

# The Standard Bearer

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## Jehovah my portion

Rev. John Marcus

## The sin of schism

Prof. Barrett Gritters

## But

Rev. William Langerak

## The graft

Dr. Brendan Looyenga

## Lessons from the Judges: Samson seeking an occasion

Rev. Ryan Barnhill



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**Editorial office**

Prof. Barry Gritters  
4949 Ivanrest Ave SW  
Wyoming, MI 49418  
gritters@prca.org

**Business office**

Mr. Alex Kalsbeek  
1894 Georgetown Center Dr  
Jenison, MI 49428-7137  
616-457-5970  
alexkalsbeek@rfpa.org

**Church news editor**

Mr. Perry Van Egdom  
2324 Fir Ave  
Doon, IA 51235  
vanegdoms@gmail.com

**United Kingdom office**

c/o Mrs. Alison Graham  
27 Woodside Road  
Ballymena, BT42 4HX  
Northern Ireland  
alisongraham2006@hotmail.co.uk

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## Meditation

Rev. John Marcus, a minister of the Word in the Protestant Reformed Churches

# Jehovah my portion

**Thou art my portion, O LORD: I have said that I would keep thy words.**

**Psalms 119:57**

Psalms 119 is the prayer of a pilgrim facing the ups and downs of life. Facing these things, our temptation is to approach life from a horizontal perspective, looking only on the earthly plane. The psalmist, however, teaches us to take a vertical perspective, looking at life in the light of our relationship with Jehovah God. In his prayer, he declares his delight in God's love to him as well as his love to God. He confesses his neediness, expresses his thanksgiving to God, and calls upon God for grace and mercy along the way. Especially is he full of praise for Jehovah, who made Himself to be the psalmist's portion.

The truth that Jehovah is our portion ought to touch every square inch of our lives. Life without this portion would be the definition of misery. But when Jehovah is our portion, then all is well. A proper perspective on the whole of our pilgrimage will have as its starting point the truth that Jehovah is our portion. So, the psalmist begins the section with that idea. Literally, the psalmist says in the original Hebrew, "Portion mine, Jehovah," showing the emphasis of this section.

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The portion for an Israelite in the Old Testament was the inheritance that was allotted to him. One's portion was his greatest and most treasured possession, the one thing he would choose to keep if he had to give up everything else. What makes the inheritance of the land of Canaan so precious to the saints of old was the fact that God put His temple there and dwelt among His people. That raises the question, what is *our* greatest and most desired possession? What, above all else, is most precious to *us*?

The wicked seek after the things of this world. Their most precious possessions are their houses, cars, investments, influence, and pleasure in eating, drinking, and making merry. They hate God and His law; He is not their portion.

But, by God's grace, Jehovah has made Himself our

portion through His rich mercy in Jesus Christ. The glorious nature of God's mercy makes the psalmist proclaim "The earth, O LORD, is full of thy mercy" (v. 64). He sees that Jehovah God, the great I Am, the faithful covenant God, is a God who shows abundant mercy. It is God's mercy that delivers us from our deepest woe and gives to us the greatest good. Although we continue to be plagued by the old man of sin and are often drawn after the idols of this world, nevertheless, Jehovah remains our portion. He, above all things, is most precious to us! How precious is that mercy of God to take rebellious sinners into covenant fellowship with Himself!

That Jehovah is our portion will inevitably manifest itself in our lives. In particular, when we are of God's party, we will join with others who are of God's party and separate ourselves from those who are against God!

On the one hand, then, the reality of our relationship with Jehovah will influence who we have as our friends. That is evident when the psalmist says, "I am a companion of all them that fear thee" (v. 63). It makes sense that we, who have Jehovah as our portion, want to join with others who have Jehovah as their portion. We are united and bound together to others who share the same reverence and awe of God. We want to unite with them in the church institute, glad when they say with us "Let us go into the house of the LORD" (Ps. 122:1). What a joy to be part of the communion of saints in which we rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. Similarly, we want to be joined in marriage to those who are "heirs together of the grace of life" (I Pet. 3:7). Indeed, the truth that Jehovah is our portion ought to regulate all of our relationships.

On the other hand, when Jehovah is our portion, we will also experience separation from the wicked who stand against God's party. That separation occurs in part because they set themselves to afflict us in their hatred of God and His people. The psalmist says, "The bands of the wicked have robbed me" (v. 61). Not that they stole his money; rather, they encircled him in order to oppress him and destroy him spiritually. We are assailed by the wicked through so many different means, electronic or otherwise. By God's grace we respond to

the wicked, “Depart from me, ye evil doers: for I will keep the commandments of my God” (v. 115). Our love for God manifests itself in the fact that we do not want to fellowship with those who hate Him. Having Jehovah as our portion, we want “no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness” (Eph. 5:11).

When Jehovah is our portion and we belong to His party, it also follows that we will be committed to keeping God’s Word. We see this commitment in the psalmist when, immediately after confessing “Thou art my portion, O LORD,” he adds this promise to God: “I have said that I would keep thy words” (v. 57). He commits himself to giving careful attention to and exercising great care over God’s words.

God’s words include everything He says to us, a record of which we have in holy Scripture. The central message of these words of God is the promise of salvation in Jesus Christ. When we think on these words of promise, we say with the psalmist, “How sweet are thy words unto my taste! yea, sweeter than honey to my mouth!” (v. 103). We want to give careful attention to these glorious words concerning God’s love to us.

Not only do we want to keep those words that express God’s love to us; we also desire to keep those words that express our love to God. When Jehovah is our portion, the law of God will not be a burden but rather a delight (v. 77). We want to keep those words that show us the way to express our love to God.

That commitment to keep God’s words will necessarily manifest itself in a life of daily repentance. The psalmist says, “I thought on my ways, and turned my feet unto thy testimonies” (v. 59). By God’s grace, we take heed to our ways in the light of God’s words and respond by turning our feet into the way of obedience. When we consider the glorious word of God’s love proclaimed in the gospel, thankfulness makes us want to turn away from sin and turn in love to God. Indeed, the more we love God the less we will hesitate to obey Him. That is evident from verse 60 where the psalmist says, “I made haste, and delayed not to keep thy commandments.”

When the wicked tempt us to turn aside from God, the fact that Jehovah is our portion will show itself in a steadfast desire to resist temptation and to walk in His ways. So it was, when the “bands of the wicked... robbed” the psalmist, he responded “but I have not forgotten thy law” (v. 61). Snares beset us, but we do not want to stray from God who has been so merciful to us.

Jehovah being our portion goes hand in hand with a commitment to keep God’s words and walk in His ways to the glory of His name.

And yet, we understand that salvation is never accomplished by our own strength. So, the fact that Jehovah is our portion will make us those who pray to Him. The psalmist understands this well, hence the prayer that makes up the whole of Psalm 119. We see some of the major elements of prayer in this psalm, summarized with the acronym A-C-T-S (adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication).

*Adoration* ought to stand on the foreground of all our prayers. Jesus teaches us that in the first petition of the model prayer: “Hallowed be thy name.” When God makes Himself to be our portion, we will want His name to be praised. Not surprisingly, we find words of praise throughout the psalm. In verse 7, the psalmist proclaims, “I will praise thee with uprightness of heart.” Verse 171 says, “My lips shall utter praise, when thou hast taught me thy statutes.” And, from this section of the psalm, “The earth, O LORD, is full of thy mercy” (v. 64). Over and over, the psalmist utters words of adoration to God.

Secondly, knowing Jehovah as our portion, we make willing *confession* of our sins and neediness. The psalmist implies he is sinful when he says, “I thought on my ways, and turned my feet unto thy testimonies” (v. 59). When he thought on his ways, he understood he fell short and needed to turn his feet back toward the way of obedience. We find that more explicitly in other sections of the psalm. In verse 9, he understood he needed grace and therefore asks, “Wherewithall shall a young man cleanse his way?” (v. 9). Also, at the end of the psalm, we find the confession, “I have gone astray like a lost sheep” (v. 176). How good for us to confess our need of grace when we pray to God!

The third element of prayer that flows from knowing Jehovah as our portion is *thanksgiving*. The psalmist shows his thankful heart when he says, “At midnight I will rise to give thanks unto thee because of thy righteous judgments” (v. 62). He understands that God’s righteous acts of judgment are also for our salvation. Thankful for his salvation, he cannot keep these thoughts of thankfulness from swirling around in his head, even at midnight. He is so thankful he is not willing to turn over and go back to sleep. Rather, he rises to give thanks to his faithful covenant God.

Finally, the knowledge that Jehovah is our portion will lead us to make *supplication* to Him. He alone can give grace and mercy and everything we need for body and soul. Not surprisingly, we find the psalmist making a multitude of requests throughout the psalm: “O forsake me not utterly” (v. 8); “O let me not wander from thy commandments” (v. 10); “Deal bountifully with thy



servant, *that* I may live, and keep thy word” (v. 17), and so on. Also, in this section of the psalm: “I intreated thy favour with my whole heart: be merciful unto me according to thy word” (v. 58). When Jehovah is our portion, we will look to Him for His favor and mercy. We make these supplications to God, not because we are worthy of anything. Rather, we ask these things “according to thy word;” that is to say, according to God’s word of promise, which promise is yea and amen in Christ Jesus.

Every element of life flows out of Jehovah the Giver of life. Having a personal relationship with Him will therefore affect our attitude towards Him who is our portion and towards others with whom we have contact in this world. Having Jehovah, the God of love, as our portion, we will be committed to keep all His words that declare His love to us and the way to express our love to Him. Having Jehovah as our portion we will pray to Him, from whom all blessings flow. He above all things is most precious. Blessed be His holy name!



## Editorial

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

# The sin of schism

Five editorials have appeared, thus far, on the unrighteous and painful schism in the PRCA. The first editorial simply lamented. Next, we recognized that the schism is a great threat to us and our children. The reality of this threat has been confirmed by more recent actions and writings. The horror of this threat is evidenced in broken marriages, parents divided from their still-at-home children, and young people leaving the spectacle in disgust. One man described it as “ripping the entire denomination apart in every way—congregations, mission fields, colleagues, friends, families, parents, children, and marriages, causing destruction and unspeakable grief.” Who does not feel this grief?

The next two editorials addressed the contended doctrines and the disorder taking place among those dissatisfied with assemblies’ decisions. Finally, the editorial of May 15 addressed an old question that has newly become a further source of contention and alleged reason for schism: Is the Christian totally depraved? I carefully showed from the Scripture and confessions how a Reformed Christian must answer the question.

