

The Standard Bearer

A Reformed semi-monthly magazine

September 15, 2022 • Volume 98 • No. 21

A wonderful gift

Herman Hoeksema

Reporting sexual abuse: The fatal misuse of Matthew 18

Prof. Barrett Gritters

Why should I learn this if it will never help me in life?

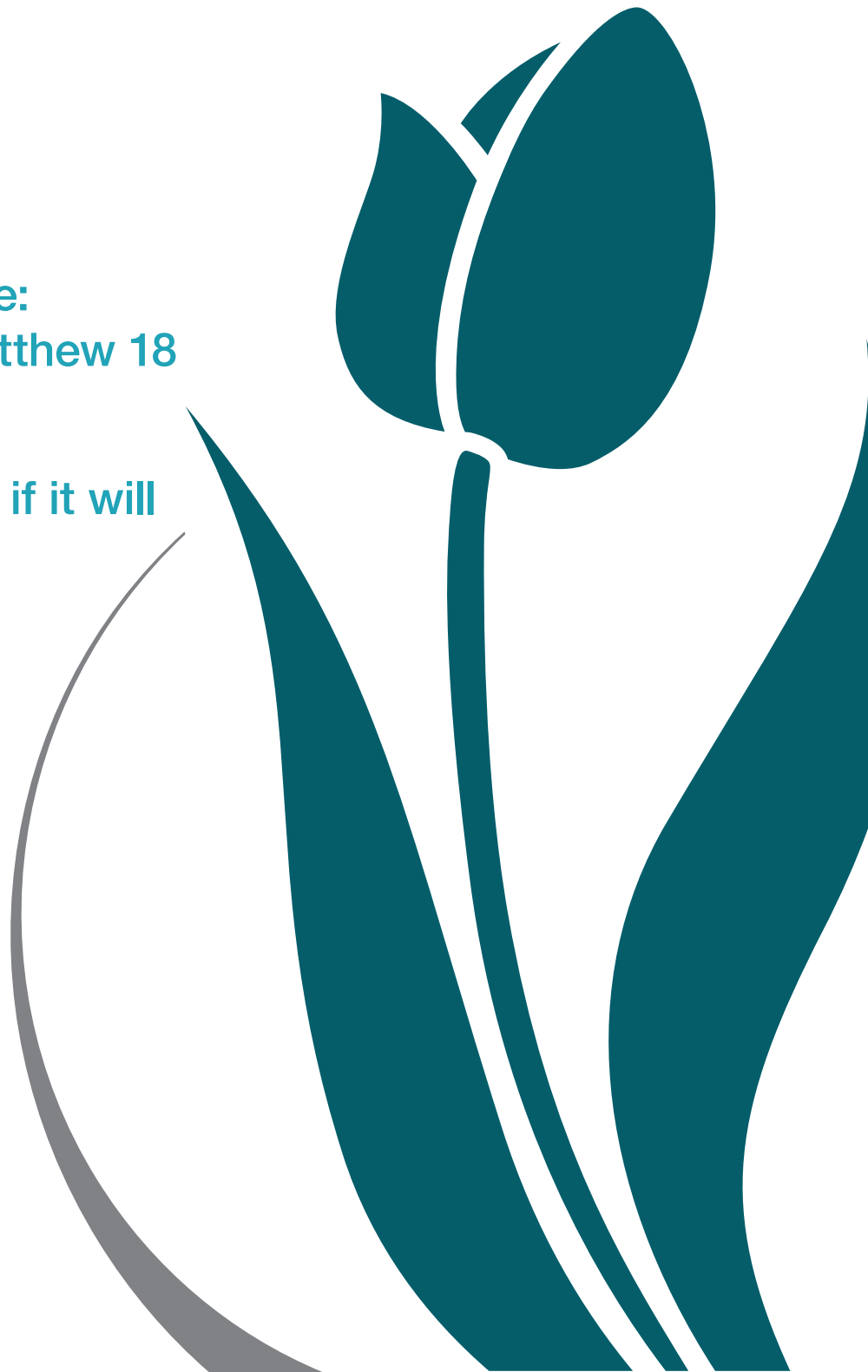
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The *Standard Bearer* (ISSN 0362-4692 [print], 2372-9813 [online]) is a semi-monthly periodical, except monthly during June, July, and August, published by the Reformed Free Publishing Association: 1894 Georgetown Center Dr, Jenison, MI 49428-7137.

Postmaster

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

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All communications relative to the contents should be sent to the editorial office.

Subscription price

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

Advertising policy

The *Standard Bearer* does not accept commercial advertising of any kind. Announcements of church and school events, anniversaries, obituaries, and sympathy resolutions will be placed for a \$10.00 fee. Announcements should be sent, with the \$10.00 fee, to: RFPA, Attn: SB Announcements, 1894 Georgetown Center Dr, Jenison, MI 49428-7137 (email: mail@rfpa.org). Deadline for announcements is one month prior to publication date.

Website for RFPA: www.rfpa.org

Website for PRCA: www.prca.org

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Meditation

Herman Hoeksema was the first editor of the *Standard Bearer*.

A wonderful gift*

There was given to me a thorn in the flesh, namely, a messenger of Satan....

II Corinthians 12:7b

What a wonderful gift!

A sharp thorn in the flesh!

Stranger still: a messenger of Satan who strikes with fists!¹

And yet, that is what the apostle means. This is how it is before the consciousness of his faith at the moment; this thorn in the flesh, this messenger of Satan is God's gift to him.

For that reason, and only for that reason, is he reconciled unto it. He can be quiet when this thorn stings. He can keep silence before God when the fist-blows of the messenger of Satan come pounding down upon him again. To him it is all a gift of God.

The heart of God's child has no rest until it finds rest with everything in God: not only with prosperity but also with adversity; not only with times of happiness, when everything in him leaps with joy, but also when the gloomy garments of mourning must be draped over his shoulders; not only with light, but also with darkness; also with sharp thorns in the flesh and with messengers of Satan. According to the Father in heaven, it is good for His child to find rest for his soul in God's grace and supreme majesty.

So long as there exists a duality before his consciousness, whereby evil and good come to him out of two different hands, the one from the hand of the Prince of darkness and the other from the hand of his heavenly Father, so long as the balance of life does not come to rest in his heart, he does not enjoy full peace. As long as it is that way, then it is as if the Accuser of the brethren were also the co-ruler of his lot in life.

O, certainly, it gets quieter if he may come to the glo-

rious confession that his God, who bridles the devils and all evil men, is mightier so that they cannot touch a hair of his head against the will of his heavenly Father. After all, then in the hottest danger he takes shelter in the shadow of the Almighty and his joyful song flows from his lips, "A sea of disaster may strike with its waves, However high it goes, it does not even touch him."²

But what will you say when that sea of disaster touches you anyway? For such is often reality. The path of God's child is so often dark, and suffering is his portion. His punishment is right there every morning again, while it is well with the wicked on earth. When pains and sorrows gnaw through our body; or when anguish is our portion; or when violence and injustice fight against us and have the victory over us; when the thorns in the flesh cease not to torment us and the messenger of Satan continues striking with his wicked fists....

And the prayer of deliverance is again and again forced upon the frightened soul, but heaven remains closed to our prayers. It does not seem that the ear of the Father in heaven is inclined to our prayer, and the much desired deliverance does not come....

What then?

O, then the harp must not be hung on the willows. The distressed soul must not continue lying low in despair. The prayer of the lips must not be muted. The confidence of the heart must not die. With an even stronger beat of the wings, faith must rise still higher, to the light of God's friendly face where it learns to understand its dark path.

Then that high-rising sea of disaster becomes God's sea; that dark path becomes God's way; that fearful suffering becomes God's wonderful guidance.

Those enemies stand on our way because God has sent them there; that injustice and that violence overpower us then according to His will.

That thorn in the flesh and that messenger of Satan then become His gifts.

* This meditation was originally written in Dutch and entitled "Een Wondere Gave." It can be found in the June 1, 1926 issue of the *Standard Bearer*. Prof. B. Huizinga, translator.

1 In the KJV, the verb in II Cor. 12:7 is "to buffet" ("the messenger of Satan to buffet me"). In the original Greek, which the Dutch *Statenvertaling* follows very closely, the verb is literally "to strike or give blows with fists." The Dutch is: *vuisten slaan*.

2 Hoeksema quotes the last two lines of Psalm 32, stanza 3 in the Dutch Psalter (1773). The English equivalent in #83 of our 1912 Psalter is: "No whelming floods shall reach them, nor cause their hearts to fear."

Then peace comes, even when the thorn still stings and the devil still strikes and the sea still threatens to flood us. For then we have learned to understand that all these things are arranged for us by His fatherly hand. They are all God's gifts.

