

# The Standard Bearer

A Reformed semi-monthly magazine

April 15, 2022 • Volume 98 • No. 14

## Why weepst thou?

Rev. Michael DeVries

## The PRCA and the true/false church (3)

Rev. Joshua Engelsma

## Metaverse

Rev. Nathan Decker

## Habakkuk:

### The just shall live by faith (Introduction)

Rev. Ronald Hanko

## The Council of Chalcedon (451): Other decisions

Prof. Douglas Kuiper



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.

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Website for RFPA: [www.rfpa.org](http://www.rfpa.org)

Website for PRC: [www.prca.org](http://www.prca.org)

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## Meditation

Rev. Michael DeVries, minister emeritus in the Protestant Reformed Churches and member of Southwest PRC in Wyoming, MI

# Why weepest thou?

**Jesus saith unto her, Woman, why weepest thou? whom seekest thou? She, supposing him to be the gardener, saith unto him, Sir, if thou have borne him hence, tell me where thou hast laid him, and I will take him away. Jesus saith unto her, Mary. She turned herself, and saith unto him, Rabboni; which is to say, Master.**

**John 20:15, 16**

Tears can be blinding. Grief can be debilitating. So it was for a time for Mary Magdalene following the death and burial of the Lord Jesus. Ever since Jesus had delivered her from the torment of seven devils, her life had been devoted to the Savior. It had been her joy to follow Him, and the service of love had been her very life. Mary Magdalene had been faithful to the end.

But she had been too much attached, too much concerned with Jesus as she had known Him. It is now her deep sorrow due to His death that prevents her from recalling His words. She had paid little attention to what Jesus had said about His approaching suffering, death, and resurrection. Mary had gone to the grave with the other women to finish embalming the body of her beloved Master. To perform one last act of love upon that body was now her sole comfort. To see Him alive was the last thing that she expected.

Seeing that the grave stone had been rolled away does not dispel her fears as to Jesus' death. It rather causes her to have new fears and more dreadful thoughts. She jumps to the conclusion that the body of her Lord had been taken. She proceeds no farther with the other women, but runs to tell the disciples. John and Peter hasten to the grave to see whether her report is true. They will behold the wonder of the linen grave clothes. Believing that Jesus is risen, they return to the city with joy and gladness in their hearts.

Meanwhile, Mary follows slowly. It seems she is irresistibly drawn to the empty tomb. Undoubtedly, the tears were flowing freely with each step. This time Mary goes up to the tomb, stoops down, and looks into it. The grave clothes are there for her to see, but she is blinded—blinded not only by her tears, but also by

her failure to exercise her faith! So intense is her sorrow that the presence of two angels in white garments does not even fill her with amazement. And to their question, “Woman, why weepest thou?” she answers, “Because they have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid him.” Her whole mind is focused upon the dead body of her Master. She has thought for nothing else!

Then it is that Jesus speaks to her. She is not even eager to talk about the matter. Having replied to the angels, she turns away from them. But now she finds herself confronted by another who asks her the reason for her sorrow, “Woman, why weepest thou? whom seekest thou?” But she, being neither in the mood to speak further of the matter nor even caring to lift up her eyes, merely notices that a man stands before her. Assuming that this is the gardener, she addresses Him with the hopeful question, “Sir, if thou have borne him hence, tell me where thou hast laid him, and I will take him away.” She is willing even to believe that it was no evil purpose that the body of her Master had been removed. Only let her know where He is, and she will take care of things!

But then the wonder of God's grace becomes manifest to her. She did not know Him. Seeking the dead body of her Master, she did not recognize her living Lord—not even when she met Him face to face! The risen Lord spoke to her only one word. He says simply, “Mary.” That word is sufficient. There is instant recognition! Mary not only recognizes her Lord and Master by His word, but in it she also tastes of His love for her.

Joy overwhelms her, and she falls down at His feet crying, “Rabboni,” which means “Master.” But it is then that Mary is made to feel the rebuke of love in that one word Jesus had spoken to her. And she is taught a very important lesson. For falling on her knees before Him, she was about to embrace Him and to hold Him tightly in her love and joy at seeing Him alive. Jesus makes the rebuke of love more pronounced, “Touch me not, for I am not yet ascended to my Father.” That must have hurt Mary. Undoubtedly, she did not understand

it all at that moment. She, too, must wait until the Spirit is poured out before she will see these things in the right light.

It was not that Jesus' resurrection body might not and could not be touched. It was touched! The women returning from the grave were met by Jesus and Matthew tells us, "They came and held him by the feet, and worshipped him" (Matt. 28:9b). Yet Mary is forbidden even to touch that body of Jesus. Why? At this point she saw no difference between His resurrection body and His body before His death and burial. To Mary it is Jesus returned to this earthly flesh and life. And she wanted to embrace that body to express her love and joy that He is returned to *this* life. Mary does not yet see the wonder of it all—that He has conquered death and risen above its power.

The lesson was necessary because of Christ's love for Mary. Without it her joy could be but a temporal one, for she must fear lest He once again be put to death. She must see that Jesus is now above all the assaults of the devil and his servants. His body is one that must ascend up to His Father and to her Father. She must remember that His kingdom is not an earthly kingdom but a heavenly one. Jesus teaches her that from now on her worship and service of Him will take on a new form. She is taught that she can and must rejoice even when Jesus is not physically with her upon this earth.

But we also see here that Jesus teaches that her unbelief is forgiven. He says to her, "I ascend to my Father and to *your* Father and to my God and to *your* God." Jesus was raised for her justification! Though Mary does not yet fully understand all of this, it is spoken to prepare her so that when the Spirit is poured out, she will understand, believe, and rejoice in the God of her salvation.

On the other hand, had Jesus not rebuked her, had He allowed her to take Him by the feet and cling to Him, she would not have understood His disappearance again from view. She would not have understood the fact that during the forty days He would appear only a few times. She likely would have resorted to weeping. Instead of looking up to her victorious Savior in heaven, she would have continued to look upon the cross as man's work instead of God's work to realize Christ's kingdom.

Mary's particular lesson is also necessary because of her character. The other women only needed to hear the words of the angels reminding them of Jesus' words. They only needed to see the grave clothes, and they were convinced that He was risen, recalling His words. Peter and John likewise, even without the word of angels, saw and believed.

But, as we have seen, Mary wept so profusely that she did not even see that at which she was looking. She stooped and looked into the grave, but not to see if He was risen. She looked only to convince herself that His dead body had not been moved to some corner of the grave. When the angels speak to her, she shows reluctance even to talk about the matter. When Jesus Himself speaks, she gives expression to the hope that the gardener knows where the dead body is. Mary needed this special lesson. She must be taught by being forbidden to worship Christ as the other women had done.

Yet Mary is not denied a way to express her faith and love. God never denies His children that, even though they may have been walking in a way of weakness. The all-wise God knows that there is no better way to strengthen one's faith than to give him an opportunity to express it. Therefore, Mary is told to go and tell Jesus' disciples that He is risen and ascends to His Father and to theirs and to His God and to theirs. Without a doubt, the news of Christ's resurrection was already rapidly spreading. But Mary too is to be a witness of His resurrection. Mary must teach others that His kingdom is not earthly. Mary must tell others that Jesus will not be with them in the same way now as He was before. Mary must do this so that her faith may be expressed, may be exercised, and so may grow.

Now Mary has quite a different message than she had before. She had come weeping, in sorrow, with the message, "They have taken the Lord out of the sepulchre, and we know not where they have laid him." Now she comes running with joy with the message that Jesus is risen and that she has seen Him. Before she had run in the intenseness of her sorrow. Now she runs because of an overflowing joy. Before, she had sorrow because of her failure to exercise her faith. Now she has joy in the exercise of a renewed faith.

But what about us? Do you sometimes find yourself standing outside the tomb weeping? Do we often fail to live in the consciousness of the blessed truth that Christ is risen? Are we inclined to focus upon the troubles and tribulations, the afflictions and sorrows that we face due to our forgetting the words of Christ in the weakness of our faith? Are we sometimes discouraged about the state of the church, overlooking the fact that our risen Lord is directing all things unto her full salvation and glory?

Do not be found weeping outside the tomb! He calls your name. Hear and believe that He, our risen and exalted Lord and Master, is directing all things to bring us to that glory of life everlasting in His kingdom. Look up with the eye of faith and confess, "Rabboni, Master"! Empowered by His Spirit, let us go forth as joyful



witnesses. We will give this witness by revealing that we look for our risen Lord to return in power and great glory.

Weep not! Men have not laid Him somewhere. Looking for His return, let us long for the day when

God shall wipe away all tears from our eyes; “and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away” (Rev. 21:4). Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly!



## Editorial

Rev. Joshua Engelsma, pastor of the Crete Protestant Reformed Church in Crete, Illinois

# The PRCA and the true/false church (3)

In this brief series of editorials, I have been setting forth the distinction between the true church and the false church. I have argued especially that one must allow for varying degrees of purity within true churches, and that one must distinguish between an apostatizing church and an apostate church.

In my first editorial I examined how this view of the distinction is the teaching of the Belgic Confession in Article 29 as well as the teaching of Scripture. In the second editorial, I walked through the history of the church since the Reformation and showed how this view of the distinction was maintained in Reformed orthodoxy by men such as J. Calvin, H. Bavinck, and H. Hoeksema.