In this editorial we treat a more fundamental question regarding the very definition of *schism*. Readers of the *SB* may benefit from a careful consideration of this sin. The Church Order calls it one of the chief sins on account of which an officebearer will be deposed from the ministry. It would be wise to teach your children and young people of these matters. Your children must understand the issues as they see friends depart.

On the one hand, those who have left the churches, led by former PRCA ministers and a few elders and dea-

cons, reject the charge of schism. They claim that they must leave the PRCA because the PRCA impenitently deny God’s truth and therefore are on the path to destruction. Among other accusations, we are guilty of trampling the truth of Jehovah with idolatry, polluting the churches with the filth of conditional theology, willfully twisting the Word of God, shrewdly deceiving the unwary, and allowing the will of man to prevail. The PRCA’s sin is so serious that the new church’s founding document calls all PRCA members to come out from the PRCA lest they perish in God’s soon destruction of us. From the viewpoint of those who departed, therefore, leaving is not schism but reformation.

On the other hand, two consistories declared that these ministers were guilty of the gross sin of schism. Classis and synod concurred. The ministers were not charged with the sin of false doctrine but the sin of schism. Not heretics, but schismatics. Why?

The deposition case of one of these ministers came to Synod 2021 via protests against the charge of schism. Synod showed how the minister and, by implication, others were guilty of schism. The schism was by the minister’s public slander of his own consistory (they were “rebellious children”) and another consistory (“they minimize the error and strengthen the hand of evildoers”); by his slander of a fellow minister (“leading the listener to believe that the [other minister] does not confess salvation by grace alone”); by his slander of the church visitors (publicly misrepresenting their advice, saying that “they are prophets of Egypt,” and that they “will not counsel you to your profit, but to your shame”); by his gross

mischaracterization of Classis East's actions (Classis East "willfully defended false doctrine"); and by his refusal to heed his consistory's advice and by public criticism of the consistory's decisions (by which he "promotes insubordination among the members toward the consistory"). All these sins created sharp division in the congregation and denomination. That should not be difficult to see.

Nevertheless, in the process of answering the protestants, Synod carefully explained the sin of schism, in part to correct the misperception that schism can be created only by teaching false doctrine.

So, what is schism? And how is one guilty of it?

### Schism is sin against the unity of the church

Schism is not merely division in the church. There may be division without sin. The Great Reformation was division but was not schism. Schism is sin. The Dutch Afscheiding (Secession) of 1834 was division in the State Church but was not schism. These reformations of 1517 and 1834 (and others) were *necessary* separations because the church had corrupted herself. Division was necessary in order to separate from evil. It was not sin.

Schism is *sinfully* dividing the church of Jesus Christ. Schism is sin against the real and precious spiritual unity of Christ's church.

Church unity is one of the most precious blessings of our ascended Christ. The church's unity is the Spirit-created oneness we all have in our Head, Jesus Christ. Believers are one as they all partake of Christ Himself and agree in true faith. Theologians have at times described this unity regarding several realities:

- 1) Unity in Christ as Head (Eph. 1:10, 22, 23);
  - 2) Unity of Christ's Spirit (Eph. 4:3; I Cor 1:16);
  - 3) Unity of our one faith, the truth as it is in Jesus (Eph. 4:5, 21);
  - 4) Unity of love that binds (Col. 3:14);
  - 5) Unity of a common hope (Eph. 4:4); and
  - 6) Unity in the Fatherhood of God (Eph. 4:6).
- "There is one body," says Paul in Ephesians 4. The body is Christ's. We are united in Him.

More poetically, we confess: "Elect from ev'ry nation, Yet one o'er all the earth; Her charter of salvation: one Lord, one faith, one birth. One holy name she blesses, Partakes one holy food, And to one hope she presses, with ev'ry grace endued."

Precious to us, unity is also precious to Jesus Christ. What could be more precious to Him than the unity of His own body, the one, holy, catholic church? So there ought to be little more precious to us as well than the unity of the body and bride of Jesus.

Although the church's unity is not first a *calling* but a *fact* ("there is one body"), nevertheless, with the fact of

unity always comes a calling to unity. "Manifest the unity!" and "Guard the unity!" are the ways the church has expressed the calling. And with the calling to "guard" is the warning: "Do nothing to damage unity."

In both epistles that most clearly teach the reality of church unity, it is the *calling* to unity that receives the emphasis. Ephesians 4 begins with this calling and in I Corinthians 12 Paul only briefly states the reality before extensively urging upon the divisive members at Corinth the calling to maintain it, an urging that continues through the great chapter 13 on charity—the "more excellent way" of living out the unity. Calvin uses some hyperbole when he says, "...it is the main article of our religion that we be in harmony among ourselves." With less exaggeration, he says, "...on such agreement the safety of the Church rests and is dependent."

Teaching our children about unity ought to start with these two epistles. Unity is a reality; unity also has a calling.

The calling is to manifest unity and maintain unity, to show unity and to guard it. Individuals: Manifest the unity of the local congregation by membership in her. Guard that unity by confessing truth over against the lie, by living peaceably and hating strife. Congregations: Manifest that unity in denominational bonds with those of like faith, and then strive to maintain it in biblical manner. Denominations: Manifest that unity by contact with other churches that exhibit the marks of the true church, allowing nothing but essential matters to keep us apart. The Church Order, Article 85, warns, "Churches whose usages differ from ours only in non-essentials shall not be rejected."

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Just because unity is so important, schism is so offensive to our Lord Jesus. It's also the devil's specialty. The church is always threatened by schism.

Referring especially but not only to unity in the local congregation, Synod 2021 stated, "schism is a sin-caused division among members in the church." Then, addressing the specific issue before her, Synod declared: "A person can be guilty of schism not only by the sin of preaching false doctrine, but by other sins." Synod's declaration was addressing the misperception that schism can only be caused by false doctrine. From Scripture Synod showed the churches that one can be guilty of schism in many ways. Most PRCA members have received Synod's explanation from their consistories. If you have not, you may ask for it from your elders or our editorial office.

In the first epistle to the Corinthians, Paul addresses the sin of schism in three different places. First, some Corinthian members sinned against unity (were schis-

matic) by following certain preachers rather than others (chap. 1). They were guilty of a party spirit. Rebuking these followers of men, Paul says, “Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions (the Greek is *schisms*) among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.” Second, other Corinthian members sinned against unity (were schismatic) when they came to the Lord’s Supper improperly (chapter 11). “...when ye come together in the church, I hear that there be divisions (the Greek is *schisms*) among you; and I partly believe it.” Paul uses the word “heresies” in the next verse, which is not a reference first to *false doctrine*, but to *factions*. Schisms and heresies were two different ways of describing the same reality: sinful division in the body of Christ. Third, others caused schism by their pride or jealousy over spiritual gifts in the church (chapter 12). Some were proud of their own gifts. Others were jealous of their neighbor’s gifts. Paul uses the analogy of the human body to point out that all the members were necessary—the visible and invisible, the great and the small, the comely and the uncomely. “...there should be no schism in the body.”

To show that Synod’s views were not novel, Synod pointed out that Reformed theologians and Reformed churches have always understood that schism is committed not only by false doctrine but also by other sins.

Prof. H. Hanko: “The sin of public schism is the sin of dividing the congregation or the churches into factions, arousing the people of God to discord or mutiny. The motives may be those of self-justification or defiance of authority in the church or desire for personal self-advancement” (*Notes on the Church Order*, Art. 80). Prof. D. Engelsma: “Schism is self-willed, self-seeking separation from the covenant community of God in Jesus Christ, that is, the church, with agitation that brings strife and division into that covenant community. Schism is sin against the unity of the church” (*Standard Bearer*, May 15, 2003). “The minister who publicly agitates against the decision of his consistory will be censured for schism” (*Standard Bearer*, April 15, 1992). VanDellen and Monsma speak of schism being caused by “minor differences in doctrine or church government” (*The Church Order Commentary*, p. 331). The Church Order itself says that a man may be guilty of schism when he enters the ministry without a lawful call (Art. 3). No false doctrine there. And Herman Bavinck: “Guilty of schism are those who, though leaving the foundation of doctrine intact, nevertheless break with the church on subordinate points of worship or church government” (*Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:319).

Men and women have been guilty of gross sin against the unity of the church. Please read and re-read the Synod’s careful explanation in answer to the protests of the deposition. But the schism continues. As the days proceed, the slander escalates and the disorder becomes more chaotic. More are carried away in the division.

May the gracious Lord prevent the fissure from extending further into the churches. May He grant repentance unto restored unity. In the July issue we published the prayer of Synod: “We earnestly seek reconciliation in the biblical way of confession and forgiveness.... The very gospel of Christ demands that we try to reconcile.... [W]e attempt to begin a healing of the breach between us.”

May God also give renewed love for the truth of one of the most precious Psalms: *Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! It is like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron’s beard: that went down to the skirts of his garments; As the dew of Hermon, and as the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion: for there the LORD commanded the blessing, even life for evermore.*

With your children, ponder the last stanzas of “The Church’s One Foundation”:

Though with a scornful wonder  
Men see her sore oppressed,  
By schisms rent asunder,  
By heresies distressed;  
Yet saints their watch are keeping,  
Their cry goes up, How long?  
And soon the night of weeping  
Shall be the morn of song.

Mid toil and tribulation,  
And tumult of her war,  
She waits the consummation  
Of peace forevermore;  
Till with the vision glorious  
Her longing eyes are blest,  
And the great church victorious  
Shall be the church at rest.

Yet she on earth hath union  
With God the Three in One,  
And mystic sweet communion  
With those whose rest is won;  
O happy ones and holy!  
Lord, give us grace, that we,  
Like them, the meek and lowly,  
On high may dwell with Thee!

# Letters

## Incentives to good works

I am writing out of concern that the idea of “incentives” for good works can be taken in a wrong way. Rev. K. Koole addresses this idea in his recent series on H. Witsius—I appreciate his willingness to continue down the road to understanding these issues better.

My concern is that we might think of the personal blessings promised in Scripture as a separate goal. Personal goals should not be an extra motivation alongside our thankful love for God. Rather, they must be completely subordinate to and must not exist apart from the one motivation of love. We are to love God with all our heart and soul and mind—there is no room for any other motivation. Even the love for myself and my neighbor is found within that love for God. Making personal benefits into a separate goal diverts us from that calling.