Wonderful gifts!

The gift of a messenger of Satan!

How wonderful is the counsel and mighty are the deeds of the Lord our God!

Wonderful already is God's work in our eyes, as we consider how the Lord our Redeemer executes His counsel for the deliverance and glorification of His people *in spite of* the cunning attacks of the devil and all hostile powers.

How great is the power of the wicked! The little flock in the midst of wolves is in peril every hour! How great is the power of sin in our own heart and all around us in the world! There is seduction and temptation everywhere! What enemies there are who are bent on destroying the people of God spiritually and preventing them from ever entering into the city that has foundations!

And yet, in spite of all of this, God the Lord leads His people, right through all the hostile powers and unto the glory that He has purposed for His people in Christ Jesus from before the foundation of the world.

How wonderful!

God's thoughts are very deep.

His power is infinite and His wisdom is unfathomable.

The work of the Lord is even more wonderful to our eye of faith when we also consider that He executes His counsel, achieves His purpose, and leads His people to salvation, not only *in spite of*, but also *by means of* these same hostile powers, and that everything must serve Him for that purpose. Not only the good messengers, but also the accomplices of the devil and Satan himself, so that they become gifts of God to His people!

So it is in this word of the apostle.

A messenger of Satan is *given* to him.

It does not matter whether or not we can clearly discern what this thorn in the flesh consists of. It is true that

much has been written about this very question and all kinds of answers have been offered by so many interpreters of Scripture. One supposes that we should think of a certain physical infirmity; then again, another finds in this thorn in the flesh the indication of a certain spiritual weakness. The fact is, this question cannot be given an exact answer and all attempts to find an answer must always result in vain conjecture. After all, the apostle himself gives us no more light. And the fact is also that it does not matter whether or not you can clarify the matter at hand, regarding what this thorn in the flesh consists of.

What matters is that we understand and maintain that it was a messenger of Satan who struck him with fists, but who, according to the apostle's own words, was given to him by his God.

Therein lies the wonder.

And therein lies also the powerful comfort of this word.

After all, Satan's purpose is not God's purpose.

When the Prince of darkness surveys his hellish spirits and he chooses for himself one of the mightiest in order to send him to the apostle, then his purpose is always to destroy this witness of God and His Christ in the world and to do damage to the cause of the Lord.

It is always like that. The devil's motive is enmity against God and his purpose is always evil. So it was in the early morning of history, when he dripped the poison of his temptation into the soul of our first

parents, and conjured up for their imagination the lie, "Thou shalt be as God." That is how it has been all through history, when on the blood-soaked road the serpent shuffles along after the seed of the woman, crushing its heels.³ So it is with the Savior's curse when the hands of the wicked nail the Lord of glory to the cross and kill Him.

So it is when one of the serpent's underlings is sent

to strike the apostle with fists.

So it is also in the life of God's church through the whole of the new dispensation. Seeking whom he may be able to devour, he goes about furious, raging, hopping-mad, foaming, as a devouring lion.

The work of the Lord is even more wonderful to our eye of faith when we also consider that He executes His counsel, achieves His purpose, and leads His people to salvation, not only *in spite of*, but also *by means of* these same hostile powers, and that everything must serve Him for that purpose. Not only the good messengers, but also the accomplices of the devil and Satan himself, so that they become gifts of God to His people!

³ Shuffling does not seem to be an apt description of a serpent that has no feet, but the verb Hoeksema uses is *aanschuifelt*, which means "shuffles along."

And yes, now it is already unspeakably wonderful and glorious, an admirable display of divine power, when the Most High puts a check on this roaring lion, restrains him, and always keeps him under His force.

But greater yet is the wonder when Jehovah uses this wrathful enemy as a means for the execution of His divine counsel.

Then Satan's purpose is not God's purpose. Then the Evil One still intends to destroy God's plan. That will forever be his great guilt.

But then God's purpose is achieved!

Also by means of the devil and his messengers!

Then they must also work together for the salvation of God's people.

Then is the messenger of Satan a gift of God.

Wonderful gift!

To me it is given....

A messenger of Satan!

The apostle did not always understand this.

The peace that speaks to you out of these words was not always his portion.

For it was, after all, an evil thing. That thorn in the flesh and those wicked blows of the messenger of Satan made him sigh. It was even impossible for him to be busy in the work of the Lord with all his powers. It was a thing to pray about.

And the apostle prayed.

He prayed for redemption from the assaults of the Evil One.

Earnestly he prayed: "Lord, take this thorn out of my flesh and rebuke that messenger of Satan, that he may stop striking me!"

Repeatedly he prayed. Three times.

And every time he waited for an answer. He did not force. In prayer he did not set before the Lord any time frame. He repeatedly offered his prayer, perhaps stretched out over a period of fourteen years. But it was all in vain. His prayer did not appear to be heard. Heaven seemed closed to this prayer. The thorn still stung after each repeated prayer and the fist-blows of the messenger of Satan were still felt.

The apostle underwent an experience that is commonly repeated in the life of the child of God. Oh, we know not what we shall pray as we ought. We do not see very far. Especially when it comes to details in life, to certain twists in the road, steep perhaps and difficult to pass, then we understand so little about the connection of things. Then we judge so easily by what we see right before our eyes, without reckoning with the end of our way.

O, yes, we know it well; all things must work together for good to those who love God!

But *this* certain thing? *This* evil? *This* suffering?

And we pray according to our shortsighted understanding. We want the evil to be averted through our prayers. We implore: Lord, not along this difficult way! And the prayer is not heard. It appears for a time that the Lord does not heed the voice of our weeping. Heaven remains closed....

Until!

Yes, surely there comes an answer from the Father in heaven; different, indeed than what we had imagined; but an answer, so that a wonderful peace descends into the distressed soul: "My grace is sufficient for thee!"

So it was with the apostle. It was said to him, "My grace is sufficient for thee and my strength is made perfect in weakness." No, not so suddenly did this voice from heaven resound in his soul. At first he did not hear that answer from his God, much less understand. But in the way of repeated and more and more humble prayer, submitting himself more and more to the will of the Lord his God, he understood the way along which the Father was leading him.

There was danger for the apostle. He had not yet been completely delivered from the old power of sin. He had received much. Outstanding revelations were given to him. He was caught up into Paradise and there he heard unspeakable glory, heavenly things. And now the danger came. Surely he would be able to exalt himself on account of the excellency of the revelations. In fact, his sinful flesh was certainly inclined to do that.

But that is not allowed. Against it the Lord watches. One must not go in that way of sinful self-exaltation....

Therefore, that messenger of Satan. And now it is not the devil's purpose to keep the apostle small and glorify God's name in the weakness of the apostle, but God's purpose is sure. And that purpose alone is achieved.

And so it often goes for the praying child of God. An evil oppressed his soul and he prayed. That evil had to be brought in prayer, and so he besought the Lord. But the evil remained. And yet, peace came to the soul even in the midst of affliction because the Spirit, who prays for us with groanings that cannot be uttered, causes the answer from heaven to resound in our souls:

"My grace is sufficient for thee."

"My strength is made perfect in weakness."

And then it is well with us.

First there was unrest in the troubled heart, because the evil that was brought in prayer was not taken away.

Now there is peace, because we have come to understand that what was first brought in prayer is God's gift.

To me is given a messenger of Satan!

The Name of the Lord be praised!

Hallelujah!



Editorial

Prof. Barrett Gritters, professor of Practical Theology in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary and member of Hudsonville PRC

Reporting sexual abuse: The fatal misuse of Matthew 18

There exists among some a misunderstanding about the application of Matthew 18 to cases of sexual abuse so serious that it may be fatal. There, Jesus instructs one who has been sinned against to “tell him (the sinner) his fault between thee and him *alone*.” It is a wrong, dangerous, and maybe fatal application of Matthew 18 to require one who has been abused sexually to confront the abuser privately before reporting the sin to anyone else, if at all.

To address this shameful sin again on these pages is painful but necessary. We may be thankful that by church discipline the Lord is beginning to “cleanse from evil-doers the city of the Lord” (Psalter #271). But awful as it is to imagine, there may well be more perpetrators who must be brought to the light and more victims whom their church family may help to heal. A wrong application of Matthew 18 to sexual abuse will help neither victim nor perpetrator but could be deadly to both.

In the recent special issue of the *Standard Bearer* on sexual abuse,¹ both Rev. Nathan Decker and Rev. Joshua Engelsma wrote that Matthew 18 may not be used to exhort a victim to confront—by herself—the perpetrator of the abuse. In this editorial, I want to repeat their contention and further justify that view both historically and exegetically.

