

# The Standard Bearer

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## Run the race

Rev. Dennis Lee

## The sin of forgiveness (2)

Prof. Barrett Gritters

## Intolerance of Christianity displayed in Australia

## RCUS missions conference

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## Praying for our prodigals

Mrs. Margaret Laning

## Spiritual maturity

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## Domestic mission committee updates

Mr. Douglas Dykstra



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## Meditation

Rev. Dennis Lee, pastor of Kalamazoo Protestant Reformed Church in Kalamazoo, Michigan

# Run the race

Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Hebrews 12:1-2

Are you an active, vibrant, and energetic Christian? Are you a single-minded, whole-hearted believer living in devotion to God, or are you for some reason not functioning as fully as you could as a believer? Are you exerting yourself in the principal commandment of true religion, which is *love*? Utmost love! You and I are called to exert ourselves *in fullness* of love unto our God and our neighbor, at every point in time and in every season of life. These verses lay that calling upon us. Run! Not walk, not jog, but run! Run the race! By the power of grace working in you, exert yourself in fullness for the Lord. That is the calling of these verses—your calling and mine.

Every believer is called by God to run the race of the Christian life. And that is no easy calling! The Word of God is, of course, using the familiar earthly analogy of physical running to describe the Christian's calling to live each and every day of his life trusting God, loving Him, and therefore obeying Him in everything and submitting to all of His providential rule of our lives. This spiritual "race" we have been called to "run" is *lifelong*. There is no retirement from Christian living. Whether we are as young as little children or as old as dying Jacob who, leaning upon the top of his staff, worshiped God and blessed the sons of Joseph with his last ounce of energy, we are called by God to run the race our entire lives. This race is much more like a marathon than a short sprint or a mile run, and that makes it difficult!

That being the case, we do well to understand more details about running this spiritual race. Where did we start and where do we finish this race? This race

started at our regeneration. We began running this race when we were given new life in Christ. And this race finishes either when Christ comes again or when we die, which ever comes sooner. The aged apostle Paul thought of the latter when he wrote under inspiration: "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day..." (II Tim. 4:7-8). The "course" the apostle referred to was the path of his life. His race was long and difficult, and he experienced many sufferings, especially during his missionary journeys.

While different, our course of life is not so unlike the apostle's, is it, dear reader? It has its twists and turns, its joys and sorrows, its highs and lows—lows that can stretch for months and years, and can be so agonizing! Agonizing! Agony! That is the exact word in the original for the word "race." The race we are called to run is *agonizing*! To be sure, unbelievers go through very similar challenging and troubling life events as we do, including the very tough ones. But for believers, we are called to go through them by faith! We are to trust God fully! This course of life and spiritual racetrack is the *Christian* life! We are called to live in relation to all that comes upon us by faith. It is a life of *conscious faith* that enjoins us to a trusting, loving, and cheerful submission in relation to *all and everything* that comes our way in life, as well as a heartfelt obedience to *all and everything* God tells us to do in His Word. All and everything! From this description of what running the race involves, we see even more clearly that we have a difficult calling.

But the difficulty of our calling becomes even more vivid when we consider the *reality* of the lives of some of the saints who took this calling seriously.

The inspired apostle was writing to a very discouraged group of Jewish Christians. Towards the end of Hebrews 10, he told them to "call to remembrance the former days...[when they had] endured a great fight of afflictions" (v. 32). For living and testifying unashamedly of their Lord, they had endured many fierce persecutions. They had endured mockery. They had en-

dured their property being damaged, their businesses being shut down. They had endured being ‘canceled.’ And they had stood strong! But now, when fresh persecutions came their way, they became discouraged and were sorely tempted to give up on their faith (vv. 38-39). They had need of endurance (v. 36)! How difficult it was for them to continue running the race!

Nor was it any easier for the Old Testament heroes of faith set forth in Hebrews 11. Some of the sufferings they endured on account of their faith included being tortured (v. 35), “stoned, sawn asunder...slain with the sword... being destitute, afflicted, tormented...” (v. 37).

