

The Standard Bearer

A Reformed semi-monthly magazine

December 15, 2021 • Volume 98 • No. 6

The Savior is born!

Rev. James Slopsema

Synods 2020/2021 and “in the way of repentance” (3)

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Praying to our Father in heaven

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Encouragement to flaunt church discipline?

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The Prohibition

Rev. Ryan Barnhill



The *Standard Bearer* (ISSN 0362-4692 [print], 2372-9813 [online]) is a semi-monthly periodical, except monthly during June, July, and August, published by the Reformed Free Publishing Association: 1894 Georgetown Center Dr, Jenison, MI 49428-7137.

Postmaster

Send address changes to the *Standard Bearer*, 1894 Georgetown Center Dr, Jenison, MI 49428-7137.

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Subscription price

\$30.00 per year in the US, \$42.00 elsewhere
esubscription: \$20.00
esubscription free to current hard copy subscribers.

Advertising policy

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Website for RFPA: www.rfpa.org

Website for PRC: www.prc.org

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Meditation

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

The Savior is born!

For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.

Luke 2:11

The details of Jesus' birth in Luke's gospel are scanty. In response to the decree of Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed, Mary and Joseph made their way to Bethlehem. The Jewish custom was to pay these taxes in the city from which one's family originated. Since Joseph and Mary were of the house of David, they went to Bethlehem, the city of David. Finding no room in the inn of Bethlehem, Joseph and Mary found lodging in a stable, probably one of the many caves outside of the city where passing caravans put up their animals for the night. There in the stable Jesus was born of the virgin Mary. He was wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger, which was a feeding trough.

What a significant birth this was! There has been no greater birth in all history. Never in history has a virgin given birth to a child. But more amazing yet is that through this birth the Son of God came into our flesh. And He did so to bring salvation to a world of fallen sinners.

But the birth of the Christ-child must be announced! People must know! And so the Lord sent His angel to lowly shepherds outside of Jerusalem who, abiding in the fields, were keeping watch over their flocks by night. How striking, yet significant, that the announcement of the greatest birth in history should come to these lowly shepherds.

Our focus is on the glad tidings that the angel brought—unto you this day in the city of David a Savior is born, Christ the Lord.

Who is this Savior?

To the shepherds who kept watch over their flocks by night the angel of the Lord appeared announcing the birth of a baby. The angel indicated that this birth had taken place "this day." Bear in mind that the Jewish day began at sundown. And so it was that sometime earlier that night this babe had been born.

The angel also informed the shepherds *where* this babe was born: He was born in the city of David. The city of David was Bethlehem, so called because this was the town from which the great king David had come. These shepherds were themselves from Bethlehem, keeping watch that night over their flocks.

And according to the angel this babe just born in Bethlehem was a *Savior*. The Lord had just sent a Savior into the world. A Savior is one who brings salvation, who delivers from woe and trouble.

Luke and the other gospel writers tell us that this Savior is Jesus. He is the son of the virgin Mary, espoused to Joseph. His name was given to Him by God Himself, as revealed to both Mary and Joseph by the angel. And appropriately, the name "Jesus" means Savior.

Obviously this babe is not just any savior, of whom there were many in Israel's history. Think of Moses, the judges, and king David whom the Lord used to save Israel from her enemies. This Savior is greater than these. He is none less than *Christ* the Lord.

That He is Christ means that He is the Anointed One. Throughout the Old Testament God promised to send the Anointed One who would serve as God's prophet, priest, and king, not just for Israel but for the elect that God had among the nations. All the Old Testament prophets, priests, and kings in Israel's history were only types and pictures pointing to the great Anointed One who was to come. The angel identifies this newborn as that Anointed One. As the Anointed One, this babe would accomplish that which no other prophet, priest, or king in Israel had ever accomplished. He would bring the salvation of God.

And He is the *Lord*. By identifying the babe of Bethlehem as "the Lord," the angel revealed that He is God. Luke identifies the angel that appeared to the shepherds as the angel of the Lord, whose glory shone round about them. That Lord is none less than the Lord God. That God is Lord emphasizes sovereign ownership and rule over all. The Savior that has been born is that same Lord God. From ancient times the Jews understood that the Christ must be God. The prophets

had made this clear, as Isaiah did in chapter 9 verse 6 of his prophecy, “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.” On the basis of this and other prophecies, the people of Jesus’ day understood that the Christ would be God. This is evident even from Jesus’ trial before the Sanhedrin, when He was put under oath and asked, “Tell us whether thou be the Christ, the Son of God” (Matt. 16:16). The babe born in Bethlehem that night is the Lord God of heaven. He has come into human flesh as the Christ to bring salvation. This is the wonder of the incarnation.

What is the salvation He brings?

The circumstances of Jesus’ birth would lead many to conclude that nothing much would come from Him. Jesus’ birth was most humble. He was not born in a royal palace with doctors and nurses attending and crowds waiting with bated breath for the news of His birth. He was born in a lowly cattle stall, with no one to assist His mother at His birth but Joseph. Then He was wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger.

The humble circumstances of His birth characterized His entire life. He was raised in the despised town of Nazareth by humble parents. Although He attracted multitudes in His short public ministry, He owned only the clothes on His back. And it all ended when He was rejected by the people and suffered death by crucifixion.

This is the Savior?! The Christ?! The Lord God come in human flesh to bring His great salvation?!

The lowly circumstances of His birth and entire life indicate the kind of salvation He has come to bring.

Certainly, He has not come merely to save us from our earthly woes. Most in history are concerned only about deliverance from physical poverty, illness, discrimination, war, and strife. They want a heaven here on earth. They will not find this salvation in Jesus who is born Christ the Lord. The masses followed Jesus for this kind of salvation. Miraculously He healed the sick and fed large multitudes with just a few fish and biscuits. Why, He even raised the dead. They clamored for Him to be their king. But when the masses discovered at His trial before Pilate that He was not the kind of savior they envisioned, they rejected Him and demanded His crucifixion. Neither do the masses today want this Jesus, even though they give lip service to Him as they seek to use His memory to make their heaven on earth.

Jesus has come as Christ, the Lord to save us from our sins. This is what the angel told Joseph in a dream

when he explained the virgin birth and instructed Joseph to name the babe Jesus—for He shall save His people from their sins (Matt. 1:21).

What is this salvation from sin? The great evil that came upon mankind is not poverty, sickness, war, or discrimination. The great evil that we all deal with is sin. Sin renders us guilty before God and makes us liable to the terrible judgments of God, now and eternally in hell. Sin is also a power that has taken hold of mankind so that all we can do is sin and bring the misery of sin upon ourselves even in this life, which prepares us for greater misery in hell.

Jesus has come to save sinners from their sins. He came to deliver sinners from the guilt of sin, so that they appear sinless before the face of God. He came to deliver sinners from sin’s power so that they can live in the freedom of God’s righteous law. He came to bring sinners into a blessed covenant life with God and with each other.

This required Jesus to walk the way of suffering. To accomplish this great salvation, He must take upon Himself the guilt and punishment of sin and bear it all away, all the while walking in perfect obedience. He alone can do this, being both God and a righteous man. He did this all His life but especially at the cross. And the humble circumstances of His birth were only a picture of the greater humility that awaited Him as He bore the wrath of God for sin.

Who receives His salvation?

“*Unto you* is born this day in the city of David, a Savior,” announced the angel to the shepherds. Jesus Christ, the Lord, came as the Savior of the shepherds.

How significant is the fact that the angel of the Lord was not sent with his glorious message to the political leaders of the world, nor to the religious leaders of Israel, nor even to the multitudes that came to the temple. This is because the salvation of the Christ-child was not for them. Nor were they looking for such a salvation.

The angel came rather to these lowly, uneducated shepherds. They were numbered among the elect remnant in Israel. Their election was evident from their faith, a faith that brought them to the manger and to the people with a joyful report of what they had seen and heard. Notice that they were probably the only visitors. Their news of the Savior’s birth fell on deaf ears. The blindness of unbelief saw no future with a babe that was laid in a manger. But the lowly shepherds were men of faith. To them the angel came and proclaimed that to them had the Savior been born.

The word of salvation that the angel spoke to the shepherds comes to all those who believe. *Unto you* is

born a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. As believers, let us gaze on the manger scene and see the humility and shame of the cross that Jesus came to endure for His

own. Embrace the babe of Bethlehem and the salvation He brings. And with the shepherds joyfully proclaim what you have seen and heard.



Editorial

Prof. Brian Huizinga, professor of Dogmatics and Old Testament in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary

Synods 2020/2021 and “in the way of repentance” (3)

A definition

I am not aware of any carefully and comprehensively constructed exposition of the biblical concept of repentance produced in the history of the PRC. From one point of view, the absence of such a work is not entirely surprising because repentance is one of the elementary principles of the doctrine of Christ, the renewed instruction in which the writer to the Hebrews deems unnecessary (Heb. 6:1). Yet sometimes we must revisit and sharpen, and perhaps even correct, our understanding of the elementary principles. Surely one of the good and praiseworthy purposes of our faithful God in laying His heavy hand upon us in recent years is to force us to wrestle with the doctrine of repentance, and especially what we mean by the phrase “in the way of repentance.” If you have followed carefully the disputed doctrinal issues brought to the assemblies over the last several years, and with sharp eyes have read through the many pages of the last several *Acts of Synod*, you might know that the phrase “in the way of repentance” made a single appearance somewhere deep in the synodical decisions of Synod 2018 and then rose to the foreground and was oft-repeated at Synods 2020/2021.

In this article I will give a definition of repentance and demonstrate how I arrived at it. Next time I will take this basic, bare-bones definition and go to the Scriptures to put some flesh on it. Repentance is the believer’s sorrowful turn from sin unto God in the seeking of remission.