The need for reporting sexual abuse

Even though reporting is another aspect of the excruciating pain that a victim endures, reporting is essential. Because perpetrators may not be allowed to continue their fornicating and murderous ways. Because victims must be helped to heal—brought to life again. Because other victims must be encouraged to come forward so that their wounds may begin to be treated. And because the church must be a safe place for the people of God, especially for children. Hiding this sin makes the church a dangerous place, especially for children.

But asking sexual abuse victims to report their abuse and then deal with all the difficulties that it will involve is asking so much. It is something like asking a trau-

matized Vietnam war veteran to talk openly about the unspeakable horrors of his experience, or a child to relive the nightmare of seeing his father murder his mother. For some, even entertaining the thought of reporting brings panic. Ever present are shame and embarrassment. False guilt is involved: “I am to blame as much as he or she is.” Remembrance of threats may give them pause: “If you tell anyone, you will ruin my life, and I may ruin yours! No one will believe you.” The ferocity with which some victims want to hide the secret shows the continued influence and control of their abuser. Some victims have learned to cope with life and its difficulties and are convinced that dealing with it will only make life worse than it is now. Some would rather die than destroy their family, which they are convinced will happen if the truth is ever known. Or the perpetrator is dead.

Yet for everyone’s sake—their own, other yet-unknown victims, even the still-living perpetrator who must be brought to repentance and salvation—reporting and exposing the sinner is necessary. I hesitate to say ‘necessary’ because those who are not victims must exercise greatest care about how (and how soon) they press ‘necessity’ on those who have been so violated.

Education

Our churches and other church groups are learning about sexual abuse. The lessons may be painfully slow to sink in, but I trust we are learning. What we have learned must become part of denomination-wide consciousness.

In the past, some were not aware of the nature of the sin.² We did not fathom the incalculable and sometimes irreparable damage done to the victims.³ In the opening verses of Matthew 18, Jesus indicates just how horrendous is the sin of offending little ones when He says it

1 May 1, 2022; extra copies are available by writing to the RFPA or the SB’s editorial office.

2 Please re-read the powerful articles in the May 1, 2022 special issue.

3 I have read many books on sexual abuse, and the best I have read that describes the awful damage done to victims is Bessel van der Kolk’s 2014 *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. It is a must-read for those who may think that ‘murderous’ is too severe to describe the evil of sexual abuse.

would be “better that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he were drowned....” Why? Because “little ones perish.” The damage done by sexual abusers is destruction of the greatest magnitude. In addition, we did not grasp sufficiently the devilish grip (see II Tim. 2:26) sexual sin has on perpetrators, and the fact that this sin often has grown to become such an integral part of them that it brings the highest likelihood of recidivism—falling back into the sin that they ‘confessed’ and of which they ‘repented.’ A sex-abuser has allowed the devil to shape him into such a deceptive creature—even a ‘machine of destruction’—that, although the grace of God can reform him, he cannot be reformed easily.

In the past some of us were ignorant. I grieve over the further damage to God’s people that this ignorance allowed. I am sorry daily over my own ignorance. But these days such ignorance becomes inexcusable, especially for officebearers and school communities.

Because repetition is one of the main principles of teaching and learning, it is necessary to repeat some of the important lessons. And some lessons may even be developed, as I try to do here.

Matthew 18 misunderstood

What must never be done in the case of sexual assault is to demand that the victim “follow the way of Matthew 18,” if the meaning is “go *by yourself* to rebuke your abuser, and if he repents, this is the end of the matter since you have ‘gained’ him.” The result of such advice will be further, maybe irreparable, damage to all the parties, even to those who were traumatized decades before, perhaps *especially* for them.

Simple, biblical wisdom ought to be enough to make this clear. Christian common sense would never instruct a child to confront her rapist father by herself. No one would require a 7th-grade boy to confront his predator-teacher alone. Being alone with them is what made the sin possible! What sane parent would instruct their children that if “Uncle Bob” ever does something unseemly to them while he’s babysitting, they should “go the way of Matthew 18” by talking privately to the wicked uncle? “Don’t tell us; just go to him. If he’s sorry, you don’t need to tell anyone.”

This ‘common sense’ is in fact the Reformed tradition and biblical doctrine.

The Reformed tradition

In the early days of the Reformation era, pastors and elders in the Netherlands faced difficult questions regarding Christian discipline, specifically whether *all* sins that are known only to one or a few must be kept

private. Repeatedly, the churches concluded that *some* private sins were of such a nature that they must be treated publicly.

Some examples. The assembly of Wesel in 1568 decided that “someone who *secretly*...disseminated strange teachings... shall be *reported*...to the consistory.” In 1571, the Synod at Emden concluded, “but *hidden* sins, those which might bring harm and ruin to the general welfare or to the churches, such as treason or the seducing of souls, shall be *reported*....” At Dordt, 1578, again: “In answer to the question which sins are public: A public sin is one which...because of its grossness is deemed worthy of *public* punishment. Thus the sins of David against Uriah, of Ananias and Sapphira against the Holy Spirit were made public and punished as public sins” (emphasis in all quotations added).

In other words, the question whether all private sins must be kept private between the accused and accuser alone was answered with an emphatic, “No!” Some sins are of such a nature that they *may* not be kept private. Sexual assault is one of them and fits in Dordt’s description of a sin that “because of its grossness [so ‘weighty’!] is deemed worthy of public punishment.” Thus, even if a victim today will not file charges with the police, which is often the case, the consistory deems the sin “worthy of public punishment” and makes it public. A sexual abuser fits in Emden’s description of a sinner who “might bring harm and ruin to the general welfare or to the churches.”

These young Dutch churches were following the pattern set by their Swiss neighbors led by John Calvin (Calvin died in 1564, only a few years before these synods met) and the consistory in Geneva who demanded *public* treatment of certain gross, *private* sins.⁴ It is not surprising then that in the 1940s, almost 400 years after the young Reformation churches faced this question, VanDellen and Monsma took a similar position. In their treatment of the Church Order’s Article 72 (“as long as the sin is of a private character...the rule clearly prescribed by Christ in Matt. 18 shall be followed”) they clearly qualify the rule in this way: “Sins that are not generally known shall not be revealed *unless the nature of the transgression should require such*....”⁵ The

4 See John Witte, Jr., and Robert M. Kingdon’s *Sex, Marriage, and Family in John Calvin’s Geneva: Courtship, Engagement, and Marriage*. vol. 1. Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005. My thanks to Prof. Cory Griess for this resource. He is preparing to lecture this fall on the treatment of sexual sins in Calvin’s Geneva.

5 *The Church Order Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1941), 301. Emphasis added. See also their treatment of Article 73 where they also speak of the “common sense” requirement to report “very grievous and dangerous sins” (302, 303).

nature of sexual abuse requires that it be revealed, not kept private. This is Reformed tradition, and the Reformers were not ignoring Jesus' prescriptions in Matthew 18.

"The rule of Matthew 18" (Church Order, Art. 72)

Matthew 18's rule to keep private sins private is a vital part of the passage, but it is not the main point Jesus is making there. If we may speak of 'first principles,' Jesus' primary doctrines here are two: 1) the calling to protect the sheep (the "little ones" referred to in the earlier part of the chapter), and 2) the calling to seek the well-being of a sinning brother who may be harming the sheep. Both must be kept in view in our understanding of the text.

With regard to the wayward brother, our motive is love and the aim his salvation. The controlling thought is "gaining" him (v. 15).

To work this out practically, start at the lowest level of sin's severity. Charity requires that some sins not be confronted at all. Peter says that the manifestation of love in some cases will be to "cover" the sin (I Pet. 4:8). Every parent and every spouse knows that wisdom often is to ignore lesser offenses. Making an issue of every fault will hurt, not help; it is not needed to "gain" the brother.

Other sins, weightier, must be addressed but kept private. To publicize them would be to violate Matthew 18. According to Calvin, Matthew 18 warns "that no man bring disgrace upon his brother by rashly and without necessity divulging secret offences." For example, it would be unnecessary and even rash to divulge to others that my brother lied to me and repented. What does not *need* to be known by others *may* not be known. Privacy is "the rule of Matthew 18" with which we are so familiar.

And yet, other secret sins must be made known. Divulging the rape of a student by her teacher is neither 'rash' nor 'without necessity' (remember Calvin's words). In this case, secrecy would be sin. The well-being of the student demands that it be known. The protection of other students demands publicity. And the well-being of the rapist—his or her repentance and salvation—mandates that the sin be brought to light.

