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Worthy is the ascended Lamb

Rev. Michael DeVries

Schism: Doctrinal questions

Prof. Barrett Gritters

The state of theology

Rev. Nathan Decker

Watch your mouth (2)

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*Refresh: Embracing
a Grace-Paced Life
in a World of
Endless Demands*

Mrs. Cherith Guichelaar



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Contents

Meditation

- 363 Worthy is the ascended Lamb
Rev. Michael DeVries

Editorial

- 365 Schism: Doctrinal questions
Prof. Barrett Gritters

Letters

- 368 Question on Witsius
369 Questions on the two thieves

All around us

- 370 The state of theology
Rev. Nathan Decker

Search the Scriptures

- 372 Jonah's prayer (1) (Jonah 2)
Rev. Ronald Hanko

Taking heed to the doctrine

- 375 Assurance and good works (3)
Prof. Ronald Cammenga

Strength of youth

- 378 Watch your mouth (2)
Rev. Joshua Engelsma

Bring the books...

- 380 *Refresh: Embracing a Grace-Paced Life
in a World of Endless Demands*
Mrs. Cherith Guichelaar

News from our churches

- 382 Mr. Perry Van Egdom



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Meditation

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

Worthy is the ascended Lamb

And when he had taken the book, the four beasts and four and twenty elders fell down before the Lamb, having every one of them harps, and golden vials full of odours, which are the prayers of saints. And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation; and hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth.

Revelation 5:8-10

George F. Handel's magnificent oratorio, *Messiah*, concludes with the powerful song of praise, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain." The entire choir, including soloists, join in singing praise to the Lamb. The lyrics for this last song in the *Messiah* are taken from this fifth chapter of the book of Revelation. How beautifully this chapter sets forth the great glory and the blessed purpose of Christ's ascension into heaven.

The context explains that John beholds in the vision the throne of God and the book held in the right hand of Him who sat on the throne. The book or scroll is written on both sides and has seven seals. A strong angel sounds forth a challenge throughout the entire universe and to every creature, "Who is worthy to open the book and loose the seals thereof?" And John wept much because no one was found worthy upon earth, or in the highest heavens, or even in the depths of hell.

But an elder of the church triumphant immediately comforted the apostle by calling his attention to the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, a Lamb as it had been slain. The Lamb came forward and took the book out of the right hand of Him who sat upon the throne. And the rest of the chapter is one grand hallelujah to God and to the Lamb, because the Lamb was worthy to take the book and open it. "Thou art worthy!"

Do we see the significance of this as far as the ascension and exaltation of Christ are concerned? For us as the people of God in the midst of the trials and tribulations of this present time; for the church of Christ even as Satan rages against her, knowing his time is short;

especially as we see the end of the ages hastening upon us—it is of unspeakable comfort to know that our ascended Lord and Savior is worthy. He is ruling over all, directing all things unto the salvation of His people and the coming of His kingdom.

This book or scroll, with its seven seals, is obviously of great significance in the vision. The seals must be loosed or broken before the book can be opened and read. Evidently, it is so constructed that each seal must be broken in order, and as each seal is broken a new section of the book can be read. But, of course, the important question is: what is written in the book? Without a doubt the book contains "things which must shortly come to pass" (1:1); "things which must be hereafter" (4:1). This is what God purposed to reveal to His servants, notably here to His servant John. The book contains the counsel of God with regard to all that must take place from the ascension of Christ till the kingdom is fully realized and perfected in the new heavens and the new earth.

The book is given to the ascended and glorified Christ. He is worthy! It is given to Him, not only so that He can read it and be aware, in His human nature, of what is yet to take place in history. Certainly the fact that the book is sealed indicates that the content is secure and unknown to all except God who is seated upon the throne. And the fact that there are *seven* seals would show that the content concerns the full and perfect realization of the kingdom and covenant of our God.

In addition, in light of all that follows in the book of Revelation, it is clear that when the seals are opened things begin to happen. That the Lamb is found worthy to open the book means that Christ receives all power to develop and to complete the kingdom and covenant of God. Christ now receives power and authority to control and direct all history to that end. He is able to control even all forces of darkness that rise against God's kingdom in this present dispensation.

So we see in chapter six that, when the Lamb opened the first seal, the white horse with its rider appears and

runs its course through the earth. When the second seal is broken, the red horse with its rider goes through the earth to take away peace and to kill with the sword. And in the scheme of the book of Revelation, the opening of the seventh seal ushers in seven trumpets, the seventh of which brings forth seven angels with seven vials full of the wrath of God. All of these things Christ causes to take place as He opens the seals of the book. Breaking seal after seal, Christ brings to pass all that must come to pass unto the salvation of the church and the bringing in of the glorious kingdom of God.

No wonder heaven breaks out in praise and adoration of Him who sits upon the throne and of the Lamb! The four beasts or creatures, representing the redeemed creation, and the twenty-four elders, representing the church, take the lead in acknowledging the worthiness of the Lamb to bring the kingdom of God to perfection. They fall down before the Lamb, acknowledging Christ's dominion. Each one of them has a harp and a golden vial (bowl) full of odours (incense) representing the prayers of the saints. The harp in Scripture represents the prophetic office (cf. I Sam. 10:5; I Chron. 25:1-3; Ps. 49:4). The vials of incense represent the priestly office, and the text itself explains that the incense or odours are the prayers of saints, which was the calling of the priests to present in devotion to God. Our prayers express our love and devotion to our God, the God of our salvation.

They sing a new song. Not now simply a song of praise and adoration to the Triune God of heaven and earth, the almighty Creator and Sustainer of all things; but this new song focuses directly on the Lamb, and through the Lamb to Him who sits on the throne. The Lamb that has been slain, ascended and exalted, now holds the book with its seven seals. They sing, "Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof." Christ will accomplish all that must be done. He will obtain the ultimate victory, establishing the kingdom of God in the glory of the new creation.

But this new song is then a song of redemption! Christ is the Lamb, the Lamb as it had been slain. His cross is on the foreground in this song, His atoning sacrifice for the sins of those given Him of the Father. The reason He is worthy is that He was slain and has redeemed us to God by His blood (v. 8). This new song glorifies the Lamb for His work of redemption. The cross is the legal basis for His glorious exaltation and for the right given Him to cause all these things to come to pass that God has decreed for the realization of His kingdom. And thus, at the same time, this song magni-

fies the amazing grace of God who gave His only begotten Son to be slain upon that cross. Salvation is of the Lord! As the passage demonstrates, every knee must bow and every tongue must confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

This new song is then a song of victory. It declares that the Lamb has made the saints to be kings and priests unto God and that they reign upon the earth (v. 10). We, as His people, are already a kingdom in principle. The kingdom of God has been established within us spiritually already now. And the full realization of the kingdom is certain. For the Lamb has taken the book and is even now opening the seals thereof. The beasts and the elders are able to speak as if everything were already accomplished. Already Christ has made them priests and kings. Already they and, in principle, we also reign with Him over all things! As His priests, we more and more consecrate ourselves and all that we have unto His service. As kings in Christ, we rule our members and possessions unto His glory.

And this new song becomes ours: Worthy is the Lamb! A seven-fold praise is rendered unto Him—"to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing" (v. 12).

What comfort this heavenly perspective of the ascension of Christ affords us! The psalmist David had prophesied of it, "The LORD said unto my Lord, sit thou at my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool" (Ps. 110:1). How wonderful to live in the assurance that our Savior has such power and dominion at God's right hand. It is He who loved us unto death who holds all things in His hands. Everything that happens comes to pass under Christ's direction as He breaks the seals in perfect wisdom. He sees to it that the judgments of God are called out with the blasts of the seven trumpets and that they are poured out with the emptying of the seven vials. And it is all directed unto the full salvation of His beloved bride, the church, and the coming of the kingdom, and the glory of our God.

Even those things that would fill our minds with dread—tribulation, famine, pestilence, earthquakes, the reign of the antichrist—these too come by His appointment and are under His control. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Not one of His people, redeemed by His blood to be a king and priest of God in the new creation, shall be separated from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord! Even as His church must pass through many troubles and trials, all is well for her and her future glory is assured.

Let us too fall upon our knees before the Lamb, the

ascended and exalted Christ of God. Worthy is He! Let us serve Him with gladness and zeal as His priests and kings. Worthy is He! Let us flee unto Him with all of our troubles, fears, and sorrows. Worthy is He! His ascension and glory will assure us of our glory when the things that must shortly come to pass have all been executed by Him.

Handel's oratorio, *Messiah*, concludes with a powerful "Amen." The "Amen" goes on and on, echoing back and forth from the choir, some 138 times. It confirms that the Lamb truly is worthy. The Word of God that has been sung is true. All these things shall truly and certainly be! Thanks be to God!



Editorial

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

Schism: Doctrinal questions

In recent months, a new discussion of an old question is taking place among some in the Protestant Reformed Churches. The fundamental doctrine of total depravity is the issue, and alleged error regarding this doctrine becomes another source of contention. In the present atmosphere of suspicion, an alleged denial of total depravity becomes further "evidence of apostasy" in the PRCA and another reason for division.

But rather than allowing the discussion to bring forth that fruit, let it produce the fruit of new commitment to study Scripture and the confessions and be strengthened in our faith. This "affliction" can be for our profit. Such is not only possible, but what we pray for daily.

The question: Is the Christian totally depraved?

The question is not whether the non-Christian is totally depraved. About that there is no doubt. Rather, the question is whether *I*, a regenerated child of God, am totally depraved. Is that label to be used for me, a Christian? In this answer we must be clear and distinct.

When I teach catechism to the youth, I always instruct them, "If someone asks whether you are totally depraved, do not answer with a simple 'yes' or 'no.' Always explain your answer carefully because you do not know what the questioner means."

On the one hand, the question could mean, "Are you—a Christian—dead in sin and slave to the devil? Are you blind to spiritual things, deaf to the Lord's voice, unable to walk in any of God's commandments, an enemy of God, incapable of any good...and is that *all* you can say about yourself—as a Christian?" If that is the question, then the proper answer is "No."