The Scriptures

To obtain a correct understanding of the precise idea of repentance in Scripture it is necessary to consider the Hebrew and Greek terms for it as inspired by the Holy Spirit. One Hebrew word is the verb *nacham*, which means, “to pant, to sigh, to breathe with difficulty,” and has come to mean “to repent.” Though seldom used with

reference to man because it is actually the term Scripture uses for its profound teaching of the repentance of God (Gen. 6:6-7), this word emphasizes the penitent sinner’s experience of grief and is used in Job 42:6, “Wherefore I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes.” The other (and primary) Hebrew term used throughout the Old Testament is the verb *shubh*, which means, “to turn, to return,” and it emphasizes a radical change in one’s attitude toward sin and God. This word is translated “repent” (I Kings 8:47), but usually “turn” (Jer. 3:14) or “return” (Is. 55:7).

The most important New Testament term is the Greek verb *metanoeo*. It means “to change one’s mind,” and according to one lexicon is used “of those who, conscious of their sins and with manifest tokens of sorrow, are intent on obtaining God’s pardon.” The word is employed in connection with the preaching of John the Baptist—“*repent* ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 3:2); Jesus—“*repent* ye, and believe the gospel” (Mark 1:15); and the apostles—“*repent* and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins” (Acts 2:38). As a noun, *metanoia* is used in II Corinthians 7:10, “For godly sorrow worketh repentance unto salvation....”

From these terms we get an accurate idea of the biblical concept of repentance. The most important and frequently used Hebrew term emphasizes *turning*—turning from sin to God. The most important and frequently used Greek term emphasizes the internal, spiritual change of the mind or heart whereby one looks back at his sin with sorrow and looks forward to the promised pardon of God. Once again, repentance is the believer’s sorrowful turn from sin unto God in the seeking of remission.

The confessions

In the Reformed tradition the term “repentance” is

sometimes used in a broader sense, and includes the concept of the quickening of the new man and a walk in a holy life. When repentance is used in this broader sense, it is synonymous with “conversion” so that the two terms are then used interchangeably. Conversion is a life-long, daily turning of the whole man, inwardly and outwardly, a turning of his whole life from the ways of sin to the ways of righteousness. The Heidelberg Catechism permits the use of the term “repentance” in this broader sense. In LD 33, Q. 88, the Catechism asks, “Of how many parts doth the true conversion of man consist?” However, in the original German we read, “Of how many parts doth true repentance or conversion consist?” Then Q&A 90 proceeds to teach that true conversion (“repentance”) includes this positive aspect: “a sincere joy of heart in God, through Christ, and with love and delight to live according to the will of God in all good works.”

The likely explanation for the language of Q. 88 is that the biblical term for “turning” can be translated as either conversion or repentance. Besides, John Calvin, whose theology had an influence upon the authors of the Catechism, teaches in his *Institutes*, “[I]n my judgment, repentance can thus be well defined: it is the true turning of our life to God, a turning that arises from a pure and earnest fear of Him; and it consists in the mortification of our flesh and of the old man, and in the vivification of the Spirit.”¹ And later: “I interpret repentance as regeneration, whose sole end is to restore in us the image of God.”² By “regeneration” Calvin means life-long, daily conversion.³ In the Reformed tradition, therefore, there is the accepted use of the term “repentance” to signify what the HC, LD 33 calls “conversion.”

Nevertheless, this broader sense should not become our default setting or govern our textbook definition and understanding of repentance. The Canons of Dordt do not use the term repentance that way, and none of our Three Forms of Unity treats repentance as thoroughly as the Canons. Our Reformed conception of repentance must rely heavily upon the Canons. From beginning to end, the Canons use both the terms “conversion” and

“repentance,” and based on usage the authors appear to be making a conscious distinction.⁴ The Canons speak of repentance in a sense narrower than conversion, and the uses can be divided into two groups. First, patterned after Jesus’ own preaching (Mark 1:15, “Repent ye, and believe the gospel”), the Canons repeatedly link together repentance and faith as the content of the call of the gospel and as that which God by the gospel confers upon the elect. This issued call, “Repent and believe!” means, “Turn from your sins and believe in God’s merciful pardon in Christ!” We see this use, for example, in Canons I.3, “by whose ministry men are called to repentance and faith in Christ crucified.”⁵ Secondly, as I will show below, the Canons speak of repentance in Head V when explaining God’s work of restoring an erring sinner. God restores by bringing the sinner to repentance so that he turns away from his sin. However, when the Canons intend something broader they use the term “conversion.” Thus it is not “repentance” but “conversion” that appears in the title of Head III/IV, “Of the corruption of man, his conversion to God, and the manner thereof.”

A Reformed definition of repentance can be drawn from Canons V.7, which is arguably the definitive confessional statement on repentance. It teaches:

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

Here we have three elements following the phrase, “renews them to repentance.” First, what immediately follows is the Canons *definition* of repentance. When God renews someone to repentance, He brings them “to a sincere and godly sorrow for their sins that they may seek and obtain remission in the blood of the Mediator.” The definition contains two parts: sorrow and seeking. Those who repent are those who sorrow over their sins and seek remission for those sins in the blood

1 *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. Mc Neill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977), 3.3.5.

2 *Institutes*, 3.3.9.

3 Speaking of Calvin’s influence, we know that at the same time Ursinus was writing the HC he was translating into German Calvin’s Genevan Catechism, which in all of its versions equates repentance and regeneration (conversion). See, Lyle Bierma, *An Introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005); and James T. Dennison, Jr., *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2008).

4 This distinction does not come out in the Dutch, which uses the same word *bekeering* for conversion and repentance. However, the Canons were originally written in Latin and the distinction holds in the Latin. “Conversion” in the Canons is the translation of the noun *conversio*, “turning, conversion,” or the verb *converto*, “to turn, to change.” “Repentance” in the Canons is the translation of the noun *resipiscentia* (which corresponds to the Greek *metanoia*), “a change of mind, recovery of one’s sense, becoming wise again,” or *poenitentia*, “repentance, penance, regret.”

5 The remaining references are: II.5, 6, and III/IV.10, 12.

of the Mediator. A more literal rendering of the original Latin, as proposed by Homer C. Hoeksema, makes plain that it is through the instrument of faith that forgiveness is obtained: “in order that they should sincerely sorrow after God over the sins committed, that they should through faith, with a contrite heart, desire and obtain forgiveness in the blood of the Mediator.”⁶

Secondly, the Canons continue by stating the immediate and blessed *result* of repentance: “...may again experience the favor of a reconciled God...” Upon repenting and having obtained through faith the remission of God in the blood of Jesus, the believer experiences the favor of a reconciled God.

Third, the Canons conclude with the *fruit* of repentance—the fruit that emerges from the heart of the sinner who has been reconciled to God and experiences God’s mercies anew: “...through faith adore His mercies, and henceforward more diligently work out their own salvation with fear and trembling.” With a renewed taste of the mercies of God, the penitent believer cries in adoration: “Who is a God like unto thee, that pardoneth iniquity” (Micah 7:18)! Then, with greater diligence, the restored sinner works out his own salvation with fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12). Salvation is worked out in a holy life of obedience to the law. Here again, we see that a holy walk in good works, while the necessary fruit of genuine repentance, is not part of repentance as such. It belongs to the “henceforward.”

On the basis of the Canons, then, we arrive at our working definition, a definition that is in perfect harmony with the scriptural terms for and teaching of repentance. Repentance is the believer’s sorrowful turn from sin unto God in the seeking of remission.

The tradition

The Reformed tradition supports this definition and understanding. Interestingly, in his *Reformed Dogmatics*, Herman Hoeksema mimics the Canons and locates his formal definition of repentance in that section in which he covers the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. There he states, “Repentance is a state of mind, a turning of the mind from the love of sin and unrighteousness unto the love of righteousness, and therefore unto a true sorrow over sin.”⁷ In harmony with this definition, he distinguishes conversion and repentance in his work *Wonder of Grace*. About conversion he writes, “By this I mean that it is a turning about of the whole man, with

his internal life as well as with his external walk;” he adds, “...conversion has two aspects. The first of these is that it is a turning away from sin with all our heart and a fighting against sin. This, in general, is what the Bible means by the putting off of the old man, or the mortification of our members which are upon earth. Its chief characteristic is repentance, or true sorrow over sin;” then he concludes, “conversion is that work of God in man whereby the sinner repents and walks in all good works.”⁸ For Hoeksema, conversion is one thing, and repentance is an element of it and something narrower—an inward turning and sorrow.

Although Calvin made repentance and regeneration (conversion) synonymous in his *Institutes*, one can with little difficulty read through his commentaries and find him giving a much narrower signification to repentance, even as we saw last time in his comments on Matthew 3:8 and Acts 26:20. Furthermore, although the original German of the HC, Q. 88 makes repentance and conversion synonymous, author Zacharias Ursinus clearly distinguishes them in his commentary on the Lord’s Day: “For repentance does not comprehend the whole extent of the subject—it does not express from what, and to what we are changed, but merely signifies the sorrow which is felt after the commission of some sin. Conversion, on the other hand, embraces the whole, as it adds that which is the beginning of a new life by faith.”⁹

Another similar formulation common in the Reformed tradition is that set forth by Louis Berkhof: “conversion comprises two elements, namely, repentance and faith,” and repentance is defined as “that change wrought in the conscious life of the sinner, by which he turns away from sin.”¹⁰

Is not the conception of repentance set forth in this article confirmed by the biblical construction, “repent of ____?” For example, Revelation 2:22, “except they repent of their deeds.” Repentance is fundamentally an activity of ours with respect to *sin*. If there is no sin, there is no need for repentance (Mark 2:17). We repent *of sin*. We do not live a holy life *of sin*. We are not renewed *of sin*. We *repent* of sin. Our definition must fit within that construction and account for the fact that repentance pivots about *sin*. Repentance is turning from *sin*, in sorrow over *sin*, and seeking God’s remission for *sin*.

6 *Voice of Our Fathers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1980), 681.

7 *Reformed Dogmatics*, (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2005), 173.