Perhaps we have not suffered the same kind and measure of sufferings as these saints. But who knows what tomorrow brings when it comes to the course of life ahead of us?

And now, consider two more difficulties or dangers that can slow us down and, very really, even threaten to stop us from finishing the race. They are weights and entanglements: “...let us lay aside every *weight*, and the sin which doth so easily *beset* [entangle] us.” Weights are objects or activities in our lives that are not necessarily sinful in and of themselves, but greatly slow us down and hinder our calling to live in fullness unto God. Some common ‘weights’ slowing down the twenty-first century believer include electronic devices, gaming, hunting, and playing or watching sports. Dear reader, are there ‘weights’ in your life? On what are you habitually spending an inordinate amount of time? You could have used all of that time on activities that are truly important and of heavenly and eternal value! We are called to “lay aside *every weight*.” The same could be said about ‘entanglements,’ which are worse than weights because, unlike weights, they are most certainly sinful things. Sin has a way of entangling and stopping us from running the race. Sin trips us up and causes us to stumble and fall. If we are serious about our calling to run the race, we must endeavor to identify and remove every entanglement and weight in our lives. Will you?

That is the calling of running the race set forth in these verses. How difficult it is! So much effort is required of us, so much care to be taken on the course with all its hindrances slowing us down and dangers threatening us. This is truly an agonizing race when you consider all its dangers, difficulties, and discouragements. And it is always there every day waiting for us to run! Who of us will not feel weary and tempted to stop running the race?

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Our compassionate Savior knows and understands the

very feeling of our infirmities and provides us with many blessed encouragements! Two of them are set forth in these verses.

First, there is the blessed encouragement from the “great cloud of witnesses” (v. 1). The reference here is to all the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11. We know that because the word “wherefore” that begins chapter 12:1 connects it with all of chapter 11, so that the verses we are considering form the grand conclusion to all the wonderful lives and deeds of the heroes of faith.

Through the word “cloud” we see a figure. We see a big, beautiful stadium packed with seats going all around and high up—seemingly into the clouds! Who are seated on those rows and rows of seats but the Old Testament heroes of faith—named and unnamed—of Hebrews 11? To be sure, the reality is not that they are spectators watching us run. We know this because they are “witnesses”—not spectators but *witnesses*. And witnesses testify. They testify of their lives of faith. They testify of their sufferings and struggles. Most of all, they testify of the unfailing faithfulness of God throughout their lives. How we can learn from them! We can be encouraged that we are not alone in our struggles. These witnesses tell us in Scripture that God was with them! Do we pay attention to what they say in Scripture, and therefore do we know that He is also with us in our struggles?

Second and even more, we receive a great and blessed encouragement from Jesus Himself who also ran a race! However, quite unlike us, He ran it perfectly—with perfect endurance, with zero weights and entanglements, and most importantly, for our sake. He had a far more difficult race than ours, for His began at His incarnation and continued all the way to His accursed death on the cross. There, He who bore our sins especially suffered the punishment and agonies of hell that we deserved! Have you considered and do you know something of the great and many sufferings your sins and mine brought upon Jesus? Who can understand the greatness of Christ’s sufferings for us? Let us take encouragement from this blessed and gracious truth!

And let us also take encouragement and learn from the *way* our Savior ran His race. He ran with perfect focus and determination! He knew Father’s mission and will for Him, and He was perfectly focused on it all His life. He ran undeterred towards the cross to save us and was not discouraged by pain, sorrow, or shame! The divine Son of God endured great and terrible shame at the hands of sinful men as He descended from heaven to earth, ran at full speed toward the cross, and there especially suffered for us to save us from our sins! What explains such focus and determination? The explana-

tion lies in where His spiritual eyes were focused. They were fixed and focused on the prize awaiting Him at the finish line—His blessed reward of exaltation, that of being “set down at the right hand of the throne of God” (v. 2). That was the joy continually set before Him, the joy of receiving that reward He would earn by completing His course at the finish line of His race. What great joy that is! Because of that joy, and because He kept His eyes focused on it and not on any discouragement or distraction, He despised the shame, endured the cross, finished His race, and obtained sweet and complete victory for us!