The commands and “rewards” of Scripture could be called incentives because they provoke us to good works by directing and supporting the love we already have in our new man. But the word *incentive* often means “additional motivation”—like the incentive of some cash back when financing a new car. A loving husband gives encouragement to his wife who is burdened with the overwhelming demands of motherhood, but he does not offer her “incentives” based on fulfilling her duties. That would imply that her love for her family is not enough motivation so a little more is needed. Our new man is already 100% motivated by love. We do not have a lack of motivation, we have a competing motivation—our sinful old man.

An added motivation is not only unnecessary but also cannot possibly result in good works. The idea of doing good works so that we get a personal reward is self-contradicting—it demands that we perform selfless acts for ourselves.

Perfect love means that it does not matter whether a good work benefits myself or my neighbor. It is hard for us to imagine a perfectly good work since our old man buries all our good works in filth. But we do have one example—Christ, in perfect love, gave us all His personal benefits (even spiritual ones) on the cross.

Of course, we desire and give thanks for all of God’s gifts. But rather than *directly* seeking personal benefits of any kind, we should be seeking the kingdom of God and His righteousness (Matt. 6:33), while trusting our Father to provide all things necessary for body and soul (LD 9).

Doug Wassink  
First PRC, Holland

## RESPONSE:

Dear Brother Wassink:

You are right, incentives for good works, or if you will, incentives unto godliness *can* be taken the wrong way and *can* be used in an improper fashion, especially when tied in with blessings associated with them and with promised rewards. But because such *can* be abused does not mean the benefits of the godly life serving as incentives ought not be preached. The fact is there are instances when such incentives are to be emphasized and must be preached, namely, when it’s the text of God’s Word. And when the text requires it, that means the Holy Spirit Himself requires the preacher to do justice to the text that the Spirit Himself has inspired.

The Holy Spirit in His wisdom certainly knows what Christ’s people in their weakness need to hear time and again. To His exhortations unto godliness, the Spirit frequently affixes promised blessings and rewards to encourage believers in the life of discipleship and its demanding, often costly way. When He does, we must not pretend to be wiser than He, not when it comes to our Lord addressing His people for their encouragement. And what must not then happen, when the preacher holds before God’s people these added incentives, is that he is subjected to criticism for bringing too much of man’s doing into the picture and charged with not emphasizing grace enough or not being Christ-centered. Not if what he is doing is being true to the text.

For example, consider I Peter 3:1-6, where the apostle calls believing wives to submit to their husbands, even to unbelieving ones, pagan men who were anything but happy that Christianity had been brought into their homes. For their faith, these newly converted women would often suffer injustices. Yet they were not to divorce these harsh, unhappy husbands. They were required to continue in meekness to serve and live with them, if such would have them.

Why?

The apostle could simply have declared to these wives, “Because Christ is your Lord, and He commands you to do so!” End of argument. But he does not. To their Lord’s authority and their calling to love Him the Spirit directs the apostle to give added incentive. The apostle says that Christ may very well use their Christian submission to their harsh, unhappy husbands (their returning good for evil) to convert these husbands to the Christian faith. To whose benefit? To the whole household’s, of course, but to that of the faithful wife’s



especially, as she has returned good for evil and love for harshness.

Wonderful incentive! Which, by the way, has served as a third point in many Protestant Reformed sermons of the past. It's the text. For us to dismiss or minimize this incentive because we judge it not to be Christ-centered enough would border on impertinence. Ironically, and importantly, what the text is making plain is that it is in the way of self-denial that one actually benefits, that is, spiritually. As Scripture declares, "Whosoever will [be willing to] lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it" (Luke 9:24).

Maybe you judge that a wife married to a harsh, unbelieving husband should not need such incentive. Thankfulness for her own salvation should be enough. Maybe I as a preacher am inclined to tell the wife that remaining married and submitting is commanded by her Lord! And that should be enough. But the Lord in His wisdom and mercy, knowing what such wives sometimes have to suffer, deems otherwise. He, in effect, says, "I, unlike marriage counselors of today, forbid you to divorce that unbeliever. This means, for my sake, you will have to suffer a difficult marriage. But to encourage you to endure in the self-denying way, I give you incentives to suffer for My Name's sake. I may use the obedience I require of you to gain to Myself that husband of yours. And such obedience will serve as a blessing to you and your children as well. But even if I do not use it to convert your husband, it will still be to your spiritual advantage and well-being in the end, as well as a good example to your children. Press on!"

To this we could add I Corinthians 7:13-16. There the believing spouse is commanded not to divorce the unbelieving spouse, thinking perhaps then to marry a Christian instead. In that passage God states His own covenant promise as an incentive not to do so. Even if the unhappy spouse never converts, consider this: your children are not unclean, "but now are they holy." Strong incentive to be obedient to the Lord's demanding commandments, because out of such soil (the life of godliness, doing *good* even to those difficult to love and respect) the Lord will bring blessings for self and good fruit.

And, another example: how often Scripture uses the figure of planting and harvesting. As it is in the agricultural realm, so in the spiritual. Scripture points out more than once that according as the believer sows (uses his time and talents), so he shall reap. He who sows sparingly unto the Lord and His kingdom, shall reap sparingly. Consider Lot. He who sows abundantly (his time and energy for kingdom purposes) shall reap abundantly. Consider Abraham and Joseph.

One can turn to the Proverbs and find texts almost at will as they contrast the life governed by wisdom versus the way of the fool. Proverbs underscores wisdom's benefits as promised and received by those who in obedience to God wisely hearken to His Word. This is the wisdom of the Holy Spirit as He gives God's children instruction and then gives them incentive to pay heed. It is evidently something He sees we have need of and can profit from.

You state "The idea of doing good works so that we get a personal reward is self-contradicting—it demands that we perform selfless acts for ourselves."

As you phrase it, your statement is deficient and improperly phrased.

"Perform selfless acts for ourselves"? No, Scripture states that we, as Christ's disciples, are to deny ourselves ("perform selfless acts") for Christ's sake. But then Christ assures His disciples that this will also profit them, that is, benefit them spiritually. Such will serve their (our) spiritual health, strength, and growth. Surely this is not improper or to be dismissed as being motivated by something that is self-serving in some self-centered way.

Consider God's Word calling us to pray and also to keep the Sabbath Day holy, "frequenting" the means of grace. Why? Out of a love for God to be sure, and in gratitude for being delivered from "the house of bondage." Such are primary. But also, such will benefit one spiritually, strengthening one's faith and arming one for the spiritual battle. Proper incentives, benefiting self spiritually, and not to be dismissed. We should be interested in our own spiritual growth.

In the end, what is going to be served by obeying these precepts of God is our ability to serve Christ and His body, our fellow saints. This is not self-centeredness. And this is pleasing to the Lord.

In conclusion, we underscore two points.

First, to speak of incentives being given by God for the doing of good works (walking in love and godliness) that benefit ourselves spiritually does not displace the primary motivations for such a life of obedience, namely, gratitude for so great a grace shown to us as sinners and the knowledge of God's surpassing love. They always remain primary as motivation. The promised blessings that tie in with the life of obedience to God are added by God Himself as incentives. The point is, when a Scripture passage presents such, we must not be hesitant to declare it is so. Our Christ is that kind of a gracious, benevolent Lord.

We think, for instance of those facing martyrdom, enduring pain and agony for who knows how long. Simon Peter's martyrdom comes to mind. His primary

motivation certainly was what his Lord had forgiven him, and hence, his willingness to so suffer in gratitude and out of love for his Lord. But we must not then disparage or dismiss the promised reward of glory. In the gospels, Christ Himself, responding to a question by Peter, gave this incentive of reward to those who would follow him and have to “count the cost” (read Matt. 19:27-30 and Matt. 5:11, 12). It is not selfish or simply self-serving to live holy or to suffer for Christ’s sake with such in mind. Rather, the believer does so knowing it will be to his spiritual profit, and that means, doing so with one’s relationship to God in mind for this life and the life to come. There is a glorious reward of grace to follow. So, whatever you may lose in this life or your Christianity may cost you, press on. Great will be your reward in heaven.

Of this message Scripture approves.

And second, such incentives for living unto God do not detract from salvation being all of grace or being to the glory of God, as some, it seems, fear. The very works we perform are the fruit of the power of grace that saves, of grace that transforms and has enabled one to begin to live unto God. And living unto God means one ceases being so singularly self-centered and self-serving.

When one who is newly converted, for instance, sees this whole transformation in his life and realizes he has

a whole new perspective on life with an interest in godliness and spiritual things, to whom does he give the glory and the credit? Not to self, but to the God of transforming grace. And when others see Christianity in action, that which the apostle calls the life of good works, they are compelled, in the end, to magnify the power of grace as well (cf. I Pet. 2:12).

The point we make is, as believers are faced with all the difficulties of life and living unto God faithfully, Scripture gives incentives to encourage them (us) along the way—to make the right choices and to “eschew” evil. Surely this is the point of Hebrews 11 throughout and particularly Hebrews 11:26, which speaks of Moses choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God (to be identified with God’s Israel), “for he had respect unto [valued highly] the recompense of the reward.” And as Hebrews 12:1ff. makes plain, what is set before us in Hebrews 11 is for our instruction and example.

If Scripture is our rule (and it is), then it cannot be said that these considerations detract from or threaten to displace our undeserved redemption and God’s love as the primary motivations to live as Christians unto Christ. Not when these incentives are embedded in the text, and must be preached as such.

Rev. Kenneth Koole



## All around us

Rev. Martyn McGeown, pastor-elect of Providence PRC in Hudsonville, MI

# Gender dysphoria and the courts

## Gender dysphoria and its “treatment”

Imagine a small child, perhaps as young as ten years old. Imagine a little boy or a little girl, or a young teen—*your* child—distressed and “unable to function emotionally for at least six months” for some or all of the following reasons:

A strong desire to be of the other gender or an insistence that one is the other gender; a strong preference for wearing clothes typical of the other gender; a strong preference for cross-gender roles in make-believe play or fantasy play; a strong preference for toys, games or

activities stereotypically used or engaged in by the other gender; a strong preference for playmates of the other gender; a strong rejection of toys, games and activities typical of one’s assigned gender; and a strong dislike of one’s [anatomy] (12).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In this article I refer to the judgment of the (UK) High Court of Justice in “Quincy Bell and Mrs A vs. The Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust (Defendant).” Paragraph (not page) numbers are from that document issued on December 1, 2020, and italics are mine: <https://www.judiciary.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Bell-v-Tavistock-Judgment.pdf>

If you brought your child to the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust in London, England (or to an equivalent clinic in your country), he/she might well be diagnosed with “gender dysphoria” and be referred to its Gender Identity Developed Service (GIDS). Dysphoria (from *dus*—difficult; and *pherein*—to bear, which is the opposite of euphoria from *eu*—well) is a profound state of unease or dissatisfaction. Gender dysphoria is a profound state of unease or dissatisfaction about one’s gender. One does not merely dislike one’s gender, but one has a strong, perhaps overwhelming and crippling, desire to be the other gender. A boy wants to be a girl, or a girl wants to be a boy. More than that, a boy insists that he is a girl, and must be called such and become such; or a girl insists that she is a boy, and must be called such and become such. “Gender dysphoria [is] a condition where persons experience distress because of a mismatch between their perceived identity and their natal sex, that is, their sex at birth. Such persons have a strong desire to live according to their perceived identity rather than their natal sex” (3).