8 *Wonder of Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1982), 75-78.

9 *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1985), 469.

10 *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1953), 486.



All around us

Rev. David Noorman, pastor of Southwest Protestant Reformed Church in Wyoming, Michigan

Michigan AG Nessel asks: “Do the 10 commandments dictate otherwise?”

If this recent reference to God’s Ten Commandments were in the print news, you would not find it on the front page, nor in the religion section. It would have been the smallest of articles, buried in the back of the politics section. I would have missed it.¹ The reference was published in the massive machine of self-publication we know as Twitter—just a few tweets. The author is worthy of note; her name is Dana Nessel, the Attorney General of the State of Michigan.

The background

Unlike Nessel’s tweets, the occasion for them was front-page news. It begins with the Texas Heartbeat Act, which was passed by the Texas state legislature and signed into law by Texas Governor Greg Abbot. The law effectively outlaws abortions once a fetal heartbeat can be detected (usually around six weeks). In September, the U.S. Supreme Court denied an appeal to block the law. The whole matter is ongoing in the courts, and will be for some time.

The state of Michigan became part of the conversation because it (along with 25 other states) has a law banning abortion dating back to 1931.² Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer regarded these developments as “devastating,” and promised her continued opposition to the law and the sentiments of it: “As long as I’m governor, any law to strip away fundamental reproductive rights, or weaken access to lifesaving health care, will not get my signature. And I’ve called on our Legislature to pass a bill and send it to my desk that repeals this 90-year-old ban on abortion.”³

1 I did not miss this story thanks to *The Heidelberg*, where the following article was reposted: E.J. Hutchinson, “Yes, Bring Back the Decalogue,” *The American Conservative*, Oct. 5, 2021, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/yes-bring-back-the-decalogue/>. Hutchinson is an associate professor of classics at Hillsdale College, and his article provides very insightful commentary. It is highly recommended.

2 Dave Boucher, “Whitmer keeps bashing Michigan abortion law, but has little power to change it,” *Detroit Free Press*, Oct. 1, 2021, <https://www.freep.com/story/news/politics/2021/10/01/michigan-abortion-law-whitmer-roe-wade/5945434001/>.

3 Boucher.

What does this have to do with a few tweets by Michigan’s attorney general? The national, front-page news (the Texas Heartbeat Act, upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court) occasioned a state-level conversation about a ninety-year-old abortion ban, and that conversation included the potential of that law being *enforced*.

Enter AG Dana Nessel and her tweets. As Nessel herself will tell you, she is the top law enforcement official in the state of Michigan.

Nessel’s argument

Here is Nessel’s self-publication on Twitter:

Adultery is a felony in Michigan. The prohibition was passed the same year as MI’s abortion ban. Do those who support the Texas abortion law also support granting standing to private citizens when they violate the law? What say you Michigan legislators?

Do MI residents want to see me, the top law enforcement official in the state, start to prosecute crimes of adultery? I have used my prosecutorial discretion not to do so, but do the 10 commandments dictate otherwise? Which legislators would like me to initiate such actions?⁴

A high-ranking, elected state official making a reference to the Ten Commandments is not necessarily newsworthy, but Nessel’s argument should get our attention.

The first question, taken (charitably) at face-value, is fair enough; it is fair for an elected official to ask the mind of her constituents. One of her premises is sound enough; it is reasonable for a state attorney general to use “prosecutorial discretion” to decide which cases to pursue, and which to leave alone. Her basic argument is clear enough; clearly, there are laws on the books that are no longer enforced, and it is the attorney general’s prerogative to make those judgments.

But our interest is Nessel’s reference to the Ten Commandments. “I have used my prosecutorial discretion not to [prosecute crimes of adultery], but do the 10 commandments dictate otherwise?” Even judging char-

4 Dana Nessel, *Twitter*, Sept. 21, 2021.

itably, it is difficult to read this as a genuine question looking for helpful direction. The question is rhetorical, and the vast majority of public responses to her tweets confirm that it was received as such. The masses of people heard Nessel's questions, and agreed with her argument.

Nessel and the masses do not believe the Ten Commandments dictate (authoritatively prescribe) that she must enforce the adultery law. Likewise, Nessel and the masses do not believe the Ten Commandments dictate (authoritatively prescribe) that she must enforce the abortion ban.

Case closed. Or, at her discretion, cases never opened.

Nessel's ignorance

Nessel apparently does not and (apart from the grace of God) will not recognize that her rhetorical, even sarcastic reference to the authority of the Ten Commandments is sin against the sovereign God of heaven and earth. It is inexcusable ignorance.

Without question, there is liberty in the use of the powers of her office. No doubt, there are human limitations that make it impossible for her to enforce a particular law in every case (even those state laws that correspond directly to the Ten Commandments). But contrary to her argument, God's law does dictate, with supreme authority, what is right for every man and woman in Michigan and around the world. And despite her claim to "prosecutorial discretion," God's law does dictate what is the responsibility of every man and woman, no matter what one's office may be.

The dictates of God's law are as authoritative as they are clear.

Thou shalt not kill. No, not even unborn children. It is every man's and woman's responsibility to love the neighbor and prevent their hurt. As much as possible, it would be the responsibility of the Michigan attorney general to enforce a state law that bans abortion.

Thou shalt not commit adultery. Not in Moses' day. Not in Jesus' day. Not in 1931. Not in 2021. It is every man's and woman's responsibility to keep this commandment and maintain the sanctity of marriage between a man and a woman. As much as possible, it is the responsibility of the Michigan attorney general to enforce a state law that makes adultery a crime.

The attorney general seems to recognize her responsibility to her constituents, but not her greater responsibility to God. Earthly rulers are *ministers*, or *servants* (Rom. 13:4). A servant does not do his own will, but must carry out the sovereign dictates of his master.

May all God's servants be directed by the dictates

of God's law! This has always been the desire of the church with regard to the powers that be. We pray for them, "that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty" (I Tim. 2:2), and we sing to them in light of their weighty office:

Where'er His creatures gather
The unseen God is near;
Let rulers fear their Ruler,
Their Judge let judges fear....

Do justice for the helpless,
The orphan's cause maintain;
Defend the poor and needy,
Oppressed and wronged for gain...

The Most High God has called you
And set you up on high
But ye to Him must answer,
For ye like men must die (Psalter #223).

The bigger picture

Nessel's rhetorical question is a small skirmish in the great battle that encompasses all of history—the warfare between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. As it was from the beginning, the assault is against God and the authority of His Word. Nessel's question is eerily similar to the question of the serpent to the woman: "Yea, hath God said?" "Do the Ten Commandments dictate otherwise?"

Contrary to Nessel's rhetoric, the answer is a resounding "Yes," though the world will never acknowledge it to be so. Whenever God is in the world's news, He (or His Name, or His Word, or His law, or His Anointed One) will be portrayed as the enemy, belittled as irrelevant and powerless. Whenever the world speaks, writes, or even tweets, they will show themselves arrayed for battle against God.

Yet, we know that God reigns supreme, and we confess that His word regulates all our faith and all our life. The mocking insults and violent attacks against Him are in vain, and the outcome of this warfare is not in question. God's victory is sealed in His eternal counsel, and on the last day it shall be fully manifest to all. Then, no one will be ignorant of the answer to the attorney general's question, nor will any earthly rulers dare call into question the authority of God's law. Until that day, we sing with hope:

Arise, O God Eternal,
Thou Judge of all the earth,
Through all Thy ransomed nations
Send now Thy justice forth (Psalter #223).



Search the Scriptures

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

God's repentance

And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did it not.

Jonah 3:10

Jonah 3:10 is one of many verses that speaks of God repenting. Others are Genesis 6:6, 7; Exodus 32:14; Deuteronomy 32:36; Judges 2:18; I Samuel 15:11, 35; II Samuel 24:16; I Chronicles 21:15; Psalm 90:13; 106:45; 135:14; Jeremiah 18:8, 10, 13; 26:3, 19; 42:10; Joel 2:13, 14; and Amos 7:3, 6. What do these verses mean? Does Jonah 3:10, with the other verses, mean that God changed His mind?

Compounding the problem are those verses that say God does not repent, notably Numbers 23:19, "God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent: hath he said, and shall he not do it? or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good?" Romans 1:29 says that "the gifts and calling of God are without repentance." Malachi 3:6 says, too, that God does not change, "For I am the LORD, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed."

What, then, are we to make of Jonah 3:10 and how can it be reconciled with Numbers 23:19 and Malachi 3:6? Open Theism, a modern theological movement, teaches that God does change and changes in response to our actions, an easy but unacceptable solution that does not do justice to Malachi 3:6 and the biblical doctrine of God's immutability.

Many evangelicals are content to leave the matter as a contradiction, or as they call it, an antinomy. That, however, is a denial of another of God's attributes, His simplicity. God's simplicity, taught in James and Peter, means that there can be no contradiction in God and it is an aspect of God's unchangeableness. His revealed will cannot contradict His eternal good pleasure, even if we cannot understand how the two are reconciled. If His revealed will contradicts His decree then in His revealed will He lies to us.

Nor must we take the position of Matthew Henry:

God's threatenings are conditional, "unless

they repent," as are His promises, "if they endure to the end," Matthew 10:22. God said afterward by Jeremiah, Jeremiah 18:7-8: At what "instant I shall speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up and to pull down and to destroy it, if that nation, against whom I had pronounced, turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them."

That God does *not* change must be the starting point for any discussion of a verse like Jonah 3:10. If God changes, then He is no greater than we are (Num. 23:19) and no different from the idols the Ninevites worshiped in their ignorance and unbelief. Then we have no certainty or possibility of assurance and no hope in Him. Then our certainty of God's love is no more than a little girl pulling the petals off a daisy and saying to herself, "He loves me...he loves me not." Then Christ's death and resurrection can come to nothing, then grace is powerless, and the Spirit of God works often in vain. The immutability of God is foundational not only to theology but to our own hope and blessedness, as Malachi 3:6 makes clear.