In this editorial I want to argue further for this right view of the distinction between true and false churches by drawing out some of the serious implications of a wrong view of the distinction, before concluding with a summary of the proper view of the distinction.

### Implications of a wrong view of the true/false distinction

From time to time, some have proposed an absolute distinction between the true church and the false church. When referring to an absolute distinction between true and false, I mean that a person labels all churches either as true because a church bears perfectly the three marks of a true church or as false because a church has departed in any degree from those marks. Such a position rules out that there is a process in which a true church becomes false, a process that often takes place over many years. Any church in which there is

any error whatsoever is judged not to be apostatizing but absolutely apostate and false. Often this erroneous view of the distinction is employed to teach that one's own church is the only true church while all others are false churches.

Hopefully, it is evident from the preceding editorials that this absolute distinction between the true church and the false church is not the biblical and Reformed position. As a further argument against that view, I want to point out several serious implications of it. Though one might deny holding to these positions, they are the inevitable implication of the wrong distinction.

#### 1. Pride

Failure properly to teach the distinction between the true church and the false leaves churches and individuals open to the danger of ecclesiastical pride.

It is not too difficult to see how this erroneous distinction could be weaponized in an assault on other churches. If one must distinguish absolutely between the true church and the false, if there is no room for varying degrees of purity between true churches, if there is no room for speaking of a church as apostatizing rather than apostate, then the moment a person detects any fault in a church with respect to the marks, that church no longer is a true church but has become a false church. How easy, then, for a person to look out over the ecclesiastical landscape and conclude, “There is error in all these other churches and denominations. None of them agrees entirely with my church and denomination. And if the church that differs from my own just a little is a

false church, then all the other churches that differ from my own a lot definitely must be false churches. Therefore, they must all be false churches!”

At the same time one puts down every other church, he elevates his own church and denomination. The obvious implication is that one views his own church and sister churches to be the only true churches left on the earth. The attitude is conveyed: “The number of God’s people on the earth nearly corresponds to the few thousands in my church and sister churches. Truth is found only here. These churches alone are true.”

This is a position that gives every indication of pride. This attitude is akin to the proud attitude of Elijah during the days of Ahab and Jezebel when he thought that he alone remained faithful to God. Elijah needed reminding that there were still 7,000 in Israel who had not bowed the knee to Baal.

This view of the church makes it increasingly difficult for the member to make a full-throated confession: “I believe an holy catholic church.” The church on earth is a remnant in comparison to the world, but her being a remnant does not mean that her members are found only within the small bounds of one’s own denomination. The church is catholic in that at any one time God has His people scattered throughout the world, small in number in comparison to the world but much more than what I see and know. That is what makes this a matter of faith: I believe that there are such members of the church, even though I do not see them and know them. And these members of Christ’s church are members of church institutes that differ from my own and possess varying degrees of purity.

Reformed orthodoxy rejects such pride. It despises ecclesiastical pride as much as it does personal pride. In humility, Reformed orthodoxy does not make an absolute distinction between the true church and the false. In humility, Reformed orthodoxy distinguishes between an apostatizing church and an apostate church. In humility, Reformed orthodoxy maintains that among true churches there are varying degrees of purity. In humility, Reformed orthodoxy gives unashamed credence to the catholicity of the church.

In humility, Reformed orthodoxy acknowledges that one’s own church or denomination is not the only true one while all others are false.

The warnings of Scripture with respect to pride must be heard in this connection: “Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall” (Prov. 16:18). “God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble” (I Pet. 5:5).

## 2. Slander

A second serious implication of a wrong view of the distinction between the true church and the false church is that it comes dangerously close to (if not is) slander.

This wrong view comes dangerously close to (if not is) slandering other true churches. Under the influence of this wrong view of the distinction, one regards a true church of Christ and says, “It is false. It is a whore. It is Babylon. It is dead. It is without Christ. It is hated and cursed by God. It is incapable of producing believing children.” A person might say this about a church, when in reality that church

is not false, is not a whore, is not Babylon, is not dead, is not without Christ, is not hated and cursed by God, and is not incapable of producing believing children. Instead, that church is a true church, in which Christ is present, and where believing children are brought forth.

This wrong view comes dangerously close to (if not is) slandering other individual believers. When a Christian with a misguided view of the distinction arrives in heaven, he will find (perhaps to his astonishment) that there were many more Christians in the world than he knew.

He will find himself praising God alongside brothers and sisters whom he shredded in this life with his careless words. He assigns them a place in a false church, where Christ is not present savingly, when in reality Christ was present in that church savingly.

Most serious of all, this wrong view comes dangerously close to (if not is) slandering the Head of the church, Jesus Christ. Regarding a true church, one might say, “Christ is not there!” But the truth is that Christ is there. He is present there in the preaching of His Word. He is present there in His sacraments. He

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is present there in His discipline. He walks among that candlestick. Regarding a true church, one might say, “She is a whore, a false church!” Yet she is not a whore but the precious, lovely bride of Christ, bought with His blood and purified. To say this with respect to a true church is to say it with respect to Christ.

### 3. Radical

This wrong understanding of the distinction is a departure from the biblical and Reformed faith. It is no development of doctrine, but a serious deviation and regression. It amounts to radical ecclesiology.

This is not merely my judgment, but the judgment of many other Reformed theologians. One Reformed man has called it “narrow churchmanship.”<sup>1</sup> Herman Hoeksema has called it an “untenable position.”<sup>2</sup> David Engelsma has called it a “mistake” and a “fanatical application”<sup>3</sup> of the distinction, and elsewhere “radical ecclesiology.”<sup>4</sup>

### A positive summary of Reformed ecclesiology

From what has been said so far, it ought to be clear what is the proper view of the distinction between the true church and the false church. But, to be clear, I want to conclude with the following summary.

The church is the elect body of Jesus Christ (cf. I Cor. 12:12; Eph. 1:22-23). She is *one*, with all the members united together in Christ (cf. Eph. 4:3-6). She is *catholic*, a church gathered from all of history out of all the nations of the earth (cf. Rev. 7:9).

This one body of Christ is manifest on the earth in local, instituted congregations (for example, the church in Corinth and the church in Ephesus). Each congregation is autonomous and a complete (though not exhaustive) manifestation of the body of Christ (cf. Church Order, Art. 84).

The reason why there are so many different congregations and denominations in the world at present is due in part to the fact that she is found in different parts of the world with different cultures and histories. But the reason is also due to sin and apostasy that necessitate denominational divisions.

These local congregations are distinguished into true

churches and false churches (cf. Belgic Confession, Art. 29). Some churches in the world are true; others are false. Some are the bride of Christ; others are rightly designated the whore and Babylon.

True churches are identified by certain, objective marks. They are the faithful preaching of the gospel of grace, the right administration of the two sacraments (which some might broaden slightly to include biblical worship), and the careful exercise of Christian discipline (which some might broaden slightly to include proper church government).

False churches are identified by certain, objective marks. In them is found no preaching of the gospel but, rather, the preaching of the lie. Other sacraments are added to the two instituted by Christ, and the doctrine of the sacraments is corrupted. Impenitent sinners are allowed to carry on in their sinful behavior without discipline being administered, while discipline is exercised only on those living godly lives.

An absolute distinction between true and false may not be made, that is, one may not say that an error in a church automatically makes it false. Rather, there is a spectrum of purity in true churches where the marks are evident to a greater or lesser degree. Apostasy in a church is a gradual process, and, if church history is any indicator, a process that takes place over decades if not centuries.

Though a church that has begun down the road of apostasy is still a true church, that does not in any way excuse or justify her error. She is worthy of rebuke, and she stands in need of correction.

Though a church has begun down the road of apostasy, those in a more faithful church will not mark her as false. Without compromising on the truth of God’s Word, a more faithful church will deal humbly with the less faithful. This carries through in the respectful way that individual members of the one deal with individual members of the other.

A true church will seek to express the unity of the body of Christ as much as is possible on the earth (cf. John 17:11, 21, 22). On the basis of a common confession of the biblical, Reformed faith, she will unite and affiliate with other true churches of Christ throughout the world.

The marks of a true church serve to guide and govern the membership of believers. Even though other churches may be true churches with varying degrees of purity, this does not necessarily mean that we ought to be members of them. If we are presently a member of a true church, we ought not to leave her for any carnal or insignificant reason. If she goes astray, we ought to labor long and hard to correct her. Only if she shows

1 P. Y. DeJong, *The Church’s Witness to the World* (St. Catharines, ON: Paideia Press, 1980), 2:270.

2 Herman Hoeksema, “True and False Church,” *Standard Bearer*, vol. 27, no. 6 (Dec. 15, 1950): 128.

3 David Engelsma, “The Marks of the False Church,” *Standard Bearer*, vol. 58, no. 11 (March 1, 1982): 258.

4 David Engelsma, *The Belgic Confession: A Commentary* (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2019), 2:158.

herself hardened to correction will we leave to join ourselves to a church that is more faithful or to form a church anew.

Such a view of the church avoids the pitfalls of pride, slander, and radicalism, while at the same time avoiding the pitfalls of compromise, indifference, and false ecumenicity.