Yet there is something more important to consider about the sinner. Jesus is teaching us that we seek to "gain the brother" by calling him to repentance. But everyone knows that a private admonition of a sex abuser by his victim is woefully insufficient to lead him to proper repentance, just as it would be insufficient (even sinfully negligent) to rebuke an alcoholic or porn ad-

dict once and believe that he will properly repent with no further action. He needs help! Yes, happily, with some sins gaining the brother is simple: rebuke, repent, forgive, forget. But with sins like sexual abuse gaining the brother or sister is painfully difficult, complex, time-consuming, exhausting. This sin is usually so much a part of his life that his repentance must be multifaceted, as well as deep, broad, sincere, and "sufficiently evident" to a consistory before he is restored (see Church Order, Art. 75). The roots of this sin go very deep. Restoration may take a long time. A very long time. The sex-abuser whose repentance is a mile wide but only an inch deep is not repentant and will perish. The one who truly "hears thee" and is "gained" (Matt. 18:15) is a fully repentant, humbled, broken, and radically changed man. He is a new creature. To gain him takes more than any individual, much less the victim, is able to do.

With regard to the abused *sheep*, even when the sin was committed decades ago (perhaps *especially* then), love for the sister or brother will not say, "Now you are mature enough to go to him by yourself." In fact, our love for the abused will compel us to learn how deeply scarred, damaged, wounded, injured, broken, and shattered she is. Maybe more damaged by the passage of time. The spiritual scar tissue that may be visible actually covers a more serious wound that never healed and has become worse.

In sum: 1) Not only *may* we not ask a victim of sexual abuse to go to her abuser alone—the need to keep her safe forbids this. 2) But no victim is *able* to do what Jesus says in Matthew 18 is the main thing to be done: gain the brother. This takes the work of the consistory and many others.

To drive this point home, to ask a victim to go privately to her molester to gain him would be sin against *everyone*! Sin against the victim who likely would be re-victimized (murdered again). Sin against the molester who without a massive amount of help will perish spiritually (Matt. 18:9 speaks of "hell fire"). Sin against others inside and outside the church who may become additional murder victims. And sin against the church that will come under the judgment of God (die!) for allowing sin to be treated superficially (Jer. 6:14; 8:11).

Simplistically to apply "the rule of Matthew 18" in the case of sexual abuse, therefore, is to do the polar opposite of what Jesus was teaching in the chapter: Love your brother. Seek his salvation. Protect the sheep.

(Next time: *If not Matthew 18, what is the way to confront/report sexual abuse?*)

Reaching the unreached

Dear Editor,

This letter responds to a couple of articles by Rev. Daniel Kleyn in the October 1 and December 15, 2021 [SB] issues entitled “Worldwide preaching and the return of Christ.”

“This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a *witness unto all nations*; and then shall the end come” (Matt. 24:14). This sign is set alongside the rise of Antichrist and his kingdom, rightly, because when he comes to power, all mission work will cease. Thus worldwide preaching and rise of Antichrist are two clear pointers to the nearness of the end of the world.

Many, including Rev. Kleyn, think the Great Commission to disciple all nations is nearly fulfilled because almost all the political nations of the world have a church of some sort. Is this what Christ meant? “Nations” in the Greek is *ta ethne*, the word from which we get ethnic, an adjective describing a group of people of similar race, language, and culture, *not* a political nation of which there are over 200 today.

The facts: World population (estimate) 2022 is 8 billion, comprising 10,000 people groups (some overlap political boundaries).

Estimates are that 95% of the world’s population have access to Scripture in a language they can understand, which is excellent news; yet 2 billion people live in “unreached people groups.”

The best resource on this is the website Joshua Project (<https://joshuaproject.net>).

A people group is a significantly large group of individuals who have a common affinity for one another, sharing language, religion, ethnicity, residence, class or caste, and more.

All the elect of God from every people group will be saved, but discipling the peoples means more than converts; rather, it means believers who have a certain maturity. “Teaching them to observe all things.”

I have written this letter because many are ignorant of *the present facts regarding world evangelization* including those in the Protestant Reformed Churches and their sisters.

You could argue that a handful of disciples in a people group today, or such disciples in past history, would suffice to demonstrate that the Great Commission has been fulfilled. However, the fact that so many

groups have not been discipled today makes this highly unlikely.

“Our mission is to see vibrant, growing, mature churches planted and multiplied among every people and so fulfil our Lord’s mandate” (*Operation World*, p. 23).

Apparently, few of the unreached peoples have *no Christians* but believers constitute a very small minority (average 0.4%, which is 4 in 1,000).

Frontier People Groups (FPGs) are Unreached People Groups with estimated Christian adherents less than or equal to 0.1% and no confirmed, sustained church planting. Joshua Project data shows almost 5,000 groups with total population of 2,004,095,000, with little chance of hearing about Jesus from someone in their own people group.

Only a tiny portion of mission prayer and resources go to FPGs. Very few mission agencies and churches send even 1% of their missionaries or financial support to work among them.

“Frontier groups indicate the huge needs for evangelism and church planting that remain in the world. Many people assume the Great Commission is all but accomplished, *but our data indicates that is far from true*” (Bill Morrison, Joshua Project).

Examples of Frontier Groups are East Uyghur (China) 8.8m; The Baloch (Pakistan) 9m; Yemeni Arabs 20m.

The Indian sub-continent has the largest concentration and variety of least-reached peoples on earth. Here are two examples: Bania (16m) and Brahmin (34m).

“Pray the Lord of the harvest.”

Sources:

Praying through the Window III, The Unreached Peoples, ed. Patrick Johnstone. Seattle: YWAM publishing, 1996.

Operation World 7th edition, Jason Mandryk. Colorado Springs: WEC international and Biblica publications, 2010.

Julian Kennedy
Covenant PRC
Ballymena, Northern Ireland



All around us

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

U.S. Congress seeks to codify *Roe vs. Wade* and *Obergefell*

The legislative process in the United States is complicated. First, a bill (a legislative proposal) is written. Second, the bill passes through various committees in the House of Representatives. Many bills die in committee, where they often undergo amendments, and they never reach the floor for a vote. The Speaker of the House of Representatives determines the voting schedule—he or she (the current Speaker is Nancy Pelosi) has enormous power, therefore. If a majority of the House of Representatives votes for a bill, it passes to the Senate, where the Senate Majority Leader (currently, Charles Schumer) determines the voting schedule. He, too, has great power. Many bills that gain a majority in the House never see the light of day in the Senate.

If a bill is brought to the floor of the Senate, it can advance to a vote only after debate is finished. A vote to end debate is called “cloture,” which requires sixty out of one hundred votes. Without cloture a bill cannot advance; it effectively dies. Bills often die in the Senate for that reason when senators invoke the so-called filibuster rule, which prolongs debate, thus preventing advancement of the bill. If cloture happens and the filibuster is overcome, a bill can then pass with a simple majority (or a tie broken by the Vice President) of fifty-one votes. If the bill passes the Senate, and is not vetoed by the President (he still has the right to block it), he signs it and it becomes law. That is the simple version.

But there is another way to change the law if passing legislation is too difficult in a divided U.S. Congress: the U.S. Supreme Court. This Court, consisting of nine judges or justices, interprets the U.S. Constitution, and in recent years its rulings have been effectively legislation from the bench. For example, in 1973 the famous *Roe vs. Wade* decision and later the 1992 *Casey vs. Planned Parenthood* ruling made abortion legal in the U.S., making it difficult for individual states to restrict abortions. That has recently changed with the *Dobbs vs. Jackson Women’s Health* ruling of June 2022, which has overturned the longstanding legal precedent of *Roe vs. Wade*, so that the Supreme Court has now ruled that abortion is not actually a constitutional right after all. Individual states may now legislate on the issue, with some states imposing greater restrictions than others, and other states continuing to allow unrestricted abortion.

The U.S. Supreme Court, with its conservative majority (conservative does not mean “Christian,” of course; none of the Supreme Court Justices is a conservative Christian; the most conservative are either Roman Catholic or liberal Episcopalian) has shocked many political figures in the U.S. and across the world. It has also led to widespread protests, illegal picketing of justices’ homes, and threats of violence against justices. It seems that leftists can no longer rely on the court to rule to their liking, so that they will have to return to the legislative process, the long, arduous, frustrating legislative process described above.

That explains why congressional Democrats (the party currently in the majority) have rushed to codify *Roe vs. Wade*, that is, they want to make unrestricted access to abortion *federal* law, and thus overrule any restrictions that individual states might introduce. One pro-abortion website that seeks such codifying stated, “Abortion access would be protected from...restrictions [including] six-week bans, 20-week bans, mandatory ultrasounds, biased counseling, waiting periods, and requirements that providers obtain admitting privileges at local hospitals” (actofwomen.org). The inappropriately named “Women’s Health Protection Act of 2022” and the “Ensuring Access to Abortion Act of 2022” recently passed the House of Representatives with votes 219-210 and 223-205 respectively, but will probably not advance in the Senate where the makeup is 50-50 (with 48 Democrats and 2 Independents who caucus with the Democrats and 50 Republicans). Republicans in Congress, although some are more liberal than others, generally do not support unrestricted abortion in all fifty states.