The usual explanation of any verse that speaks of God's repenting is that this is an anthropopathism or anthropomorphism, that is, an ascription of human emotions or characteristics to God. This was the view of John Calvin and of most Calvinistic and Reformed commentators:

Now as to what Jonah adds, *that God was led to repent*, it is a mode of speaking that ought to be sufficiently known to us. Strictly speaking, no repentance can belong to God: and it ought not to be ascribed to his secret and hidden counsel. God then is in himself ever the same, and consistent with himself; but he is said to repent, when a regard is had to the comprehension of men: for as we conceive God to be angry, whenever he summons us to his tribunal, and shows to us our sins; so also we conceive him to be placable, when he offers the hope of pardon. But it is according to our perceptions that there is any change,

when God forgets his wrath, as though he had put on a new character. As then we cannot otherwise be terrified, that we may be humbled before God and repent, except he sets forth before us his wrath, the Scripture accommodates itself to the grossness of our understanding. But, on the other hand, we cannot confidently call on God, unless we feel assured that he is placable. We hence see that some kind of change appears to us, whenever God either threatens or gives hope of pardon and reconciliation: and to this must be referred this mode of speaking which Jonah adopts, when he says that God repented.¹

In other words, God in Jonah 3:10 adapts Himself to our understanding, speaking as though He changes, because that is the way it appears to us. In fact, He had eternally decreed all the circumstances of Jonah's visit to Nineveh and preaching there, including the threat of Nineveh's destruction and the resultant repentance of Nineveh as well as His own mercy toward the city and only appeared to change His mind when He showed to Nineveh the mercy He had decreed for them. This, however, leaves the question whether there is conflict or contradiction between God's revealed will (the imminent destruction of Nineveh) and His eternal good pleasure and decree (the salvation of Nineveh).

There are several things that need to be added to what Calvin says, therefore. First, we must remember we are speaking about God and that there are questions we ask that cannot be answered, both because He chooses not to answer them and because the answer is beyond our comprehension. That God is unchangeable is clearly taught in Scripture but so is His incomprehensibility, though His incomprehensibility does not mean and cannot mean that there is contradiction in Him. Nevertheless, in all His works and ways He is beyond our full understanding and that is true also of His repenting.

In addition to His incomprehensibility there is also the truth that Chrysostom pointed out long ago, that the threat of Nineveh's destruction was the means God used to bring about their repentance:

Men threaten punishment and inflict it. Not so God; but contrariwise, He both predicts and delays, and terrifies with words, and leaves nothing undone, that He may not bring what He threatens. So He did with the Ninevites. He bends His bow, and brandishes His sword, and prepares His spear, and inflicts not the blow. Were not the prophet's words bow and spear and

sharp sword, when he said, "yet forty days and Nineveh shall be destroyed?" But He discharged not the shaft, for it was prepared, not to be shot, but to be laid up.

Yet the question remains, how could God send Jonah to say in His name, "Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be destroyed," without lying or later changing His mind?

The question must be answered in light of what Scripture says about Jonah as a sign to the Ninevites. That he was a sign meant there was more to Jonah's preaching than the bare words threatening Nineveh's destruction. Jonah was a living example to the Ninevites of repentance and of the mercy of God shown to those who are repentant. Thus Jonah's sermon preached in word and by his person was not just, "you are going to perish in forty days," but "repent or perish" with implied gospel promise of mercy to those who do repent. That message the Ninevites not only understood but put it into practice when they did repent. God, then, did not lie or change His mind but did exactly as He had said through Jonah's words and example.

God's Word to Nineveh, therefore, was both of judgment and of mercy, judgment for those who did not repent (and surely there were some) and of mercy to those who did. That is the gospel message always, a message to which God is true when He executes His wrath and displeasure on those who continue in unbelief and when He shows mercy to those who, by His almighty and wonderful grace, turn from their wicked ways.

Putting that all together, God's repentance toward Nineveh was not God changing but God adapting Himself in His Word to our understanding, doing so in such a way that His Word, both of judgment and mercy, brought Nineveh to repentance and thus accomplished His eternal good pleasure in Nineveh. That does not mean, though, that the references to God's repentance can be brushed aside as something meaningless. God repenting is, in fact, what we experience when we have sinned against Him and in the way of repentance experience once again His favor. When we have sinned, we lose the sense of His favor and experience His holy anger against sin. When, by God's grace, we repent of our sin, we find once again the blessedness that David speaks of in Psalm 32.

The Canons of Dordt in Head V put it well, speaking of God's purpose in showing us His anger against our sin and in "repenting" of His anger. They also remind us that God accomplishes this purpose through the exhortations and threatenings of the gospel:

Article 13. Neither does renewed confidence or persevering produce licentiousness, or a disregard to

¹ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Twelve Minor Prophets*, vol. 3, Jonah, Micah, Nahum (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1950), 115-116.

piety in those who are recovering from backsliding; but it renders them much more careful and solicitous to continue in the ways of the Lord, which He hath ordained, that they who walk therein may maintain an assurance of persevering, lest by abusing His fatherly kindness, God should turn away His gracious countenance from them, to behold which is to the godly dearer than life: the withdrawing thereof is more bitter than death, and they in consequence hereof should fall into more grievous torments of conscience.

Article 14. And as it hath pleased God, by the preaching of the gospel, to begin this work of grace in us, so He preserves, continues, and perfects it by the hearing and reading of His Word, by meditation thereon, and by the exhortations, threatenings, and promises thereof, as well as by the use of the sacraments.

We experience this “repentance” of God, therefore, when we repent of our sins. Then we find, too, when we have sorrowed for our sins and turned from them that it is really not God who changed but we ourselves, and that by His grace. So we are blessed again, and what a blessed thing it is to experience once again the favor of a reconciled God (Canons V. 7)!

Jonah 3:10 tells us that God’s repentance came about when God saw their works. Their works are the good works of repentance and conversion, works that God views with favor and Himself judges to be “good.” He does this, however, not because our repentance is worth anything in itself, but because it was purchased at the cross and given by His Spirit. The work of truly sorrowing for sin and turning from it, then, is acceptable to God and blessed by Him because “it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:13).

That does not compromise the “must” of repentance. I must repent of my sins and humble myself before God when I have sinned, and only then will I enjoy again God’s favor and blessing. When I have repented, then I will acknowledge that it was God Himself who brought me to my knees and will also acknowledge that He brought me down by the command to repent and

the threat, “repent or perish.” Walking in sin, I knew something of what it is to go in the broad way that leads to destruction, though by the grace of God I have been delivered from that way.

Was that not David’s experience as he records it in Psalm 32:3-4?

When I kept silence, my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long. For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me: my moisture is turned into the drought of summer.

Repentant and having put away his sin, he says (vv. 5-6):

I acknowledged my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the LORD; and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin. Selah. For this shall every one that is godly pray unto thee in a time when thou mayest be found: surely in the floods of great waters they shall not come nigh unto him.

God, then, repented in this sense, that seeing His own grace and powerful Word working in the Ninevites, He showed mercy to them, as He had also to Jonah, and as He does also to every repentant sinner. He is not dependent on us or a God who can only respond to what we do, but He is the Almighty who works both the will to repent and the doing of it and

who then, as almighty and merciful, shows His abundant mercy to those who have trembled at those awful words, “repent or perish,” and who have turned from sin and turned to Him.

Recognizing all this our confession is,

O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor? Or who hath first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen (Rom. 11:33-36).

Jonah 3:10 tells us that God’s repentance came about when God saw their works. Their works are the good works of repentance and conversion, works that God views with favor and Himself judges to be “good.” He does this, however, not because our repentance is worth anything in itself, but because it was purchased at the cross and given by His Spirit. The work of truly sorrowing for sin and turning from it, then, is acceptable to God and blessed by Him because “it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:13).



Believing and confessing

Rev. Rodney Kleyn, pastor of First Protestant Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan

Praying to our Father in heaven

Lord's Day 46

Question 120. Why hath Christ commanded us to address God thus: "Our Father"?

Answer. That immediately, in the very beginning of our prayer, He might excite in us a childlike reverence for, and confidence in God, which are the foundation of our prayer, namely, that God is become our Father in Christ, and will much less deny us what we ask of Him in true faith than our parents will refuse us earthly things.

Question 121. Why is it here added, "Which art in heaven"?

Answer. Lest we should form any earthly conceptions of God's heavenly majesty, and that we may expect from His almighty power all things necessary for soul and body.

"Lord, teach us to pray."

Because our praying is difficult and deficient, and because we are forgetful sinners, we need instruction in prayer. This prayer, which we call the Lord's Prayer but which is really the Disciples' Prayer, is Jesus' instruction to His disciples and to us in prayer.

In this first lesson, Jesus teaches us not only *what* words we should use to address God in prayer but also, because prayer is worship, *how* we should be thinking of God as we approach Him in prayer.

"Our Father, which art in heaven."

The biblical idea

To understand what a "father" is, we must begin with Scripture and with understanding who God is as our Father. The earthly father was made by the Eternal Father as a dim reflection of Himself.

We also live in a fallen world in which this reflection has been destroyed by sin. How many do not know the pain of fatherly neglect and even abuse? How much do we not, even as Christian men, fall far short of the ideal in our role as fathers? To understand who God is as Father and to be what God intends as fathers we must let Scripture inform our thinking. Only then can someone whose experience with their earthly father was bad find comfort in thinking of God as his/her Father.

Biblically, the father is the male head of a home in which there are children, whose role is to be the provider, teacher, example, protector, and spiritual leader of his family (Gen. 3:19; Eph. 6:4; Job 1:5). Fatherhood, however, describes not just a person and a role but also

a relationship. All of this is reflective of who God is as Father.