But the question could mean something very different. It could mean, "Do you still have an old man, sinful flesh in which dwells no good, a corrupt nature about which you can say 'depraved and only depraved'?" If that is the question, then the proper answer is "Yes."

To the one the answer is "no" and to the other "yes" because they are different questions.

In my experience, this has been a perennial question, ever since my days in seminary when students would debate it. But discussion of it does not need to be contentious as long as we ask the question carefully, answer biblically with clear distinctions, and listen to one another. Then, when the Word of God is open and the confessions are at hand, the matter is not so difficult.

The regenerated believer's present corruption

Those who want immediately to say "yes" to the question (Is the Christian totally depraved?), point to the present and ongoing sinfulness of the Christian. And rightly so.

In one versification of Psalm 51 we sing: "I am evil, born in sin." A generation ago, in an attempt to deny the *present* depravity of Christians, some Reformed Christians wanted to change the song to "I *was* evil..." If we are honest with our own experience, we know that is a serious mistake, which is why we do not object to singing, "A mighty stream of foul transgression prevails from day to day..." (Psalter #419, from Psalm 65). From us, redeemed and renewed Christians, a foul stream of sin issues forth.

Believers sing that because the Bible teaches it. Apos-

tle Paul, as a regenerated Christian, says, “I know that in me, (that is, in my flesh) dwelleth no good thing” (Rom. 7:18). He confesses, “I am carnal” (7:15). This is why, a few verses later, he says, “O wretched man that I am” (7:24). Not “I was” but “I am.” I am carnal; I am wretched.

The explanation for this carnality is the presence in every Christian of the “old man” of sin (Rom. 6:6; Eph. 4:22; Col. 3:9). Our new man is what Christ provides us in our second birth, in regeneration; our old man is what our parents provided us in our first birth. Ephesians describes this old man as “corrupt according to deceitful lusts” (4:22). Nothing more can be said about our old man than “corrupt.” For this reason, the old man must be daily put to death, or put off as a change of old clothes. In Galatians Paul speaks about the ongoing war between the flesh and the spirit (5:17). Until we die and our old man is abolished, the Christian lives with the painful and sad reality of his old man, the flesh.

This biblical testimony explains why the Reformed confessions can speak of the *believer’s present* corruption, and in the most severe ways. The Heidelberg Catechism confesses that the Christian battles against “corrupt inclinations of the flesh,” and has a “corrupt nature against which he has to struggle all his life long” (LDs 16, 43). He is “still inclined to all evil” (LD 23). For this reason, we must “all our lifetime learn more and more to know our sinful nature” (LD 44), “so that we may deeply humble ourselves” (LD 45). “Depravity always cleaves to us” (LD 51). We are “so weak in ourselves that we cannot stand a moment; and besides this...our own flesh cease[s] not to assault us” (LD 52). There is no lack of clarity in the Catechism.

Also the Belgic Confession is clear and powerful. Article 15 teaches that the “corruption of the whole (human) nature” is a “hereditary disease wherewith infants themselves are infected in their mother’s womb” and “produceth in man all sorts of sin....” Since the Roman Catholic church taught the error that baptism did away with our sinful nature, the confession clarifies: man’s “vile and abominable” nature is not “by any means abolished or done away by baptism, since sin always issues forth from this woeful source.” Stop a moment to examine your own heart. Do you understand your sinful nature? Confess with the apostle: I am that woeful source. The vile and abominable nature is mine. It is my old man, my sinful nature, my flesh. “A sense of this corruption should make believers often to sigh....”

The Canons of Dordt echo this confession of the Christian’s present depravity. We are delivered from the

dominion and slavery of sin, but “not altogether from the body of sin and from the infirmities of the flesh” (V.1). How is this explained? Our children derive a “vicious nature” from us believing parents as by “propagation” (III/IV.2). As the Canons come to a close in Head V, our confession becomes especially poignant. We confess that “the body of sin” produces “daily sins of infirmity” and mar our best works with “spots.” Therefore, we have “constant matter for humiliation before God...for mortifying the flesh more and more... and for pressing forward to the goal of perfection” when we will “at length be delivered from this body of death.” The “remains of indwelling sin” are shameful. For the Christian, presently.

Depravity, however, is not the only thing a Christian has to confess about himself. He not only has an “old man.” He is also a “new man.” Denial of this is denial of Scripture and the Reformed creeds.

The regenerated believer’s present goodness

Marvel of marvels, when God begins to apply *to* and work *in* the elect child of God what Christ earned *for* him, he becomes a “new creature.” “Old things are passed away, behold, all things are become new.” Christ is now in him and he is “in Christ” (II Cor. 5:17).

The marvelous changes that take place include these, each of which could take an article to explain: 1) He is not dead in sin, but alive in Christ (Eph. 2:1, 5). 2) His old, hard heart is removed, and replaced with a heart of flesh (Ezek. 36:26). 3) His will—that is, his power to wish and desire—before stubborn and enslaved to sin, is now good, pliable, free (Rom. 7:15-19: “to *will* is present with me”). 4) His mind is “renewed” and therefore can understand spiritual things (Rom. 7:25; 12:2). 5) His affections are again clean (Gal. 5:18-25; Col. 3:2). 6) Not to be forgotten is that the Christian is restored in God’s image (Col. 3:10; Eph. 4:24). And because the image of God was man’s original goodness, redeemed and renewed Christians must be described again as “good.” It is the goodness of God Himself. 7) Thus, the believing Christian does good. Once again, he is able to will and to do what is truly good (Phil. 2:12, 13; see also Ps. 34:14; 37:3, 27; Matt. 5:44; Gal. 6:10; etc.). Risen with Christ, Christians “seek the things above” (Col. 3:1).

To put this all in very practical terms, the believer says: I love God. I love my neighbor. I do not love God as I ought to love Him, but I love Him. My love for my neighbor is woefully weak, but I love him. God does not love my neighbor *for* me. God does not love Him-

self *for* me. By His marvelous renewing work in me, I love Him and I love my neighbor.

As clear as the Reformed creeds are about the believer's present corruption, as we have seen, they are even more clear about the believer's present goodness.¹

In its opening and familiar Lord's Day, the Heidelberg Catechism has me confess that God works in me such that I am "sincerely willing and ready to live unto Him" (LD 1). Though by nature I am "incapable of doing good and inclined to all evil," the exception to this inability is regeneration, by which I am now capable (LD 3). As partakers of Christ's anointing, I "fight against sin and Satan with a free and good conscience" (LD 12). The "corrupt inclinations of the flesh...no more reign in me." Instead, I "offer myself unto Him a sacrifice of thanksgiving" (LD 16). Twice, Lord's Day 24 speaks of "*our* good works." Lord's Day 26 teaches that by the Holy Spirit Christians lead "holy and unblameable lives" and Lord's Day 33 that "with love and delight I live according to the will of God in all good works." Thus, I begin to live "not only according to some, but all the commandments of God" (LD 44). Finally, the Heidelberg joins the other creeds by describing this work of God in and through the believer as progressing, increasing, growing, "more and more" (for two examples see Lord's Days 26 and 44).

The Belgic Confession teaches that the believer is "capable in all things to will according to the will of God" (Art. 14). Faith is fruitful in the believer to the "practice of" good works, which works "are good and acceptable in the sight of God." Then, as though to make the point emphatic, the article says three times: "we do good works... we do good works...the good works we do."

What these two creeds say clearly enough, the Canons of Dordt says with a power and clarity that no one who reads them can gainsay the goodness of the renewed believer.

Read Head III/IV.12-16 so that you can make this personal confession with the fathers of Dordt: God powerfully illumines my mind by His Holy Spirit, that I may rightly understand and discern the things of the Spirit of God. He pervades my inmost recesses; opens my

closed heart and softens my hard heart. His regeneration of me is a work most powerful and most delightful, not unlike creation or the resurrection from the dead. He infuses new qualities into my will, which before was dead but is now alive. He makes my will good, obedient, and pliable. He activates and strengthens my will so it brings forth the fruits of good actions. My will is not only activated by God but becomes itself active. So, I am permitted to say that I believe, I repent, and I love my Savior by virtue of that grace received. Wonder of wonders, my will is no longer bound, but free.

So marvelous is this wonder work of God that the new man is victorious over the old. I do not endure a life-long stalemate. "Sin shall not have dominion over you!" (Rom 6:14).

Conclusions

This is the confession of a Reformed Christian: In my old man, my flesh, I am corrupt and only corrupt. But I have not *only* an old man and flesh. I am a new creature in Jesus Christ. Thus, if you ask me, "Are you totally depraved?" I answer: "In my flesh, yes, for I confess with Paul that, in me, that is, in my flesh, dwells no good thing." I experience that and know that about

Thus, if you ask me, "Are you totally depraved?" I answer: "In my flesh, yes, for I confess with Paul that, in me, that is, in my flesh, dwells no good thing." I experience that and know that about myself. But I will add to the answer: "If you ask about me in my *entirety*, no! Christ dwells in me and has changed me, restored me in God's own image, and I am not permitted to say about His goodness in me, 'evil and only evil'."

myself. But I will add to the answer: "If you ask about me in my *entirety*, no! Christ dwells in me and has changed me, restored me in God's own image, and I am not permitted to say about His goodness in me, 'evil and only evil'."

Second, as Reformed believers, let's use the language of the Scripture and the creeds when discussing the important questions about man's present condition. The creeds are an important court of appeal in our discussions. Of course, Scripture is our final authority, but as we discuss the meaning of a doctrine or of any passage, go to the creeds. As confessing members of a Reformed Church, we swore that we believe what they teach. As officebearers, we are bound to them. Sadly, some well-intentioned Christians make statements that betray a very serious ignorance of the creeds. Let us take this discussion as a call from God to become well versed in Scripture and our Reformed confessions.

Third, as Christians, rejoice in these beautiful truths.