This too is how *we* must run our race. We too need to have our eyes fixed on the gracious prize earned for us by Jesus, and not on any discouragement or distraction. Like the apostle Paul, we need to have our eyes fixed on the gracious reward awaiting us at the finishing line, that crown of righteousness (II Tim. 4:8). Like Jesus, we are to embrace our marvelous and gracious re-

ward with joy. In this way, Christ is not only our great encouragement, but also our chief and perfect example in the running of our race.

And finally, He is also our only source of strength! Christ is truly the all in all of those who belong to Him! This is why we are told to look to Jesus and no one else, who is the Author and Finisher of our faith. If we look elsewhere for our strength, we will be weary and fall. Jesus is our only and complete source of strength. With Him as our source of strength we have no need for any other! For He is the Author of our faith: He created it, and it was He who joined us to Himself by the bond of faith! And He is also the Finisher or Perfecter of our faith, that is, the One who realizes the goal of our faith. He does so by supplying us the spiritual focus and strength we need each day to run our race.

So look to no other but Jesus for all you need, and run the race!



## Editorial

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

# The sin of forgiveness (2)

Forgiving an impenitent sinner is a sin. Offensive as that may sound—even blasphemous—this is Scripture’s teaching and that of the Reformed Church Order, as we saw last time (Nov. 1, 2022). The automatic and immediate declaration of forgiveness to someone who is not sorry for gross sin is “the sin of forgiveness.”

When a fifteen-year-old boy with an assault rifle murders three of his classmates, it is a sin for the victims’ parents and friends immediately and publicly to say, “We forgive you.” If a father raped his daughter, it would be a sin for the daughter to forgive him immediately and unconditionally, and a worse sin for the rapist father to require her to do so. “I forgive you, daddy, even though you aren’t sorry. And since you taught me that to forgive is to forget, I will try to forget what you did, and I promise not to tell anyone else.” It is not offensive to withhold forgiveness here. It is offensive to grant it.

Yet there are those who believe that anything less than immediate and automatic forgiveness is contrary to biblical principles and violates the essence of grace.

For them, those who have been forgiven graciously must also forgive others graciously. Is this not Jesus’ teaching? It seems to make biblical sense until we look at it more carefully.

The key to understanding this is the biblical teaching that forgiveness is not a *feeling* I have in myself toward a sinner, is not releasing bitterness toward a sinner, is not even a decision not to be angry and to let the sin go. Rather, forgiveness is an audible declaration from the offended one to the offender: “I put away your sin; I release you from your debt; I will not deal with you based on your sin or think of you in light of it. I am finished.” In the case of the impenitent sinner, God does not permit this. Why not?

## Be followers of God

First, automatic and immediate forgiveness for impenitent sinners does not follow the pattern of God’s forgiveness, who forgives us only when we repent and withholds it until we do. And our forgiveness must model His: “forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake



hath forgiven you” (Eph. 4:32). God’s forgiveness is His declaration to us, as He declared to David through the prophet, “I put away your sin,” which did not come to David until there was a God-worked repentance in him. Before then, David was miserable. He sang in Psalm 32, “*when I confessed transgression, then thou forgavest me.*” Our Presbyterian brethren express the Reformed understanding of this in their creed: “None may expect pardon without it [repentance]” (WCF 15.3). John Calvin said that “forgiveness of sins can never come to anyone without repentance.” (Of course, this does not at all mean that Jesus’ death did not pay for the sin; it just means that God does not *declare* forgiveness of it *to our conscience*.) And since God does not declare forgiveness to the impenitent, neither may we. “If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him” (Luke 17:3).

### Seek the brother’s good

Second, automatic and immediate forgiveness for impenitent sinners short-circuits what God intends among Christians—the gracious correction of sinners and the healing of breaches, as both the sinner and the sinned-against stand together in the shadow of Christ’s cross. When my brother sins a great sin, my calling is to seek his good, which is not to forgive him automatically when I know he is not sorry for his sin. Instead, I must be like Nathan the prophet who came to the impenitent David first to convict him of sin, press him to “own” it, call him to repentance, and *then* to declare forgiveness to him. It would have been no love to David to leave him in the misery of unconfessed sin. What the proponents of immediate and automatic forgiveness fail to see is that if their practice catches on, that is, if those sinned against quickly forgive and move on, soon will be forgotten the blessed work of speaking grace to the penitent sinner: “I forgive you.”