The fatherhood of God begins eternally in the Trinity where Father and Son love each other in the Holy Spirit. This rich relationship is given some beautiful and unfathomable descriptions in Scripture. In John 17, Jesus speaks of His righteous Father and the love that they enjoyed with each other before the foundation of the world (John 17:24-25). In John 1:18, Jesus is described as "the only begotten Son which is in the bosom of the Father."

The term "Father" is used in reference to God just a few times in the Old Testament, but many more times in the New Testament. In fact, it is Jesus' most used designation for God, and He teaches us to use this name when we call on God. The reason for this is that God is and can be our Father only through Jesus. In John 1:12 we are told, "But as many as received him, to them gave he power [that is, "the right"] to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name." Galatians 3:26 says, "...Ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus."

This teaches us that the family of God is spiritual, that God is not the Father of all mankind and we a universal brotherhood, but that it is through adoption and regeneration that we who are by nature children of the devil (John 8:44) are brought into God's family. As a part of this family, we bear a spiritual likeness to God our father and we are constantly being transformed into the image of His Son (Rom. 8:29).

There is an urgency that everyone who does not be-

lieve in Jesus ought to feel and hear from us, an urgency to believe the gospel of God's Son. There comes a day when God the Father will say to some, "I never knew you" (Matt. 7:23), and when Jesus will say to others, "Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Matt. 25:34).

A rich relationship

When Jesus instructs us to call God "Our Father," He wants us to be thinking of a two-sided relationship: God's relationship to us as Father, and our relationship to Him as children. Our interest is personal: "What does it mean that God is my Father? How does that affect my coming to Him in prayer?"

There are four things for us to remember about God in His relationship to us as our Father.

First, the term "Father" conveys an intimacy, a love and affection. Psalm 103:13 refers to this as a father's pity. Pity is the expression of a deep and strong emotion in tender and gentle affection. Jesus wants us to think of God this way as we come to Him, because this is how He knew and approached God (Matt. 26:39). Perhaps the best description of this in Scripture is the father's reception of his prodigal son in Jesus' parable: "But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him" (Luke 15:20).

Second, the term "Father" denotes a full awareness and involvement of God in the details of our lives. The omniscient God knows our "downsitting" and "uprising" and is "acquainted with all our ways," even "understanding our thoughts afar off" (Ps. 139:2-4). When it comes to prayer, the Father knows all our needs before we tell Him (Matt. 6:31-32). Just as a committed earthly father knows his children and their needs and situations and is committed to their care, so God knows and cares for us.

Third, the term "Father" speaks of God's commitment to correcting and disciplining us. "For whom the Lord loveth he correcteth, even as a father the son in whom he delighteth" (Prov. 3:12). This can be painful for me as a child of God, but it is the one of the surest marks that I am one of His children. Hebrews 12:6-8 tells us that such chastening is evidence to us of God's love, of His receiving us, and of His dealing with us as sons. We understand that this is how things are in a healthy Christian family, and as God's children we thank Him for the chastisements and pray for humility to learn and grow through them.

Fourth, as our Father, God is committed to our spiritual growth, not only through discipline, but also by

providing for us all that we need for our bodies and especially for our souls. He does this by exhorting, comforting, and charging "as a father doth his children" through the Word, both in Scripture and preached (I Thess. 2:10-11). To put this another way, God is a communicating Father. For prayer, this means that we should be praying with our Bibles open, hearing God's voice as we lift our prayers to Him.

For our part, properly understanding God as our Father, should produce in us a childlike reverence and trust as we come to Him in prayer. As with our children, there ought to be a delicate balance between intimacy and respect, so that our closeness and familiarity with our Father does not produce a casualness in our worship and prayer. A respectable earthly father is a man who is attentive and loving to his children, but also a firm and resolved leader who does not indulge every wish of his children. Children will respect such a father-figure because they know that in him there is safety and love, as well as protection and consistency. We need to remember, that our Father is "in heaven," that is, He is the exalted One who inhabits eternity, who is the Ruler over all, the God of heavenly majesty, the God of almighty power.

Implications for prayer

"Abba Father."

You know the joyful sound of children when, at the end of his work-day, dad comes home. We come before God not as fearful servants but as beloved children with love and delight. He receives us. He seeks such to worship Him (John 4:23). He draws near to those who come in repentance (James 4:8). We can be intimate with God, rejoicing in His love.

But always with reverence. "Let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear: For our God is a consuming fire" (Heb. 12:28-29). God is worthy of all honor, and what a wonder that we can approach Him.

And also with boldness and confidence. Boldness because we know He will not only receive us, our persons, but also that He will hear our prayers, our words. Confidence, not only that He will answer our prayers, but also that He will give us always what is best for our situation.

Always, and only, as we are accepted in Christ, the beloved (Eph. 1:6). "In whom we have boldness and access with confidence by the faith of him" (Eph. 3:12).

Questions for discussion

1. Find the references to God as Father in the Old Testament. Why, do you think, there are so few of them? What promise is there in these references?
2. How does the coming of Jesus in the New Testament change/improve our approach to God in prayer (Heb. 10:19-22)? Why does Jesus' coming change this?
3. How does someone who has had dreadful childhood experiences with their father come to terms with God as Father? What would be the difficulty in this?
4. How would you answer someone who speaks of God as a universal Father and of all human beings as one big family? What is the danger of this thinking?
5. What do these verses teach us about the Fatherhood of God: John 1:12; Romans 8:14-17; II Corinthians 6:17-18; Galatians 3:26?
6. What is the pity of God, and what can we learn from it for our own parenting (Ps. 103:13-14)?
7. God is omniscient and we obviously cannot know our children as He knows us. What does God do with His familiarity with us, and how can we learn from this in regard to our children?
8. Why are correction and discipline essential for a healthy parent/child relationship? Why is this necessary in God's relationship to us, and why is it necessary in raising our children?
9. What is the primary way that God ministers to our spiritual needs, and what does this teach us about intentional communication with our children (Deut. 6:7)?
10. What attitudes should the truth of God as our Father in heaven produce in us?
11. Are the old English pronouns, *thee/thou*, the only way to speak reverently of/to God?



Ministering to the saints

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

Luther burning the papal bull: Encouragement to flaunt church discipline? (1)

The scene was Wittenberg, Germany; the date was December 10, 1520. Toward a fire burning in a courtyard, a procession of students made its way. There were *dozens* of students, led by Martin Luther and Philip Melancthon, with arms full of books that taught the heresies of Rome. On the fire went the books, their words and pages reduced to nothing. Along with them, Luther burned one other document: the bull *Exsurge Domine*, in which Pope Leo X threatened Luther with excommunication.

By this act, Luther responded to the pope's authority in general, and to the pope's threat of excommunication in particular. This act also demonstrated Luther's conviction that the Roman Catholic church was not open to doctrinal reformation; if one would preach the pure gospel, he must be put out of Rome.

How is Luther's act an example for us? If the con-

sistory of a true church puts us under discipline for a censurable sin, may we claim to follow Luther's example by saying "I don't care!"? No; this would express impenitence and hardening in sin. Nor do we follow Luther's example if we have a low view of the authority of the elders of the true church and a low view of Christian discipline. Through the elders, and by means of discipline, Jesus Christ governs His church as her King.

In this and a following article we will examine Luther's act in more detail, probe into its reasons, and lay a foundation for us properly to follow his example.

The history (abridged)

Two events in Luther's life, and the pope's response to those two events, led up to that moment in Wittenberg. The two events in Luther's life were his nailing the

Ninety-Five Theses to the church door in Wittenberg (October 31, 1517), and the Heidelberg Disputation (April 1518).

The pope's response to those two events was to authorize men to try to reason with Luther and to issue two papal decrees, called bulls. (The word "bull" comes from the Latin word *bullā*, referring to the pope's seal that is affixed to the decree.) The first bull, *Exsurge Domine*, declared Luther's teaching to be wrong on forty-one counts, and threatened Luther with excommunication if he did not repent. This bull Luther burned on December 10, 1520. In the second, *Decet Romanum Pontificem*, Pope Leo declared Luther and his followers to be excommunicated.

Having related this history more fully in a recent *Standard Bearer* article,¹ I will not repeat it. But note how Rome's practice of church discipline differs from that of Reformed churches. In Rome, the pope excommunicates; in Reformed churches, the body of elders does. The pope might consult advisors before excommunicating someone, but if he wishes, he may declare one excommunicated without the advice of others. Reformed elders must admonish often, and seek the advice of classis before excommunicating someone. The pope may excommunicate without threatening if he wishes; in Reformed churches, *many* admonitions precede excommunication.

So may we follow Luther's example? If so, how? Or, is it permissible to flaunt the discipline of the church?

A right ecclesiology

We can best answer the main question, whether to follow Luther's example, when we know *why* Luther did what he did. For at stake, fundamentally, is a right ecclesiology, a right doctrine of the church.

First, then, is the church that is disciplining and excommunicating a true church of Jesus Christ, or not? The issue is not whether any particular human *thinks* that the church is true or not; the issue is what does *Christ* say? Does He consider that congregation, her faults notwithstanding, to be part of His body? Does He work in and through that church and her elders by His word and Spirit? If not, we need not fear the discipline of that church.

Perhaps the question whether we may "flaunt" church discipline is misleading. To flaunt is both to defy and to taunt another. We ought to oppose error without taunting. In fact, Luther was not taunting Rome. But he certainly was making a statement that the word

of excommunication by a false church is meaningless. However, if Christ claims a church as His own, we may not view that church's discipline as meaningless. To do so is to reject Christ and His authority as Head and King of the church.

Second, at stake in this ecclesiology is our confession that the church has four attributes—she is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic—as well as the question, where is this church found? Rome taught, and still teaches, that *Rome* is this one, holy, catholic, apostolic church: "The sole Church of Christ is that which our Savior, after his resurrection, entrusted to Peter's pastoral care.... The Church, constituted and organized as a society in the present world, subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in communion with him."² By contrast, Reformed believers confess that this one, holy, catholic church is not found in only one institution, but in the spiritual, invisible body of Christ. Yet, individual congregations are to manifest these attributes of the church to the best of their ability.