Modern medicine claims the ability to change boys into girls and vice versa. The first step is to delay puberty, which is to block the hormones that in the teenage years cause boys and girls to mature into young men and women. These puberty blockers can be prescribed to boys and girls *as young as ten*, so that they do not become men and women *until they have decided what gender they want to be*. The director of GIDS testifies, “The primary purpose of puberty blockers is to give the young person time to think about their gender identity” (52). The literature published by GIDS states: “[Puberty blockers] may improve the way you feel about yourself.” “[They] will make you feel less worried about growing up in the wrong body” (63).

The second step, if the patient still experiences gender dysphoria, is to prescribe cross-sex hormones from the age of sixteen. These drugs stimulate the body to develop some of the physical characteristics associated with the desired gender. For example, a pubescent girl will grow facial hair and her voice will deepen; and a pubescent boy will not develop the normal muscle mass and may even develop breasts. However, cross-sex hormones do not give teenagers the private parts of their preferred gender.

The third step is gender-reassignment surgery, which attempts to give a person a body closest to their pre-

ferred gender, which, of course, can never achieve a true metamorphosis. This option is only available in the UK to people over the age of eighteen years.

I repeat, this is happening to children *as young as ten*. They are being placed on a pathway, beginning with puberty blockers, which, they are promised, will enable them one day to become the man/woman that they want to be. Once transition is complete—or even before that point—society demands and the law will enforce that demand, that Sheila be called Simon and Stanley be called Sue, that Simon (really Sheila) be allowed to use the men’s bathroom, be called “he/him” and even “they/them;” and that Sue (really Stanley) be allowed to use the women’s bathroom.

**I repeat, this is happening to children as young as ten. They are being placed on a pathway, beginning with puberty blockers, which, they are promised, will enable them one day to become the man/woman that they want to be.**

### Bell vs. Tavistock Clinic

In 2020 the (UK) High Court of Justice ruled in favor of an individual called Bell, who had transitioned from female to male, but then desired to “detransition” to her birth gender. (By the way, there are increasing numbers of gender dysphoria patients who regret their “transition”—such confused individuals must live with the consequences of decisions made in childhood/adolescence for the rest of their lives.) Bell is one with “buyer’s remorse.” Her lawsuit alleges two things: first, “that children and young persons under eighteen years of age are not competent to give consent to the administration of puberty blocking drugs” and second, “that the information given to those under eighteen years of age by the [Tavistock clinic] is misleading and insufficient to ensure such children or young persons are able to give informed consent” (7).

Of course, a secular court does not address the issue of morality: is it *lawful in the sight of God* to do this to people, and especially to young and vulnerable children/teenagers? Obviously not! God made them male and female (Matt. 19:4). The court is concerned only with the question of “informed consent.” Can a child/teenager *comprehend* the enormous, life-changing implications of such a decision at such a young age? And, if not, what protections should there be in place; and what is/should be the role of parents and the courts in such decisions?

Bell herself testifies that she was not ready. “From the age of four or five she displayed gender non-conformity,” and after researching her problems online, she writes, “I thought I had finally found the answer

as to why I felt so masculine, uncomfortable with my female body and why I was so much more similar to a stereotypical boy than to a stereotypical girl in physical expression and interests” (78). At the age of fifteen Bell was referred to GIDS and began taking puberty blockers. She then began to discuss surgery, “visualizing [herself] becoming a tall, physically strong young man where there was virtually no difference between [her] and a biological boy” (80). After three years of testosterone treatment she began to have doubts, but these were allayed through participating in online forums with other trans people: “The consensus was that most transsexual people have doubts and that it is a normal part of transitioning, so the doubts should be ignored.” Bell had a double mastectomy at the age of twenty. Bell concludes:

I started to realize that the vision I had as a teenager of becoming male was strictly a fantasy and that it was not possible. My biological make-up was still female and it showed, no matter how much testosterone was in my system or how much I would go to the gym. I was being perceived as a man by society, but it was not enough. I started to just see a woman with a beard, which is what I was. I felt like a fraud and I began to feel more lost, isolated and confused than I did when I was pre-transition (81).

From January 2019 Bell stopped taking testosterone. “She now wishes to identify as a woman and is changing her legal sex back to that on her original birth certificate” (83). Bell now wants to prevent others making the same catastrophic mistake. She writes:

I made a brash decision as a teenager, (as a lot of teenagers do) trying to find confidence and happiness, except now the rest of my life will be negatively affected. I cannot reverse any of the physical, mental or legal changes that I went through. Transition was a very temporary, superficial fix for a very complex identity issue (83).

The Tavistock clinic defended its practices, insisted that children and teenagers are competent to make such decisions concerning their gender identity, and maintained that the information provided is age-appropriate, clear, and not misleading. The judges of the High Court expressed serious concerns, concluding:

There will be enormous difficulties in a child under sixteen years of age understanding and weighing up this information and deciding whether to consent to the use of puberty blocking medication. It is highly unlikely that a child aged *thirteen years or under* would be competent to give consent to the administration of puberty blockers. It is doubtful that a child aged

*fourteen or fifteen years* could understand and weigh the long-term risks and consequences of the administration of puberty blockers (151).

The court identified the following concerns.

First, the data provided by the Tavistock Clinic lacked detail on patients’ age distribution, reasons for gender split, and reasons for increased referrals to GIDS (29-32). For example, in 2009 ninety-seven children were referred and in 2018 that number rose to 2,519! The Clinic offered no explanation. In 2011 the gender split was 50/50 between boys and girls, while in 2019 the split was 76/24—why are girls suddenly affected in much larger numbers than boys? Again, the Clinic could not provide the data. The Clinic also had no data on the “proportion of young people referred by GIDS for puberty blockers who had a diagnosis of Autistic Spectrum Disorder,” an added complication in the case of a gender-confused child. The court found this “lack of data analysis—and apparent lack of investigation on this issue—*surprising*” (34).

Second, the court found the process for taking consent inadequate:

The court gained the strong impression from the evidence and from those submissions that it was extremely unusual for either GIDS or the Trusts to refuse to give puberty blockers on the ground that the young person was not competent to give consent (44).

The court goes on: “The evidence...clearly shows that practically all children/young people who start puberty blockers progress on to cross sex hormones” (56); in fact, the path from one drug to the next is “virtually inexorable” (68). The court added, “The treatment may be supporting the persistence of gender dysphoria in circumstances in which it is at least possible that without the treatment the gender dysphoria would resolve itself” (77). “There is strong evidence that once a child commences on puberty blockers they will progress to cross sex hormones, which will cause irreversible changes to the child’s body with lifelong medical, psychological and emotional implications for the child” (93). The court judged that puberty blockers do not give young people “time to think” (as the Clinic argued), but are really stepping stones to cross sex hormones, noting that in the Netherlands *only 1.9%* “stopped the [puberty blockers] treatment and did not proceed to cross sex hormones” (57). The court was “surprised” that GIDS did not provide equivalent data for the UK (59).

Third, the court heard evidence that young children and adolescents with underdeveloped brains make “different, more risky decisions than adults.” One expert witness testified:



It is very possible for an adolescent to be unable to fully grasp the implications of puberty-blocking treatment. All the evidence we have suggests that the complex, emotionally charged decisions required to engage with this treatment are not yet acquired as a skill at this age, both in terms of brain maturation and in terms of behavior (46).

Of course, any parent of a teenager knows that!

### At the “mercy” of the courts and prey to social pressure

That leaves the fate of British children under sixteen with gender dysphoria at the dubious mercy of the courts. Since such young people cannot judge their readiness for such treatment, a court would adjudicate with or without parental consent. Transgender groups reacted angrily to the judgment and the Clinic plans to appeal. Transgender activists need not worry, however, and I take cold comfort from this judgment. Courts have been slow to protect children and young people from the menace of transgenderism, often overriding parents’ concerns, even punishing recalcitrant parents who refuse to recognize their child’s gender preferences. I mention only the case of Robert Hoogland, who in April 2021 was sentenced to six months in prison in British Columbia, Canada, and fined \$30,000, on the charge of “family violence.” In February 2019 the Supreme Court of British Columbia had ordered that Hoogland’s daughter, then fourteen years old, should receive testosterone treatments in order to allow her to transition to her preferred male gender. The court had also ruled that the child’s parents would be guilty of “family violence” if either of them referred to their daughter as a “girl” or with female pronouns. Hoogland violated that order, by, among other things, refusing to recognize his child’s preferred gender and by naming and shaming the health professionals involved. The court took a dim view and Hoogland was punished.

There is also evidence that, especially among girls, gender dysphoria diagnoses are exploding because of peer pressure. The blog *Science Based Medicine* featured two articles on that subject by Harriet Hall.<sup>2</sup> In the first post, Hall analyzes the work of Lisa Littman, (former) assistant professor of Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island (I say “former” because her research was pulled from the university website and she

was fired due to pressure from “trans activists”). Littman coined a term, “Rapid-Onset Gender Dysphoria,” which, she suggests, is due to “social contagion and online influences, rather than to an innate, immutable sense of incongruence between anatomical sex and personal sense of gender.” Girls, much more than boys, feel social pressure in their teenaged years to become “trans.”

In the second post, Hall reviews a book, *Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters*, by Abigail Shrier, which builds upon Littman. “There are many social media sites and online forums that facilitate the discovery of a trans identity,” writes Hall. Notice the word “facilitate.” Such websites advise confused girls: “If you think you might be trans, you are.” They also encourage girls to “deceive parents and doctors” so that they obtain the treatment that they want, and deceptively paint a rosy future for those who transition. Schools and therapists either cannot or will not help: laws against so-called “conversion therapy” make it very difficult for anyone to “question a patient’s self-diagnosis of gender dysphoria.” Hall makes mention of “a highly respected expert on gender dysphoria [who] refused to reduce the source of distress to one problem”:

He insisted on looking at the whole kid. In a series of 100 boys he treated who had not been socially transitioned by parents, a whopping 88% outgrew their dysphoria. He was accused of practicing conversion therapy, was fired, and his reputation was ruined.