Jesus’ instruction in Matthew 18 must not be forgotten: “If thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother.”<sup>1</sup> Christian love and grace require us who have been sinned against to go to the brother, seek his repentance to “gain” him. If he does not repent, Christian love even requires Matthew 18’s more difficult calling—to take witnesses and even bring the matter to the church. To gain him is always our goal. To do less is not love. Do not short-circuit what God calls Christians to do.

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1 Keep in mind what I wrote in September—that the victim of a sin that is a *crime*, like sexual assault, must not be expected to confront a sinner alone.

### Be not selfish

Third, although automatic and immediate forgiveness sounds pious, it may even be an act of selfishness. One man described it as a “process that isn’t truly forgiveness, but simply a strategy for moving on.”<sup>2</sup> Others have called it “therapeutic forgiveness” because it seems to be good therapy for us who are wounded by sinners. This therapeutic forgiveness is not for healing relationships but for healing the victim of sin. Christian pastors, elders, and counselors certainly must recognize the need for soul-therapy for those damaged by sin. But the therapy they need is not to declare forgiveness to an impenitent man. Besides, since our forgiveness is modeled after God’s, our forgiveness of others is not therapy for ourselves any more than God’s forgiveness of us is therapy for Himself.

### Do justice to justice

Fourth, automatic and immediate forgiveness risks losing sight of God’s justice manifested in His punishment of sin in His own Son. We receive God’s forgiveness in no other way than by faith that embraces Christ in the bright light of God’s justice. Faith acknowledges that Christ was *justly* punished in our stead, and faith confesses that God’s justice *needed to be* satisfied. Likewise, the relationship between sinners in which we declare and receive forgiveness always is a mutual recognition of justice—that sin deserves punishment. On the one hand, the sinner confesses justice: “My sin is a debt for which I justly deserve punishment, but I plead that you not make me pay what I owe.” If “I am sorry, please forgive me” does not mean that, we have taken the heart out of confession of sin. On the other side, the sinned-against also confesses justice. When he declares, “I forgive you,” he means that he will not give what the sinner deserves, because God does not give him what he himself deserves. In other words, in all acts of forgiveness, mercy and justice meet, righteousness and peace kiss (Ps. 85:10). Our thankful song shall be “of mercy and of justice” (Ps. 101). Always.

### Do not weaponize forgiveness

Finally, to teach that impenitent sinners must be forgiven automatically and immediately furnishes a deadly weapon to ungodly men and women who want to continue in their sin. I have heard from victims of terrible abuse who said that their abuser always taught them automatic and immediate forgiveness. And since forgiveness meant that the matter was finished, no one

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2 *Bulletin of Ecclesial Theology*, v. 8.1 (August 2021), ii.

else was to find out what happened, and the murderous abuse could continue. False teaching has rarely been weaponized against the innocent as effectively as this false teaching.

In this light, some expected objections can be addressed.

*Does refusal to forgive promote bitterness in us?*

The most common reason given to require automatic forgiveness is that not forgiving will allow bitterness, anger, and vengeful attitudes to fester. But this is a misunderstanding. Two things must be kept in view: First, Christians must always put away bitterness, anger, and vengeful attitudes. Victims of horrible crimes pray daily that Christ's Spirit would keep them from bitterness and fill them with kindness, love, mercy, and grace. Bitterness and anger are permitted no one. Even when we withhold forgiveness, we must show kindness. Second, remember that forgiveness is not a letting go of evil thoughts and feelings, but a *declaration* to the sinner that lets him go from any obligation to pay for his sin.

*Didn't Jesus forgive those who crucified him even though they were not repentant?* "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

When Jesus was being crucified, He prayed a beautiful prayer that His Father would forgive those who unjustly put Him to death. It is like the last prayer of the martyr Stephen as he lay dying from being stoned: "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge" (Acts 7:60).