Having in these first three editorials set forth generally the proper view of the distinction between the true church and the false church, I intend in a few other editorials to make application of the distinction to the Protestant Reformed Churches.

## Letters

### God's grace and our good works

Dear Editor,

Greetings in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. May He receive all the glory.

I have been reading the doctrinal discussions in the PRC from the...magazines.

In my reading concerning the controversy I had one verse repeatedly impressed upon my heart that I cannot recall being cited in any of the literature mentioned above. ...[T]his verse by Paul seems to encapsulate the true doctrine nicely: "But by the grace of God I am what I am; and his grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain; but I laboured more abundantly than they all; yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me" (I Cor. 15:10).

It seems Paul is used by God to demonstrate...the proper way in which we should view God's grace and our good works. Paul begins the chapter directing our hearts to the love of God in Christ as declared in the gospel he preached: "[B]y which also ye are saved" (I Cor. 15:2; cf. Rom 1:16). Paul then summarizes the gospel as the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (I Cor. 15:3-8) and in humility Paul declares he is most unworthy of being an apostle: "[B]ecause I persecuted the church of God" (I Cor. 15:9; cf. Phil 3:6).

Next...Paul gives us one of the most beloved phrases in Scripture: "But by the grace of God I am what I am." Paul declares his identity as an apostle and therefore as a Christian solely because of the grace of God (cf. Eph. 3:7, 8). Many men in the PRC have repeatedly said that God's grace is the only reason they are saved and have a covenant relationship with God. In essence the PRC echoes Paul here.

Paul does not allow us to become the so-called "frozen chosen," that will profess faith without works (cf. Jas. 2:17ff.), for he says God's grace was not given in vain. How can Paul say the grace of God given to him

was not in vain? Paul explains: "[B]ut I laboured more abundantly than they all." In other words, Paul does not divorce his good works from God's grace, but points to his good works as evidence (fruit) of God's grace.

Despite Paul's insistence that he is an apostle by grace alone, he does not fear saying that he worked harder and suffered more than any other apostle (cf. II Cor. 11:23; 12:11).... Yet, in listing his good works, Paul does not boast in himself but uses his experiences to glorify God: "[Y]et not I, but the grace of God which was with me."

This is the heart of the matter. Paul established that all he has is by God's grace alone. Then Paul declares that his good works are the fruit of God's grace. And he concludes by giving God all the glory. God's grace was before, during, and after Paul's good works. Is this not true doctrine? Yes, it is the very truth I have read again and again in the *SB* despite the claims of some.

I pray this text is useful and finds a place in your heart to assure you that the PRC is carrying the truth of God in her heart. I hope this text (I Cor. 15:10) is published in the future to edify and correct us in the proper understanding of God's grace and our experience of this salvation in our lives. Thank you for your time....

Sincerely,  
*Chris Brunt*  
(Chino, CA)

### Editor's response:

Amen! This truth of God's sovereign grace is what we teach in the PRC and what we are committed to publishing in the *SB*.





## All around us

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

# Metaverse

Around five years ago, I gave a speech entitled “Living Wisely in a Digital Age.” A central point was to highlight the importance of being proactive in knowing about technology, striving to understand the potential spiritual harm of using a device or application before jumping headlong into it. One of the greatest dangers is that we become passive by using every new device or platform without much thought. This much is clear: certain devices and apps do impact the spiritual and emotional well-being of the believer. Discernment is always necessary when considering any new technology or platform. That was true five years ago when I wrote the speech. It is true today. It will be true in the years to come. And as the pace increases at which the technological landscape changes, it is never too early to consider from a Christian perspective the technology that is on the horizon but soon enough may become commonplace in our lives. For that reason, we do well to consider Facebook’s recent announcement regarding Metaverse.

In October of 2021, Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Facebook, announced a change to his company’s name. The different name reflects clearly the future and vision of the largest social media company in the world: Meta Platforms Inc., to be known for short as Meta. Meta is shorthand for the Metaverse, a word that may be new to some readers today but will become mainstream in the years to come. The Metaverse is a digital world combined with augmented reality that Zuckerberg’s company will create in the coming years. Admittedly, it can be difficult for one without expertise in these areas to grasp what the Metaverse is. Here are some descriptions that give a sense of what Zuckerberg and his team are attempting to create:

The metaverse is not a digital world. It’s a digital world of worlds through which people can travel seamlessly, retaining their appearance and digital possessions wherever they go. These worlds do not merely exist in VR (virtual reality), but also layer onto physical reality through AR (augmented reality).<sup>1</sup>

Think of it as the internet brought to life, or at least rendered in 3D. Zuckerberg has described it as a “virtual environment” you can go inside of—instead of just looking on a screen. Essentially, it’s a world of endless, interconnected virtual communities where people can meet, work and play, using virtual reality headsets, augmented reality glasses, smartphone apps or other devices. It will also incorporate other aspects of online life such as shopping and social media, according to Victoria Petrock, an analyst who follows emerging technologies: “It’s the next evolution of connectivity where all of those things start to come together in a seamless, doppelganger universe, so you’re living your virtual reality life the same way you’re living your physical life,” she said.<sup>2</sup>

So, what exactly is this Metaverse? In short, it will be the new version of the internet. Experts say it will not exactly replace the internet, it will just absorb it and take it to the next level—the “Internet 3.0.”<sup>3</sup>

Certain hardware would be necessary to navigate through the Metaverse, such as a headset, glasses, or gloves to simulate movement and touch. And when in the Metaverse, a person would be represented by a self-created avatar. The building blocks of the technology are already available: virtual reality goggles, controllers with haptic technology, augmented reality layered upon the real world (think the popular game Pokémon Go).

The Metaverse is Zuckerberg’s vision for the company. Considering the technology already available, it is attainable to a certain degree. He has already committed 10,000 people in Europe and \$1 billion dollars to create the Metaverse. Undoubtedly, this is the new wave of technology that will eventually hit us in the years to come.

There is so much more that could be said about the Metaverse, what it is and its potential dangers. The purpose of this article is not to go into all of these details, but to impress upon readers the necessity of think-

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2021/10/28/1050280500/what-metaverse-is-and-how-it-will-work>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.crisismagazine.com/2021/christians-beware-the-metaverse>.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/prepare-metaverse>.



ing carefully about the Metaverse before it is upon us. One of the quotes above that is alarming is how the Metaverse as the new Internet would “absorb it [the Internet] and take it to the next level.” It is so disturbing because it reveals how using and living in the Metaverse would take place gradually, and even imperceptibly, over some time, as many of these technologies become more cost-effective and commonplace. This is how the increased use of almost any technology occurs in our lives. Think about social media, for example. There was no single moment in time when it began to dominate the lives of so many people. It happened slowly, gradually, so that today for most people, hardly a day goes by without using some form of social media for communication, buying and selling, news consumption, or entertainment. Not only what the Metaverse is but also how it may be incorporated into our lives makes it all the more important to be aware of its developments in the coming years.

One of the ways to keep abreast is to search out commentary on these new technologies from a Christian perspective. I leave you with a quote, which should cause all of us to pause and think very carefully and prayerfully about how we would use this technology if it were available to us today. It is found in an article appropriately titled “Christians, Beware of Metaverse”:

If Christians want to continue to live in the world God created and do the work He sent us to do, we must

consider the risk in handing over the reins of our daily experiences to these forces. There are some forces that are too strong for most people’s wills to resist—like opioid or meth addictions. The “old” internet has been able to create multiple near-irresistible forces (social media, streaming pornography, video games, etc.). An enhanced, immersive super-internet would undoubtedly have the power to absorb entire lives into a world of distractions that people will not be strong enough to pull away from.

Think of what the updated version of pornography would be like...if the consumer is fully immersed in an experience indistinguishable from reality. Think of what the updated version of video games would be, with adventures far surpassing any previous generation’s imagination that you could disappear into for days. Think about what “social media” would mean if you can just enter each “friend’s” post as they travel to Portugal or snorkel in the Bahamas or attend a concert.

Before the Metaverse fully emerges (likely in the next decade), some serious prayerful discerning is necessary on whether, or to what degree, we should enter it. Because while we may gain an endlessly fascinating digital world, we could also lose our very real souls.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.crisismagazine.com/2021/christians-beware-the-metaverse>.



## Search the Scriptures

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# Habakkuk: The just shall live by faith (Introduction)

**The burden which Habakkuk the prophet did see.**  
**Habakkuk 1:1**

### Who was Habakkuk?

He is mentioned twice in the book as the author (1:1; 3:1) and in both cases is called “the prophet” indicating that he was a prophet for life, unlike Amos, who was a herdsman called to bring the Word of God. Habakkuk 3:1 and 19 suggest the possibility that he was also a Levite and among the temple musicians. The reference to Shigionoth in 3:1 seems similar to the word “Shiggaion” in the heading of Psalm 7, though no one knows what

either word means. Also, the last words of the book, “To the chief singer on my stringed instruments,” are similar to the headings of many Psalms (4, 5, 6, 8, 9, etc.) and indicate that the last chapter of Habakkuk was meant to be sung in the temple.