On the one hand, I willingly embrace the knowledge of my present depravity. 1) It humbles me, and every day

¹ See also, e.g., the Westminster Confession of Faith (IX, XIII, XVI).

furnishes me with reasons to be more humble. Insofar as I am *not* humble, I betray the sad truth that I do not know myself (or the Scripture) very well. “In me, that is, in my flesh, dwells no good thing.” So I need Jesus Christ every day and I love Him for His grace to me, sinner. 2) Knowing my present depravity puts me on my guard against myself. There is a source of such evil in me that I must be terrified of my own potential to sin shamefully. 3) Knowing my present depravity is a safeguard against despair: when I find such terrible thoughts in my mind, such ability to sin horribly, I do not conclude that I must not be a Christian. Rather, I remember Paul’s warning not to allow sin to reign in me (Rom. 6:12) and then re-

mind myself of the deliverance that yet must come when this old man is abolished by death.

On the other hand, I embrace the knowledge of God’s good work in me through Christ’s Spirit. This is reason for greatest joy. Rescuing me from my sin and death, He not only forgives me, but He also gives me a life and joy incomparable to any other. I will not fail to recognize this work of Christ *in* His people. I will not dishonor this “new creation” that He made me to be, any more than I will dishonor His first creation of the heavens and the earth. I will live in the victory that is mine through Christ. Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Rom. 7:25)

Letters

Question on Witsius

Dear Editors,

Is there not a major contradiction between Witsius (*Standard Bearer*—“Still relevant”—*Dec. 15, 2020, p. 127*) and what we confess as Protestant Reformed believers? Witsius’ writings are put forward by Rev. Koole as a relevant solution to our doctrinal struggle. I do not think so. Among many of Witsius’ problem statements, one stands out in summary: “Whence it is, that by how much one is more holy, by so much he is the more acceptable to God.” In direct contrast, we believe and confess that we are acceptable to God not on account of our own works or worthiness, but only on account of the satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, who Himself is our righteousness before the judgment seat of God. In Him we have complete holiness.

Even though Rev. Koole writes, “We will let the reader reflect upon what Witsius wrote above and consider how orthodox one finds these statements to be,” he leaves the reader with the impression that this statement can be orthodox or unorthodox. At a minimum he should either condemn the statement or prove that it’s true and relevant to the current issues in the churches. Please clear up this major contradiction between truth and error for all the readers of the *Standard Bearer*.

In Christ,
Wes Koops
Holland, Michigan

RESPONSE:

Be assured the statement of Witsius you bring to our attention is not one I commend or approve of, not as it

is worded, concluding with the phrase “by so much more he is *acceptable* to God.” When it comes to our being accepted by or acceptable to God, that can be and is only and ever in Christ Jesus, based on His atoning work. Our works never, not even the best of them, have any standing with God when it comes to our being acceptable to Him. That is only in and because of the Beloved. But I included it in the assertions I quoted as listed by Witsius’ to avoid being charged with being selective when it came to Witsius’ statements, ignoring those statements and responses to the antinomian assertions of which we would not approve. Because the statement as it stands (as worded) is in error, I did not expand on that particular proposition when I turned to Witsius’ explanation of his various phrases. Reflecting back, it would have been better that I had called attention to it and stated that, as worded, the statement is in error.

You will note that I find the statement objectionable due to “the wording,” that is, due to the use of the word “acceptable” as it is found in the translation (of the Latin original). The use of that word raises issues with the whole statement. So, regardless of Witsius’ brief explanation that followed a few pages later, I offered no commentary. Looking back, I should have at least stated, “With this assertion, translated as it is, we cannot agree. As it stands, it is in error.”

That said, from Witsius’ explanation that follows a case can be made that, while the word used is translated “acceptable,” what Witsius meant was, “By how much one is more holy, by so much more he is *pleasing* to God.” And that is not objectionable. There are those of the saints who in their spirituality and consistent holiness are more pleasing to God than others. In

fact, a believer himself may at one point of his life be living more pleasing to God than at another. I say this may well be what Witsius meant, because later in explaining the short assertion, he states, “Further, since God cannot but love himself, he also *delights* in that which is like him[self]; and the more of his image he discerns in anything, the more he *delights* in it” (p. 177, emphasis added). If by that explanation, Witsius meant merely to state that the more one is committed to living in holiness unto God and is consistent in that, the more pleasing he is to God (the more he, as a child of God reflects who his Father and Lord is), the statement could stand.

The Lord certainly calls us to growth in holiness and to consistency (to diligence) in pursuing godliness and resisting (eschewing) evil and temptations in this life. And He delights when it is so. Such pleases Him. This is something that can be and should be emphasized in preaching with its persistent call to the life of godliness. Not only is the preaching to comfort sin-proned saints that there is forgiveness full and free in the cross, but it is also to face every member with the question, “Where are you at in your spiritual life and development? More and more earnest in the pursuit of holiness with a disciplined diligence, or just spiritually drifting along, finding scant time for your daily devotions to the neglect of your spiritual life and your witness to Christ? If the latter, you are not pleasing God. Wake up. Start seeking God and following His precepts with the single eye, and put away your double mindedness!”

Do not forget, the Catechism itself speaks of holiness according to a scale. Lord’s Day 44 refers to the “holiest of men,” though even such fall far short of the perfection required, as they daily acknowledge. This variation of holiness of life is discernable from any study of Bible history (to say nothing of our own knowledge of fellow saints). Consider Abraham in comparison to Lot, Samuel in comparison to Eli, Joseph in comparison to his own sinful and yet saved, believing brothers. One could go on. God Himself says concerning Job, “Hast thou considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect [a spiritually mature] and an upright man, one that feareth God, and esheweth evil?” (1:8). None like him, though he was certainly not the only believer living at the time. The three friends must have been children of God, or they would not have been his friends. But they lacked the degree of holiness displayed by Job. Of Job, God Himself spoke highly. Not so of his friends as they gave their miserable assessment of things.

There are saints who come to the end of their lives and are saved as brands pulled from the fire (Jude 23),

much like Lot who vexed his righteous soul due to his lack of spiritual wisdom and his many foolish choices. Such lives serve as warnings not to emulate, lives of weak, anemic Christians, vexed with various sore consequences for self and often for one’s generations as well. And then there are those whose lives are exemplary, who die in wonderful peace, sinner-saints numbered with the wise because they knew their own susceptibility to sin and who daily sought and found the grace to live and grow in holiness, saints whose lives were certainly more pleasing to God than that of others. If that was what Witsius meant to say, I can agree.

But the word found in Witsius’ assertion as it is translated is, “more *acceptable*.” That word has connotations we cannot approve if one is speaking of being acceptable to God. Such a statement would be promoting error, and is one we should not use. It is a word to be reserved for our standing before God in Christ, whose atoning sufficiency alone can make us and our works acceptable to God. Looking back, it would have been better that I had pointed that out to avoid any misunderstanding, rather than letting it stand without comment.

The statement as it stands, as worded, is not an orthodox statement, and not one to be used in the preaching, regardless of Witsius’ explanation. I thank the brother for pointing this out for clarification and correction.

Cordially in Christ,
Rev. Kenneth Koole

Questions on the two thieves

Dear Prof. Gritters,

I refer to your editorial in the *Standard Bearer* April 1 (vol. 97, no. 13) on “Schism: Doctrinal Issues.”

Concerning good works, I fully agree with you that we do not swing from one extreme of upholding good works to the other extreme of undermining good works. Our proper understanding of good works ought to be as mentioned in Philippians 2:13. It is God who works in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure. We are saved unto obedience and good works. None of us can claim any merit for obedience and good works.

However, I do not think it appropriate to accrue the two extremes of the two thieves on the cross: 1) The left one representing those who uphold good works; 2) the right one representing those who undermine good works

These associations could be misleading and confusing.

In Luke 23:43, Jesus told the thief on His right, “To-day thou shalt be with me in paradise.” What outcome could we then draw about the thief on the right? To

what extent could we spiritualize the two thieves on the cross?

Daisy Lim
Covenant ERC, Singapore.

Dear Professor Gritters,

I have some questions about the April 1, 2021 editorial in the *Standard Bearer*, titled “Schism: Doctrinal Issues.” I agree that there are often two extreme false doctrines, and the truth is found in between them. I also agree that the truth is between the ditches of legalism and antinomianism. But I do not believe that the analogy of Christ crucified between two thieves, each representing a different extreme, is an appropriate analogy to make.

I believe that the truth taught by Christ’s crucifixion between two thieves is the doctrine of election and reprobation, and that the elect of God are worthy by nature of the same condemnation as the reprobate. Both malefactors were justly condemned, as confessed by the penitent thief: “And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss” (Luke 23:41). But one thief was chosen of God unto salvation. The fundamental difference between the two men was not that each man held to a different extreme doctrine, but that Christ died for one and not the other. As a result, the one remained impenitent and mocked Christ, saying “If thou be Christ, save thyself and us” (Luke 23:39), but the other was brought to see his salvation, to rebuke the other, and to confess Christ, calling Him “Lord,” and asking Him to “remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom” (Luke 23:42). Is the truth of election and reprobation the primary takeaway we should have of the fact Christ was crucified between two thieves?

There are two possibilities for what the analogy is. Which of these two analogies is made, or is there an alternative?

The first possibility is that the two thieves represent two extremes of doctrine in general, so that this concept can also be applied to the extremes of legalism and antinomianism. If this is the case, I do not agree that the two thieves represent two extreme false doctrines or that we should use the two thieves to explain two extreme false doctrines. This is because one thief held to true doctrine, relying on Christ for salvation, and the other held to false doctrine, rejecting Christ.

The second possibility is that the extremes of legalism and antinomianism are found in the two thieves. I do not know that there is any evidence in Scripture that one thief was antinomian and the other legalistic. We

do not know much about these men, not even whether each man was a Jew or a Gentile.

The fact that both men were crucified for breaking the law suggests that neither man was a legalist. We also cannot know for certain that either man was antinomian in the sense that either man believed or confessed he could sin that grace may abound. I do not know that the penitent thief could be considered antinomian because, though he had lived a wicked life before, we do not know that he ever had previously confessed the grace of God. Since he was probably converted on the cross, I do not know that he would have been an antinomian any longer if he had been one. I also do not believe the impenitent thief was antinomian, because he neither believed nor confessed the grace of God, but mocked the thought.