Schools routinely teach “gender and sexual identification instruction,” beginning in Kindergarten. In many states, it is not possible to opt out of such instruction in the public schools. That is horrifying and another reason to cherish and support Christian education.

Parents, be very careful about the access your children, especially teenaged girls, have to social media and the Internet. Be cautious about your children’s friends and peers. The planting of a seed into an impressionable child’s mind can have devastating, lifelong consequences. “Keep thy heart [and the hearts of thy children] with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life” (Prov. 4:23).

2 Harriet Hall, “Rapid-onset Gender Dysphoria and Squelching Controversial Evidence” and “Book Review: *Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters*” on [www.sciencebasedmedicine.org](http://www.sciencebasedmedicine.org).



## A word fitly spoken

Rev. William Langerak, pastor of Trinity Protestant Reformed Church in Hudsonville, Michigan

# But

Often maligned and under suspicion, “but” can fall on hard times. Some of it justified. Heretics use “but” to obscure error. We use it to excuse sin. And both practices are due to sin against the first “but”—“But thou shalt not eat of the tree” (Gen. 2:17). The fact is, “but” is essential to the Word of God, which came not by the will of man, *but* by the Holy Ghost (II Pet. 1:21). And without “but,” there is no gospel antithesis between God and man, sin and grace, law and gospel, truth and lie, salvation and damnation, heaven and hell, or life and death.

*But* God. Men make idols, but God made the heavens (Ps. 96:5). Idols are dead, but God lives (Hab. 2:20). With men salvation is impossible, but with God all things are possible (Matt. 19:26). Not many wise men are called, but God has chosen the foolish (I Cor. 1:26-27). Men plant, but God gives the increase (I Cor. 3:6). Men thought evil, but God meant it for good (Gen. 50:20). Men slew Jesus, but God raised Him from the dead (Acts 13:29-30). We were dead in sin, but God has quickened us with Christ (Eph. 2:1-5). We are tempted, but God is faithful (I Cor. 10:13). So faith confesses: We die like sheep, but God will redeem me from the grave; my heart fails, but God is the strength of my heart and portion forever (Ps. 49:15; 73:26).

*But* Jesus. He said: I came not to be ministered unto, but to minister; I came not to send peace, but a sword; I came not to destroy the law, but to fulfill it (Matt. 20:28; 10:34; 5:17); I came not to destroy men’s lives, but to save them; I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance (Luke 9:56; 5:32); you have not chosen Me, but I have chosen you; he that follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life; and no man cometh unto the Father, but by Me (John 15:16; 8:12; 14:6). Jesus taught: We live not by bread, but by the Word of God (Matt. 4:4); many are called, but few are chosen (Matt. 20:16); the harvest is plenteous, but laborers are few (Matt. 9:37); the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak (Matt. 26:41).

The gospel *but*. God said, “I will destroy man, but

Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD” (Gen. 6:8). The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life (Rom. 6:23). Faith is counted for righteousness to him that works not, but believes on Him that justifies the ungodly (Rom. 4:5). Salvation is not of him that wills nor runs, but of God that showeth mercy (Rom. 9:16). He saved us not by works of righteousness that we have done, but according to His mercy by the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghost (Tit. 3:5). God saved us and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace given us in Christ Jesus before the world began (II Tim. 1:9). There is no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit (Rom. 8:1). You have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption (Rom. 8:15). You are born again, not of corruptible seed, but incorruptible seed by the living Word (I Pet. 1:23). Reckon yourselves to be dead unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ (Rom. 6:11). Sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under the law but under grace (Rom. 6:14). For you were as sheep going astray, but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls (I Pet. 2:25).

But still more. He that despises holiness, despises not man but God, who hath also given unto us His Holy Spirit (I Thess. 4:8). He that doeth good is of God, but he that doeth evil hath not seen God (III John 1:11). Let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth (I John 3:18). He that loves his brother abides in the light, but he that hates his brother is in darkness (I John 2:10-11). But if you have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth: this wisdom descends not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish (James 3:14-15). Here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come (Heb. 13:14). And God be thanked that you were the servants of sin, but have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine delivered to you (Rom. 6:17).



## All Thy works shall praise Thee

Dr. Brendan Looyenga, member of Zion Protestant Reformed Church in Jenison, Michigan

### The graft

Just outside the front door of my home is a small ornamental tree that I planted last year. The tree is unusual looking, having a rounded evergreen canopy placed on top of a straight, branchless trunk. In fact, this plant is entirely unnatural, which is why it catches the eye compared to other plants around my home. Instead of being grown as a seedling, it was created by a skilled horticulturalist who grafted a bush-like dwarf pine onto a young white pine trunk. The graft between the two plants is still visible as a bulge near the top of the trunk. This bulge, however, is not just the scar tissue where the two plants were joined together. It is the living bond that ensures the ongoing exchange of fluids and nutrients between the trunk and branches of this tree.

The practice of grafting that was required to create this ornamental tree has been around for thousands of years and was commonplace in the Mediterranean world by the time the New Testament was written.<sup>1</sup> Unlike the tree outside my front door, however, plants that were grafted in biblical times were produced primarily for agricultural and not ornamental purposes. In the early first century AD world, for instance, it was common to graft new shoots of grape onto a well-established vine or branches from a wild olive onto a domesticated trunk in an olive grove. As such, Paul's analogy to grafting in Romans 11 would have been entirely familiar to his audience.

The practice of agricultural grafting allows for several advantages over traditional cultivation of plants from seeds. The most significant of these is the time-saving benefit, as most fruit-bearing species of vines or trees cultivated from seedlings take many years to grow before they become productive. Furthermore, not all varieties of fruit-bearing plants readily grow in a domesticated setting or can be propagated through seeds or cuttings, which means that they cannot be transplanted as seedlings to a hillside vineyard or olive grove. Grafting to

a well-established vine or trunk not only assures that a transplanted shoot would more rapidly produce fruit, but also allow it to benefit from the hardiness of the vine or trunk (called the *rootstock*) to which it was grafted. In that way, common stressors such as lack of moisture, sensitivity to soil bacteria, or predation by certain insect pests can be alleviated by grafting.

The process of grafting the shoot or branch of one plant to the rootstock of another is both an art and a science. The art of grafting is seen in the many different ways that it can be performed, some that work better or worse with different types of plants. This challenge is compounded by the relative skill of the practitioner, who will inevitably find that his ability to make a successful graft improves significantly with time and practice. Through experience of success and failure he will learn to identify the variables that predict success, which include: the compatibility of the two plants being grafted; the proper alignment of the two plant tissues being grafted; the amount of pressure applied to the graft; and avoidance of water loss at the site of the graft.

The principles of proper grafting noted above are all intended to promote the cellular process that is occurring in a graft. For grafting to work, a layer of plant stem cells called the “cambium,” which lies just under the bark, must be exposed in both the branch and the rootstock. The cells of the cambium give rise to the vessels of a plant that are necessary for the flow of nutrients and water between the trunk and its branches. When properly aligned, the cells of the cambial layers will intermingle and meld to create a single, unified vascular system between the grafted branch and the trunk. Over time these stem cells will multiply and grow to create a strong, living bond of interwoven tissue that also serves as a permanent conduit through which the life of the trunk and its extensive root system are connected to the grafted branch.

Though members of the Mediterranean culture during the early New Testament were certainly not aware of the specific cellular details necessary for a grafted branch to survive and bear fruit, they would have no doubt recognized the imagery of an engrafted

<sup>1</sup> Ken Mudge, Jules Janick, Steven Scofield, and Eliezner Goldschmidt. “A History of Grafting.” *Horticultural Reviews*, volume 35. Ed. Jules Janick. (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2009).

olive branch in Paul's epistle to the Romans. In chapter 11 of this book, the Spirit of Christ directed the apostle to compare Gentile believers to wild olive branches that had been engrafted into the rootstock of a mature olive tree, which represents the covenant of grace that God has established with all of His elect people, starting with the chosen nation of Israel.

In this illustration, the physical graft uniting branches to the rootstock is not directly indicated; however, we can infer it by analogy from the words of verse 20-21: "Because of unbelief they [Jews] were broken off, and thou [Gentiles] standest by faith. Be not highminded, but fear. For if God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest he also spare not thee."

From these verses we understand that the difference between the Jews who had rejected Christ and the elect Gentiles is faith. The "natural branches" were broken off because they lacked the bond of faith uniting them to the olive tree, while in contrast, the "wild branches" were made part of the tree through the bond of faith. Grafting of a believer into the covenant of grace is *by faith alone*, which therefore implies that faith can be represented as a graft between a branch and the rootstock in Paul's analogy.

Before turning to the instructive features of this analogy, it is also worthwhile to reference Christ's illustration in John 15. Similar to Paul's illustration, Christ refers to believers as branches connected to a life-giving rootstock. In a slight variation on the illustration, however, Christ declared that He is the "vine" and believers the "branches." Rather than focusing on the distinction between "natural branches" and "wild branches," the emphasis here is on the life-giving power of the vine to which the branches are connected. No mention is made of a graft or bond here, but nonetheless we may again infer from the text the analogy to faith.

The necessary bond that unites branches to the vine is implied in Jesus' illustration by His repeated use of the phrase "abide in" to describe the bond between branches and vine. The branches that *abide in* the vine will be fruitful because the life of the vine is in them (vv. 4,5). In contrast, the branches that *abide not in* the vine wither and are "cast forth" to be burned (v. 6). These verses make it plain that what differentiates between a live branch and a dead branch is its bond to—or "abiding in"—the vine. This parallel aspect between Christ's illustration of the vine and Paul's analogy of the grafted olive tree is striking and demonstrates the fact that what unites every believer to Christ is an abiding faith in Him.

Returning now to the value of this illustration, we can observe four aspects that are instructive in our un-

derstanding of faith as a graft. First among these is the fact that the graft is a *living bond* between an engrafted branch and its rootstock. Living grafts are dynamic. They grow with time and become increasingly strong and secure as the plant itself grows. And such is faith. It is a living, vibrant bond between the believer and Christ that continues to grow and strengthen under the preaching of God's Word and through partaking in the sacraments as means of grace. Faith is not a static, inanimate bond like glue or tape. It is a *dynamic* bond between the believer and his Lord that enables the Christian to endure the storms of life that would threaten to tear him away from the Vine, ensuring that he will remain as a fruitful branch to the glory of God (John 15:8).