We can date him to the times shortly before the Babylonian invasion of Judah, which means he prophesied at the same time as Jeremiah and Zephaniah. There is a reference in 1:5 to “your days,” that is, the days of Habakkuk’s contemporaries, as the time in which God’s judgment through the Babylonians would begin: “Behold ye among the heathen, and regard, and wonder

marvellously: for I will work a work in your days, which ye will not believe, though it be told you.”

His name probably means “Embracer.” Martin Luther in his preface to Habakkuk in the German Bible said: “Habakkuk bears the right name to his commission. For Habakkuk means, ‘to hug’. He does so with his prophecy by hugging or embracing his people. He comforts them and takes them into his arms as one does with a crying child or adult.” Other than that we know nothing of Habakkuk, nor need we know more. The author of the book is the Holy Spirit and all the emphasis must fall not on the man the Spirit used but on the work of the Spirit in inspiring the book and giving it to us as the Word of God.

### **When and under what circumstances did Habakkuk give his prophecy?**

It is clear from the first two chapters that Habakkuk’s prophecy must be dated just prior to the coming of the Babylonians who invaded Judah twice. He speaks of the coming of the Babylonians in 1:6, 2:8, and 3:16. The date of his prophecy, therefore, must be around 615-610 BC. The Babylonians had taken over the area in 605 BC, after defeating Pharaoh Necho (II Kings 23:29; Jer. 46:2) and the army of Egypt at the battle of Carchemish. On his way to fight the Babylonians, pharaoh had fought with Josiah, king of Judah, who was killed in the battle. Retreating from Carchemish, pharaoh had put Jehoiakim on the throne of Judah in the place of Jehoahaz (both were sons of Josiah). When Jehoiakim later rebelled against Babylon, the Babylonians came to put down the rebellion. They arrived during the reign of Jehoiachin (597 BC), who was taken away to Babylon along with many of the nobles of Judah, including Daniel and his friends. Jehoiakim had died before Nebuchadnezzar arrived to put down the rebellion, and his son Jehoiachin had to face the consequences in his place. The Babylonians invaded again during the reign of Zedekiah (586 BC), and then destroyed both the city and the temple and took Judah away into captivity. Habakkuk, it appears, prophesied during the reign of Jehoiakim and it is likely, therefore, as 1:5 suggests, that Habakkuk lived to see some of the events that he foretold.

The description of Judah’s wickedness in the first chapter of Habakkuk compares, too, to the description of the evils of Jehoiakim’s reign in Jeremiah 22:13-18:

Woe unto him that buildeth his house by unrighteousness, and his chambers by wrong; that useth his neighbour’s service without wages, and giveth him not for his work; That saith, I will build me a wide house and large chambers, and cutteth him out windows; and it

is cieled with cedar, and painted with vermilion. Shalt thou reign, because thou closest thyself in cedar? did not thy father eat and drink, and do judgment and justice, and then it was well with him? He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well with him: was not this to know me? saith the LORD. But thine eyes and thine heart are not but for thy covetousness, and for to shed innocent blood, and for oppression, and for violence, to do it. Therefore thus saith the LORD concerning Jehoiakim the son of Josiah king of Judah; They shall not lament for him, saying, Ah my brother! or, Ah sister! they shall not lament for him, saying, Ah lord! or, Ah his glory! He shall be buried with the burial of an ass, drawn and cast forth beyond the gates of Jerusalem.

This historical context is important in Habakkuk, for it was the certainty of a Babylonian invasion and conquest that raised Habakkuk’s fears and questions in chapters 1 and 2. Already in the days of Hezekiah and Isaiah, God had told Judah they would certainly go into captivity for their sins: “Behold, the days come, that all that is in thine house, and that which thy fathers have laid up in store until this day, shall be carried to Babylon: nothing shall be left, saith the LORD. And of thy sons that shall issue from thee, which thou shalt beget, shall they take away; and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon” (Is. 39:6, 7).

That word of God through Isaiah had been prior to Babylon’s rise as the world power of the day. Assyria was still dominant in those days, but by the time of Habakkuk the Babylonians were on the verge of becoming the world power and Habakkuk, under inspiration, foresaw their rise to power and their conquest of Judah. They would conquer the Assyrian empire and destroy Nineveh, the capital of Assyria in 612 BC, and defeat Egypt at the battle of Carchemish in 605 BC, becoming the dominant power in the land of Israel, later destroying Judah as a nation. Habakkuk, like many others in Judah, had trouble understanding how that could happen to God’s people and his book concerns the plight of God’s people in those coming days.

### **What is the message and theme of Habakkuk’s prophecy?**

Habakkuk’s first concern was for the wickedness of Judah that had gone so long unpunished:

O LORD, how long shall I cry, and thou wilt not hear! even cry out unto thee of violence, and thou wilt not save! Why dost thou shew me iniquity, and cause me to behold grievance? for spoiling and violence are before me: and there are that raise up strife and contention. Therefore the law is slacked, and judgment doth never go

forth: for the wicked doth compass about the righteous; therefore wrong judgment proceedeth (1:2-4).

When God assured him that He was sending the Babylonians to punish Judah for her sins (1:6), then Habakkuk wondered how a cruel and wicked nation could be so used by God: “wickedness punishing wickedness.” His question, then, was how God could use a nation more wicked than Judah, the Babylonians, to punish Judah: “Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity: wherefore lookest thou upon them that deal treacherously, and holdest thy tongue when the wicked devoureth the man that is more righteous than he?” (1:13). In spite of her sins, Judah was “more righteous” than Babylon.

When God assured him that the Babylonians were His instrument not only for chastising but also for saving Judah and for the coming of His kingdom, and that they too would come under His judgment when He was finished with them, then Habakkuk responded, as a child of God should, in faith and worship, acknowledging God’s sovereignty, the inscrutability of His ways, and His faithfulness as the Savior of His people (chap. 3). Thus Habakkuk became an example of the great truth that lies at the heart of his prophecy, which is also the theme of his prophecy: “the just shall live by his faith” (2:4).

The prophecy of Habakkuk is unique in that it contains no words addressed directly to God’s people, but is a dialogue between Habakkuk and God. Sung in the temple (3:19), however, his words would also become an encouragement and help to those who remained faithful in a difficult time. For the same reason, the prophecy of Habakkuk is included in the Word of God, that all who look for God’s coming kingdom and who believe that in His sovereignty and in His faithfulness He is the God of His people may know that “all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28). Thus in every age “the just lives by his faith.”

The just live by faith because faith is in Christ and finds its righteousness in Him; but the just live by faith also because faith understands:

Ill that he blesses is our good,  
And unblessed good is ill;  
And all is right that seems most wrong.  
If it be his sweet will.<sup>1</sup>

### How is the book of Habakkuk arranged?

The book has two main parts, a conversation between

Habakkuk and God, chapters 1 and 2, called a “burden” in 1:1, and a prayer, chapter 3. The burden includes Habakkuk’s first question, “Why does Judah’s wickedness go unpunished?” (1:2-4) and God’s answer: “The Babylonians are coming to punish Judah” (1:5-11). It also includes his second question: “How can a righteous God use a wicked nation to punish a people more righteous than themselves?” (1:12-2:1) and God’s answer to that question: “Babylon will also be punished, but, whatever happens, the just will live by their faith” (2:2-20). In the second part, the prayer, Habakkuk acknowledges God’s wonderful works of the past and confesses his faith and trust in God, who always and in all His works goes forth for the salvation of His people (3:13).

That the first part of his prophecy is called a “burden” is similar to Nahum 1:1, Zechariah 12:1, Malachi 1:1, and many other passages in the prophets. The Word of God through these prophets is a burden because it is heavy with judgment and difficult to bring. In Habakkuk the burden leads to a prayer as it ought always to do.

### What is the place of Habakkuk in the Word of God?

There can be no doubt that the book is part of the inspired and infallible Word of God. Chapter 2:4 is quoted twice in the epistles of Paul, Romans 1:17 and Galatians 3:11, and in Hebrews 10:38, not only marking that verse as the theme of the prophecy but also showing that the book of Habakkuk is the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. The faith by which the just live is always faith in Christ. That the just live by faith is both the great gospel truth of justification by faith alone, and the wonderful comforting truth that faith is the victory that overcomes the world.

Thus Habakkuk shows us that in the Old Testament as well as the New, Christ is the only Savior, faith the only way of salvation, and that by faith in Christ believers live and serve God. That is a message for all time, for if faith carried the faithful in Judah through the invasion and conquest of their land, the destruction of their place of worship, their captivity in Babylon, and the death of their kings, it can also carry us through these evil times and through the times that are coming when “if it were possible even the very elect should perish” (Matt. 24:22, 24), when Babylon the great, the Mother of harlots and Abominations of the earth, threatens one last time the existence of Christ’s church here on earth.

<sup>1</sup> Frederick William Faber, “The Will of God.”





## Pillar and ground of truth

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# The Council of Chalcedon (451): Other decisions

Previous article in this series: March 1, 2022, p. 249.

As we noted in the last article, the most significant work of the Fourth Ecumenical Council was to formulate the Creed of Chalcedon. But the Council finished this work at its sixth session and would meet for nine more sessions. What else did the delegates accomplish?