Some final questions: Is the two extremes argument a purpose of Christ’s crucifixion between two thieves? Is it right to use a Scripture passage to explain good or true things not taught by the passage? Does this change with historical precedent?

In Christ,
Richard Moore
Saint John, IN

RESPONSE:

The letters point out the reality that with every illustration or analogy to make a truth clear there is a danger of misunderstanding the analogy. Both letters have misunderstood the analogy. Neither of Mr. Moore’s proposed explanations is the point of the analogy. Daisy’s reading of it also misses the point, because neither thief, in my explanation, merely “upholds good works.” The only point of the analogy is that orthodox soteriology is always opposed by *errors on two sides*. The penitent thief does not represent one or the impenitent thief the other. Perhaps the analogy, used for centuries now, ought to be discarded so that the reality may be emphasized: there are two very serious errors, both of which must be avoided. It is a happy thing that both writers acknowledge that, for not everyone today sees it.

—BG



All around us

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

The state of theology

This article will reflect on the Ligonier Ministries' survey entitled "The State of Theology." Every two years, Ligonier partners with Lifeway Research in order to understand what Americans "believe about God, salvation, ethics, and the Bible."¹

The results are informative for the believer in the church for at least two reasons.

First, considering this survey, the believer cannot help but contemplate the end of this present age and the return of Jesus Christ. This research makes very clear the wide-spread departure from the historic Christian faith in the context of America, which paves the way for the coming of antichrist and his kingdom. These results concretely reveal that the beliefs of many Americans who may belong to a church and identify as "Christians" bear little to no resemblance to the confession of the true believer throughout the ages concerning the Scriptures, God, Jesus Christ, and salvation.

Second, this survey's results equip members of the church in their personal witness of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is the stated purpose of Ligonier in conducting this research, and it is a worthy one. Ligonier conducts this research to take "the theological temperature of the United States to help Christians better understand today's culture and equip the church with better insights for discipleship." I hope that being confronted with this information will lead us to be all the more zealous to bring the true gospel to those all around us—our actual neighbors, acquaintances, and co-workers.

Let us consider some of the more revealing results of the "State of Theology." The form of the survey asks participants to agree or disagree with particular statements regarding the Christian faith. The research was conducted among two groups: Americans in general and evangelicals in particular. I will focus my reflections on the results among evangelicals in America.

Fundamental to the Christian faith is one's confession concerning Jesus Christ. I John 4:1-3, 15 says,

Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world. Hereby know ye the Spirit

of God: every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God. And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world.... Whosoever shall confess that Jesus is the Son of God, God dwelleth in him, and he in God.

Therefore, of foundational importance is one's agreement or disagreement with the statement: "Jesus was a great teacher, but he was not God." Among those who identify as Christians, 30% would agree and 66% would disagree with this assertion. That is, one-third of American evangelicals deny the deity of Jesus Christ.

There were two statements posed to those surveyed concerning God that are insightful.

The first proposition concerns God's sovereignty in salvation. Believers have always confessed God's absolute sovereignty in all things, particularly in salvation, as revealed in His eternal decree of election. The survey asked evangelicals to consider the truth of this declaration: "God chose the people he would save before he created the world." This is a simple statement that clearly expresses the truth taught, for example, in Ephesians 1:3-6,

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ: according as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved.

Here are the results among evangelicals: 50% disagree, 23% are not sure, and only 26% agree with this straightforward, biblical assertion concerning God's sovereign decree of election.

The second proposition concerns the worship of God. The participants were asked to agree or disagree with this statement: "God accepts the worship of all religions, including Christianity, Judaism, and Islam." The survey's results concerning this statement show

¹ <https://thestateoftheology.com>

how so much of Christianity in America is in some form pluralistic. Forty-two percent of evangelicals agree with this statement. Though I expected to see the general departure from the historic Christian faith in the survey's overall conclusions, I was surprised by this finding. It is hard even to imagine how one could claim the Bible as a source of truth (the same survey revealed 93% of evangelicals believe the Bible is 100% accurate in all that it teaches) and still confess that the God of the Christian faith accepts the worship given to false gods, the God who says in His law, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me" (Ex. 20:3). Departure from the Christian faith always coincides with ignorance of the truth of the Word of God.

Another area I would like to call the reader's attention to is evangelicalism's view of man, sin, and what sin deserves as committed against the holy God. The survey reveals that much of American Christianity is Pelagian in its view of man by nature. Almost half of evangelicals (46%) agree with the assertion: "Everyone sins a little, but most people are good by nature." Concerning sin, 43% of evangelicals disagree that "even the smallest sin deserves eternal damnation." However, at the same time, almost all evangelicals (93%) agree that "hell is a real place where certain people will be punished forever."

Hand in hand with departure from the truth is a low view of the church of Jesus Christ. The preaching of the gospel is no longer believed to be God's power to save

His elect. The holy activity of worship in the house of God on the Lord's Day is no longer the chief end of man. It is permissible in many Christians' minds to live separate from the body of Christ in the church. Along these lines, the survey found that 39% of American Christians agree that "worshiping alone or with one's family is a valid replacement for regularly attending church." And if one attends a church, 26% of evangelicals believe that "churches must provide entertaining worship services if they want to be effective."

The above paragraphs examine just a few of the survey results. I could have analyzed several more of the 35 statements that make up the whole of the survey. If any reader is interested, www.thestateoftheology.com is a website dedicated to portraying the results in a clear, interactive, and informative manner.

At the beginning of this article, I indicated that it is good for us to think about these results for two reasons. I conclude with a third reason: considering them leads us to be humbled before and thankful to our God. The only reason a person would ever be able to answer the questions in a survey such as this one in harmony with the truth of God's Word is on account of the work of God by the Spirit of Jesus Christ to kindle in their hearts true saving faith. That removes all pride that could be present in our hearts as we read the sad and sobering results of the above survey. That humbles us and makes us thankful to God for the living faith He has worked in our hearts by His grace. To Him be the glory!



Search the Scriptures

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

Jonah's prayer (1)

Then Jonah prayed unto the LORD his God out of the fish's belly, and said, I cried by reason of mine affliction unto the LORD, and he heard me; out of the belly of hell cried I, and thou heardest my voice. For thou hadst cast me into the deep, in the midst of the seas; and the floods compassed me about: all thy billows and thy waves passed over me. Then I said, I am cast out of thy sight: yet I will look again toward thy holy temple. The waters compassed me about, even to the soul: the depth closed me round about, the weeds were wrapped about my head. I went down to the bottoms of the mountain; the earth with her bars was about me

for ever: yet hast thou brought up my life from corruption, O LORD my God. When my soul fainted within me I remembered the LORD: and my prayer came in unto thee, into thine holy temple. They that observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy. But I will sacrifice unto thee with the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay that that I have vowed. Salvation is of the LORD.

And the LORD spake unto the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land.

Jonah 2:1-10

In Jonah 2:1 and for the first time in the book, God is called Jonah's God: "Then Jonah prayed unto the

LORD his God out of the fish's belly." Even when finally confronted by the sailors in the middle of the great storm God sent, Jonah had only spoken of God as "the LORD, the God of heaven." He had not confessed any love for God but only that he feared God. Jonah himself calls God his God in verse 6, "yet hast thou brought up my life from corruption, O LORD my God."

We know that by election and by the promised sacrifice of Christ, as well as by the work of the Holy Spirit, Jonah was one of God's children and God his God but, having rejected God's commission and having attempted to forsake God, that was not what he experienced. Having disobeyed God, he tasted something of the consequences of disobedience and, having forsaken God, Jonah learned something of what it is like to be forsaken of Him.

Disobedience cannot find any comfort in God or experience the lovingkindness of God. David, having sinned, says: "When I kept silence, my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long. For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me: my moisture is turned into the drought of summer" (Ps. 32:3, 4); and "Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy holy spirit from me. Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with thy free spirit" (Ps. 51:11, 12). John says: "If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth" (I John 1:6). Living disobediently, we experience God's hatred of sin and His anger with us.

The Canons of Dordt sum up the teaching of the Word: "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" (V.5). Such are the consequences of unrepented sin.

This is the first theme of Jonah's prayer. He speaks not only of the horror of being thrown into the sea and drowning, but also of the horror of being separated from God. He mentions not only the belly of the fish, but also the belly of hell. He talks about God's waves and billows, not only the waves of the sea but also of God's anger (cf. Ps. 42:7). He was, he says, cast into the deep, but it made him say that he was cast out of God's sight: the waters compassed not only his body but his soul. Still in the belly of the fish with no hope of rescue, he confessed that God had already rescued his life from corruption.

It needs emphasis that a believer can suffer the consequences of his sin, not only in suffering physical con-

sequences such as health problems that are the result of drunkenness or sexual immorality, but also in suffering spiritually. The great Calvinist and biblical doctrine of perseverance does not mean that God's grace preserves His people from all the consequences of their sin. They cannot perish but they can suffer both physically and spiritually, and suffer a great deal when they fall into sin. Witness David's loss of a child and his bringing the Angel of judgment on Israel, or Peter's pangs of conscience, his tears, and his reluctance to say that he loved Jesus.

The child of God can, in suffering the consequences of his sin, find himself "in the belly of hell," tasting something of the horror of being away from God and from His holy temple, for that is the real horror of hell: "to live apart from God is death." The writer of Psalm 116 says: "The sorrows of death compassed me, and the pains of hell gat hold upon me: I found trouble and sorrow" (v. 3). That was Jonah's experience and it is, sadly, sometimes ours also, the result of our own folly and sin.

There are those who deny that the word *Sheol* (translated "hell" in Jonah 2:2) ever means hell. Many of the modern Bible versions either do not translate the word (NKJV, ESV, NASB) or translate it differently. The New International Version, for example, translates the word in Jonah 2:2 as "the realm of the dead." This is a concession to the idea that the people of God in the Old Testament knew nothing either of heaven or hell, but believed only in a "realm of the dead," a place like the Roman Catholic Limbo. It is also a concession to the recent tendency among evangelicals to deny eternal suffering and a place of eternal suffering.