Second, the graft is the *single conduit* through which all the life of the rootstock flows to an engrafted branch. All of the water, minerals, and other nutrients absorbed by the roots of the vine or trunk flow to the branch through the vessels of the graft. No other tissue or part of the plant is necessary; the graft is the *exclusive* way that the life of the rootstock flows to the branch. So too is faith the exclusive instrument by which all the blessings of salvation in Christ are received and realized. No other instrument is used alongside of or in addition to faith to provide the blessings of salvation to a believer. Salvation in all its various parts, both objective and subjective, are received through faith alone.

Third, the graft is an *inseparable bond* in which the cells of the branch and the rootstock are so intermingled with one another that together they become one plant. If one were to cut out a slice of the graft and inspect it under a microscope, it would be impossible to distinguish which cells are from the branch and which are from the trunk. They would appear to be one, single unit in the same way that a natural branch is connected at the cellular level to its trunk. This is a remarkable analogy to the result of faith, which is the *union* of the believer to Christ. We become one in Him, who is our Righteousness and Head. This truth is emphasized throughout Paul's epistles, which repeatedly (more than 70 times!) use the phrase "in Christ" to describe the inseparable union between the believer and his Lord. Though each of us is a unique and separate branch grafted to Christ for the glory of God, we are one organism through the gift of faith that unites us to Him.

As a side-note here, there is a remarkable feature of Paul's analogy that clearly deviates from the illustration of an actual graft and would certainly have struck his audience as odd, too. In Romans 11:23-24, Paul speaks of the re-grafting of the dead, native branches of Israel back on to the olive tree from which they were broken off. Any gardener familiar with grafting would know,



however, that this is impossible. Once a branch is dead, it can no longer be grafted because a living cambium is required from *both* the branch *and* the rootstock for a graft to form. Without the contribution of cells from both sources, a bond between the two cannot be established.

In Paul's inspired deviation from the natural world, we see the wondrously sovereign and unilateral nature of faith as a *gracious* gift from God to which we contribute nothing. The actual bond of faith is unlike a biological graft because it is established solely from the living vine and not from the branches. This is so true that even a dead branch destined for the burn pile, which all of us are by nature, can be grafted into Christ. As the fully divine second person of the Trinity, Christ alone is the source of the gracious gift of faith that unites us to Him.

The fourth and last aspect of a graft that is instructive for us is that it is a *visible bond* between the two parts of the grafted plant. In this way a graft is very much like a scar that tells the history of the plant. It says that

this plant did not occur naturally but was formed as the result of a violent cutting that preceded the union of its two parts. Both branch and rootstock were severed that they could be one, leaving behind an ever-growing bulge testifying to this history and the strength of the union that resulted from it.

Such is the nature of the true faith that unites a believer to Christ. It is a visible "scar" in the life of the believer that testifies to the death of his old man of sin and new life that now flows to him from Christ. And in its visibility, it boldly proclaims that the only way to union with Christ is through the violent shedding of His blood on the cross for the sins of His elect people. So, believer, bear this visible scar openly and thankfully in your life, acknowledging that it is your union to our Lord through which all of the blessings of His saving grace flow!

"I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20).



## Go ye into all the world

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

# The covenant of God and our mission to the world (4)

### A covenantal culture for missions?

Since the dawn of the new dispensation, God has been drawing His elect church into the covenant of grace in two ways, from two sources, and through two tasks. First, through the Spirit-powered gospel preaching and witness of the church in the world, declaring to the nations the salvation of the LORD and saying among the heathen that the LORD reigns, God graciously seeks and saves His lost sheep out of the hell-bound hopelessness of their false religions into the blessed eternal life of His covenant (Ps. 96, Mark 16:15, Acts 1:8). Then, through the Spirit-powered gospel preaching and discipling of believers and their seed within the church, as well as the pious and religious education of those children by their parents in home and school, God continues His covenant with their seed after them in their generations (Deut. 6:7; Ps. 78; Matt. 28:19; Eph. 6:4).

Is there any connection between these two ways whereby God is pleased to extend His covenant in this

present age?

On the one hand, they are and must be kept separate and distinct. There are wrong ways of relating and mixing these two tasks. For example, in the home we are to raise the children of the covenant in the knowledge of God their Savior and in the love of their God in Christ. But we do not send them into the neighborhood as little missionaries in the hope that God will use their witness to draw the children of unbelievers into the covenant. As we live in our neighborhoods, we most certainly teach our children to walk and talk as children of the light; we tell them that we are witnesses in the world who must let our light shine before men when playing outside or going for a walk in the park. But we do not *send* them to speak about Christ or share the gospel with the children of the world. Rather, we shelter them from the ungodly influences of those children in the safe haven of our homes, including the worldly influences that can creep into our homes through the television.

One of the most glaring and spiritually catastrophic attempts to relate the two tasks mentioned above is the view that was always prevalent in the Reformed Church in America (RCA), namely, that we do not need to establish private Christian schools to educate the children of the covenant, but we may and ought to send them to the public schools so that they can witness to the children of unbelievers. We are thoroughly convinced that it is a grievous mistake for believing parents to send their children to the public schools. First of all, the task of educating our children does not belong to the state but to us as Christian parents in the covenant. Further, we must never forget the spiritual and religious nature of the whole educational enterprise. A school does not simply teach the observable facts of nature and history. Schools teach worldviews too. Worldviews are religious in nature. Worldviews set forth what to believe about the universe, its origin, development, and end, and how to behave toward other men. The public schools teach a secular and godless worldview and a perverse and wicked ethics. Part of our calling to come out from among them and be separate (II Cor. 6:17) is that we educate our children separately in good Christian schools. Only in that way can we diligently teach and faithfully nurture our children in the knowledge of the Lord their God and their Savior Jesus Christ, as we promised to do at baptism, so that they will serve and love Him in their whole lives.

Nevertheless, part of the biblical worldview that we must diligently teach our children is that God wills to establish His covenant with the elect in all nations through missions.

I will never forget what I heard Rev. Jason Kortering say at a missions conference back in 2008.<sup>1</sup> I took notes on all the excellent speeches given at that conference. In my notes, I wrote this from Rev. Kortering's speech: "Missionaries come from Jesus Christ. They are His gift to the church (Eph. 4:11). How does He do this? They come from the life of the church. Christian schoolteachers must inculcate the truth and love of it in our youth. God has given us great truths of the covenant. Our youth are raised on this truth. We must create a 'culture for missions' in our churches. This will

be like the early church. Our youth must come to appreciate missions. They must understand its importance. It must live in their hearts."

### A culture for missions....

A culture in the churches at all levels in which there is a zeal for the work of God extending His covenant both inside and outside the church, both with the children of believers and with the elect who are yet lost in the nations....

Is there such a culture for missions in our covenant homes? Envision a Reformed home in which believers are raising their children in such a way that they are coming to see the importance of God's mission in the whole world. They eagerly talk about the work of the schools, yes, but also of missions and evangelism. In the living room, fathers and mothers not only devour literature that pertains to the covenant with us and our children but also concerning the promise to the elect afar off who have not yet heard the gospel. They are keen to read biographies of great theologians but also of great missionaries. They want to learn about the progress of the gospel in the nations in the past as well as in the present. They want to learn: Where has the gospel gone? Where must it still go? How can we promote its progress? They read the mission field newsletters and attend the mission field presentations. They pray for the missionaries. They pray not only for more pastors in the churches and teachers in the schools but also for more missionaries and open doors to new fields. Such fathers and mothers would rejoice if God would call one of their sons to be a fisher of men in the sea of nations, a sower of seed in the field of the world. They would count it an honor if one of their daughters would be a missionary's wife. Such believers love to talk about God to other believers, *but also* to people in their neighborhood and workplace. They tell their children at the dinner table about those witnessing experiences. They teach their children not only that we must come out of the world, be spiritually separate from the ungodly, and avoid close fellowship with them, since they are the enemies of the church (II Cor. 6:17; Eph. 5:11; LD 52); but they also teach their children that we must be physically in the world, have contact with the people of the world, and confess Christ before that world as prophets anointed with the Holy Spirit (Heidelberg Catechism, LD 12; Matt. 10:32). In such a home, the children of the covenant grow in their understanding of the supreme importance of the work of God within and outside the church. So I ask you, do you have a culture for missions in your home, at your dinner table, in your living room?

What about in our covenant schools? We educate

<sup>1</sup> The Domestic Mission Committee of the PRCA sponsored the conference which was held at Southwest PRC. The speakers were Rev. Arie denHartog (former missionary of the PRCA in Singapore), Prof. Barry Gritters (professor of practical theology and missions at the PRCA seminary), Rev. Wilbur Bruinsma (former missionary of the PRCA in Jamaica and Pittsburgh), and the late Rev. Jason Kortering (former minister-on-loan to sister churches of the PRCA in Singapore who was also very involved in mission work in various parts of Asia).

our children separately from the world on the basis of the biblical principles of the covenant and the antithesis. But in our isolation from the world, there is a temptation to be selfish, to develop a world-fleeing and self-centered mentality, to lose sight of the truth that God not only wills to establish His covenant with us and our children in our generations but also with men of all nations, tribes, and tongues. In his book *Reformed Education*, Prof. David Engelsma warns against the danger of world-flight in his defense of giving a liberal arts education to our children to prepare them “to live in this world, really *in this world*, in all its different spheres.”<sup>2</sup> I agree with that warning, for Jesus prayed to His Father “not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil” (John 17:15). I also issue the warning against world-flight but in a slightly different connection, namely, that we might impress upon our children that we as the church have a *mission to the world* and every Christian is a *witness that God is God* (Is. 43:10-12). We must not be so focused on ourselves and our children that we have no interest in the mission of God to save His beloved people who are still lost in darkness and to draw them into His covenant. If our children grow up with little or no interest in the extension of the covenant to others outside our circles through missions and evangelism, the problem is not that we isolated them from the world and educated them in private schools. But the problem is that in our schools we allowed a self-centered mentality to rule. The problem is that each of us has an old man of sin in us who does not love the next-door neighbor or desire the salvation of our co-worker. By nature, we are no different than the ungodly. We are prone to hate God and our neighbor, to selfishly seek our own happiness and the worldly success of our own children. By

grace, we are different from the world in that we also desire to raise our children in the faith, we seek their salvation, and we teach them to serve God. But if we only love our children who love us, what reward have we? Do not even the publicans the same? (Matt. 5:46).