Notice that in Jesus' prayer He did not declare forgiveness to anyone. He did not say to the ungodly soldiers, "I forgive you of your sin, release you of your responsibility to pay." He did not say to the chief rulers who conspired against Him, "I hold nothing against you; you will not be obliged to pay anything for this most serious offense of all human history." Instead, Jesus asked His Father to take up this work of declaring forgiveness. "Father, forgive them" is a request for His Father to speak to the guilty hearts and convicted consciences of His murderers.

His Father answered that prayer, too. After Pentecost, when Peter preached to these very murderers of Christ, Peter first showed them their sins. I paraphrase: "Jesus was a just man, and you know it by the miracles you witnessed Him perform among you. Yet you wickedly crucified Him and deserve to pay for that sin" (see Acts 2:23-36). Then, Peter called them: "Now repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins." And when they cried out in distress, Peter pointed them to repentance for sin and baptism in Jesus' name. As a result of that sermon, three thousand sinners repented and received remission: they heard God speak to their heart: "I have put away your sin." God answered the prayer of Jesus when these sinners repented. Not automatically and immediately. And the notable answer to Stephen's prayer was when one complicit in Stephen's murder, Saul, repented and became apostle Paul.

"An Evening Prayer"

(sometimes known as: "Dear Lord, Forgive")

If I have wounded any soul today,  
If I have caused one foot to go astray,  
If I have walked in my own willful way,  
Dear Lord, forgive!

If I have uttered idle words or vain,  
If I have turned aside from want or pain,  
Lest I offend some other through the strain,  
Dear Lord, forgive!

If I have been perverse, or hard, or cold,  
If I have longed for shelter in the fold,  
When thou hast given me some fort to hold,  
Dear Lord, forgive!

Forgive the sins I have confessed to thee;  
Forgive the secret sins I do not see;  
O guide me, love me, and my keeper be.  
Amen.

*When Jesus calls us to forgive seventy times seven, that surely does not expect repentance each time, does it? Should we not just keep on forgiving?*

There is nothing to make us believe that this text contradicts Luke 17, which instructs us to forgive those who *repent*. "If he repent, forgive him."

*Do you wait until your wife is sorry for every little sin she commits against you before you forgive her? Do you make her repent for the petty things she does before you forgive her?*

My marriage would not be the happy one it is if my wife and I lived that way. I am thankful—to reverse the situation—that she overlooks many of my sins, if we may call them

"petty" sins. In a marriage, as in other Christian relationships, "love covers a multitude of sins." Sometimes this "covering" is by ignoring them. And we are able to ignore these faults because we know that our spouse is, as we are, a truly penitent person, that she goes to bed each night praying with the sentiment of this old Evening Prayer, perhaps holding our hands while we pray: "Forgive the sins I have confessed to thee; Forgive the *secret sins I do not see*; O guide me, love me, and my keeper be. Amen."

Now, the warning against an improper forgiveness must not incline any of us to forget the main thing in the Christian life—that we show ourselves to be children of the Father by our eager forgiveness of undeserving sinners (Eph. 4:32-5:1), and that we seek to restore fellowship. In other words, our refusal to forgive impenitent sinners must never have the result that we do not *want* to forgive, that we do not show ourselves to be “ready to forgive” as God is always “ready to forgive” (see Ps. 86:5).

Why, if the one who sinned against me sees in me no disposition to forgive, no grace, no merciful spirit, they

will no more want to confess to me than the prodigal son if he had seen his father as a ‘hard man.’ But the prodigal “came to himself” remembering who his father was, the kind of gracious man he knew he would face when he came back down that path home. It was, truly, the goodness of God that led him to repentance (Rom. 2:5). Pray that the goodness we manifest to others may be part of what God uses to work repentance in those who sin against us. They will know that we will receive them with open arms, kill the fatted calf, and truly forget what they did to hurt us.

My Father deals with me that way.