Just as the Councils of Nicea (325) and Constantinople (381) had done, the Council of Chalcedon faced church political issues as well as doctrinal issues. Some of its church political decisions reflect the fact that church government was developing into a hierarchy, paving the way for the catholic (universal) church of that day to become the Roman Catholic Church as we know it.

### The status of the churches at Rome, Constantinople, Antioch, and Jerusalem

The Council of Constantinople had specified that the church in Constantinople was to enjoy honor and privileges second only to the church in Rome. The 28th canon of the Council of Chalcedon reaffirmed that. Why this privileged status? Rome was most important, because Peter (supposedly) and Paul had labored there. Constantinople was second, because it was the capital of the empire.

So what was the status of the churches at Antioch and Jerusalem? From Antioch, the gospel had spread westward. So the church at Antioch was also prestigious in the minds of the people. The church at Jerusalem was under the jurisdiction of the church at Antioch. Juvenal, the bishop of the church at Jerusalem, wanted his church to be as important and prestigious as Antioch, not under its jurisdiction. At its seventh session the Council agreed, and declared which outlying churches were under the jurisdiction of the church and bishop of Antioch, and which were under the jurisdiction of the church and bishop of Jerusalem.

This was a further step in exalting five churches above all the others: the four mentioned above, and that in Alexandria, Egypt. But already, the church held to the primacy of Rome.

### A developing hierarchy

The Scriptures speak of a bishop as an overseer, or elder. Reformed church government requires that every congregation have a body of bishops, or elders (Acts 14:23; Tit. 1:5; Phil. 1:1), which oversees that congregation. However, by 451 the early church considered the bishop to be one man who supervised several churches in a geographic area. The Council required these men to have stewards to help them do their work, and required all the bishops in a given area to meet twice a year.

Two men claimed to be the rightful bishop of Ephesus. Which one really was? Neither, said the Council. At its twelfth session, it removed them both from the position they thought they had, and provided them 200 gold pieces annually “for their nourishment and consolation.”<sup>1</sup>

### Multiplication of offices

Scripture gives warrant for three offices in the church: pastor, elder, and deacon. By 451 the churches were speaking of more offices than three. Among the new “offices” in the church was that of *reader*, those who would read Scripture in the worship service, and that of *singer*, those who would sing during the worship service. The fourteenth canon of the Council required that readers and singers must marry women of orthodox views, and the fifteenth said that women deacons must be over forty and remain unmarried. Evidently, church offices were multiplying beyond what Scripture required. Also, the church was already viewing the office of deacon, not as the office to administer benevolence, but as an office to do other tasks, including helping the bishops. But we can appreciate the principle that those who marry must marry

1 “The Decree with Regard to the Bishop of Ephesus,” *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, Volume 14, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1988), 266.

in the Lord, and Reformed churches require consistories to see to it (Church Order, Art. 70).

### Clergy morals

Several decisions regarded how the clergy should live. Some articles of our Church Order (noted in parentheses below) apply the same principles that the Council treated. The Council forbade the clergy to pay anyone for their position (simony), to work in a secular business for money or take any secular employment (CO, Art. 12), or to be ordained without serving in a specific church or place (CO, Art. 7). It also emphasized that foreign clergy were not to preach in local churches without the bishop's permission (CO, Art. 15), and that all clergy were to submit to their bishops.

The Council also forbade any clergyman to take a wife or to pretend to be married. The church was considering those who were celibate to be “holier” than those who were not, and requiring its clergy to lead by example. But Scripture teaches that church officebearers may be married (I Cor. 9:5) and, indeed, that they set an example by ruling their houses well (I Tim. 3:2, 4, 5).

### The church governs its own affairs

Although the form of church government was deteriorating by 451, and would continue to deteriorate until the time of the Reformation, the churches understood one point that we can appreciate: the civil government has no control over the church. The church takes care of itself. The ninth canon reflected this idea: when a clergyman sued another clergyman, the matter must stay out of the civil government's courts. The church's assemblies will address it.

Not that the church maintained this principle accurately. Soon the pope would be trying to dictate how the civil government, kings and princes, should rule. The church wanted to be supreme.

The Council made other decisions as well, but these indicate the state of the government of the church at the time of the Council of Chalcedon. Having finished our treatment of the Fourth Council, we will begin next to address the Fifth, that of Constantinople, in 553. The heyday of positive development of doctrine was past. Regarding both doctrine and church government, the church was about to enter the medieval era, the dark ages.



## Taking heed to the doctrine

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## Assurance and good works (5)

Previous article in this series: September 15, 2021, p. 489.

In this series of articles, we are concerned to understand the proper relation between the assurance of salvation and good works.<sup>1</sup> The Word of God and our Reformed confessions make plain that there is a relation between them. What is that relation? How do our Reformed confessions set forth the relation between assurance and the believer's life of holiness? What can we learn from the confessions regarding the relation between assurance and good works?

<sup>1</sup> In this series of articles, I am using the expressions “assurance of faith,” “assurance of election,” and “assurance of salvation” as expressions that are nearly synonymous. That may properly be done because our salvation, both our present salvation and our final salvation, has its origin in election and is enjoyed by faith.

In previous articles, we have seen that the relation is *not* that good works are the cause of our assurance. Good works do not work assurance. The believer's assurance of salvation is not grounded in his good works, so that he can point to his good works as the reason for his assurance. That would give to our good works a function that is out of harmony with our confessions. A young man's hard work may be the cause of his promotion in the corporation that employs him. A young woman's pleasing personality may be the cause of her popularity in the office. But the good works of the believer are never the *cause* of his assurance. Who he is and what he has done are not in whole or in part the *basis* for the salvation of the child of God—not



any aspect of his salvation, including the assurance of salvation. Rather, the cause of our assurance is Christ and His finished work, which is appropriated by faith alone.

Although good works are not the cause of assurance, good works do play a confirmatory role in assurance. This is clearly the teaching of Scripture, as we have seen in previous articles. In I John 2:3, the beloved disciple of Christ teaches, “And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments.” Similarly, he writes in I John 3:18-19, “My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth. And hereby we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before him.”

The teaching of Scripture is also the witness of our Reformed confessions. Good works serve to confirm the believer’s assurance of salvation. This is so because good works always arise out of true faith, the faith by means of which we are saved. No unbeliever but only the saved child of God can perform good works. Therefore, the good works that the believer produces are the fruit and evidence of his faith. The Heidelberg Catechism in Lord’s Day 33, Q. 91 asks, “But what are good works?” The first part of the answer is: “Only those which proceed from a true faith...” Arising out of true faith, therefore, good works confirm the faith out of which they arise.

In the last article, we began to take note of the teaching of our Reformed confessions on the proper relation between the assurance of salvation and good works. We examined the teaching of the Heidelberg Catechism in Lord’s Day 21, Q&A 54. In the present article, we will continue to explore the teaching of the Heidelberg Catechism, turning now to Lord’s Day 32, Q&A 86.

### Why must we still do good works?

Lord’s Days 32 and 33 introduce the Heidelberg Catechism’s treatment of the Ten Commandments. Q&A 86 takes up the objection of the Roman Catholic Church, as well as others who oppose the truth of justification by faith alone apart from works, that such a doctrine undermines the necessity of doing good works. If good works do not merit, so goes the argument, there is no motivation for the Christian to do good works. That objection is incorporated into Q. 86. “Since then we are delivered from our misery merely of grace, through Christ, without any merit of ours, why must we still do good works?” Salvation by grace most emphatically does not rule out the necessity of good works in the life of the Christian. In fact, not only is a life of good works consistent with salvation

by grace, but salvation by grace also establishes the Christian life of good works as the expression of gratitude to God.

The Heidelberg Catechism’s answer includes three reasons on account of which good works are necessary in the Christian life. Along with the fact that good works are an important part of the believer’s expression of gratitude to God, and along with the fact that good works serve as a witness by which “others may be gained to Christ,” A. 86 states: “Also, that everyone may be assured in himself of his faith by the fruits thereof.” From the perspective of the answer, the child of God has faith. Out of that faith flow good works, which then serve to confirm the faith that he has, so that he is “assured in himself of his faith by [its] fruit.”

Some have explained A. 86 to be teaching that there is one and only one reason for doing good works. The one reason is “that so we may testify by the whole of our conduct our gratitude to God...that He may be praised by us.” That we may be assured within ourselves of our faith and that others may be gained to Christ are not proper motivations for doing good works, they contend, but are only the effects (by-products or fruits) of a life of holiness.

It certainly is true that the outstanding reason for doing good works is that we may express our gratitude to God. Purposely, this reason is mentioned first in the 86th A. God and the glory of God must always be first in the Christian life. Consciously, the child of God must have God’s glory uppermost in his mind at all times. It certainly is also true that under the blessing of God our life of good works has the effect that we are assured of our faith. And it is also true that God may also be pleased to use our good works in such a way that their effect is that unbelievers are gained to Christ.

However, that the glory of God is the primary motivation for a life of good works does not preclude the desire of the believer “to be assured in himself of his faith” and the desire that “others may be gained to Christ,” as secondary motivations. We may draw a parallel to the means of grace. The truth that the preaching of the Word is the primary means of grace does not rule out that baptism and the Lord’s Supper are also means of grace, albeit secondary means of grace. As secondary means of grace, they are always subordinate to the preaching of the Word as the chief means of grace. Apart from the preaching of the Word, they are not independent means of grace. In a similar way, the glory of God is the primary motivation for a holy life, while the confirmation of our personal assurance of salvation and the gaining of others to Christ are secondary moti-

vations. But as secondary motivations, they are nonetheless real motivations to a life of holiness.