Having lost one of their judicial treasures, *Roe vs. Wade*, American leftists fear for another of their judicial achievements, *Obergefell vs. Hodges*, which in June 2015 made same-sex “marriage” legal in all fifty states. Again, this was legislation from the bench. In 1996 the U.S. Congress passed the “Defense of Marriage Act” (342-67 in the House and 85-14 in the Senate, which is a veto-proof majority), and it was signed, reluctantly, into law by then-President Bill Clinton on September 21, 1996. The *Obergefell* decision of 2015 effectively nullifies the “Defense of Marriage Act” and it requires all fifty states to perform and recognize the ‘marriages’

of two men or two women on the same terms and conditions as marriages between a man and a woman.

But what if the Supreme Court overturned *Obergefell*? It is time, say some, for Congress to act.

Therefore, on July 19, 2022, the House of Representatives passed the inappropriately named “Respect for Marriage Act” (in reality, the “Perversion of God’s Institution of Marriage Act”) with a 267-157 vote, which, if it passes the Senate and is signed into law, would repeal the 1996 “Defense of Marriage Act.” “No person acting under color of State law may deny full faith and credit to any public act, record, or judicial proceeding of any other State pertaining to a marriage between 2 individuals, on the basis of the sex, race, ethnicity, or national origin of those individuals,” the Respect for Marriage Act reads. Therefore, if the Supreme Court overturned *Obergefell*, same-sex “marriage” would still be the law of the land.

Abortion and same-sex marriage are still pressing issues for the American legislature. Despite razor-thin majorities, especially in the Senate, the Democrats are

trying to codify these issues into law with, in some cases, help from congressional Republicans. Time will tell if the makeup of the U.S. Congress changes after the midterm elections in November and, if it does, whether different legislators will make any difference.

“It is better to trust in the LORD than to put confidence in man. It is better to trust in the LORD than to put confidence in princes; Put not your trust in princes, nor in the son of man, in whom there is no help” (Ps. 118:9; 146:3). The same applies to members of Congress of whatever political party, and to judges. This nation is not going to be saved by electing better people to public office. This nation will be saved only when God saves His elect people from its midst by the Word and Spirit of Jesus Christ and consigns the rest to everlasting destruction. In the meantime, we live as faithful citizens of the kingdom of heaven, submitting to lawful authority, while we bemoan the wickedness of the nation in which we live.



Strength of youth

Rev. Jonathan Mahtani, pastor of the Hope Protestant Reformed Church in Walker, Michigan

Why should I learn this if it will never help me in life?

The words of a wise man’s mouth are gracious; but the lips of a fool will swallow up himself. The beginning of the words of his mouth is foolishness; and the end of his talk is mischievous madness. A fool also is full of words: a man cannot tell what shall be; and what shall be after him, who can tell him? The labour of the foolish wearieth every one of them, because he knoweth not how to go to the city.

Ecclesiastes 10:12-15

As the warm summer season quickly ends and the first semester of school has begun, the Christian school teacher can already hear his sighing students ask, “Why should I learn this if it will never help me in life?” The question may take a different form or be etched conspicuously on the bored face of a young person. Nonetheless, it can be the discouragement of a teacher. Therefore, in love for both our teachers and students, I respond to this foolish question. Contrary to popular opinion, there is such a thing as a foolish question.

The question is more of a challenge than an honest inquiry. It is at heart an accusation: “My teacher is forcing me to learn useless material that will never help me in life.” A foolish question with a foolish charge. Yet, I answer it because it presents an opportunity to instruct the youth, “lest he be wise in his own conceit” (Prov. 26:5b).

I have seven answers with seven key words, each beginning with the letter “p.” In my first three answers, I will point out why this is a poor question. In my last four answers, I will patiently respond to the question itself.

Why should I learn this if it will never help me in life?

First, I answer the question with a question: Are you a *prophet*? When did you get the ability to predict the future? Did you have a dream last night in which it was revealed to you that what you would learn today would be unnecessary tomorrow? Perhaps you have a crystal ball at home, in which you can see everything you will need to know for the future. Wise Solomon explains

that a fool is someone who speaks as though he knows the future. “A fool also is full of words: a man cannot tell what shall be; and what shall be after him, who can tell him?” (Eccl. 10:14). Why should I learn this if it will never help me in life? The question is a foolish one because it includes the false premise that the student has the prophetic gift of foresight.

Second, the questioner has forgotten God’s *providence*. God’s providence is God’s absolute control of all things for our good. God promises to His covenant son or daughter that every lesson taught, every test taken, every fact memorized, He works for our good. “And we 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). Why should I learn this if it will never help me in life? The question includes a lie, “...it will never help me in life.” Contrary to that, God promises that all we learn *must* work for our good.

Third, at the heart of the question is *pride*. It is haughty to speak as though you can predict the future. It is conceited to insist that you know better than your teachers (and parents) regarding what you need to learn. It is irreverent arrogance to contradict God’s promise that all things work for your good. You really do not know better than everyone else. Beloved student, when this foolish question arises in your heart, repent of your pride before the cross of Jesus Christ. Trust His gracious forgiveness, and humbly submit to the God who says regarding what you are learning, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Is. 55:8-9). Why should I learn this if it will never help me in my life? This is a question of foolish pride.

The first three answers point out that this truly is a foolish question. Below are four more answers that patiently respond to the question itself.

Fourth, you should learn these things because it is God’s *precept*. God commands in the fifth commandment, which Colossians 3:20 phrases this way, “Children, obey your parents in all things: for this is well pleasing unto the Lord.” Why memorize this date in history? Why understand this grammatical point and its exceptions? Why learn to solve this complex equation? Because God says, “Obey your parents.” And they have required of you to come to this school and learn from these teachers. To be lazy, to refuse, to murmur, would simply be disobedience to God’s command.

The simple fact that God commands us to learn exposes another false premise in the foolish question. Implied is that the *only* reason to learn the material is if

it will help me in life (or if I know *how* it will help me). The first reason for learning this material does not actually have anything to do with whether or not it will help you in life! The main reason is thankful obedience to God’s precepts. Even if the student cannot see how something is useful, his mind should be on Jesus Christ and His glorious work of salvation for us. Out of gratitude, obey His precept and learn the material that He requires you to learn.

Fifth, you must increase in *perseverance*. Perseverance or endurance is the ability to press on even when the going gets tough. It is the strength to keep trying even when it is difficult. It is the stamina to move forward even if it is unenjoyable. The Christian school is not only a training ground for your brain but also for your *soul*, that you might be “strengthened with all might, according to his glorious power, unto all patience and longsuffering with joyfulness” (Col. 1:11).

Young people, life is not easy. Only God knows the future trials you will face, the difficult job you may have, the sickness you will bear, further controversy in the church, and persecution in the world. Perseverance is a critical virtue that God is increasing within you as He leads you through the rigors of Christian education.

Sixth, you are *part of a community*. Oh, young student! Listen to the selfishness of that question: Why should *I* have to learn this if it will never help *me* in *my* life? Have you thought about how the material learned in your class might be useful to someone else even if you yourself do not ever use it? Maybe you are thinking, “When I grow up, I am not going to have a job that has anything to do with grammar.” Have you thought about how a fellow student might have a job that has *everything* to do with grammar? Have you thought about how someday you might be sitting down with your own children to help them with their schoolwork? Have you thought about how your knowledge of these concepts may indeed benefit others as you serve on a committee in the church or at school? “Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others” (Phil. 2:4). Christian education is not just about you. You are part of a covenant community in which you join and aid others in their mental, spiritual, and social development.

Seventh, the aim of all you learn is *the praise of God in all His works*. The goal of Christian education is summed up in Psalm 145:4: “One generation shall praise thy works to another, and shall declare thy mighty acts.” In every subject, children in our Christian schools are not merely learning ‘stuff.’ The young student has the privilege of learning God’s wondrous works—from a Reformed perspective, no less! Such

truth is not merely for brain development but for the purpose of awe and praise toward God. Why learn anything? Young person, the goal is *not* that you might receive praise, get a good grade, and get a good job. Rather, it is so that one generation may praise God's works to another.

Why should I learn this if it will never help me in life? This is a poor question because you are not a *prophet*

who can predict the future, you are forgetting God's *providence*, and it comes from a *proud* heart. Positively, the answer to this question is so that you walk in obedience to God's *precept*, so that you might grow in *perseverance*, because you are *part of a community*, and for the *praise of God in all His works*. May God give both students and teachers wisdom to respond rightly to foolish questions such as this.