Third, the true church has three marks according to the Belgic Confession, Article 29: the preaching of the pure doctrine of the gospel, the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ, and the exercise of church discipline in punishing sins. In short, the mark is that the Word of God is our only authority for faith, life, and church government. If one can honestly say before God that a church is thoroughly corrupt with regard to all three of these marks, then one need not fear that church's discipline. However, if a church possesses these marks and adheres to Scripture in every area of doctrine and life, then one must submit to her discipline. A true church is not faultless, but is one which strives to be faithful to God's Word.

Fourth, a proper ecclesiology posits that Jesus Christ alone is the Head of the church. Rome acknowledges His headship in word,³ but adds that the pope is His vicar, or substitute, who functions on His behalf.⁴ The Reformed do not dispute that some men represent Christ as the Head of the church; pastors, elders, and deacons *do*. Through them, Christ is present with His church (Matt. 28:20). But no one man alone represents Christ to the church. Christ's human representatives are a body of officebearers in the congregation, and each

1 See "Prelude to the Diet of Worms: Rome's Response to Luther" (November 1, 2021), 55-57.

2 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 234. Those with a different edition of this catechism may refer to paragraph 816. This quote, in turn, is taken from *Lumen Gentium* 8.2.

3 *Catechism*, paragraph 669.

4 *Catechism*, paragraphs 877, 880-884.

individual congregation has such a body. That many men represent Christ indicates that Christ alone is the church's Head.

Fifth, a right ecclesiology requires us to take the right view of the nature and power of the sacraments—another area in which Rome and the Reformed differ. Time and space do not allow me to develop this here. That Rome and the Reformed churches differ regarding these five main areas of ecclesiology demonstrates that Rome is a false church. *Rome's* discipline need not be feared, but that of a true church of Christ must be honored.

Luther's understanding

This Luther understood. In burning the papal bull that threatened him with excommunication, Luther was not merely reacting, nor revolting, nor flaunting discipline. He was simply indicating he did not fear Rome's discipline, because it did not need to be feared.

This Luther made clear in two treatises that he wrote, shortly after he burned the papal bull. The first is entitled "Against the Execrable Bull of the Antichrist."⁵ In it Luther says that Rome has merely declared that Luther is a heretic, and such a declaration alone does not in fact make a man a heretic. However, according to Luther, to show from Scripture that a man's teaching is contrary to Scripture is to demonstrate that he is a heretic. But Rome did not do this to Luther.

The second is entitled "Why the Books of the Pope and His Disciples were Burned by Dr. Martin Luther."⁶ The first of Luther's five reasons was that he was following the example of believers in Acts 19:19, who burned books of idolatry and witchcraft. Second, as a preacher, he must ward off or destroy false doctrine. Third, not merely was the pope in error, but to maintain his error the pope condemned the preaching and teaching of the true gospel. In other words, Luther did

not merely and rashly burn the books of someone with whom he disagreed. Rather, Rome's hatred of truth is explained by its love for the lie. Fourth, Luther indicated that others had burned his books earlier, without the pope's permission; why, then, would the pope take issue with Luther burning books? Finally, by burning these books Luther hoped to strengthen the common people in their faith. In conclusion, Luther quoted thirty false statements excerpted from the books that he burned, each of which regarded the pope's authority, power, and liberties.

By burning these books, Luther was not merely thumbing his nose at the pope, nor returning tit for tat. Rather, Luther was saying that Rome's view of the papacy, and Rome's doctrine of the church and sacraments, demonstrated that it was a false church. Her

preaching, her administration of sacraments, and her excommunication were not that of Christ, but of Antichrist.

In the year 1520 Luther was only beginning to see these points. He would see them more clearly and state them more fully in the future. In his *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, published in

1521, Luther would refute Rome's teaching that there are seven sacraments, and show that even Rome's view of baptism and the Lord's Supper was grievously wrong. But in 1520 he already recognized that Christ, not the pope, was the Head of the church; and he understood the gospel truth that we are justified by faith alone, not by works.

In fact, most people understand that Luther's example must not lead anyone to flaunt or defy the discipline of a true church of Christ. Understanding this, many who are under discipline by a true church allege that, in fact, that church is *not* a true church of Christ. If they are right, and if they have really done nothing worthy of discipline, the Lord will exonerate them. But if the Lord claims that church to be His own body, and if the person is indeed worthy of discipline, and if the person does not repent, he or she will stand before Christ in Judgment Day and hear Christ testify against him or her, and remind him or her that Christ spoke through the church.

What is it, then, positively to follow Luther's example? And how is it that Christ, in the work of discipline, speaks and works through the true church? To these questions we will turn next time.

In burning the papal bull that threatened him with excommunication, Luther was not merely reacting, nor revolting, nor flaunting discipline. He was simply indicating he did not fear Rome's discipline, because it did not need to be feared.

⁵ I have not found a full copy of this work. Roland Bainton provides an excerpt of it in his book *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1978), 125-126. That excerpt is readily available online; see <https://famous-trials.com/luther/293-execrablebull>.

⁶ "Why the Books of the Pope and His Disciples Were Burned by Doctor Martin Luther, 1520," in *Luther's Works*, Vol. 31, *Career of the Reformer (1)*, ed. Harold J. Grimm (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 383-395.



Go ye into all the world

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

Worldwide preaching and the return of Christ (2)

Previous article in this series: October 1, 2021, p. 12.

In our previous article we noted that the most prominent precursory sign of the return of Christ is the worldwide preaching of the gospel. It is the sign of all the signs. It shows us more than any other precursory sign how soon Christ will appear to bring all things to an end.

As we ponder this sign and look for its fulfilment, we discover that the gospel of Christ's kingdom has already, for the most part, been proclaimed in all the earth. The Word of God has gone out into almost all of the inhabited world. This has included its spread in recent decades into nations and peoples who had never heard it before.

It would be a mistake, however, to think this worldwide spread of the gospel is accomplished only through missions. We need to realize that the preaching of the Word to all nations and peoples begins with it being proclaimed in the established congregations of the people of God. It must start there. If we would neglect the families of the people of God in our established churches, then we would make the mistake of thinking they are not part of the world that must hear the preaching of the gospel.

The Word must first be preached in our churches. That is necessary with a view to the salvation and building up of the covenant people of God in their generations. The faithful preaching of the gospel is the chief means of grace for them first of all. It is the means Christ uses for the gathering of His elect in our own generations.

In addition to that, the Word that is preached to those who are already saved and already in the church is the means to equip the people of God to bring the gospel, in turn, to others. The preaching equips believers individually in their calling to give a witness of the truth. And it also, very importantly, equips the church as a whole to carry out the work of missions.

Missions is also, then, an important calling given to the church. She must proclaim the truth to others. We realize that not all churches are able to do the work of missions to the same degree, for not all are given, in the

providence of God, the same resources and opportunities. But every church is called to do what it can.

Christ uses His church for the spread of His gospel into all the world. He has been doing this for centuries. As a result, there are few places (if any) where the gospel has not been. There is hardly a nation or people in the world that has not heard it. This sign of all signs tells us, therefore, that Christ's return is very near.

The objection might be raised, however, that there are many persons, both in the past and in the present, who have never heard the gospel. And if that is true (and it certainly is), what then does "worldwide" preaching of the gospel mean?

What we must understand is that the fulfillment of the sign of worldwide preaching of the gospel does not mean that every individual in the world must hear the preaching before Christ will return. If that were the case, the end would never come, for millions have already died who never heard the preaching of the gospel, and millions of children die (or are killed) who never hear the gospel. Besides all this, there are also many millions who have never heard or who will never hear true and faithful preaching of the Word. But the reality is, it has never been God's purpose that every single person who is born into this world must hear the preaching. Nor is that necessary, for God leaves all men without excuse in other ways (see Rom. 1).

We also need to remember that God deals with and judges nations organically. Each nation will be judged as a whole for what that nation has done with the gospel. When a nation rejects the gospel, the whole nation is accountable before God for that, and not only those who actually heard the true gospel preached to them. Every member of those nations is corporately responsible for rejecting that Word. Each individual will be called to give account on the Judgment Day for that, and will be judged accordingly.

Thus the idea of the gospel going into all the world is not that the truth must be preached to every individual

in every age and nation, but that it be preached within each nation upon the earth. That serves God's purpose of the hardening of the ungodly and their filling the cup of iniquity. And it also serves God's all-important purpose of saving the elect kernel in each nation.

That the worldwide preaching of the Word has for the most part been fulfilled does not mean, however, that the church of Christ may stop preaching, or that believers may stop witnessing, or that the church need not be concerned about mission work. In reality, the very opposite must be true. The fact that the world still exists is exactly the proof that the gospel has not yet completed its course around the world. The gospel has not yet reached all nations and peoples, for if it had, Christ would have already returned.

Thus, the child of God and the church of Christ who urgently desire, by faith, the return of their Savior have here a powerful incentive to be busy in the work of the preaching of the gospel.

Because of this sign, the faithful church will be focused on preaching. Preaching will be a high priority. It will continue to be the main element in the worship services and in all the church's activities and work. The church and the people of God will be energetic about the preaching of the truth both within their congregations and on the mission field. This will be true of them because they know that Christ has made this determinative with regard to His return.

These are the end times. This is the last hour of history. And therefore, this is the age of the preaching of the gospel of Christ for the salvation of the church.

Whenever and wherever His Word is faithfully preached, we hear the footsteps of Christ. For it is He who preaches the Word and it is His mighty voice that brings His people to believe in Him. The fact that Jesus Christ, through faithful preaching, is gathering, defending, and preserving to Himself His church in every nation under heaven means that His return is imminent.

There is no more important work to be busy with than being a church that faithfully proclaims the gospel of Christ to herself and her children and then to all the world. May we remain busy in this, also through our prayers and support. And may God be pleased to use us as weak means to accomplish His purpose of saving His elect with a view to the glorious appearance of Christ.