The word can be variously translated, but there are passages in the Old Testament where the word must be translated "hell." One of them is Psalm 16:10, "For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption." That verse is quoted in the New Testament in Acts 2:27 and the Greek word used there always refers to the place of eternal punishment. Here in Jonah 2:2 it makes no sense to translate the word as "grave" or as "realm of the dead." Indeed, Jonah 2:6 uses another word that is often a name for hell in the Old Testament. The word is translated "corruption" in Jonah, but is often translated as "pit" (Job 33:18ff.; Ps. 28:1; Is. 14:15ff.). Jonah experienced something of the terrors of hell.

This is the intent of his words, "the earth with her bars was about me for ever" (v. 6). He felt the pit as a prison to which he was confined by the just judgment of God, with the land of the living barred to him forever. This was not only the result of nearly drowning and

being swallowed by the fish, but was far more horrible than either, for not only was he in danger of dying but his soul fainted within him (v. 7).

All this leads to his acknowledgment in verse 8 that he had observed lying vanities and forsaken his own mercy. True, he states that as a general principle, but for him it was a very personal matter. Like ourselves, he had always confessed that idolatry, serving lying vanities, was sin and a repudiation of the one, true God. He had preached that in Israel, but now he had discovered that it was possible for a child of God to fall into the sin of idolatry and to forsake the God of all mercy. He now knew better than ever before that “they that observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy.”

Lying vanities are more often than not a reference to idols in Scripture (Deut. 32:21; Jer. 14:22; Acts 14:15). Jonah was guilty of serving lying vanities when, attempting to flee from God, he thought that he could escape his commission and the Word of God to him by leaving the land of Israel. He was guilty of idolatry in thinking that the mercy of God could not be wider than the land of Israel. He was as much an idolater as the heathen sailors before their salvation in thinking that he could sin against God with impunity.

He had done that as one who knew, at least in theory, the mercy of God to Israel through many generations, in taking them as His own, in delivering them from bondage, in giving them the promised land, and in forgiving their sin uncounted times. He had done that as one who had himself been shown mercy in that he was in Israel part of the remnant according to election, the seven thousand who did not bow to Baal or worship at the golden calves. He had indeed forsaken his own mercy.

So do we all when, though believers and children of God, we wander from the right way, fall into sin, and refuse to acknowledge our wrong. We forsake our own mercy, the pity and compassion that God shows to sinners when He saves them by His grace and makes them His own. In doing that we do also as Jonah did and serve lying vanities. We set up and serve gods who are not the great God, making idols of pleasure, wealth, sexual perversities, careers, feelings, family, work, hobbies, whatever promises us satisfaction. And so we forsake God and sink spiritually under the waves and billows of His anger against our sins, even to the point where we say, “I am cast out of thy presence.” We are no less foolish than Jonah.

As the Canons say, “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 sins unto death; nor does He permit them to be totally deserted, and to plunge themselves into everlasting destruction” (V.6). His eternal love, the blood of Christ, and the work of the Spirit guarantee our rescue, as they did Jonah’s. God cannot deny Himself, no more than He can deny the saving death of His Son or the sovereign operations of the Spirit.

Jonah’s prayer is not only a recognition of his sin but also his repentance. He speaks of looking again to God’s holy temple (v. 4), of remembering God (v. 7), and acknowledges that he had served lying vanities and forsaken his mercy. That is repentance! Repentance is always an acknowledgment of sin (Ps. 51:3) and a turning from sin to God.

God’s preserving grace is evident in many ways in Jonah’s prayer and not just in his repentance and renewed trust in God. The storm and the fish were prepared by grace and swallowed Jonah that he might not perish in his sin. Jonah’s near-death experience was used by God to bring him to his spiritual senses. His three days in the fish’s belly was God’s mercy, giving him time to reflect and repent. Especially his experience of hell and of being separated from God were used for his salvation. God uses any necessary means to bring His own back to Himself, but especially their experience of the spiritual consequences of sin. So keenly do they begin to feel the horror of being separated from God that when their sin is finally discovered, it is, in spite of their shame and sorrow, a relief to them that they no longer need to try to hide their sin.

The story of Jonah, too, is a reminder that repentance is a gift of God, purchased by the blood of Christ and worked by the Spirit of Christ. Never have any tears been shed for sin that were not purchased by blood sacrifice! Never will anyone repent of any sin except it be given him! Jonah acknowledged that in his confession that salvation is of the Lord. His own repentance and salvation were entirely of the Lord, for without God’s grace he would have been in Tarshish instead of in the place of repentance, though that was a fish’s belly; far better to be there than in Tarshish where he would never again hear the name of God.

So, for the first time in the history recorded here Jonah prays. He had not prayed when sent to Nineveh, nor when fleeing from the Lord, nor in the storm, nor when wakened by the sailors, not even when thrown into the sea. As Fairbairn says, “in nothing does backsliding more readily discover itself than in the loss of familiarity with Heaven; consciousness of sin excludes nearness and freedom of communion...he has wandered

as a lost child, but says, ‘I will arise and go to my Father.’”¹

Surely Jonah’s prayer was on his part an act of desperation, but it was also proof of what the Canons say in Head V, Article 7: “For...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.”

In the confidence that salvation is of the Lord, Jonah could pray to God believing that the Lord was still his God (v. 1). That he could still pray and dared to pray was proof of God’s grace. That he had the assurance his prayer was heard from the fish’s belly was sovereign, saving grace (vv. 3, 7). Even his acknowledgment that God had cast him into the deep (v. 4) was a recognition of God’s grace to him, an erring and wandering sinner. He had seen in his “affliction” the saving grace of God and, if God was for him in afflicting him, what could possibly be against him?

¹ Patrick Fairbairn, *Jonah: His Life, Character and Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1964), 69.



Taking heed to the doctrine

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

Assurance and good works (3)

Previous article in this series: January 15, 2021, p. 182.

Stooping to our weakness

“Calvinist believers who struggle with their assurance can never know with certainty that they are one of the elect.” So writes Jerry L. Walls in *Why I Am Not a Calvinist*.¹ The charge is as old as Arminianism. It was an objection voiced by the Arminians (Remonstrants) prior to the Synod of Dordt.

In reality, the opposite is true. It is the teaching of Arminianism that strips believers of comfort. This heresy maintains that Christ died for every human being without exception. Despite a death of Christ intended for all men, God still sends some people to hell. If it is true that even though Christ died for them, there are some whom God consigns to hell, how can I be sure that I am not one of them? At the end of the day, I can have no assurance of final salvation and eternal life.

Assurance is enjoyed by the believer through faith in Jesus Christ. Faith *is* assurance. Faith is assurance because faith rests in Jesus Christ who died for elect sinners. Faith is assurance because the death of Jesus Christ was a complete satisfaction of the claims of God’s justice for all for whom He died. Faith is *personal* assurance. It is the assurance that Christ died for me,

even for me. It is the assurance that by His atonement, He covered the guilt of my sin—*all* my sins. It is the assurance that He stood in my place and endured what I deserved to endure. In the words of the Heidelberg Catechism, it is the assurance “that not only to others, but to me also, remission of sin, everlasting righteousness, and salvation are freely given by God, merely of grace, only for the sake of Christ’s merits” (Q&A 21).

But our faith is not always as strong as it ought to be. There are mountain peaks and deep, dark valleys in the life of the believer. There are times when our faith is strong; but there are also those times when our faith is weak. Every child of God can identify with the father of the lunatic boy, about whom we read that he cried out to Jesus with tears, “Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief” (Mark 9:24). We are imperfect saints—sinner-saints.

God knows the weakness of our faith. He knows how hard it is to believe that Christ died for me, even for me. What child of God cannot identify with the publican who smote his breast and cried out under the conviction of his sin, “God be merciful to me [the] sinner” (Luke 18:13)? God in His mercy stoops to the weakness of our faith and confirms in us the assurance of salvation. Chiefly He does this through His Word—the preaching and teaching of His Word. For the strengthening of our faith, He joins to the Word the administration of the

¹ Jerry L. Walls and Joseph R. Dongell, *Why I Am Not a Calvinist* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 192.

sacraments. In relation to the preaching of the Word, the sacraments function as secondary means of grace.

In addition, God also confirms our assurance of salvation through the evidence of His work of grace in our lives, including our good works. Good works are used by God the Holy Spirit to strengthen the assurance of believers.

The role of good works

Grace is not opposed to works. This is the mistaken teaching of antinomianism. To be sure, grace is opposed to works as the *basis* (*ground* or *reason*) for our salvation. But grace is not opposed to works, to working energetically and sacrificially. Grace is not opposed to works as the expression of love and gratitude on the part of the redeemed sinner. Grace is not opposed to working in the calling and station in life in which God has set each of us, no matter how lowly that calling may be regarded by some. Grace is opposed to *meriting*, not working. Grace is opposed to working to earn from God—anything from God. But grace is not opposed to working in joyful service to the One who has saved us body and soul, for time and eternity, from death and hell.

God has determined that our good works, as the fruits of election and salvation, shall play a role in our assurance. They are mistaken who contend that our good works have nothing to do with our assurance. That our good works are not the *basis* for our assurance does not mean that our good works have absolutely no role to play in connection with assurance. They do, and this can be demonstrated both from a negative viewpoint and from a positive viewpoint. I want in this article to begin by focusing on the negative: the loss of assurance when we walk willfully in impenitent sin. And then, in a future article, I want to look at the positive role that good works play with regard to assurance.

To begin with, it is the teaching of Scripture and our Reformed confessions that when the child of God goes on in a way of sin, God judges (chastens) him by taking away from him the assurance of salvation. I consider it to be a prong—a very dangerous prong—of antinomianism to deny that the people of God can ever lose the assurance of salvation.