A word fitly spoken

Rev. Joseph Holstege, pastor of Zion Protestant Reformed Church in Jenison, Michigan

Moon

There is a euphoric comfort that comes from staring at the pale face of the “lesser light” that was set “to rule the night” (Gen. 1:16). Among the diamonds set by the Creator in the dark expanse, none is so “fair as the moon” (Song 6:10). As anyone knows who has ever laid back in a soft patch of green on a summer night, though there is one glory of the sun and another of the stars, there is still “another glory of the moon” (I Cor. 15:41).

Like a flickering flame or a forest of fireflies, the moon is one of those sights to capture the imagination of a child. The mouths of babes declare what child-eyes first saw when looking up, “the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars” (Ps. 8:3). To glance at the great white globe as little more than a backdrop is a sign that something is not quite right with your soul. Thus the warning to remember your Creator in the days of your youth, “while...the light, or the moon...be not darkened” (Eccl. 12:2).

The first appearance of the moon with the stars “to rule by night” (Ps. 136:9) was on the fourth day. When Adam and Eve therefore looked up among the trees of Eden after the sun set on the sixth day, they saw it. Its glow was cast on the face of the waters when the clouds cleared and Noah peered out of his little window in the ark. It hovered over the heads of Job and his friends as they sat in silence and ashes. Its light fell over Jesus as the bloody sweat dripped from His face in the garden where the disciples slept. The moon is such a constant that sometimes we forget it is even there. Yet it is always there. And if the moon is always there, so much more the love of God for His people in His covenant. “It shall be established forever as the moon, and as a faithful witness in heaven” (Ps. 89:37).

Yet even as a sign of constancy and faithfulness, the

moon is *only* a sign. To give it ultimate significance is to run into either of two traps. The one is to see in the moon an object that exists of itself. The moon was then not set in the heavens by the Creator so much as it happened to appear in the heavens at the right place and at the right time. As absurd as it would be for the *sun* to stand “still upon Gibeon,” so impossible for the *moon* to remain “in the valley of Ajalon” (Josh. 10:12). This is the error of materialism we are so painfully familiar with today.

The other is so to elevate the moon that it is given the status of the divine. Among the many high places and priests King Josiah had to drive out of Jerusalem were those that “burned incense...to the moon” (II Kings 23:5). The Lord warned about this as a possible temptation for His people (Deut. 4:19) and attached to it the strongest penalty (Deut. 17:3). Yet even the godly can fall prey to the fear that the sun may smite them by day, or the moon by night, as if these heavenly bodies were possessed with some supernatural menace (Ps. 121:6). Thus the psalmist calms us with the gentle reminder, “Neither sun nor moon shall smite, God shall guard by day and night” (Psalter #345, stanza 2).

The idolatrous impulse to find ultimate significance in the wonders of the night sky no doubt explains why the Lord will end the world with signs in the moon (Luke 21:25). At first only the third part of the moon shall be darkened along with the stars (Rev. 8:12). Yet, in the end, the moon will no longer give any light (Matt. 24:29). It will, in fact, be turned to blood as the stars fall and the heavens dissolve (Joel 2:31; Acts 2:20; Rev. 6:12).

What is passing will then be eclipsed by what is eternal. The glory of the moon will no longer be necessary in the city where “the Lamb is the light thereof” (Rev.

21:23). “The sun shall be no more thy light by day; neither for brightness shall the moon give light unto thee: but the LORD shall be unto thee an everlasting light, and thy God thy glory” (Is. 60:19). Yet the legacy of the moon shall continue in the glory that is given to the church which is clothed not only with the sun, but has also “the moon under her feet” (Rev. 12:1). A fitting radiance that, like the moon itself, is reflective of the still brighter light of the Son.

I imagine one of the more exciting times in the Old Testament city of God was the anticipation of the new moon. As God “appointed the moon for seasons” (Ps. 104:19), it is not hard to imagine boys and girls in Je-

rusalem watching the waxing white face every night with enthusiasm. The clear note ringing from the temple mount was the signal for the beginning of the feast. “Blow up the trumpet in the new moon, in a time appointed, on our solemn feast day” (Ps. 81:3). And that is the enduring testimony of the moon to the Christian today as well, who waits for the sound of the trump and the eternal new moon when the glory of Christ will wax to its fullness and never wane again. Think of Him next time the soft nighttime glow washes over your childlike face of wonder. “In his days shall the righteous flourish; and abundance of peace so long as the moon endureth” (Ps. 72:7).



Go ye into all the world

Rev. Daniel Holstege, former PRC missionary and now pastor of the Wingham Protestant Reformed Church in Wingham, Ontario

The covenant of God and our mission to the world (8) Motivated by God's covenant to evangelize

Does the title of this article seem strange?¹ This will be my last article on the covenant and missions. Since the Lord has called me from the Philippine mission field back into an established church in North America, this will also be my last article for this rubric. So to conclude both this series and my writing on missions in the *Standard Bearer* for the foreseeable future, I would like to face the matter of our motivation to evangelize. Evangelization is chiefly the preaching of the gospel to the world by men sent by Christ through the church. But as we have seen, there is also a calling that comes to all believers to repeat the message of the gospel that we hear in the preaching through our personal witnessing (cf. I Thess. 1:8). So the question arises, What is our motivation, as missionaries, pastors, and believers, to bring the gospel to the lost? If we are not motivated to do

so, why is that? My contention in this article may seem strange. It is this: God's covenant, properly understood and warmly embraced, motivates us to evangelize.

The key is: “properly understood and warmly embraced.” I'm afraid that an improper understanding and/or an unbalanced emphasis in regard to God's covenant has been one of the culprits for a lack of motivation for missions and evangelism among Reformed people, including Protestant Reformed people. I refer in part to our automatic association and even identification of the word “covenant” with “we and our children.” When we speak the word “covenant,” we have been trained to think automatically, even exclusively, of “we and our children, generations, homes, and schools.” Thus, I imagine it might feel strange and even alarming to hear me pointing to God's covenant as a powerful motivation to evangelize. After all, God's covenant has nothing to do with the heathen out in the world, does it? They are outside of the covenant, strangers from the covenant (Eph. 2:12). Surely God's covenant motivates us to raise our children in the fear of the Lord and maintain good Christian schools. But how in the world does God's covenant motivate us to reach out to the lost?

In this series, I have attempted to show that in this present time, in fulfillment of His promise to make Abraham a father of many nations (Gen. 17:4-5), God

1 See Jason L. Kortering, *Evangelism in the Established Church: The Calling of Committees and Individuals concerning the Work of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: First PRC), p. 41: He mentions that some think our covenant view and emphasis actually hinder evangelism: “Is not our emphasis on the covenant an obstacle to personal evangelism? We emphasize correctly the importance of the Christian home, the Christian church, and the Christian day school. This makes us introspective and self-focused as people of God. If we do this in obedience to Christ, how are we supposed to reach out to others who do not share this view and who even reject it? Won't we lose our covenant perspective?”

has extended His covenant far beyond Israel into all the nations and establishes His covenant in two ways: within the church with believers and their seed in the lines of continued generations *and* outside the church with the elect who grew up in heathen homes and communities. Yes, the heathen are outside of the covenant as long as they remain unconverted. But God's purpose in the new dispensation is no less to establish His covenant with His elect among the children of believers than with His elect among the heathen. The saints in Israel longed for the days in which we live and sang, "Let the people praise thee, O God; let all the people praise thee. O let the nations be glad and sing for joy" (Ps. 67:3-4).

But I fear that there has been among us an improper or underdeveloped understanding of this twofold way of God extending His covenant. God calls the elect into His covenant from the lines of the generations of believers and their seed. A goodly heritage is ours who were baptized as infants of believers, grew up in covenant homes, attended covenant schools, and live and die within the covenant community. But here is the problem: We have embraced this lovely truth to the neglect of the equally lovely and twin truth that God also calls His elect into the covenant from the heathen darkness of the nations and religions around us, and does so through missions and evangelism (Acts 2:39).

Indeed, we seem to have so embraced the first of these two truths that we practically identify the word "covenant" with believers and our seed after us. I wonder what results I would get if I would survey the members of the Protestant Reformed Churches, or other conservative Reformed churches for that matter, with the question, "What do you think of when I say the word *covenant*?" Observing the overwhelming emphasis in our writings over the years, and our default emphasis in our covenant theology, and the flow of our energies, manpower, and resources, I would expect many to answer something like this: "What comes to mind is the promise of God to us, our children and grandchildren, and our duty to raise them in the faith." But here is the problem, that is not the covenant.