Some time ago, when researching the history of missions in the Christian Reformed Church, I was amazed to discover that one of the motives of our Dutch Reformed fathers in the nineteenth century to establish Christian schools in America was to educate the children of the covenant in such a way that they would be prepared to live in the world *as witnesses of Christ*.<sup>3</sup>

What does a culture for missions look like in one of our schools? I think of a school where there is an obvious effort from parents, boards, principals, and teachers alike to instill in the children of the covenant an appreciation for God’s mission to the whole world. I envision teachers emphasizing that the goal of their instruction is not just to help the students get a good job and a lucrative career in this life but to serve the Lord their God in the world. These teachers do not aim at the goal of training the children of believers to become social and political activists who pursue the dream of establishing a kingdom of God on earth in a Christianized society.<sup>4</sup> Rather, they aim at the goal of training the children of the covenant to live as citizens of the kingdom of Christ in all spheres of life in the world and to let their light shine before men in all those places (Matt. 5-7). In the classroom, teachers of the Christian and Reformed worldview not only teach the children what the Bible says but also train them to defend what the Bible says in future witnessing encounters with their neighbors. From time to time, when teaching biology or astronomy, history or literature, government or business, the teacher might challenge the students to ask how they would explain the Christian view on a certain topic to an unbeliever. In a high school class, the teacher might require the students to give a speech or practice dialogues to learn how to witness to the unchurched young people they might meet at college. In chapel, the minister or teacher who has been asked to speak might set before the boys and young men the absolute wonder of what God has done for us in Christ, the great need for pastors *and* missionaries, and the calling of the church to go into all the world and to shine as lights in the midst of the world.

What about in our churches? Do we have a culture

2 Chapter 3, “Reformed Education and Culture,” (Grandville, MI: RFPA, 2000) 41 (author’s own emphasis). He warns against the two dangers of world conformity and world flight. In regard to the latter, he writes, “We are not free altogether from the temptation of the world-flight mentality” (p. 42). He defines this mentality: “It considers the physical world and its institutions an evil and concludes that a Christian must get out of the world as much as possible. It advocates physical separation from the world, shunning normal earthly life” (p. 49). Some who have this mentality esteem “the Christian school mainly because it keeps the children separate from the public school children” (pp. 49-50). The concern of Prof. Engelsma is to defend the teaching of a liberal arts education in our schools from a Reformed viewpoint with the goal of preparing the child of God to live in the world “in every area of life with all his powers as God’s friend-servant, loving God and serving God in all of his earthly life with all his abilities, and who lives in the world to come as a king under Christ, ruling creation to the praise of God, his Maker and Redeemer” (p. 84).

3 See John H. Bratt, *The Missionary Enterprise of the Christian Reformed Church in America*, (unpublished dissertation, 1955), 11.

4 Engelsma, *Reformed Education*, 89-91.

for missions? In such a culture, the church is active in sending, training, and supporting ordained missionaries to foreign and domestic fields to the best of its ability. Pastors of local churches, who regularly baptize the infants of believers and preach sermons on the responsibilities of parents in the covenant, also regularly preach about the idea and calling of missions (there are *many* texts on missions in the Bible, Old and New Testaments). They proclaim the gospel of Christ crucified and risen that gives us hope for salvation, and they exhort believers to show forth that salvation from day to day as witnesses. They practice what they preach by attending evangelism committee meetings and seeking to practice biblical methods of outreach in the area around the church. While explaining that the office of evangelist has ceased (Eph. 4:11), such churches also maintain that the office of pastor includes the work of an evangelist (II Tim. 4:5). The pastors in such churches, with the support of their elders, are zealous not only to teach catechism to the children and youth of the covenant but also to reach out to lost men and women in their neighborhood. When teaching catechism, too, they seek opportunities to impress on the children not only God's promises to us but also to all those who are afar off whom the Lord our God shall call.

Do we have such a culture for missions in our circles? In my experience, there is a growing culture for

missions, but it is still a tender plant. I do not recall that there was such a *culture* in our circles in my younger years (1980s and 1990s). There were mission fields and faithful missionaries, to be sure. But in my memory, there was little emphasis on or promotion of the Great Commission. This I know: I myself did not care much about it until my seminary years. But through conferences like the one mentioned above and the good instruction of our missions professor in the seminary, the Lord caused me to see more and more the importance of missions. In the last decade or two, I observe a growing interest in missions, and I am very encouraged by it. I pray that it will continue to grow.

In my humble opinion, we who understand the truth of the covenant as it is with us and our seed, with all its implications for life, must continue to grow in our understanding of God's purpose to extend His covenant to the elect out in the nations, with all *its* implications for life. Our Protestant Reformed forefathers built our good Christian schools. Some believing parents in the denomination are still building schools. Much time and energy are spent on the maintenance, governance, and improvement of our schools. But let us grow in seeing that the building of the spiritual house of the Lord in this present age is a two-pronged endeavor. May there be among us not only a culture for the Christian home and school but also a culture for missions.



## Strength of youth

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

## Lessons from the Judges (4)

# Samson seeking an occasion

Last time, we considered Jephthah's vow. Samson was judge at the same time as Jephthah. Jephthah dealt with the Ammonites in the east. Samson had to do with the Philistines in the west. The Philistines, a warlike and idolatrous people, occupied a strip of land by the Mediterranean Sea to the southwest of Israel. Samson was born about the time the Philistines began to oppress Israel. Let us study together the history in Judges 14, focusing on one clause in verse 4: "he [Samson] sought an occasion against the Philistines."

### Peace with the Philistines

Israel was living peaceably with the Philistines. The enemy nation ruled over God's people without

resistance. Certainly, reasons can be supplied for this period without conflict. First, Israel was entrenched in idolatry, worshiping the Philistine gods. Scripture mentions nothing of Israel's repentance at this time. Why would Israel war against the very nation whose gods they embraced and loved? Second, the Philistines intimidated the people of God. The fear was that any aggression toward the Philistines would incur their wrath and mean harm (Judg. 15:11). Third, conflict with the Philistines would be costly—war is always costly. Fighting the oppressor would only multiply Israel's troubles. If living at peace with the Philistines would be the smoothest road, then that is what Israel would do.



This friendly coexistence with the foe was serious sin on Israel's part. Jehovah established His covenant with His people. They were God's friends. Flowing out of that covenant was the antithesis: because the people of God were *Jehovah's* friends, they were not to be friends with Jehovah's *enemies*. When Israel cozied up to the Philistines instead of warring against them, this was covenant transgression. No, the covenant was not *broken*—the covenant is unconditional, and, in Christ, God will never break His covenant. But this does not minimize the fact that this was serious transgression of the covenant!

Such can be the case for the church in the world and with us young people who are members of the church. As you examine your life, do you notice a low level of conflict with the wicked world? Do you find that the evil ways and philosophies of this age have flooded into your home and life? Do you observe that you are coddling your sin and cherishing your sinful nature, rather than fighting against them? In summary: are you living peaceably with the spiritual enemies that are present today?

If you are honest, your answer will be “yes.” There are reasons for this, as there were for Israel. First, when we bow the knee to the world's idols—whatever those may be today—we are not engaging in battle against the world. Conflict with the world is the furthest from our minds when we are intoxicated with its treasures. Second, to be at war with the world is a fearful thing. We say, “I better not speak out against prevalent sin in the workplace, because doing so will leave me all alone and hated by my co-workers”; or, “Why would I testify against the wickedness of this age when I know that this may very well bring persecution?” Third, the spiritual battle is costly. Spiritual conflict means that we will face inconvenience, hardship, and a life of sacrifice.

When we live peaceably with our enemies, dear readers, this is covenant transgression, as it was for Israel. God has established His covenant with us in Jesus Christ. We are the friends of God! What a marvel this is, and something that ought to make us speechless with thanksgiving. Because we are friends with Jehovah, we may not be friends with His enemies. For this transgression of the covenant we must repent, and we must flee to the cross of Christ where alone is our refuge.

### Samson seeking an occasion

While the nation slumbered contentedly under the Philistine oppression, we read of Samson, that “he sought an occasion against the Philistines” (Judg. 14:4).

An “occasion” is an opportunity for a quarrel. Samson sought an opportunity for conflict with the Philistines. Samson looked for the Philistines to manifest their

enmity in some way against him—this was necessary, for it would show Israel that the Philistines *were indeed* wicked and *truly did* hate God's people. When the Philistines would rise up in their hatred against Samson, that would be Samson's occasion to fight against them and begin to deliver Israel. It was not in his own strength that Samson sought occasion against the enemy, but it was by the Spirit's working in him. Jehovah equipped Samson also for this aspect of his work as judge.

We must not have a wrong understanding of Samson seeking opportunity for conflict with the Philistines. We should not see this as the activity of a vengeful and unstable man. Neither was Samson fighting the Philistines as his *personal* enemies for *personal* reasons. Later on, we will learn that Samson was at his wedding feast with Philistine companions, and those companions behaved wickedly toward Samson. Were Samson an explosive man with the desire to “get even,” he would have killed these companions on the spot. This he did not do. Instead, he went to Ashkelon, a distance away, and killed 30 men there (Judg. 14:19). Such is not the mark of a wild man some commentators make Samson out to be.

We should see Samson's activity much differently. Samson sought occasion against the Philistines who were the *enemies of God* and the *oppressors of God's people*. With the *enemies of God* there may be no peace. Besides, this is the work to which God called Samson as judge. Before Samson was conceived, the angel of Jehovah announced to his mother that he would begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines (Judg. 13:5). Most basically, this history is another example of the enmity that God Himself put between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman (Gen. 3:15).

Seeking occasion against the Philistines was a process. It included, first, taking a Philistine for a wife. Samson traveled to a place called Timnath, where he found a woman that attracted him (Judg. 14:1-3). Although Samson's parents protested his choice of a wife, they gave in. Samson's *purpose* in marrying her was good: he knew this would bring him into closer contact with the Philistines whom he hated and sought to destroy. But his *lust* for and *marriage* to this woman was evil. While it is true that God was not the Author of nor responsible for this sin, neither did He compel Samson to sin, we must say that this sin was *of Jehovah* (Judg. 14:4). This sin, and the events surrounding it, were “of the LORD” in the sense that He decreed it. Jehovah decreed this sinful marriage to serve the higher purpose of beginning to deliver Israel from oppression by the Philistines. Second, the process of seeking opportunity for quarrel against the Philistines continued with a riddle (cf. the history in Judges 14:10ff.).