The teaching of Q&A 86 is that, in addition to the glory of God, the desire for our own assurance and for the salvation of the neighbor ought to motivate us to do good works.

### Motivations for doing good works

That the Heidelberg Catechism sets forth three reasons on account of which the child of God ought to do good works is plain from the language of A. 86. Our English translation is consistent with the original German. After stating that first of all we ought to be motivated to “testify by the whole of our conduct our gratitude to God,” the Catechism adds *“also that everyone may be assured in himself of his faith...and that by our godly conversation others may be gained to Christ”* (emphasis added). The answer of the Catechism makes the three reasons on account of which we must do good works coordinate. They are joined by “and” and “also.” Each part of A. 86 is a response to the question, “Why must we still do good works?” First of all, and most importantly, we ought to be motivated to do good works in order to demonstrate our gratitude to God for salvation. Secondly, we ought to be motivated to do good works “that everyone may be assured in himself of his faith by the fruits thereof.” And thirdly, we ought to be motivated to do good works “that by our godly conversation others may be gained to Christ.”

There can be no question that the glory of God ought to motivate us to do good works. The Scriptures make this plain. The apostle says in I Corinthians 6:20, “For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God’s.” He adds in I Corinthians 10:31, “Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.”

There is also little question that the third reason on account of which we should do good works ought also to be a motivation for a life of holiness. The third reason for doing good works, according to A. 86, is that “by our godly conversation others may be gained to Christ.” If we love our unbelieving neighbor, co-worker, or relative as we ought, we should be motivated to do good works out of the hope that God would be pleased to use

“our godly conversation” that they may turn from their life of sin to a life lived in God’s service. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus calls the citizens of the kingdom of heaven to “[l]et your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven” (Matt. 5:19).

In support of this third reason for doing good works, the Heidelberg Catechism cites I Peter 3:1-2: “Likewise, ye wives, be in subjection to your own husbands; that, if any obey not the word, they also may without the word be won by the conversation of the wives; while they behold your chaste conversation coupled with fear.” Who can question that this was properly a heartfelt motivation to Christian wives in the days of the apostles to live godly in their marriages? This was the very thing for which they would undoubtedly be praying fervently every day—likely several times each day—that God would be pleased to work true conversion in the life of their unbelieving spouse. And now the apostle Peter holds this before godly wives as a motivation to live holily in their marriages, that their husband may be won to the gospel.

In keeping with the fact that these two parts of A. 86 are properly motivations to the child of God to live a life of good works, so too is the reason sandwiched in between these two reasons, namely, that “everyone may be assured in himself of his faith by the fruits thereof.”

Neither should such a motivation be regarded as a selfish and self-centered reason for doing good works. For one thing, it never stands alone as a reason by itself for doing good

works. Neither our own confirmation of assurance nor our desire to gain others to Christ can be divorced from the outstanding motivation for doing good works: the glory of God. But in addition to being motivated by the glory of God, the gaining of others and the strengthening of our own assurance of faith are legitimate motivations for doing good works.

Next time, we hope to take note of what others have said concerning Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 86, and in particular what they have said about this matter of good works confirming true faith.

**In keeping with the fact that these two parts of A. 86 are properly motivations to the child of God to live a life of good works, so too is the reason sandwiched in between these two reasons, namely, that “everyone may be assured in himself of his faith by the fruits thereof.”**



## Pertaining to the churches in common— Covenant PRC, Ballymena, NI

Rev. Angus Stewart, pastor of the Covenant Protestant Reformed Church in Ballymena, Northern Ireland

# March 2022 Newsletter

Dear saints in the Protestant Reformed Churches,

### Church visitation

Due to Covid-19 and its regulations, the CPRC did not have church visitation by a delegation from the PRC for the last two years. Thus it was especially good to welcome back Prof. Barry Gritters and Elder Sid Miedema (January 5-14). Like all arriving in the UK in January, the two men had to quarantine on arrival until they received a negative covid test on day two. We had planned to have our congregational dinner at a local restaurant while our American visitors were here but, sadly, we had to cancel it because of the hassle with covid rules for large group dining.

Prof. Gritters brought the Word of God at both the Sunday services on January 9, led a Bible study on Exodus 19 (cf. Heb. 12:18-29) on the Tuesday morning, and gave a lecture on “Being the Hand of God: Godly Parenting in an Ungodly World” on the Wednesday night. His excellent instruction was much appreciated by the congregation.

Advertising for the speech on child-rearing included an article written by Julian Kennedy which was published in the *Ballymena Guardian*. We were very pleased with the attendance, and the parents in the church found the lecture especially helpful ([www.cprc.co.uk/sermons/being-the-hand-of-god-godly-parenting-in-an-ungodly-world](http://www.cprc.co.uk/sermons/being-the-hand-of-god-godly-parenting-in-an-ungodly-world)).



Prof. Gritters and Sid Miedema visited a number of families in the congregation. Mary and I took them for some lovely coastal walks in the north of County Antrim and forest walks in the south of County Down, where there was snow on the mountains.

### Church activities

Alfonso and Salome Mansona and their two adult sons, Chester and Dale, were gladly received as confessing members on November 21. Jeremy Watterson, the fifth covenant child of Sam and Anga, was baptized on January 23.

Charlotte Higgs arrived in Northern Ireland from Brisbane, Queensland in the middle of February and is staying in our province for a few months. She is a member of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Australia, and a daughter of Pastor David and Sue Higgs. Charlotte has settled into the life of our congregation very well.



We were finally able to have our church dinner at the Ross Park Hotel on Friday, March 11. William Graham, our organizer and quizmaster, booked the venue soon after all the covid regulations for such events were removed. This left us short of time to contact friends outside our own congregation and get together all the orders for the three courses. Thus we decided simply to invite members and attendees with their spouses, etc. It was a very enjoyable evening of fellowship.



Michelle Lou-Hing, a niece of Marie Kennedy, and her son, Liam, were able to make it to Northern Ireland for the congregational dinner, since Michelle and her husband are buying a house in Broughshane. It is great to have them back in our midst again.

Besides the Lord's Day preaching of the Word, the four Monday evening catechism classes, and the Tuesday morning Bible study on "Saving Faith: A Biblical and Theological Analysis," we have a Wednesday night doctrine class on the Belgic Confession. We are currently on Article 37, which deals with the end times. We have covered Scripture's own eschatological time periods: the two ages ("this age" and "the age to come"), "the last days," the 1,000 years (Rev. 20), and the 1,260 days, 42 months or 3½ times (Rev. 11-13).

In our Wednesday classes, we recently concluded a series of 9 studies on "The Nearness of Christ's Coming," explaining the 7 major ways in which the Bible teaches that our Lord comes (3 in the past, 3 ongoing, and 1 climactic), the things that must happen before His glorious bodily return, and Scripture's full testimony to both its "soonness" and its "delay." All these doctrinal audios are not only available in CD box sets ([www.cprc.co.uk/product-category/cdsdvds/belgic-confession](http://www.cprc.co.uk/product-category/cdsdvds/belgic-confession)) but can also be listened to free online ([www.cprc.co.uk/belgic-confession-class](http://www.cprc.co.uk/belgic-confession-class)).

Currently, there are 3 families and 3 individuals in 3 membership classes. During the week, I meet with Billy and Anne, Grace and Kerryann Gould in Antrim; Joe and Lisa McCaughern in Portglenone; and Ivan Ortu and Colm Ring at the manse in Kells. We go through (the positive articles of) the Canons of Dordt, and then various distinctive Reformed doctrines and practices, so that new members join the church with a solid grasp of the truth, a good conscience, and joy.

### Online witness

Our main website ([www.cprc.co.uk](http://www.cprc.co.uk)) is doing very well. Around November 17, 2021, its number of daily page hits suddenly tripled. Things continued around this level for a few weeks before growing by 50%. Thus we are now receiving about 4.5 times as many page hits on our main website as we were at the time of my last letter (November 5, 2021).

We recently created an "Election and Reprobation Resources" webpage, containing links to audios and/or videos of doctrine classes, sermon series and lectures, as well as articles, pamphlets, books, etc. ([www.cprc.co.uk/election-and-reprobation-resources](http://www.cprc.co.uk/election-and-reprobation-resources)). This is our 35th handy resource page ([www.cprc.co.uk/topical-resources](http://www.cprc.co.uk/topical-resources)).

Since my last letter about 4½ months ago, we have

added 112 translations to our website. Thus, we have been receiving about 6 translations per week—a good rate! Many of these are short pieces, such as *Covenant Reformed News* articles ([www.cprc.co.uk/covenant-reformed-news](http://www.cprc.co.uk/covenant-reformed-news)) or chapters from *Doctrine According to Godliness* by Rev. Ron Hanko. We now have some 3,368 articles and creeds in more than 200 foreign tongues (from Afrikaans to Zulu) on our website ([www.cprc.co.uk/languages](http://www.cprc.co.uk/languages)).