What is the covenant? It is near the heart of being Protestant Reformed to confess that the covenant is the *relationship of friendship* that God establishes between Himself and His people in Christ Jesus, the *bond of love* in which He embraces us as His sons and daughters, as members of His one big family that stretches back to the garden of Eden and forward to the new creation, that stretches from the East to the West throughout the nations. The covenant is the *relationship of communion* that God establishes, maintains, and perfects with all whom He has chosen and redeemed in Christ through

the operation of His Spirit. The covenant is the relationship in which we enjoy sweet fellowship with God as our God already now by faith. The knowledge that God has established such a covenant with me in Christ ought to motivate me to evangelize.

Let us examine our motivation. Do we lack motivation to witness to our neighbors? Why is that? Many possible answers could be given. But if we are hiding our light under a bushel and ashamed of the gospel of Christ, we are sinning. Why do we commit that sin? Why do we lack motivation? Why do we feel satisfied that God has established His covenant with us and our children but feel little interest in God establishing His covenant with publicans and sinners in the world? On the one hand, we rightly rejoice in the fruit of the womb and thank God for our precious children who are a heritage from the Lord (Ps. 127:3). We rightly bring them for baptism in the conviction that they too are included in the covenant and church of God (Heidelberg Catechism, LD 27). We rightly train them up in the way that they should go and are diligent to teach them all the truths of God in home and school (Deut. 6:7, Prov. 22:6).

But consider: There is also a very natural impulse of hearty love and devotion to one's own children and grandchildren that is found among the publicans and sinners of the world. And the complete lack of love for the neighbor is the natural inclination of every human heart. Is it possible then that we in Reformed churches have almost imperceptibly used the beautiful truth that God establishes His covenant with us and our children to justify the development and maintenance of a way of thinking and living that focuses almost entirely on our own children? Is it possible that we have used the truth to maintain a lopsided focus on the education of our own children to the detriment of pouring energy, manpower, and resources into the evangelization of the world? Is it possible that we are hoarding our covenant blessings rather than seeking to gain others to Christ that they may enjoy the same blessings?

Be that as it may....

God's covenant properly understood and warmly embraced will motivate us to witness to the world. Consider: We are unworthy sinners in ourselves. We were poor orphans cast aside and unwanted lying polluted in our own blood. But God said to us in our miserable state, "Live." He said, "When I passed by thee, and looked upon thee, behold, thy time was the time of love; and I spread my skirt over thee, and covered thy nakedness; yea, I swear unto thee, and entered into a *covenant* with thee, saith the Lord GOD, and thou becamest mine" (Ezek. 16:1-8). We were filthy sinners,

and we still sin against our God every day. But God sent Christ to shed His blood for us on the cross, and Christ promises us in the Lord's Supper, "This is my blood of the new *covenant* which is shed for many for the remission of sins" (Matt. 26:28).

The covenant is not first of all about our children, but it is about God's gracious establishment and maintenance of this intimate relationship of fellowship with us in Christ. The covenant is our salvation! If the covenant were merely a pact or agreement God made with us at our baptism that depends on our acts of faith and repentance for the reception of eternal life, then I do not see how the covenant could be a powerful motivator to evangelize. But when we understand that the covenant is our salvation, what a motivation to evangelize! God has established an everlasting bond of friendship *with me*! God is *my God* and *my Father* who so loved me that He sent His Son to die for me and reconcile me to Him! God is *near to me* in His love and tender mercy, whispering His secrets to me, comforting me in my troubles, protecting me from all evil or turning it to my good, walking with me and talking to me, dwelling in my very heart by His Spirit! God is *my Friend*! God will never leave me or forsake me! Therefore, I have nothing to fear in life or in death. I need not fear what man thinks of me because God is my God. I need not fear what man does to me because God is for me. I need not fear if man hates me when I witness to him because God loves me.

Does not God's covenant cause you to overflow with joy and hope? Now our God comes to us and says, "Talk about me to your children when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way, when you lie down and when you rise up." But He also says, "Talk about me to the world when you go into the midst of it, as missionary, pastor, and believer. Do not be afraid of them or ashamed of me. I will be with you. But do not keep your lips silent. You are a city on a hill. You cannot be hid. Let your light shine. Hold forth the word of life. Sound forth the word of the Lord to everyone you meet."²

Indeed, the promise of the final perfection of God's covenant in the future fills us with a blessed hope that also motivates us to evangelize. I find it fascinating that

the goal of God with missions and with His covenant converge in the second coming of Christ. God calls us to send out missionaries into all the world and promises that when this gospel is preached in all the world as a witness to all nations, then the end will come (Matt. 24:14). His goal with missions is the gathering of all the elect into the covenant out of the nations, after which Christ will return. *Then* God will bring His covenant to the goal of perfection in the new heavens and earth. The holy city, new Jerusalem, will come down from heaven prepared as a bride adorned for her husband: the whole covenant people gathered out of the nations and brought to Christ. Then the tabernacle of God will be with men forever, and He will dwell with us, and we will be His people, and God will be with us and be our God. He will wipe away all tears from our eyes and there will be no more death, sorrow, crying, or pain, for the former things will have passed away. And He will make all things new (Rev. 21:1-5). His goal with the covenant is to bring it to the perfection of dwelling with His people face to face in the world to come after gathering them all into His covenant in this age through the children of believers and missions to the heathen.

That is our hope. Does not that hope motivate us to evangelize? Oh, do not strangle our motivation by claiming that we should not expect very many to come to Christ anymore, that we should only expect the church to get smaller and smaller in these last days. Do we now know the hour of the Lord's return? Do we know for sure that the Lord is now only gathering the last few stars of the innumerable multitude of the seed of Abraham? Let us not limit God. He may yet do great things. Let us fasten our hearts on the hope set before us that when the mission is complete, Christ will come and God will perfect His covenant with us. Let us fervently plant and water but leave the increase to the Lord. We know not whether the end is a few years away or a hundred. The Reformers thought they were at the end (1500s). But five hundred more years have passed, and in the meantime massive world mission efforts have taken place and massive numbers have been saved among the heathen. In our century, we know not how close or far away the end now is. But we know that we must continue to run the race of evangelization until the beast forces us to stop and flee for our lives. Then we will know that the end is very near indeed.

My hope and prayer is that this series on the covenant of God and our mission to the world has stimulated and challenged our thinking and that God will use it to spur us to open our lips and show forth the praises of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light.

² "The reason for our joyful walk of faith in every circumstance, in prosperity and adversity, is our God and His love for us. If we take this approach, our covenantal blessings will not deter us from reaching out or tempt us to abandon them, but rather encourage us to appreciate these blessings and be ready to share them with others.... As Reformed believers, our goal is not simply to 'save souls' but to bring souls into God's covenant, including the church, home, and school.... What a thrill it is when others receive eyes to see and hearts to believe such a wonderful truth..." (Kortering, *Evangelism*, p. 42).



Pertaining to the churches in common— Sister-churches—The Philippines

Rev. Ibe is the pastor of the Berean PRC in the Philippines

Conference in the Philippines

On July 3, 2022, a conference was held at Berean PRC in Antipolo City, Philippines. The theme of the conference was in line with the controversy that has taken place within the Protestant Reformed Churches in America (PRCA)—“Conference on Reformed Theology: Doctrinal Development Since Schism.” From the time that the controversy erupted, a series of events (especially the schism in 2021) and doctrinal issues developed as well. This is one of the reasons the Protestant Reformed Churches in the Philippines (PRCP) asked her sister-church, the PRCA through her Contact Committee, to co-host a conference that would shed light on the controversy, including its ongoing development, focusing on the doctrinal charges hurled by the schismatics and their continuous impact within the PRCA.

We, the PRCP, a sister-church of the PRCA, are aware of the controversy and have been following its development. Thus, we wanted to hear a presentation of the controversy, which brought so much pain and troubles in the PRCA, and in ours as well, to help us understand it better. Through the cooperation and correspondence of the PRCA and PRCP’s Contact Committees, the said conference was realized in our midst. God be praised!

Committee 1, the Contact Committee of PRCP, facilitated the conference with the help of the Councils of Berean and Provident PRC. The committee asked the help of the Men and Women Society of Berean to take the oversight of the physical preparations for this conference, such as the venue/facilities, food, and refreshments, among other things. The program was well organized and the flow of the conference was smooth throughout.

The conference was divided into three speeches—two by the guest speakers coming from the PRCA: Revs. James Laning (Hull PRC, IA) and William Langerak (Trinity PRC, Hudsonville), and another by Rev. Daniel Kleyn (PRCA missionary to the Philippines).

As far as the speeches were concerned, the speakers did a very good job in presenting each of the topics assigned to them. The content was detailed and factual. All issues were dealt with and clearly explained

and justified. All three speakers’ approach to each topic was biblical, confessional, and thus truly Reformed, for which we are grateful to the Lord.

