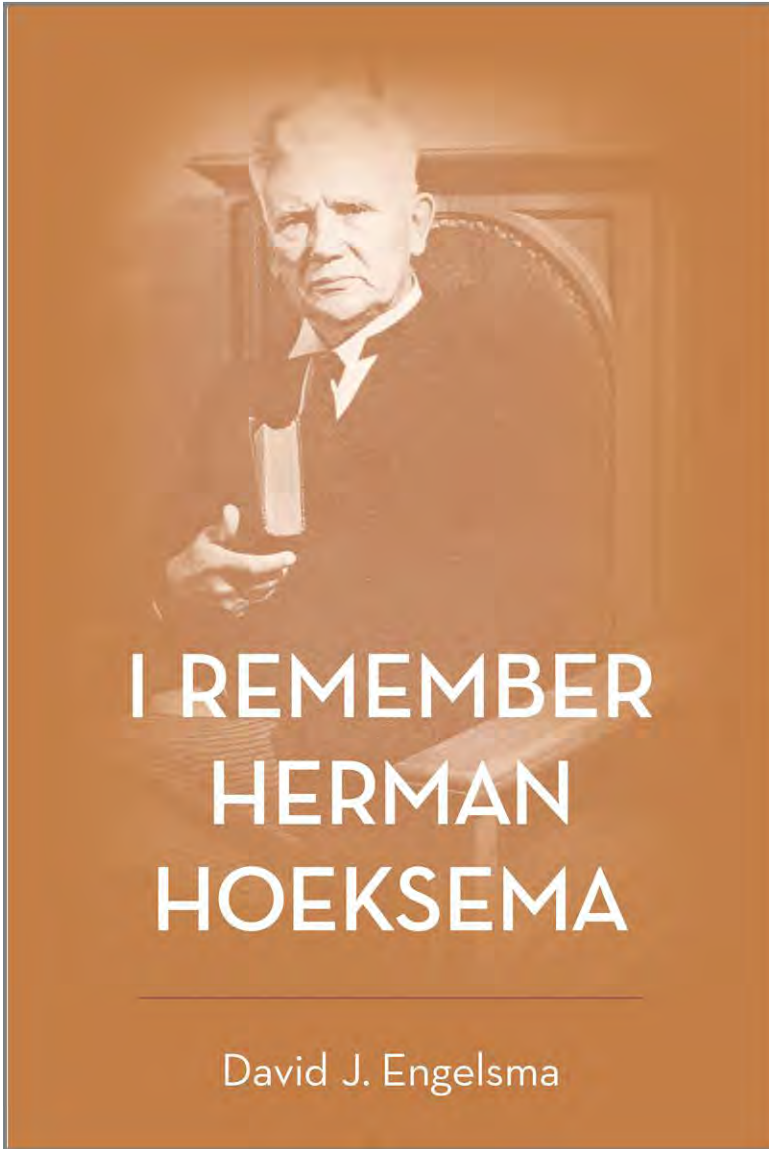
February 28—The Messiah Comes Preaching
Mark 1:14, 15

Announcements continued

Classis West

Classis West of the Protestant Reformed Churches will meet in Peace PRC, Dyer, IN (please note change of venue) 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 Peace's consistory.

Rev. J. Engelsma, Stated Clerk



I REMEMBER HERMAN HOEKSEMA

David J. Engelsma

I Remember Herman Hoeksema consists of Professor David J. Engelsma's memories of Herman Hoeksema. Engelsma grew up hearing Hoeksema preach and was Hoeksema's student in the Theological School of the Protestant Reformed Churches.

This book was originally published as a series of articles for young people in *Beacon Lights* magazine. The intent of the articles was to show something of the man whom many know only as an author and theologian.

Retail: \$9.95 | Book club: \$6.47 / \$6.96
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