Some teach that the elect child of God, although he falls deeply into sin and goes on without repenting of

his sin, still retains the sense that God is his God, that Christ is his Savior, and that he is indwelt by the Holy Spirit. They hold that no matter how abhorrent the sin—spousal abuse, child molestation, pornography, marital infidelity, drug or alcohol addiction—and no matter how long the child of God goes on in the sin, he never loses the assurance of his salvation. Sin as he may, stubbornly refuse to repent as she may, give themselves over to their sin as they may, they still retain God's assurance and the Holy Spirit's testimony that they are the children of God. Even as they go on in their sin, they still have the confidence that they belong to God as one of His elect, one of God's own beloved sons or daughters. In the past year, I have been confronted by those who have insisted on this very thing. My first response has been, "Why then repent, if I can go on in sin and retain the assurance, at least to some degree, that I am an elect child of God?"

The loss of assurance

But apart from an instinctive response, this contention is contrary to Scripture, to our Reformed confessions, and to experience.

Canons of Dordt, V, Article 5 is clear:

By such enormous sins, however, they [true believers, according to V.4] 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. (Emphasis added.)

It should be clear that either one has or one does not have the sense of God's favor. They who walk impenitently in sin lose, that is, lose altogether, lose completely, the sense of God's favor. Canons V.7 says that in the way of "a sincere and godly sorrow for their sins," the repentant child of God "again experience[s] the favor of a reconciled God." What was not his experience while he went on in his sin, in the way of repentance is again his joyful experience.

In his commentary on Canons V.5, Homer C. Hoeksema has several pertinent things to say on this matter of the loss of assurance. I highly recommend that our

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readers study this chapter in *The Voice of Our Fathers*.² In connection with this withdrawal of assurance, Hoeksema insists that “God does not ignore sins that remain in the saints. It will not do to say that all those sins are not real because they have been covered by the blood of Christ” (428). This in affect is what the antinomian teaches. Rather, “by such enormous sins the saints ‘incur a deadly guilt.’” This “we all know by experience. All our sins in themselves make us feel guilty before God. Otherwise we would never pray, ‘Forgive us our debts.’ As long as we do not get rid of this guilt by confessing our sins and seeking forgiveness through the blood of Calvary, our souls must carry the burden of guilt.” He goes on:

In the case of gross sins, sins in which saints walk and for which they do not immediately come to repentance, the result can be only that the saints feel themselves to be in a state of damnation. When they finally come to the spiritual consciousness of these sins, the saints can give expression to that hopeless feeling. This is fundamentally true with all sin. As long as sin is not confessed in prayers for forgiveness, saints experience deadly guilt (429).

A bit later, Hoeksema says, “The grieved Spirit does not give up the elect and forsake them; *but he withdraws from them in their consciousness*” (430). With reference to the language of Canons V.5, he says: “When the Spirit is grieved and withdraws from the saints in their consciousness, the exercise of their faith is interrupted, for the Spirit is the author of faith.... When saints sin and continue in sin, the exercise of their faith is interrupted” (430). The consequence of this interruption of the exercise of faith is the loss of the assurance of salvation: “When by his enormous sins the child of God grieves the Holy Spirit, interrupts the exercise of faith, and wounds his conscience, the result must be *that he loses his good conscience for a time*” (431). And further:

All that he has left is his old accusing conscience, the awareness of the condemning judgment of God. This result follows inevitably upon the interruption of the exercise of faith, for the good conscience of the Christian is his apprehension by faith of the justifying judgment of God in Christ. If the exercise of faith is interrupted, his good conscience is wounded, or silenced, and the evil, accusing conscience *has full sway*. (431)

The last consequence of the saints walking in enormous sins, mentioned by the Canons in V.5 is that they “lose the sense of God’s favor for a time.” Commenting on

this aspect of God’s judgment on impenitent saints, Hoeksema says:

Once one has received the grace of God, he cannot lose it. But it is possible and is a very painful reality *to lose the sense of God’s grace*. Then one experiences what the psalmist describes in 32:3-4: “When I kept silence, my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long. For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me: my moisture is turned into the drought of summer.” One experiences that he cannot say, “This God is my God.” He cannot say, “My only comfort is that I belong to my faithful savior Jesus Christ.” He loses the experience of God’s favor upon him and of the fellowship of God. He experiences dreadful separation from God, that God’s face is hidden from him, that the light of his countenance does not shine upon him, and that his ear is not open to his prayers. (431-32)

“Such a person,” Hoeksema continues,

may attend the preaching of the word, but he finds no comfort, nourishment, and edification in it. The blessed tidings of the gospel do not seem to be directed to him personally. Perhaps he makes use of the sacraments, but they render him no assurance and do not strengthen his faith. He may attempt to sing the songs of Zion, but his heart is not in it. How awful such periods in the life of the child of God can be! How dreadfully real the thought can become to one in such a state that he is not a child of God. Even after finally coming to the realization of his gross sin, how painfully he can bemoan his state and in doubt and temptation complain that he cannot be a child of God. How he may become the object of the fierce attacks of the devil, who accuses him on the basis of his enormous sins that he is not a saint at all (432).

This is all very real for the child of God who goes on stubbornly in his sin. “Until one repents, the fatherly countenance of God does not shine upon him. The way of life is the way of repentance, not the way of sin and impenitence, *and only in the way of repentance can one have the sense of God’s favor*” (432).

Note that: “only in the way of repentance can one have the sense of God’s favor.” Never in the way of impenitence can we enjoy the sense of God’s favor, but only ever in the way of repentance. And that for a good reason. The reason is that God uses the loss of His fatherly favor as one of the important things that brings His wayward child to his senses so that he resolves to return to the bosom of Father. The child of God simply cannot stand the darkness of soul that accompanies the loss of the sense of God’s favor. God uses this to bring His prodigal son or daughter to their knees with the determination, “I will arise and go to my Father” (Luke 15:18a).

2 Homer C. Hoeksema, *The Voice of Our Fathers: An Exposition of the Canons of Dordrecht* (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1980, 2013 second ed.), 425-33. Italics will always be my emphasis.



Strength of youth

Rev. Joshua Engelsma, pastor of the Protestant Reformed Church in Doon, Iowa

Watch your mouth (2)

Previous article in this series: March 1, 2021, p. 255.

Communication [keh-mew-neh-ka-shon], *noun*: a process of sharing information with another person in such a way that the sender's message is understood in the way he intended it to be understood.

In a previous article, we introduced the subject of communication. We looked at the nature of communication (using the definition above), and we considered what a precious gift communication is.

The introduction continues with this article. Before turning in future articles to specific principles of good communication, I want in this article to continue to lay the groundwork by considering the importance of communication and the source of it.

The importance of communication

The importance of communication for our earthly relationships can hardly be overstated. There is an inseparable connection between the nature of one's communication with another person and the strength of your relationship to that person. Good communication is an indicator that a healthy relationship exists; poor communication is an indicator that an unhealthy relationship exists.

The Bible speaks often of the importance and power of our words. The book of Proverbs is filled with references both to the negative and positive power of our words. Read carefully and reflect on the following verses:

- “An hypocrite with his mouth destroyeth his neighbor: but through knowledge shall the just be delivered” (11:9).
- “There is that speaketh like the piercings of a sword: but the tongue of the wise is health” (12:18).
- “A wholesome tongue is a tree of life: but perverseness therein is a breach in the spirit” (15:4).
- “A man hath joy by the answer of his mouth: and a word spoken in due season, how good is it!” (15:23).
- “Pleasant words are as an honeycomb, sweet to the soul, and health to the bones” (16:24).

- “Death and life are in the power of the tongue: and they that love it shall eat the fruit thereof” (18:21).
- “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver” (25:11).

Another important passage on the subject of the power of our words is James 3:1-12. There the tongue is compared to the bit in a horse's mouth and to the rudder of a ship. A bit is a small piece of metal placed in the mouth of a horse, but with that small bit the rider is able to turn the powerful horse in whatever direction he pleases. A rudder is a relatively small piece on a large ship, but with that small rudder the helmsman is able to turn the great ship in whatever direction he pleases. So is the tongue a small member of our body, but a member with great power: “Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing” (3:9, 10a).

Where there is sinful communication in a relationship, the relationship suffers. For example, if your communication with your parents is characterized by lying and angry speech, your relationship with them suffers. If your communication with a friend remains on the surface level, the relationship will not grow. Consider the following consequences of ineffective communication on our relationships:¹

- The relationship remains superficial and shallow. We do not really get to know each other. The development of deep unity and intimacy is hindered.
- Simple disagreements blow up and become huge.
- Important issues remain unclarified.
- Wrong ideas are uncorrected.
- Matters that need attention are neglected.
- Conflicts and misunderstandings are unresolved.
- Wise decision-making is thwarted.
- Love and affection are not expressed.
- We do not receive spiritual help from each other.

¹ Taken, with some adaptations, from Wayne Mack, *Strengthening Your Marriage* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1999), 75; and an unpublished article by John Kruis entitled, “Communication.”

- Boredom and discontentment with the relationship develop. Suspicions are aroused. Frustration arises and turns into bitterness, resentment, hatred, and a desire for revenge.

On the other hand, good communication promotes health in a relationship. For example, if there is good communication with your parents, your relationship with them is healthy. If your communication with a friend is proper, the friendship grows. Consider now the opposite effects of good communication in our relationships:

- The relationship is deepened. We really get to know each other. There is the development of deep unity and intimacy.
- Simple disagreements are worked through and do not become huge.
- Important issues are clarified.
- Wrong ideas are corrected.
- Matters that need attention are addressed.
- Conflicts and misunderstandings are resolved.
- Wise decision-making is promoted.
- Love and affection are expressed.
- Spiritual help is given and received.
- The relationship is characterized by joy and mutual trust.

An appreciation for the power and value of words lends itself to our using them well. Think of this in terms of a good kitchen knife (after all, Prov. 12:18 refers to our words as a sword). If you appreciate the power of the knife, you know that it is a sharp instrument for cutting that can be used for great good (for example, prepping meals) or for great harm (for example, slicing a finger). Knowing this, you will use the knife carefully and only for the purposes for which it was designed. An appreciation of the power of our words both for good and evil ought to lend itself to our using them carefully and for the purposes for which God designed them.