## All around us

Rev. Clayton Spronk, pastor of Faith Protestant Reformed Church in Jenison, Michigan

# Intolerance of Christianity displayed in Australia RCUS missions conference

In the *Standard Bearer* and many other forms of media exists a recorded testimony to the truth of God that can and will be used against us by the world. It is sobering and a little frightening to realize that anytime the powers that be in the world (government, media, big-business, and more) want to attack us, our families, and our churches, they already have plenty of material that they can use. A recent article on *christianitytoday.com* illustrates the reality that enemies of the truth can and will use what was said by us or by the church we are members of to attack us. The title is “Australian Football Executive Forced to Resign, Prompting Debate about Religious Liberty,” and the reporter presents the following:

He lasted 30 hours.

Andrew Thorburn, a former banker, was appointed chief executive of Essendon Football Club on September 27. A little more than a day later, he was forced to resign from the prominent “footy” club because of his connection to a conservative Melbourne church.

In a public statement, Thorburn summed the situation up briefly: “My personal Christian faith,” he said, “is not tolerated or permitted in the public square.”

The president of the Australian football club strongly disagreed with that characterization, saying in a statement that “this is not about vilifying anyone for their personal religious beliefs, but about a clear conflict of interest with an organisation whose views do not align at all with our values as a safe, inclusive, diverse and welcoming club.”

Thorburn is chair of the board at City on a Hill, an evangelical Anglican church that started in Melbourne in 2007. It currently has eight sites; five are in Melbourne. The founding pastor, Guy Mason, is affiliated with Acts 29. In 2013, Mason preached about homosexuality, calling same-sex sex a sin, and he has also spoken from the pulpit about abortion, at one point comparing the number of terminations of unwanted pregnancies to the Holocaust.

Online clips of the old sermons surfaced after Thorburn’s appointment, creating a scandal.

Thorburn’s short stint and dramatic resignation may be one of the most egregious examples of someone being forced out of a prominent position for their affiliation with conservative Christianity. His resignation is especially shocking because no one has accused him of saying or doing anything inappropriate. According to the Essendon board, Thorburn doesn’t even hold the offensive views that the club found unacceptable.

“The Board made clear that, despite these not being views that Andrew Thorburn has expressed personally...he couldn’t continue to serve as the club’s chief executive,” president Dave Barham said.

The resignation has sparked a new debate in Australia about freedom of religion. Legal experts point out that Victoria’s Equal Opportunity Act 2010 says people cannot be treated unfavorably because they engage in a religious activity or because they hold or do not hold any lawful belief. Shouldn’t that protect Thorburn?



“The issue we have here is he holds the position in the church,” said Kiri Jervis, a partner at the Sydney law firm Clyde & Co., “and the church holds those views, so does that make the two incompatible in a workplace? That’s the question.”

Neil Foster, a Christian professor at Newcastle Law School, thinks there’s a clear argument the club violated the law. Even though Thorburn officially resigned, he was effectively dismissed.

“It seems likely that what has happened here is ‘direct discrimination,’” he wrote. “It is unlawful to take ‘adverse action’ against an employee on the basis of their religion, unless it can be shown that the action was taken ‘because of the inherent requirements of the particular position concerned.’”

Foster said he couldn’t think why an executive’s churches’ views on homosexuality or abortion—“views on moral issues that have been shared by Christians, Muslims, Jews, and many other religious believers for a long time”—would be relevant to Australian football.

“Is it really essential to delve into the moral positions of senior executives in a football club?” he asked.

Some religious fans of the Essendon team, known as the Bombers, were deeply offended by the resignation. Peter Comensoli, Melbourne’s Catholic Archbishop and an Essendon supporter, said he was “appalled” and would no longer support the club.

“It is quite a bizarre reality we seem to have entered into,” Comensoli said, “where people are being judged unworthy to lead because of some of their basic Christian beliefs.”

The responses of Anglican leaders were more muted. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, is currently visiting Australia but has declined to comment on the controversy, saying only that secular countries have not yet determined how to deal with differences over faith, ethics, and behavior.

Philip Freier, the Anglican archbishop of Melbourne, said he regretted that Thorburn’s short-lived appointment has been the source of “so much angst for so many people.” He added that it would be “unfortunate if people of faith are sidelined from participation in professional and public life on account of personal religious belief.”