We hear His footsteps through the worldwide spread of the gospel. That quickens our hope concerning His return. In all our sorrows and persecutions, with uplifted heads, we look for Christ to come as Judge from heaven. For then He will cast all His and our enemies into everlasting condemnation, and will translate us with all His chosen ones to Himself into heavenly joys and glory (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 19).

What a blessed hope we have. More urgently and more sincerely we pray, "Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly."



Strength of youth

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

Authority (2) The prohibition

What is authority? We spent the last article in this series answering that foundational question. Authority is the right to rule. We explained that God has all authority, has conferred authority upon Jesus Christ according to His human nature, and through Christ has bestowed upon certain people the right to rule. Those people on earth to whom God has given authority include parents in the home, and the husband as head of his wife; teachers who stand in the place of parents; officebearers in the church; government officials on the national,

state, and local level; employers in the workplace; and the gray head.

Now that we have laid the foundation, where do we go from here?

If we wanted, we could explore Scripture's teaching on the responsibilities of those who have the right to rule. We could say something about parents and the carefulness they must exercise. We could address the dealings of employers toward their employees. We could write about officebearers in the church and the conduct

to which Christ calls them in their office. Scripture certainly speaks to those in authority and exhorts them to proper governing in the sphere in which God has placed them. Those bestowed with the right to rule may not conduct themselves cruelly, selfishly, or in any way that crushes and harms those below them. The parents, officebearers, employers, teachers, and others in authority must exercise their duties with a proper trembling before God's face and according to His Word alone.

As important as that is, we intend to go a different direction: what the Bible says to those *under* authority. This is appropriate, because you young readers find yourselves in that stage right now: you are *under* many more people than you are *over*! To that end, we intend to answer two questions—the first in this article, the second in the next, and both connected to the fifth commandment (see Ex. 20:12, and the Heidelberg Catechism's explanation in Lord's Day 39). What sin does God forbid for those who are under the rule of others (negative prohibition)? What attitude and behavior does God require for those who are under the rule of others (positive requirement)?

Sin against authority, that is, sin forbidden by the fifth commandment, has a vocabulary. The vocabulary is varied, but three words that well describe such sin are dishonor, rebellion, and disobedience. *Dishonor* is esteeming the God-appointed position of those in authority as a very light thing. *Rebellion* is revolting against and consciously elevating oneself over those who rule. *Disobedience* is refusing to do what one is told.

This sin reaches back to the beginning.

Sometime between the creation of the angels and the fall of man into sin, part of the angelic realm proudly *re-volted* against God. Some of the angels, Lucifer among them, attempted to dethrone God and to be God in His place. Lucifer and the other angels showed themselves rebellious against the sovereign God who has all authority.

It comes as no surprise, then, that Satan, the rebel, approached Eve in the garden and tempted her to *dis-obey* God's clear command, "of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it" (Gen. 2:17). Already the devil had defiantly risen up against God in the angelic world, and now he wanted the first woman to do the same on earth.

But Eve fell into the sin of rebellion even *before* she partook of the forbidden tree. How? She rebelled against her husband and head, Adam. The serpent made his approach to Eve at a time when she was away from her husband. Satan intended to get at Adam through his wife Eve. The devil began to talk with Eve and Eve responded (Gen. 3:1-5). When the devil began to con-

verse with Eve, she should have immediately directed him to Adam. But she took matters into her own hands, demonstrating self-assertion and showing that she was not in submission to Adam. Such was sin against the God-appointed authority of her husband.

Eve continued on this path of sin with what she did next. She (and her husband) caved to Satan's temptation and partook of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. That was the sin of *disobedience* to God. That word "disobedience" contains real horror. When our first parents ate of the forbidden tree, they said "yes" to the devil and "no" to God. To God's good command, "Thou shalt not," Adam and Eve said, "We shall." We may never frame this event as a mere eating of some fruit, as if to say, "What is the big deal?" Rather, the Fall consisted in eating fruit *contrary to the command of God*—nothing less than revolt against the Most High.

Indeed: sin against authority is very old.

Violations of the fifth commandment have spanned history and continue into the present day. Rebellion covers the wicked world like a raging flood, leaving so much damage behind. Current at least to the writing of this article, sports venues are erupting with a derogatory chant about the current president of the United States. This chant reflects attitudes in America toward the government: being a Republican entitles someone to trash Democratic leaders, and being a Democrat gives someone the right to mock Republican politicians. Or, what about the police? The images of weapon-bearing mobs, crunched police cruisers, and shattered glass on sidewalks remain fresh in our minds. Some movements openly display their contempt for most, if not all, who wear the badge. Where does this toxic, anti-authority mindset come from? Usually, if not always, from homes where structure is broken, roles are reversed, and where parents esteem authority a light thing and teach their children to do the same.

But enough about the world. This flood of rebellion seeps under the church doors, too, influencing God's people. And the sad reality is, this sin in the world of dishonoring authority finds a ready friend in our sinful nature—that old Adam nature, that rebel nature. Let's look at three areas where authority is challenged among us.

We begin in the home. Conflict usually arises when dad or mom make a decision disagreeable to us or that is deemed unreasonable. The resistance comes, the words of objection spill out, and the grumpy mood follows. The lawyer, whose name is 'teenager,' begins arguing his case, answering each parental point and finding every possible loophole. Tension rises in the home, too, when the weaknesses and infirmities of our par-

ents begin grating on us: “Dad has plenty to say about how I should be talking and behaving, but he doesn’t always model it in his own life—how does he expect me to take him seriously?” says Johnny. “Mom can be so overbearing, and it’s really hard to take all her little demands. I’m tired of it!” exclaims Suzie.

The same could be said about students’ attitudes and behaviors in school toward the teachers. The homework is too much, the classroom procedure does not fit our tastes, the course is boring, the teacher’s personality is opposite from ours. We bring our frustrations sometimes to the teacher’s face, in a show of defiance, but more often we voice our complaints to the friend in the hallway or vent on social media. In any case, it is a wrong attitude and behavior toward the teacher.

In addition to home and school, already now and continuing through your life you are under authority in the church. When you stand up and confess your faith before the congregation, you say

a weighty “yes” to this question: “Will you submit to church government, and in case you should become delinquent (which may God graciously forbid), to church discipline?” The importance of that question, young people, cannot be overstated. More and more today, church members who disagree with decisions of a consistory or church assembly do not avail themselves of the church orderly avenue of protest and appeal (elders and assemblies are not infallible, after all—if you judge upon solid grounds that a decision is in error, protest it). But instead, families air out their objections at Sunday coffees, individuals post their problems online, and narthexes become gossip rooms. This spreading of one’s dissatisfaction dishonors the office in the church.

The Word of God brings out the gravity of sin against God-appointed rule. Deuteronomy 21:18-21 indicates how seriously God takes it:

If a man have a stubborn and rebellious son, which will not obey the voice of his father, or the voice of his mother, and that, when they have chastened him, will not hearken unto them: then shall his father and his mother lay hold on him, and bring him out unto the elders of his city, and unto the gate of his place; and they shall say unto the elders of his city, this our son is stubborn and rebellious, he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton, and a drunkard. And all the men of his city shall stone him with stones, that he die: so shalt

thou put evil away from among you; and all Israel shall hear, and fear.

By application in the New Testament, such a one is subject to discipline by the church and, should he remain impenitent, excommunication. And even where the Scripture does not include an explicit warning against the sin, it is implied (Ex. 20:12; Eph. 6:1-3; Col. 3:20). The point? God takes the sin seriously, and so should we.

Let’s remind ourselves *why* this sin is so odious to God. And here we return to the ABCs of authority: God has all authority, has conferred authority upon Jesus Christ according to

His human nature, and through Christ has bestowed the right to rule upon certain people. When we dishonor those appointed to their position by God, we dishonor *God*. When we strike out in rebellion at men and women above us in rule, we strike out in rebellion at *God*. Young

people, look beyond the face of your parent, your teacher, your elder, your boss, your president. Look beyond them and see the almighty God on His throne, high and lifted up—*He* has put them above you! What you do to *them*, you do to *Him*.

How often we fail in our attitude and behavior toward authority. Ours is a mountain of sin.

This is why we are so thankful for the perfection of *Another*. Christ Jesus was always perfectly *obedient* to the will of His Father. And being obedient to the will of His Father partly involved *submitting* to the authorities especially at the end of His life, though they were wicked authorities. But He submitted to them and was obedient to the will of His Father. He fulfilled the fifth commandment. Consider this, too. He submitted to these authorities knowing that it must be thus, that He might go to the cross. Go to the cross for such unworthy, dishonoring, rebellious, disobedient people like us! Many are our sins, but those sins are forgiven for the sake of Christ’s sacrifice.

By the power of Christ’s indwelling Spirit, turn from this sin! By the grace of God, hate this sin! In the strength of Christ, fight against this sin! In great gratitude for the bloody cross and the empty tomb, go forth, living according to what God commands *positively* of us under authority. To this requirement we turn next time.

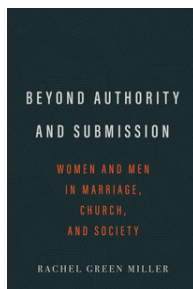
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Bring the books...

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

Beyond Authority and Submission: Women and Men in Marriage, Church and Society by Rachel Green Miller. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2019. 273 pages, paperback. \$17.99 [Reviewed by Brenda Hoekstra, wife and mother in Hudsonville (Michigan) PRC].



Rachel Green Miller has done her research!