An occasion against the enemy Samson sought, and an occasion Samson found. I can do no better than quote a memorable paragraph from Prof. Engelsma's exposition of the history:

Marriage to the Philistine results in Samson's killing of thirty men of Ashkelon (Judges 14:19) and in his firing the crops of the Philistines (15:3-5). The burning of the Philistines' corn, vineyards, and olives leads directly to Samson's smiting Philistines 'hip and thigh...with a great slaughter' (v. 8). This, in turn, gives Samson the opportunity to kill a thousand Philistines—no doubt the flower of the Philistine army—with the jawbone of an ass. By the time the consequences of Samson's marriage to the woman of Timnath have been fully worked out, the fields of Philistia are smoldering wastelands, the Philistine people are threatened with famine, the army of the Philistines is destroyed, and these enemies of Israel are paralyzed by the terror of Samson.<sup>1</sup>

In seeking and finding occasion against the enemy, Samson pointed ahead to Jesus Christ. Christ repeatedly sought occasion against His foes during His earthly ministry. An instance of this was the Sabbath that Jesus and His disciples walked through a field, and the disciples plucked the crop to eat it. Jesus did this deliberately, seeking occasion against the Pharisees. The Pharisees found fault with the Sabbath crop-picking of the disciples, and Jesus used this as an opportunity to expose the Pharisees (Matt. 12:1ff.). Whenever Christ sought an occasion against the foe, He did so with a burning zeal for the glory of His Father. In each instance of occasion-seeking, the greater-than-Samson stepped ever closer to the cross where He would defeat sin, Satan, and death. Then He came to that cross. On that tree, Jesus paid for the sins

of His people. Having paid for their sins, He actually and inwardly, by His Spirit, delivers His own from the dominion of sin. One day He will return to complete the destruction of His enemies and ours.

By the Spirit of the crucified and risen Savior, we also seek occasion against our spiritual enemies. Youth of the church, this is our calling! Obviously, seeking an occasion against our foes does not mean we engage in physical warfare. Neither is our calling to be a generally rude or needlessly militant people. Rather, it is a spiritual battle fought by God's grace against His enemies and ours.

Consider what this looks like on the church level. Week by week, in his reading of books and magazines, as well as by his careful observations of society, your pastor is seeking occasion to battle against the enemy. Whether it is a particular sin, a certain temptation of the devil, heresy, or something else which assaults the church, your minister is called to expose these enemies and fight against them in the pulpit. This is one part of well balanced preaching. Support your minister in this—you and the church need it.

How about you, personally? Are you aware of the enemy *within* the gate, your sinful nature? What is so much of the Christian life, even minute by minute, but seeking occasion against this enemy and its lusts! Are you watching for the foe *outside* the gate, the evil world? When it rears its LGBTQ+ head, there is an occasion; when it seeks to influence you by its authority-defying ways, there is an occasion; when it offers its whorish women on the screen without you even looking for them, there is an occasion. Different battlefronts call for different tactics, but always this is true: you are to battle against these foes in Christ's power and to the glory of God!

Such is your calling, young men and women. This you will do, by the mighty Spirit of Jesus Christ.

<sup>1</sup> David J. Engelsma, *Unfolding Covenant History: an Exposition of the Old Testament*, vol. 5, *Judges and Ruth* (Grandville: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2005), 146.



## News from our churches

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

### Trivia question

How many churches are included in Classis East of the PRCA? And how many in Classis West? Answer later in this column.

### Minister activities

Prof. R. Dykstra (PRCA Seminary) accepted the call from Byron Center PRC. He was installed on June 27 with Prof. B. Gritters leading the service. The inaugural sermon was preached in the evening, with a short program and refreshments following.

Hudsonville PRC called Rev. W. Bruinsma (Pittsburgh PRC). Rev. Bruinsma was led to decline this call.

Rev. R. Barnhill (Peace PRC-Dyer, IN) declined the call from Wingham PRC.

Kalamazoo PRC also called Rev. R. Barnhill. God led Rev. Barnhill to decline this call.

Crete PRC formed a trio of Rev. J. Engelsma (Doon PRC), Rev. N. Decker (Grandville PRC), and Rev. C. Spronk (Faith PRC). From this trio a call was extended to Rev. Engelsma, who accepted it on July 11.

The PRC Synod extended a call to Rev. C. Griess as replacement for Prof. B. Gritters in the PR Seminary as Professor of Practical Theology and New Testament Studies. On July 11, Rev. Griess accepted this call.

The final worship services of Bethel PRC (Roselle, IL) were held on June 27. May the Lord continue to be with the congregation and her former pastor, Rev. D. Lee, as they experience the disbanding of this dear congregation.

We remember in prayer Rev. Dennis Lee, Rev. John Marcus, and their families as they are presently without a charge and wait upon the Lord's will. We also remember in prayer Rev. Martyn McGeown and his wife as they await final approval from the government so he may come and take up his labors in Providence PRC (Hudsonville, MI). Rev. McGeown preached his farewell sermon in Limerick June 27 and spent the month of July organizing many important matters in preparation for traveling to the USA to take up his work in Providence PRC. Please keep Rev. McGeown, Larisa, and the saints in Limerick and Ballymena in your prayers during this time of transition.

### Seminary activities

The seminary is now in her summer break. Continue to pray for the seminary in all her needs. The faculty keeps busy with preparation for the next term as well as with other activities, and many of the students return to their summer jobs. The staff is present to assist with any needs you may have. The seminary, including the library and bookstore, are open daily (M-F, 8-5) during the summer months, except for holidays.

Senior seminary student Josiah Tan (Covenant ERC, Singapore) was examined at the PRC Synod (June 8-10), with Synod informing Covenant ERC that they judged the brother worthy to be declared eligible for a call to the ministry. We rejoice with the brother and his wife in God's goodness and pray that he will soon find a place to serve in Christ's church. He plans to leave the U.S. on July 13.

The internship of Seminarian Marcus Wee (Covenant ERC, Singapore) started July 1 and will run through the

end of the year. He has been assigned to Faith PRC (Jenison, MI) with Rev. C. Spronk serving as his mentor.

Seminarian Matt Koerner (entering his junior year) has been licensed to speak a word of edification in the churches. As of May 30 he has begun preaching in various PRCs, including out west this summer.

Work continues on the Spring 2021 issue of the *PRTS Journal*. If you wish to be added to the mailing list, please call or email the seminary. (The *Journal* is free.)

Seminary Conference: What is preaching? What does it mean to preach the gospel? How does one preach the commands of Scripture? What is application in preaching? Make plans now to hear four speeches by the seminary professors, under the conference theme "The Lord Gave the Word: Preaching the Gospel." The conference will be hosted by Trinity PRC, on the late afternoon and evening of October 28 and 29. More details will follow.

### Evangelism activities

The Young Calvinists hosted a speech on "Personal Evangelism," given by Seminarian Josiah Tan at Hudsonville PRC on June 30. Refreshments followed. All were encouraged to bring a friend, and enjoy this important message!

### Congregational activities

The congregation in Lynden, WA changed the times of their worship service on June 27 to 9:00 and 11:00 A.M. This was due to the forecast for record high temperatures there. While average temps for that date are in the upper 70's...all forecasts indicated God would warm up the area to about 105 degrees. Lynden PRC is not air-conditioned. So Lynden could do as missionary pastor Rev. Daniel Kleyn has often done—issue a warm welcome to those in attendance! A taste of Redlands, perhaps!

### Young People's activities

The Western Young People's Retreat took place June 28-July 2 at Camp Sanders in Idaho. The theme of the retreat was "Restraining My Feet from Evil," from Psalm 119:101. Rev. R. Hanko and Rev. M. De Boer from Edgerton PRC (MN) were scheduled to speak. We pray that God might have used this retreat for the spiritual growth of all who attended and also as a time of fellowship to build up and strengthen one another in the Lord. Oh yes, it was warm!

### Senior retreat!

Save the date for the 2022 Senior Retreat to be hosted by Grace PRC. The dates for the retreat will be September

20-23, 2022. It will be held at the Blue Gate Garden Inn and Conference Center in Shipshewana, Indiana. More information and details to follow.

### Trivia answer

There are 19 churches in Classis East of the PRC, and

with the loss of Bethel PRC in Roselle, IL there are now 14 churches in Classis West. Membership totals continue to be about twice as many persons in Classis East than there are in Classis West. More trivia next time.

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

## Announcements

### Wedding anniversary

With hearts filled with thanksgiving to our faithful God and Father, on August 11 we celebrate the 50th wedding anniversary of our parents, grandparents, and great grandparents, **Ike and Phyllis Uittenbogaard**. God has graciously upheld them through the years, and we have been blessed by the godly example they have set for our family. It is our prayer that the Lord will continue to keep them in His care in the years ahead. “But the mercy of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear him, and his righteousness unto children’s children” (Psalm 103:17).

Chad and Sue Uittenbogaard

Alyssa, Kelsey, Karyn, Bryce

Alex and Haley VanGinkel, Tate, Gabe

Blake and Emily DeRoos, Mason, Cody

Dan and Kathy Poppema

Anna, Elizabeth, Drew, Grace, Levi, Lael

Joe and Faith Bootsma, Eden, Naomi, Isaac

Jeff and Becky Uittenbogaard

Steve and Denise Uittenbogaard

Alaina, Olivia, Elsie, Maggie, Cade

Mike and Steph Uittenbogaard

Zoe, Tessa, Ivy

Hull, Iowa

### Classis East

Classis East will meet in regular session on Wednesday, September 8, 2021, at 8:00 A.M., in the Grandville Protestant Reformed Church, Grandville, Michigan. Material for this session must be in the hands of the stated clerk no later than August 9, 2021.

Rev. C. Spronk, Stated Clerk

### Reminder

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

### Reformed Witness Hour

[reformedwitnesshour.org](http://reformedwitnesshour.org)

#### Rev. C. Haak

August 1—Building with Sword and Trowel  
Nehemiah 4

August 8—Ought Ye Not to Walk in the Fear of God?  
Nehemiah 5

August 15—O God, Strengthen My Hands  
Nehemiah 6

August 22—Putting Things in Order  
Nehemiah 7

August 29—The Power of the Pulpit  
Nehemiah 8

### Classis West

Classis West of the Protestant Reformed Churches will meet in Crete, IL, on Wednesday, September 29, 2021, at 8:30 A.M., the Lord willing. All material for the Agenda is to be in the hands of the stated clerk 30 days before classis convenes, that is, by August 30, 2021. All delegates in need of lodging or transportation from the airport should notify the clerk of Crete’s consistory.

Rev. J. Engelsma, Stated Clerk