Richard Condie, the Anglican bishop of Tasmania, said he thought that Thorburn’s position was “untenable,” but Essendon should have tolerated his affiliation with a conservative church.

“It seems those whose highest virtue is their professed tolerance have few qualms about being intolerant of others,” he told the Australia Broadcasting Corporation’s Religion and Ethics program.

Before Thorburn’s 30-hour position as the chief executive at Essendon, he was chief of the Bank of New Zealand. Then he moved to Australia in 2014 to take a position

as the head of the National Australia Bank. During his tenure at the Australia Bank, the bank teamed up with the Australian Football League to sponsor the inaugural Challenge Pride match, promoting LGBT inclusion in the Australian Football League, the most popular sport in Australia.

“I love all people, and have always promoted and lived an inclusive, diverse, respectful and supportive workplace,” said Thorburn, who has been a fan of the Essendon club since he was a child. “Despite my own leadership record, within hours of my appointment being announced, the media and leaders of our community had spoken. They made it clear that my Christian faith and my association with a Church are unacceptable.”

According to Thorburn, he was told he could keep his position at the club if he resigned from the church. He felt he couldn’t comply with the ultimatum.

“I was being required to compromise beyond a level that my conscience allowed,” he said. “People should be able to hold different views on complex personal and moral matters, and be able to live and work together, even with those differences, and always with respect.”

In a second statement released in early October, Thorburn thanked the hundreds of people who had reached out with support and said he’d heard from many people who “expressed genuine worry” about religious discrimination.

“True tolerance, inclusion, and diversity also includes people of faith,” he said.

On the other hand, Stan Grant, chair of Australian/Indigenous Belonging at Charles Sturt University, argues that “inclusion is always selective,” and “if Thorburn was chairman of a social club that barred women or black people he would have been asked to make the same choice.”

Social mores are changing, Grant wrote, and that will come at the cost of some careers. That’s the price of social progress. He summed it up briefly: “Rendering unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s is becoming more difficult.”

Thorburn would likely agree.

## RCUS Missions Conference

The Home Missions Committee of the Reformed Church in the United States (RCUS) met for a conference February 7-8, 2022. Rev. Cody Schwichtenberg’s report on the conference appeared in the March/April 2022 edition of *Reformed Herald*.<sup>1</sup> While it is not entirely clear who attended the conference, evidently the members of the committee, denominational missionaries, and professors of the Heidelberg Theological Seminary (Sioux Falls,

<sup>1</sup> [https://rcus.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/27772\\_RCUS-Mar-Apr\\_02.pdf](https://rcus.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/27772_RCUS-Mar-Apr_02.pdf).

SD) participated. Schwichtenberg states, “The main purpose of the conference was *to begin the process of building a strategy for doing mission works by learning from our missionaries.*” The conference covered “a variety of subjects,” and the work of missions was examined “from a variety of different vantage points.”

On the first day of the conference Dr. Maynard Koerner led in opening devotions and explained the biblical calling of believers to desire the salvation of unbelievers. A discussion took place concerning “past successes and failures experienced by missionaries in the RCUS.” Schwichtenberg’s report indicates that the conference attendees agreed that the RCUS “could improve upon...building and nurturing strong core groups as well as encouraging more involvement from the sending church.”

On the second day of the conference Prof. J.P. Mosley emphasized the “main calling [of the church] is to preach the Gospel.” Schwichtenberg reports that the conference focused on two questions: “Do we start a work in a big city or small city” and “Are we asking too much of our missionaries?”

May God use the conference to help the RCUS reach the committee’s goal of being “good stewards of the time and responsibility the LORD has given” them for mission work, while they continue to trust the Lord to build His church.

What is to be learned by considering the work other

churches are doing in missions? This is a good question for us to ask in the PRC. I know that I cannot answer this question by myself. But I suggest that the idea of a conference to discuss a variety of topics is worth considering. I am on the Domestic Mission Committee, which seeks to serve the churches in common in the area of home missions. The committee is made up of capable men who are trying their best to serve the churches in the work of home missions. The committee makes annual reports to synod and receives input from the synod each year on how it is performing its tasks.