Thanks to Nic, a Reformed elder in S. Africa, Afrikaans has grown most, increasing by 35 to 175 translations. Polish has seen 33 additions through the work of Marcin in Norway, Sebastian in Poland, and Robert in the Republic of Ireland. For our Polish translations, now totalling 88, Mary has created a specific Polish webpage ([www.cprc.co.uk/languages/polish](http://www.cprc.co.uk/languages/polish)), to add to the other 9 individual language webpages (Afrikaans, Burmese, German, Hungarian, Indonesian, Italian, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish).

We also received a good number of translations in Hungarian (13 by Balint) and Russian (12 by Viktor). The others are 6 Spanish (by Jorge in Peru), 5 Portuguese (including 2 pamphlets on drama by Revs. Dale Kuiper and Richard Smit), 4 Swahili (the last 3 of which were by Lilian, a new translator from Nairobi, Kenya), 3 Dutch (by Gerben in the Netherlands), and 1 Latin (the Belgic Confession, so that we now have all 4 of our Ecumenical creeds and all 3 of our Reformed creeds in this language).

In the last month or so, Sam Watterson has been placing paid ads on Facebook on behalf of the CPRC, targeting people within 30 miles of Ballymena. So far, he has advertised the video debate on Calvinism ([www.Youtube.com/watch?v=G5B\\_UknPtFM](http://www.Youtube.com/watch?v=G5B_UknPtFM)) and an article on the *real* healing miracles in the Bible ([www.cprc.co.uk/articles/healings](http://www.cprc.co.uk/articles/healings)). We have been receiving positive feedback and intend continuing this means of advertising.

### British Reformed Fellowship (BRF)

The first *British Reformed Journal* with Sam Watterson as editor was sent to subscribers and BRF members in January. These are the titles of its five articles: "New Editor!" "Editorial: It's Too Complicated," "The Destructive Teaching of Hypo-Calvinism in Common Grace Scripturally Exposed," "Two Men from Trier: Karl Marx (and Communism) and Caspar Olevianus (and the *Heidelberg Catechism*)," and "Doctrinal Doublespeak." The cost is just £10 (or \$20US) for 4 issues and new subscribers are very welcome ([www.britishreformed.org/journal/subscribe](http://www.britishreformed.org/journal/subscribe)).

At this summer's BRF Family Conference in

Castlewellan Castle, County Down, Northern Ireland (July 9-16), Profs. David Engelsma and Brian Huizinga will unfold the glorious truth of our “Union with Christ” ([www.cprc.co.uk/articles/](http://www.cprc.co.uk/articles/brfconference2020)



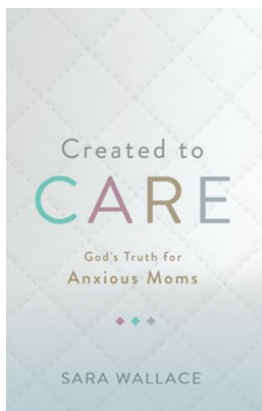
[brfconference2020](http://www.cprc.co.uk/articles/brfconference2020)). The booking forms for the conference (including its low prices) and the contact details for the booking secretaries are available online ([www.brfconference.weebly.com/booking.html](http://www.brfconference.weebly.com/booking.html)). We hope that many of you will be able to join us for a wonderful week of Reformed teaching and fellowship!

As of today, the UK has ended its covid travel rules. This means that people arriving in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales no longer need to get tested or write a passenger locator form. This is good news for people flying in for July’s BRF conference or those wanting to visit the CPRC in Ballymena!

May the Lord bless and keep you all,

*Rev. Angus and Mary Stewart*

## Bring the books...



*Created to Care: God’s Truth for Anxious Moms*, by Sara Wallace. P&R Publishing Company, 2019. 158 pages. Softcover. \$15.99. Reviewed by Cherith Guichelaar, pastor’s wife and mother in Randolph, WI.

I find that the words “what if” are two slippery words. A mother’s back can bend weary by the load of “what ifs”: *What if our child continues to struggle academically? What if the cancer treatments fail? What if our wayward child doesn’t repent? What if our child never finds a spouse? What if I am failing as a mother? What if, what if, what if*—the devil is delighted when the “what ifs” begin to circle, entrapping us.

It was in such a crippling game of “What If” that God led me to pick up Sara Wallace’s book *Created to Care: God’s Truth for Anxious Moms*. The book is made up of ten chapters that cover numerous anxieties with which mothers may struggle. The author’s goal in going through these different worries is for mothers to find their strength and comfort in the Lord as they seek to fulfill their callings.

The book begins by addressing the burden that comes when mothers place unrealistic expectations

upon themselves that are not specifically addressed in the Bible. Think of a classic example: “All the other moms buy organic fruit. What if *my* child is inhaling pesticide?” Or, “I have to make baby books for all five kids, and I don’t know where to begin!” Placing these burdens upon oneself is a recipe for crushing mom guilt and anxiety. The only way to break the vicious cycle of anxiety is to “apply God’s truth directly to our expectations” (21).

Chapter two draws attention to the exhaustion that can encompass mothers in seasons of busyness. During these draining times, Sara encourages mothers to fuel themselves with reminders of God’s character. Even when physical rest is low, spiritual rest is found in the truth that God’s only begotten Son died for *you*.

Chapters three and four cover six priorities that take up most of a mother’s time and energy. When approaching the topic of prioritization, Sara warns, “It’s good to take control of our priorities, but if we’re not careful, our priorities can start controlling *us*” (42). She begins the section by prioritizing our relationship to the Lord. Sara points out that time in the Word is *for* us, but not ultimately *about* us. She states, “When we make God’s Word all about us, it’s easy for us to be disappointed in our quiet times” (43). She cautions mothers against comparing their devotional lives and encourages them to remember that God’s Word can work in us despite our moments of fatigue and distraction. A second pri-



ority she covers is marriage. I was very thankful for the emphasis she put on setting aside quality time with one's spouse. She says, "God created marriage to be a picture of Christ and the church. Marriage, not parenting, is the ultimate picture of the gospel." In addition to this she states, "When we prioritize our husbands, we're not just trying to keep them happy; we are putting the gospel on display for our kids" (47). When it comes to prioritizing our children, the author states that the goal is to train them up in the fear of the Lord. This requires "love, comfort, stability, predictability, and consistency" (49). A third priority she mentions is the keeping of the home. When homemaking, Sara encourages wives to ask their husbands which areas they would like to see prioritized. She also wisely states that if mothers take joy in the messes and mundane, their children will learn to take joy in that as well.

I found her chapter on disciplining children to be refreshing. She notes that where our discipline strategy is weak or nonexistent, we are not mimicking the love of our heavenly Father. She says, "Discipline is a beautiful gift to our children. It gives them safety and security" (100). The realistic need for discipline shines through when she says,

This is a battle—not against our kids, but for our kids. This means that our kids will resist discipline, no matter how perfect our strategy is. The problem isn't necessarily our discipline. It's our kids' hearts. When they don't respond to our discipline, it doesn't mean the discipline isn't working. It means that this is a war. We are fighting for our kids' hearts—and so is our enemy (105).

I appreciated her reminder that success is not measured by immediate results. Rather, heart change happens on the inside, one step at a time. She comments,

We want to reap when it is still time to sow. We also forget that sowing season is a season and that every season has an end. If we put off disciplining now, soon it will be too late. Our kids won't learn to obey on their own. Obedience comes through seeds of discipline, which are planted by faithful mamas who tirelessly tend to them. Sowing is slow. Its repetitive. It takes focus and intentionality. Yes, we will break a sweat. Yes, we will get dirt under our fingernails. But soon the days of planting will be over. Now is the time to roll up our sleeves and get our hands dirty. Don't give up. Discipline again and again and again. You aren't banging your head against a wall—you're planting seeds of eternal life (109).

The book also covers the topic of criticism. When offering criticism to others, she advises offering it in the

context of the relationship over important issues and not just opinions. She also suggests giving criticism in a way you would want to receive criticism. Ultimately, "God uses criticism from others to help us grow and to show us our blind spots. Security in Christ helps us discern which comments to take to heart and which ones to discard. It allows us to respond to criticism humbly and confidently at the same time" (74).

The last chapter offers advice on raising our children in the world with a restful heart. Sara says, "Out of the entire timeline of world history, God picked this time and this place for our children to be born. It's not our job to prepare the world for our kids. It's our job to prepare them for the world—the world that God chose for them" (147). She states, "The best way I can prepare my kids for everything 'out there' is to prepare them for what's inside their own hearts" (144).

Overall, I enjoyed the book and recommend it as an easy read. My one criticism would be the author's reference to two movies in her book. Where I do not appreciate or find it necessary to use these references to provide the reader insight, it did not take away from the overall content the book provided. When I began my reading, I thought I knew the exact anxieties my heart held, but I came to find every chapter had its applications. This proved to be humbling, but also uplifting as I reflected on who God is and what He has done for me. Where I fail, grace abounds more. As the author puts it, "I can talk to my kids about God's forgiveness all day long. But showing them his forgiveness is different. When I repent in front of my kids, I take their hands and lead them to the cross. I show them the well-worn path I have walked many times. I point out my footprints for them to put their own feet in" (19).