Knowing the power of our words, how urgently and regularly we pray: “Set a watch, O LORD, before my mouth; keep the door of my lips” (Ps. 141:3). Knowing the power of our words, how zealously we strive: “I said, I will take heed to my ways, that I sin not with my tongue: I will keep my mouth with a bridle, while the wicked is before me” (Ps. 39:1).

The source of communication

The words we speak come forth from our mouths, which means it is necessary for us constantly to learn to guard our lips and bridle our tongues. But the mouth is not the ultimate source of our communication. The source is much deeper. The source is the *heart*.

The heart is the source from which flows the whole stream of our life. Proverbs 4:23 exhorts us, “Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life.” This is true of our thoughts, emotions, and actions, as well as our words. Proverbs 16:23 says with respect to our words, “The heart of the wise teacheth his mouth, and addeth learning to his lips.” One of the clearest statements of this truth is found in Jesus’ words in Matthew 12:34-35, “O generation of vipers, how can ye, being evil, speak good things? for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh. A good man out of the good treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things: and an evil man out of the evil treasure bringeth forth evil things.” Later Jesus says, “But those things which proceed out of the mouth come forth from the heart; and they defile the man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies” (Matt. 15:18-19).

The source of all sinful communication is not ultimately in the mouth but in the sinful heart of man. Wicked words are motivated by sinful pride and selfishness. Why did I lie to my parents about where I was and what I did on Friday night? Because in my heart I’m concerned about saving my own skin from the consequences of my sins. Why did I blow up and speak angry words to my sibling? Because I did not get my way and my idol of comfort was being threatened. Why did I gossip about that other member of the church? Because in my pride I want others to think less of her and more of me. Those things which proceed out of my mouth come forth from my heart!

In contrast, the source of all holy communication is the grace of God in the regenerated hearts of His children. By the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit in us, we have been given new hearts. Those new hearts beat with love for Him who has first loved us, with holy fear and reverence of the all-seeing God, and with gratitude for His gracious saving of us from sin. Out of love, holy fear, and gratitude, we sing praises to Him and confess His name. Out of love, holy fear, and gratitude, we speak the truth in love to our neighbor, to instruct, comfort, encourage, or correct him. A good man out of the good treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things!

What this means for you and me practically is that the “war of words” is fought not at the level of the mouth so much as at the level of the heart. Yes, we must learn to guard our lips and apply proper principles of good communication in our relationships. But we must also come to recognize the deeper struggle in our hearts. Knowing this, we seek forgiveness at the foot

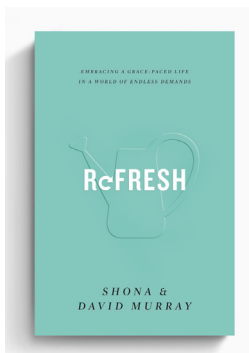
of the cross for the pride and selfishness of our hearts, we pray for grace to guard our hearts, and we beseech the Lord that He would work in us increased love, holy fear, and gratitude. And from hearts filled with such

love for God, holy fear, and gratitude, the inevitable outflow will be words like a honeycomb, sweet to the soul, and health to the bones.



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



Refresh: Embracing a Grace-Paced Life in a World of Endless Demands, by Shona and David Murray. Wheaton: Crossway, 2017. 198 pages. Paperback. \$14.99. Reviewed by Cherith S. Guichelaar.

I sometimes think we do not get to know each other as we ought.

Perhaps this is not on purpose, but simply because it feels too uncomfortable. It is out of most people's comfort zone to say, "I'm broken. I'm struggling to lay it at the cross. I don't understand why, but I feel emptied. I feel like a bad Christian. Does God even understand?" Maybe it is hard to say these things because we feel it is even harder to be on the listening end. People just won't understand. Or worse, they won't know what to say. But, how could they when I hardly know what to say? And maybe that's why I felt compelled to write a book review of sorts on *Refresh*. I say "of sorts" because I realize this is not exactly a typical review. But being encouraged myself by the book, I wanted others to have opportunity as I did to say, "She gave me words. She understands." And others do understand. Maybe not everyone, but there are those who do. And above all, God understands. And He is glorified as the Limitless One when we bring Him our limitations.

I thought I was dying of an incurable disease. I had

convinced myself that something was desperately wrong. Everything matched up. At least that is what Google told me. I had gone to the doctor a number of times, and although they were not finding anything, I knew that they were missing something. It hit me one night as we were setting up the Christmas tree with our kids. We have all these ornaments with our family pictures in them. Each year we add a new one to the collection and we smile as we look back at how our family has changed and reflect on God's faithfulness to us throughout the years. What was supposed to be a joyful time with family left me enveloped with sorrow and emptiness. As I looked at all the pictures, I couldn't help but think, "This will be my last Christmas walking. Lord, please help me to find joy in this pain." Later, as I sat watching my husband do a puzzle, asking him for the thousandth time if he thought I was dying, I started to hyperventilate. I couldn't control myself. I was dying. God was punishing me for being such a bad Christian. That moment changed everything for me. For us. It set us on a path only God could have ordained so perfectly.

My husband gently listened and after we knelt to pray he said, "I came across a video the other day. Do you want to watch it with me?" I could hardly think past the aching in my body, but somehow we did end up sitting together watching a video on anxiety. Anxiety? That is not what I had. I had an incurable disease. Anxiety means I am weak, not trusting. Anxiety is just a nice way of saying I'm crazy. Yet, as I watched and listened, I felt understood. It brought a sense of relief,

but also a sense of overwhelming sadness. If only I had known five, eight, ten years ago, I would not have wasted so much time. Where do I go from here?

And that's when I came across the book *Refresh* by Shona and David Murray. And refresh my soul is exactly what it did. Shona was like the older, wiser friend I had never met, but yet I knew she understood. She was the minister's wife who was supposed to have it all together, yet she was falling apart. She knew she was blessed beyond measure, yet was struggling to lay her burdens down at the cross:

I felt I was a bad mother, a bad wife, a bad daughter, and a bad Christian. Guilt over a myriad of tasks not done—or poorly done by my standards—suffocated me. And despite running at top speed, the finish line was never in sight (21).

Eventually, when I finally crashed on the rocks in March 2003, David and I decided to call in my father, an experienced pastor of fifty years who would surely be able to find my spiritual problem.

However, when he heard my story, he was convinced that it was not so much a spiritual problem as a mental and physical problem with spiritual consequences. He said that due to many factors, including burnout and long-term stress, my body was run-down and my mind was broken. The normal physical and mental processes were disrupted, and as a result, the most precious thing in my life was profoundly affected—my relationship with the Lord (24).

Shona took me through ten stations of the 'refresh gym' that led me to feel encouraged in my relationship with the Lord and those around me. With biblical truth sprinkled throughout the pages, she helped me acknowledge, by God's grace, what different life circumstances and lifestyle choices had contributed to the helplessness I was feeling. Through my reading I was impressed with my need for sleep, exercise, and healthy eating habits. I was especially struck by her insights on sleep. She says, "I believe my sleep is one of the best illustrations of my rest in Christ. I refuse to believe the lie that I must be known for my sacrificial service to Christ rather than by my resting on Him" (53). In her book, Shona addresses the use of medications/antidepressants, which I

found insightful and enlightening. She also sets forth the importance of biblical friendships to encourage us in our daily walk. After reading, I simply sat with thankful heart for those kindred spirits who have cheered my way. The book also gave me opportunity to reflect on how I define myself and re-orientated my thinking to who I am as God's blood-bought child. I left my reading with a sigh of relief as I felt God caring for me, helping me prioritize my life, telling me that by grace, as I rest in Him, I will effectively fulfill my callings to His glory. I was able to confess with surety "God owns the gym and is himself the trainer. His athletes are hand-picked and very dear to him" (34).

So maybe you are just plain burned out and need a wake-up call to slow down. Or, could you be one that has opportunity to use this book to be the hands and feet of Christ to a fellow believer? Or, maybe you do not know it, but just maybe you are struggling with that scary word "anxiety," or even "depression"—terms that seem terrifying but are very often misunderstood.

Perhaps this book could help water your thirsty soul. Maybe it will help you be a little more open in your struggle, knowing that others have been there too. If it can help even one lonesome sheep move from a place of fearing God's wrath to quiet rest when they read the command in Philippians 4, "Be careful for nothing," my heart will rejoice. I will be thankful. If even one can say, "Yes, God *is* commanding us not to be anxious; but He is *not* an angry Father when He commands it. On the contrary, He is the one who *understands* that the anxieties will come. And this Father of mine, He will give me peace that passes understanding."

Lately, there are these still small moments where I find myself pausing from my morning duo of devotions and coffee. I pause to look near my feet where I hear my children going back and forth between the giggling and squabbling that siblings constantly do. And I look at them with different eyes. With the eyes of a mother who is present. With the eyes of one who has been gently gathered and carried in the bosom of her Shepherd. I find myself pondering, asking, "Why this way Lord? Why did You bring me through this fire? Couldn't I have learned a different way?" And I hear Him gently whisper back to me, "Cherith, My strength is made per-

After reading, I simply sat with thankful heart for those kindred spirits who have cheered my way. The book also gave me opportunity to reflect on how I define myself and re-orientated my thinking to who I am as God's blood-bought child. I left my reading with a sigh of relief as I felt God caring for me, helping me prioritize my life, telling me that by grace, as I rest in Him, I will effectively fulfill my callings to His glory.

fect in weakness.” And that grace is enough for today. And for the first time in a long time, I understand this. And I am thankful. I find myself at rest, cheered to run

the race God has called me to run. And God used Shona’s book *Refresh* to help bring me here.



News from our churches

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

Trivia question

Which student did Synod 1960 examine and declare a candidate for the ministry of the Word and sacraments in the PRC? Answer later in this column.