Rev. Laning delivered his speech on the place, distinction, and relation of “Repentance and Good Works” in the life of the believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. Rev. Laning emphasized the fact that both “repentance and good works” are neither a condition to God’s continued blessings upon the children of Jehovah, nor a prerequisite to God’s activity of continued care, guidance, and preservation of the saints in this life unto the world without end, but are rather God’s gift and thus gracious fruit of Christ’s accomplished salvation on the cross at Calvary.

Rev. Langerak delivered his speech on “The Covenant, Fellowship, and Good Works.” Rev. Langerak carefully and faithfully laid down that good works are “the believer’s fellowship with God and *not* the way unto fellowship of God” (emphasis: WL). This means that “the obedience we gratefully give in a life of good works according to the power of His Spirit working in us is never a prerequisite of, or a condition unto, or the basis for, or an instrument unto, or the way unto... the covenant relationship” with Jehovah God. To state this positively, “obedience is the life of the covenant as God’s justified and sanctified friend-servants delight in walking in obedient friendship with their Friend-Sovereign to whom they are beholden for all the good works they do, and not He to them...”

Rev. Langerak also explained that the use of the phrase “in the way of” in connection with God’s fellowship in His blessed, gracious covenant established with His elect in Christ is biblical, confessional, and thus, Reformed. Proverbs 12:28 and 16:31 were cited and Canons of Dordt, 1.8 “He hath chosen us from eternity...to salvation and the way of salvation, which He hath ordained that we should walk therein.” John Calvin on the same subject stated thus, “There will be no impropriety in considering holiness of life as the way, not indeed the way which gives access to the glory of the heavenly kingdom, but a way by which God conducts his elect to the manifestation of that kingdom,

since his good pleasure is to glorify those whom he has sanctified” (*Institutes*, 3.18.4). Rev. Langerak went on to show that Herman Hoeksema wrote the same thing: “Reformed it is to say that God gives His salvation to His people in the way of repentance, a grace which He by His Holy Spirit implants into our hearts, and, which again He brings into conscious activity through the preaching of the gospel” (“Faith a Condition According to Scripture?” *SB*, Vol. 26, #12; March 15, 1950).

In summary, Rev. Langerak pointed out that the PRCA has stood and continues to stand on the scriptural and Reformed truth that “God-worked blessings that follow God-worked activities are neither conditions nor a prerequisite!” He likewise asserted from Scripture, the confessions, and the Reformed fathers the fact that faith is always powerful and active in the believer: “For in Jesus Christ...faith...worketh by love” (Gal. 5:6); “All in whose heart God works in this marvelous manner are certainly, infallibly, and effectually regenerated and do actually believe. Whereupon the will thus renewed... in consequence of this influence becomes itself active. Wherefore also, man is himself rightly said to believe and repent by virtue of that grace received.... Believers in this life...rest satisfied with knowing and experiencing that by this grace of God they are enabled to believe with the heart and love their Savior.... Faith is, therefore, to be considered as the gift of God...because it is in reality conferred, breathed, and infused into him... [and] because God...works in man both to will and to do, and produces both the will to believe and the act of believing also” (III/IV.12-14). “Faith is a profound spiritual gift, and also a profound spiritual activity of the entire soul” (H. Hoeksema, “Saving Faith,” *SB*, Vol. 38, #12, 1962).

Finally, Rev. Langerak explained again, from Scripture, the confessions, and the historical doctrine of the PRCA, the importance and the rightful place of repentance in the life of every child of God: “The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom ye slew and hanged on a tree. Him hath God exalted to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins” (Acts 5:30, 31). “When they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life” (Acts 11:18). “...[T]hat they should repent and turn to God and do works meet for repentance” (Acts 26:20). “Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance” (Matt. 3:8). “That others who are called by the gospel obey the call and are converted...must be wholly ascribed to God, who as He has chosen His own from eternity in Christ, so He confers upon them faith and repentance...” (Canons III/IV,10). “...He preserves

in them the incorruptible seed of regeneration...and again, by His Word and Spirit, certainly and effectually renews them to repentance, to a sincere godly sorrow for their sins...” (Canons, V.7). “He that is filled with the sorrow of true repentance cannot rest until he has received the assurance of forgiveness and knows that he is once more the object of God’s favor and lovingkindness” (H. Hoeksema, “Abundance of Rain,” *SB*, Vol. 19, #18, June 1943). “God promises to you salvation, provided He works in you faith and repentance, the fruit of which you may discern in yourselves by believing and repenting” (H. Hoeksema, “Reply to the Rev. Kok (2),” *SB*, Vol. 29, #5; December 1, 1952). “Such will find that in the way of repentance blessings will come like a pouring rain however ill-deserved they may be apart from Christ.... To preach repentance in the true sense is to preach Christ.... Return unto me, and I will return unto you, saith Jehovah of Hosts (Mal. 3:7)” (G.M. Ophoff, “The Prophecy of Malachi,” *SB*, Vol. 31, #15; May 1, 1955). “The central thought of the text is to emphasize that it is impossible for God to bless anyone unless he comes to repentance. As long as he does not come to repentance, and as long as he despises and does not know the goodness of God, he cannot taste the blessing of God.... What shall we say then? The goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance. If you have not come to repentance, you have never known the goodness of God. If in the midst of those men who despise the goodness of God, you become a penitent sinner, what then? I am not ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ. For in it is revealed the righteousness of God, which is by faith in Christ Jesus...” (H. Hoeksema, “Despising God’s Goodness,” *SB*, Vol. 73, #14; April 15, 1997).

Rev. Kleyn delivered his speech on “Church Political Matters and the Role of Elders and the Calling of Members.” In his speech, Rev. Kleyn stated what can be considered as “church political issues”: explanation and application of Article 31 of the Church Order; church orderly way of addressing errors, heresies, concerns, etc.; elders ruling over the pastor, and pastors submitting to elders; terminology such as “error,” “heresy,” “heretical statement,” “heretic”; Formula of Subscription examination for an officebearer; the discipline of officebearers, that is, suspension and deposition; the difference between “schism” and “church reformation”; the office of believer with its responsibilities, proper behavior, etc.; attitudes toward officebearers, assemblies, the church; the identity and use of the marks of a true church, and the question of when is the right time to leave a church.

Then, he went on to make it clear how Article 31 of the CO should be explained and its significance for all in the church. With this before us, he explained the con-

tent of Article 31 of the CO with respect to the right and obligation to protest and appeal; the wrong and right interpretation of the same article and the corresponding warnings against its wrong explanation and the grievous consequences that often follow. Positively, he set forth the long-standing explanation of the PRCA with regard to Article 31 and therefore its official position by citing the “Explanation of the Rules for Protests, Appeals, and Overtures” of the PRCA in 2004.

He also discussed its significance to the officebearers in the church as it relates to the following political matters: the specific vows to submit to and obey the CO; elders ruling over their pastors; the judgments of Christ through the broader assemblies, among others. Then, its significance for the members in the churches, especially on the important issue of when to leave a denomination.

Following the three speeches, the audience was given the chance to ask questions, and the three speakers graciously answered them. Good questions related to the topics were asked, and were answered carefully and clearly based on the Word of God and on the confessions.

Those who were present at the conference, including those who joined us via Zoom video call (the saints in CERC, Singapore; several men and women from our churches, and outreaches and contacts in the southern part of our country) have had nothing but good to say concerning it.

We are all so thankful to the LORD! This brief account of the conference is one way also of extending our deep gratitude to the PRCA (through her Contact Committee) for helping us understand better the controversy. Though it caused many griefs and great pain to all of us, yet God used them all and turned them to our profit and for His glory!

Through this conference God has once again renewed His faithful witness of the unity that we share and enjoy in the truth of His sovereign, unconditional, particular, efficacious, and gracious salvation, which is through God’s gift of faith in the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ alone! *Soli Deo Gloria*.

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Announcements

Bible study

Students attending universities and colleges and any post high-school young adults in Northwest Iowa are invited to participate in the Young Reformers Bible Study held at Dordt University. The study is held weekly in one of the classrooms on campus. For information on location and times contact Derk Burgers at (712) 578-9833 or derkkatrina@gmail.com. Come join us for an evening of encouragement and fellowship centered on the Word of God!

Annual meeting

The Annual Meeting of the RFPA will take place on September 22, at 7:30 P.M. at Terra Square in downtown Hudsonville. Miss Joyce Holstege will be the speaker.

Classis West

Classis West of the Protestant Reformed Churches will meet in Doon, Iowa on Wednesday, September 28, 2022, at 8:30 A.M., the Lord willing. All delegates in need of lodging or transportation from the airport should notify the clerk of Doon's Consistory.

Rev. J. Engelsma, Stated Clerk

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