It is true, I do not know if tomorrow stands me on a mountain high or stooped in a valley low. But the fears begin to fade when my heart confesses, "If more pain means more glory, only God can help me to accept that. He can also help me to praise Him for it" (112).

If you choose to read this book, I hope your innermost being can also praise God for creating you to care in the honorable calling of mother. Not because you are going to care perfectly, but because in His perfection, "He created us to care within the perfect context of *his* perfect wisdom and *his* perfect strength—not our own. He chose weak and broken vessels to accomplish this task so that he will get all the glory" (8). My desire for you is that *Created to Care* will draw you closer to your heavenly Father in every unique season of "what if."



## News from our churches

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

### PRC news (denominational)

On March 16 Hudsonville PRC extended a call to Rev. D. Kleyn, currently missionary to the Philippines.

On March 20 Doon PRC also called Rev. D. Kleyn from their trio of Rev. J. Holstege, Rev. D. Kleyn, and Rev. J. Smidstra.

Grace PRC's Council formed a new trio on March 20, from which the congregation voted on April 10: Prof. B. Gritters (PRC Seminary) and Revs. N. Decker (Grandville PRC) and D. Noorman (SW-PRC).

### Seminary News:

By the time you read this, seminary will have only a few weeks left in its second semester, then exams. The two foreign students, Marcus Wee (full four-year program, from Covenant ERC in Singapore) and Isaac Peters (special three-year program, from Evangelical Presbyterian Church in Australia), are finishing up their final semester with us and are looking forward to graduation in a few months.

Work is being done on the Spring 2022 issue of the *PR Theological Journal*. This time the *PRTJ* will feature the speeches from the Fall 2021 seminary conference on preaching. Look for this issue to appear in the near future. If you wish to sign up to receive this free publication, contact the seminary office.

In March, Pre-seminary student Bruce Feenstra (Hope PRC-Redlands and now Hope PRC-Grand Rapids, MI) made application to enter the seminary this fall. He was interviewed at the March 17 meeting of the Theological School Committee and recommended for entrance into seminary. Now the PRC Synod must act on this recommendation at its annual meeting this June. We rejoice with this brother in God's leading to this point and pray that He will continue to pave the way for Bruce's training for the ministry of the Word in the PRC.

### PRC news (congregational)

The spring bulletins of our congregations reveal that this is another season of home visitation by our pastors and

elders. May the Lord richly bless this good Reformed and biblical practice and use our pastors and elders to build up the body of Jesus Christ in the doctrine and life of the gospel.

**Calvary PRC (Hull, IA)** held their Spring Program on Sunday evening, March 27. "God of Creation" was the theme, with these songs being some of the featured ones by the choir and band: "The Heavens Are Telling," "All Creatures of our God and King," and "All Things Bright and Beautiful."

**Edgerton PRC (MN)** will host the Combined Men's Society meeting on April 18. Hull PRC will lead the after-recess discussion. What a blessing that this annual tradition continues!

**Hudsonville PRC (MI)** recently made some decisions regarding the Reformed Book Outlet, the bookstore they operate in downtown Hudsonville, MI. Because the building they were in from the beginning was recently sold, they sought and found a new building on Harvey St., just to the east. The new location requires some renovations, so there is a delay before they can reopen (their last day of business in the former location was March 26). But, as they advertised, "watch the bulletin or our social media pages for updates on when we will open in our new location. In the meantime, our website will still be open for ordering, for shipping or for local pickup." We are truly thankful they could find a location close to the spot they had occupied for all those years and wish them well in the new location. And let me encourage those in the West Michigan area to visit the store and buy some good books!

**Hull (IA) PRC:** All area women—that is, in the Siouxland area!—are invited to the Spring Ladies' League meeting to be held in the Hull PRC on Thursday, April 28.

**Immanuel PRC (Lacombe, AB):** The Evangelism Committee is hosting a Potluck Supper and Singspiration on Good Friday, April 15, at Genesis PR School. Doors will be open at 5 with devotions for supper be-

ginning at 5:30. “After supper there will be a time for celebrating our Savior’s redeeming work on the cross for us, through singing! The Evangelism Committee would like to encourage special numbers as well.” In case you are wondering, Immanuel holds her Good Friday service in the *morning*, thus opening the *evening* for this event.

Due to the congregation’s growth, the Council of Unity PRC (Byron Center, MI) recently decided to add an elder and a deacon, bringing the total to seven elders and six deacons. You may recall that Unity (like Byron Center PRC, out of which they have their origin) has their annual congregational meeting in *July*, not at the end of the year as most of our churches do.

Zion PRC (Jenison, MI) recently accepted the Domestic Mission Committee’s request to serve as the new calling church for a PRC home missionary. Watch for more news on this exciting endeavor! And let’s be in prayer for her Council and members as they involve themselves in this very special labor.

### Young people/young adult activities

The Crete PRC young people hosted an Easter Singing on April 10.

The Hull PRC Young People’s Society invited the congregation and all in the area to their Resurrection Singing on April 10.

Another Western Young People’s Retreat has been planned for July 12-15 at Camp Sanders in Tensed, Idaho. The theme this year is “Walking by Faith” based on I Corinthians 5:7.

### PR Christian school activities

Grandparents’ day in our Christian schools is always a very special day for us grandparents. Recently, Trinity High School (Hull, IA) held theirs on March 24, which included a special program and lunch. Faith CS in Randolph, WI held theirs on April 1, which began with a chapel followed by an open house and meal. Heritage CS is to hold theirs on April 15, which includes a chapel, snacks, and class visitation. An annual highlight for my wife and me!

Another special item to mention is that this is the time of year for annual Christian school society meetings. A glance at the school notices and church bulletins will show you that these meetings are scheduled consistently for March and April. At these meetings society members choose new board members, adopt budgets for the operation of the schools, and vote on special proposals related to building and grounds mat-

ters. As one participates in such society meetings, he sees the blessings of God’s covenant in generations—from the children in the school to the great-grandparents in attendance! May we not take the privilege—and calling—of such membership for granted. Did I mention that at these meetings new members may also join? Will you consider it, if you are not already one?

### Church library feature—Trinity PRC

Our next church library to be featured is Trinity PRC’s in Hudsonville, MI. The picture and the description come compliments of Corey Terpstra, a member of the library committee and Council liaison.



“When Trinity’s new sanctuary was added a few years ago our library was relocated and a beautiful new area with lots of room to grow was created. Trinity’s library includes an area for periodicals and magazines, a growing children’s section, a large selection of commentaries, and an adult section that includes titles from doctrine and the church to practical Christian living. Our library committee continues to add new books and titles each month. Our committee ‘advertises’ books related to specific topics each month in an area of our narthex. Our library continues to grow and is a great resource for our congregation. We are encouraged to see very good usage from all ages in our congregation.”

Don’t forget that I am looking for *your* church library to be featured next! Please send me a picture and a short description of the place and function of the library in your congregation.



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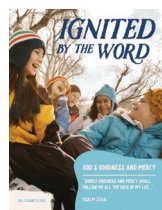
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## Food for thought

Hallelujah, What a Savior!

Man of sorrows what a name  
For the Son of God, who came  
Ruined sinners to reclaim:  
Hallelujah, what a Savior!

Bearing shame and scoffing rude,  
In my place condemned He stood,  
Sealed my pardon with His blood:  
Hallelujah, what a Savior!

Guilty, vile, and helpless we;  
Spotless Lamb of God was He.  
Full atonement can it be?  
Hallelujah, what a Savior!

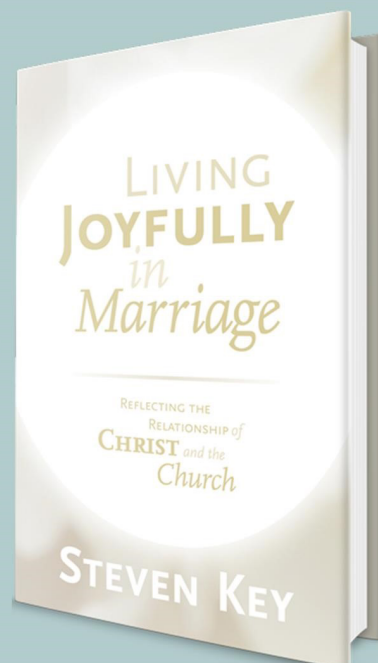
Lifted up was He to die;  
“It is finished” was His cry;  
Now in heaven exalted high:  
Hallelujah, what a Savior!

When He comes, our glorious King,  
All His ransomed home to bring,  
Then anew this song we’ll sing:  
Hallelujah, what a Savior!

Philip P. Bliss, *Trinity Hymnal* #175

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## Announcements

### Resolution of sympathy

The Council and congregation of the Kalamazoo PRC mourn the loss of our dear sister in the Lord, **Miss Wenta Jean Watson**. “Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints” (Psalm 116:15).

Rev. Dennis Lee, President  
Thomas Verbeek, Clerk

### Classis East

Classis East will meet in regular session on Wednesday, May 11, 2022 at 8:00 A.M., in the First Protestant Reformed Church of Holland.

Rev. Clayton Spronk,  
Stated Clerk