Minister activities

Hudsonville PRC formed a new trio of Rev. C. Griess (First PRC—Grand Rapids, MI), Rev. E. Guichelaar (Randolph PRC), and Rev. R. Kleyn (Covenant of Grace PRC—Spokane, WA). Rev. Griess received this call, declining it on April 18. Kalamazoo, MI PRC called Rev. R. VanOverloop. Wingham PRC called Rev. J. Smidstra (First PR Holland, MI). Rev. Smidstra declined this call. Byron Center PRC called Rev. J. Engelsma (Doon PRC). God led Rev. Engelsma to decline and remain in Doon.

Congregational activities

The five Siouxland area churches annually hold a Combined Men’s Society meeting. This year it was held on March 15 at Hull PRC. Bible study began at Hebrews 10:7. For after-recess, the Doon men presented for discussion Rev. Engelsma’s article “A Servant Leader” in the June 2018 *Standard Bearer* (vol. 94, no. 17).

This was on the bulletins of the above-mentioned five churches in March: “SAVE THE DATE! A Midwest Young People’s Retreat is being planned for our area freshman though 2020 high school graduates. This retreat will take place at Inspiration Hills on August 9-11. Sign-up sheets will be available *today*, and we ask that young people who plan to attend sign up by March 22nd. We plan to open up registration to all of Classis West after learning how many of our own area young people plan to attend.”

This from the bulletin of Lacombe, Alberta: “Has this warm weather got you thinking about summer holidays? Well, it sure has for us! That’s why the planning committee is pleased to announce the dates for our up-

coming church camp! Please reserve in your calendars August 2-5, 2021. There are many details yet to be figured and much more planning to do, but we hope to see you there!”

School activities

Those in northwest Iowa were invited to an evening of Protestant Reformed high-school bands from Indiana, Michigan, Iowa, and Wisconsin joining together to present a program on Friday evening, April 16. And we are certain they made a joyful noise! If you missed it, you may find the concert on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MtHZ8qSwWrc>.

Future Teachers and Ministers: Information for the 2021 PR Scholarship Fund essay competition is now available. Please email prscholarship@gmail.com to receive the essay topics and submission requirements. Completed essays must be submitted by May 31.

Covenant Christian School in Lynden, WA held their All-school program recently. What follows is taken from their bulletin: “He is the Lord of the sea and Ruler of the waves! Covenant Christian School presents its annual school program, ‘The Lord of the Depths,’ this week Friday, March 26, at 7:30 p.m. at our church. Please join us as we, through singing, recitation, and video, celebrate our Lord, the Creator and Ruler of the ocean! Hope to see you there!”

Sister-church news

On March 14 something happened in the Covenant Evangelical Reformed Church in Singapore that seldom happens! No less than six infants were baptized in one service. What a joy for the parents and witnessing congregation. Hope they had plenty of warm water!

Young people’s activities

The young people in Hull, IA PRC were busy creating

a new area church directory. By area is meant the five Siouxland area churches.

Easter singspirations abounded throughout the denomination, most hosted by the young people. Yes, we sang of our risen Redeemer!

A glimpse from the past—1959 & 1960

In the evening of September 15, 1959 an excited crowd of about 160 gathered in Southwest PRC for the purpose of organizing a PR High-School Society.... That evening 94 charter members signed up.... Rev. and Mrs. R. Veldman along with Rev. and Mrs. C. Hanco celebrated 30th wedding anniversaries.... They also celebrated 30 years in the gospel ministry, all in September of 1959! ...Rev. H. Veldman of Edgerton, MN accepted the call to labor in the Redlands, CA PRC. Also, after meeting in Legion Halls and similar buildings since 1953, the congregation at Redlands purchased the church, social hall, and parsonage from the Free Methodists located at Colton Ave. and Webster St. With a great deal of volunteer help by the men and women of the congregation, the Building Committee completely remodeled and redecorated the parsonage.... Seminarian Jason Kortering was scheduled to preach for the congregation at Hull, IA, leading the vacant group in seven services over the holiday season.... The December “Indian Summer” weather enjoyed in Michigan gladdened the hearts of Southeast’s Building Committee, for the builders of the new church were able to accomplish much in that unexpected warm spell. The new church should seat over 300 people.... The January 5 issue of the *Grand Rapids Press* reported that the Michigan Supreme Court upheld the right of the Rev. Herman Hoeksema faction to retain control of the First Protestant Reformed Church.... Doon’s Consistory decided to conduct an adult Bible class on Friday evenings, with Rev. G. VanBaren treating the material found in “Essentials of Reformed Doctrine”.... Rev. Herman Hoeksema commemorated 40 years of gospel ministry in First PRC.... Rev. C. Hanco spent three weeks preaching in Isabel, SD and Forbes, ND as requested by the Mission Committee.... The congregation at Holland, MI held the first service in their new meeting place at Washington and West 12th St.... The consistory at Redlands, CA decided the members there would drink the wine in unison in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, adding to the unity of the sacrament.... Classis West decided to adopt a set of rules for parliamentary procedure, and to request Synod to incorporate these rules in a new Church Order book, together with a constitution for the Classical Committee.... The Young People’s Society of Southeast

PRC sponsored a Protestant Reformed Music Festival, the first of its kind.... Edgerton, MN PRC installed Rev. B. Woudenberg as their pastor.... First PRC took drastic measures to protect their auditorium from damage caused by a leaking roof.... Classis East met in Hope PRC of Grand Rapids, with Rev. H. Hanco presiding and his father Rev. C. Hanco transcribing the minutes as clerk.... The Ladies’ Society in Doon, IA sponsored a singspiration with proceeds to go for a new tile floor in the church basement.

Hull Welcomes New Pastor

In the early days of November, 1959, the congregation learned that our pastor, Rev. J. Heys, had accepted the call from our sister congregation of South Holland, Illinois. It meant that we as a congregation would have to face that period of calling, waiting, learning of decisions — perhaps repeated over and over again.

We immediately set out to find the man of God’s choosing. As consistory we made a trio and on Nov. 27 called Rev. G. Vanden Berg. We soon learned that it was not the Lord’s will for him “to come over and help us.”

By then we had bid farewell to Rev. Heys and family. With hearts filled with deep appreciation for his years of faithful service, the Word still written deeply upon them, we saw him leave to labor in another flock.

A short time before we asked the Seminary for the services of student J. Kortering during the holiday season. He came into our midst for the first time on Christmas Eve to share the Christmas program with us. During his stay he preached for us seven times.

Soon after his departure we called Rev. C. Hanco who also declined. On February 24 we extended a call to Rev. R. Veldman, who could not arrive at a decision for us “mutually gratifying.” Our attention next centered on Rev. M. Schipper who received our call on April 7. He too could not heed our call.

By July 3, candidate Kortering was eligible for a call. At the congregational meeting of July 13 he was elected and the call-letter was sent on its way. Patiently we waited for six weeks, till on August 24 the letter of acceptance arrived.

Being vacant for approximately 9 months, our church was again sent another undershepherd by the Lord.

Looking back over that period of time we are deeply grateful above all to our God who so abundantly provided for us. Our cry of victory is “Ebenezer, hitherto hath the Lord helped us.” There were times when our hopes were high, but also times when we were discouraged. Through it all, God has provided for the needs of our congregation.

Insert is from the November 15, 1960 SB.

Trivia answer

The young man declared a candidate in 1960 was Jason Kortering, who went on to serve God in the congregations at Hull, IA (twice), Hope (Walker, MI), Hope in Redlands, CA, Loveland, CO, and Grandville, MI, as well as serving as minister-on-loan to Singapore. Rev. Kortering became emeritus in 2002 and recently passed to glory. More trivia next time.

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

Announcements

Resolution of sympathy

The Council and congregation of the Kalamazoo PRC extend our Christian sympathies to the family and friends of our dear sister in Christ **Berdena Rust**. She went to be with her Lord on March 23, 2021. “Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory” (Psalm 73:24).

Steve DeVries, Vice-President
Thomas Verbeek, Clerk

Resolution of sympathy

The council and congregation of Southwest PRC express our Christian sympathy to Kirsten DeVries and Joel and Connie DeVries in the death of Kirsten and Joel’s father, **Tom DeVries**. He went to be with his Lord on April 11, 2021. “Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints” (Psalm 116:15).

Rev. D. Noorman, President
Tom VanderWoude, Clerk

Wedding anniversary

May 21 marks the 50th wedding anniversary of our beloved parents and grandparents, **Jim and Lois Rau**. We thank God for His tender loving care over them and us. Their example of love and dedication to each other, our family, His church, and our schools have been a true blessing to us all. We pray the Lord may continue to bless them in the years to come. “Except the LORD build the house, they labor in vain that build it: except the LORD keep the city, the watchmen waketh but in vain. Lo, children are an heritage of the LORD: and the fruit of the womb is his reward” (Psalm 127:1, 3).

Dan and Carol Boeve

Tyler, Rebecca, Breanna, Jonathan

Kimmy and Cheryl Kooiker

Kole and Christiana Blankespoor

Brady and Dayna Kooiker, Brenna, Liam

Greg and Rochelle Gritters, Grayson, Averie

Shana, Anthony, Joshua

Jeff and Kim Scholten

Dan and Amber Gritters, Kaden, Levi

Brooke, Austin, Cody

Rodney and Julianne Rau

Madison, Micah, Cambria, Gavin
Grand Rapids, MI

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.

Reminder

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

Call to Synod

Synod 2020 appointed Georgetown Protestant Reformed Church, Hudsonville, Michigan the calling church for the 2021 Synod.

The Consistory hereby notifies our churches that the 2021 Synod of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America will convene, the Lord willing, on Tuesday, June 8, 2021 at 8:00 A.M., in the Georgetown Protestant Reformed Church, Hudsonville, MI.

The Pre-synodical service will be held on Monday evening, June 7, at 7:00 P.M. Rev. R. VanOverloop president of the 2020 Synod, will preach the sermon. Synodical delegates are requested to meet with the Consistory before the service.

Delegates in need of lodging should contact Mr. Philip VanderWall, O-3705 W. Leonard, Marne, MI. Phone: (616) 302-4725.

Consistory of
Georgetown PRC
Mr. Philip VanderWall, Clerk