A phenomenon surfaced around 1980 known then in more fundamentalist Christian groups as “Christian Patriarchy,” “Quiverfull Movement,” and “submissive lifestyle.” As it moved into more mainstream conservative churches, it acquired the more palatable name of “complementarianism,” which also varies by degrees as to how it is executed in daily life. These teachings were, after all, an answer to what women’s liberation had pushed into the churches regarding an unbiblical equality of men and women in the church. This form of equality was leading to women officebearers and their ordination to the ministry. Anything that answered that seemed to be a good idea. Complementarianism got increasingly promoted and organized in part by the work of interdenominational groups such as the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW), which proselytizes evangelical churches to adopt their doctrines on gender, promoting them as conservative and biblical. This theology of submission and headship has garnered the support of the second largest denomination in the U.S., the 16 million member Southern Baptist Convention. It was also behind the parachurch Promise Keepers movement.

The trouble with such reactionary theology is that it usually ends up causing the pendulum to swing too far the other way. Formerly a simple lifestyle choice, now it has become a belief system that redefines the message of the Bible concerning salvation for men and women. The framework for this new theology is built on a paper written by Susan Foh in 1974, and furthered by the Danvers Statement published by the CBMW in 1988. Susan Foh took a novel approach and interpreted the woman’s desire in Genesis 3:16 to be a desire to usurp or control her husband. Foh is quoted by Miller: “These words mark the beginning of the battle of the sexes.... The woman’s desire is...to usurp his divinely appointed headship, and he must master her, if he can. So

the rule of love founded in paradise is replaced by struggle, tyranny and domination” (p. 113). Note that the implication of Foh’s interpretation is that it is God’s own words that brings this radical change away from His original design. Foh’s interpretation has become the default position in many complementarian resources, including the ESV Bible, which, to further establish the idea, now has different wording in Genesis 3:16 than the KJV. Many from the CBMW consider these roles to be part of who men and women are, and were from the beginning, and some believe that it will still apply in the new world to come. Because of this thinking, authority and submission gets applied to all aspects of life, even where it should not.

The CBMW and its teachings have also become the grassroots power behind the political arm of reconstructionism. For a more in-depth look into the life of full-blown headship and submission theology, an interesting read is *Quiverfull* by Kathrine Joyce. This is an objective look at that movement from the inside. As I read Joyce’s book, I was left wondering why such a supposedly ‘correct and biblical’ answer could have failed so completely even to address abuse in marriage and the home. Why did it not at least stem the rise of abuse? Why did it not push abuse to near extinction? Instead, most of its brightest and best fell publicly by the very things it supposedly does not have: cheating and abuse.

Then I read *Beyond Authority and Submission: Women and Men in Marriage, Church and Society* by Rachel Green Miller. Rachel very adeptly sorts through and correctly separates what is actually biblical and what is not. Rachel identifies and correctly answers the error made by Foh; and, where it is perpetuated by many authors after her. Based on H. Hoeksema’s brief treatment of God’s judgment on Eve, and Calvin’s explanation of the word *desire* in Genesis 3 and 4, I find Miller is right and Foh is very wrong. Having come from an era when this ‘headship/submission in all spheres’ theology did not exist, I have always been wary about it, it seemed foreign. In fact, it is extra-biblical.

The error built by the CBMW has been expanded on, and grown into various degrees of Christian Patriarchy and complementarianism; it was expressed in the lifestyle of the popular Duggar Family program with its extra-biblical idea of the “umbrellas of protection.” The theology is intertwined with an ever-growing number of books on the subject, espe-

cially of the marriage-help genre, the girlhood/womanhood genre, but also of the inspirational fiction, love-story genre. Some of these books on marriage and girlhood/womanhood have found their way even into PRC study groups. It finds acceptance in Calvinistic circles since it is built around conservative teachings. This is ironic, since Calvin taught the equality of women as humans and coheirs of the kingdom, taught doctrine to women as well as men, and even worked toward a development for some diaconal work by women.

We, as Reformed people should reevaluate these teachings and be willing to step back from them. These teachings are leading women and men away from Jesus Christ. For women, Christ is our only Mediator and spiritual covering, not our husbands; and mothers are not the ‘covering’ for their children; that is not ‘the covenant.’ The outworking of the Christian life for believers cannot be narrowed to mere observing or filling of roles supposedly prescribed by the Bible. Symbolism, such as purity rings for teen daughters, cannot define obedience to Christ and does not do the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit through the preaching. The only reliable symbols God gave us are the two sacraments.

Marriage was instituted in Paradise where Adam and Eve were already holy, so marriage may not be viewed *strictly* as a means of sanctification. It is time to see submission for what it really is according to Scripture and not simply as a form of permission to be sought by the ‘weaker’ gender. ‘Womanly submission’ is certainly not a prescription for spiritual passivity in sanctification, much less a passivity of faith. It is also time to stop seeing women as ‘the problem’ in a misguided reaction to feminism, remembering that believing women are freed in Christ from curses and judgments just as much as the men are. It is time to stop short-changing ourselves as women by purposefully choosing not to learn doctrine, believing that doctrine is for the men. It is certainly time to stop lending our hand to the reconstructionist efforts by embracing these ideas.

This new theology of headship and submission has caused much difficulty in how to counsel and teach submission and headship in marriages where spiritual immaturity is present,

and especially where abuse is also present; the ‘roles’ idea simply does not fit or help. To avoid such troubles in our churches, Miller’s book would help in re-examining what the Bible really teaches about authority and submission in marriage, church, and society.

Godly women embrace what Christ has given them: the office of believer and all the responsibilities that go with that. We should remember that we are daughters of King Jesus, even if our men forget. Sometimes the wife might well be the spiritually stronger one, respectfully and lovingly encouraging her husband in his headship. The teachings held as biblical manhood and womanhood are erroneous interpretations of the Bible as viewed through the lens of culture. Instead, we are to judge our cultural ideas through the lens of Scripture.

I believe that for the most part we in the PRC are properly defining headship and submission. But even as parents, we must be careful in our presentation of what submission and authority are within the context of Christianity as a whole. Spouses learning doctrine together strengthens marriages so much more than living out some roles. Living according to dictated roles is the lazy way out, a ‘cop-out’ of our spiritual responsibility and calling to do the hard work of living out of our faith, of working out our own salvation with fear and trembling, and of the hard work of applying the preaching to our own life every day. We need to remember to be Christians first.

I highly recommend this book for pastors, elders, and parents who want to rescue our sons and daughters and fortify them against an age of troubled marriages, divorce, and abuse. As Rachel states,

Authority and submission are important aspects of our relationships, but they shouldn’t be the lens through which we view all of life. There is so much more to who we are and how we should relate to each other. By moving beyond an exclusive focus on authority and submission, we can incorporate the biblical themes of unity, interdependence, and service into our teachings on how women and men should live and work together as co-laborers in marriage, church, and society.

While Shepherds Watched

While shepherds watched
Their flocks by night,
All seated on the ground,
The angel of the Lord came down,
And glory shone around.

“Fear not,” said he, For mighty dread
Had seized their troubled minds;
“Glad tidings of great joy I bring
To you and all mankind.”

“To you in David’s town
This day, is born of David’s line
The Savior who is Christ the Lord;
And this shall be the sign.”

“The heav’nly Babe
You there shall find
To human view displayed,
All meanly wrapped in swathing bands
And in a manger laid.”

Thus spake the seraph,
And forthwith
Appeared a shining throng
Of angels praising God, who thus
Addressed their joyful song.

“All glory be to God on high,
And to the earth be peace;
Goodwill henceforth from heav’n to men
Begin and never cease!”

Announcements

Dear *Standard Bearer* subscriber,

The RFPA is now in our 98th year of publishing the *Standard Bearer*. God is truly faithful. As the years progressed, a lot of content was produced in this crown jewel of the RFPA. So, many years ago, men on the RFPA board decided to compile some of this content into books. This resulted in classics like *Behold, He Cometh!* and *Voice of Our Fathers*.

As more time went on, we continued to add books to our catalog, some from *Standard Bearer* content, others of fresh content. In fact, we now have over 130 books in our catalog.

We think you would find our books to be a valuable

addition to your subscription to the *Standard Bearer*. So we write to you to encourage you to join our new RFPA subscription model. You will continue to receive the *Standard Bearer*, and you will also receive books that we produce—either newly published books, books from our backlist, or some combination of the two. In fact, just for joining our new subscription you'll get to choose some free books from our complimentary books catalog.

We ask you to upgrade your *Standard Bearer* subscription to a Level 1 or Level 2 subscription (more info at rfpa.org/pages/membership). You'll be glad you did.

RFPA Board

Resolution of sympathy

The Council of Hope PRC of Redlands expresses their Christian sympathy to fellow officebearer Steve Potjer and his wife Beth and to children and grandchildren in the passing to glory of his mother **Mrs. Mary Potjer**. May the Word of God in Philippians 1: 21 "For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain" be a comfort to the family.

Rev. Matt Kortus, President

Peter Smit, Clerk

Resolution of Sympathy

The Council of Hope PRC of Redlands expresses their Christian sympathy to fellow officebearers, Darin and wife Amy Gritters and Todd and wife Erika Karsemeyer in the loss of their grandmother, **Mrs. Clarice Gritters**, beloved charter member of our congregation. Sympathy is also expressed to the children: Jeanne and Ed Karsemeyer and to brother and sister-in-law; Otto and Mary Gail Gaastra and grandchildren; Shaun and Lorianne Karsemeyer and to their families. Psalm 17: 15, "As for me, I will behold thy face in righteousness: I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with thy likeness."

Rev. Matt Kortus, President

Peter Smit, Clerk

Classis East

Classis East will meet in regular session on Wednesday, January 12, 2022 at 8:00 A.M., in Providence Protestant Reformed Church. Material to be treated at this session must be in the hands of the stated clerk by December 11, 2021.

Rev. Clayton Spronk, Stated Clerk

Teacher needed

Heritage Christian High School (Dyer, IN) is seeking three full-time teachers in the English, Mathematics, and Social Studies Departments for the 2022-2023 school year. Please contact our administrator, Ralph Medema, ralph.medema@heritagechs.org or 219.730.9876.