But perhaps it would be wise for the delegates to pause at synod and have more of a round table discussion about the work of missions, especially home missions. We have not had a home missionary for almost two years, and we have not had a home mission field for even more years. What questions should we be asking about how to be more active in this work? Does the fact that we are comfortable with having five/six professors in the seminary while we have no home missionary (albeit two foreign missionaries) say we need to reshuffle our priorities? What other possible conclusions should we come to about areas where we could improve? These are great questions for the DMC and Zion PRC (the sending church for home missions) to ask, but it would be helpful to hear the perspectives of many others as well.



## Pillar and ground of truth

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

# The Council of Constantinople (553): The meeting

Previous article in this series: August 2022, p. 439.

The last article set forth the context for the meeting of the Fifth Ecumenical Council. The Monophysites were teaching that if Jesus was one person, He necessarily must have one nature (*mono* = one; *phusis* = nature). Other theologians took the opposite position: because Jesus has two natures, He is two persons. These latter set forth their position in “The Three Chapters,” or “Heads.” Without question, the Three Chapters contained error, and Emperor Justinian condemned it. But why did he condemn it: because he saw the truth of

the matter, or because he preferred the opposite error? Clearly his wife was a Monophysite sympathizer. The Monophysites dug in their heels. The pope unhelpfully kept changing his mind on the matter. And the emperor called the Fifth Ecumenical Council.

## Delegates

The Fifth Ecumenical Council met in eight sessions from May 5 to June 2, 553, in the palace of the Patriarch (Bishop) of Constantinople. Although Emperor Justinian

had called it, he did not preside over it; Eutychius, the Bishop of Constantinople, did. This was unusual: the emperor presided over five of the first seven ecumenical councils. But the emperor's direct involvement in the controversy leading up to the Council, and his wife's clearly-expressed position on one side of the issue, probably explain his absence.

Present at the Fifth Ecumenical Council were the bishops of two other of the five patriarchal cities: Apollinaris, Patriarch of Alexandria, and Domnus, Patriarch of Antioch. The Patriarch of Jerusalem sent three bishops to represent him. Of the five patriarchs, only the Bishop of Rome (Pope Vigilius) was not present or represented. He was, of course, invited; and his absence is a story in itself.

The shrewd Empress Theodora had arranged for Vigilius to become pope in 538, and promised to recompense him handily if he would defend her views and nullify the decisions of the Fourth Ecumenical Council. Imagine what church history would have been like if the great creed of Chalcedon was declared to be in error, and retracted! That creed set forth the firm foundation for all later development of the doctrine of Christ's person and natures. But the pope's arm was being twisted to overturn it. In 545, Justinian summoned Vigilius to Constantinople, and he had been there ever since. In other words, Vigilius' absence was not due to his inability to make the thousand-mile journey. Nor was it due to his not being invited. Probably it was due to his sense that the position he favored would not win the day.

Present also were many others; Philip Schaff says 164 bishops were present.

## Decisions

A letter from the emperor was read at the first session. In it he expressed his desire for unity in the empire, and particularly a united presentation of the true faith against heresies. He desired that the Council defend the decisions of the Council of Chalcedon, oppose the two-natures-equals-two-persons error (dyophysitism), and noted that the pope was not cooperating.

Many of the ecumenical councils dealt with church political matters in addition to the main theological issues that confronted them. The Fifth Ecumenical

Council, apparently, did not; at least, no canons regarding church political matters have come down in history. The council seems to have dealt exclusively with the doctrinal question.

In the end, the Council reiterated that it stood on the foundation laid by the previous Councils of Nicea (325), Constantinople (381), Ephesus (431), and Chalcedon (451). It supported the emperor in his condemnation of The Three Chapters, which means that it opposed dyophysitism.

The Council also drew up fourteen doctrinal statements. Each took the form of an anathema, a condemnation of those who denied the statements. Some of these reiterated the basic truths that the church had confessed about the Trinity and deity of Christ. One of

them (the third) made clearer than the church previously had that the divine Logos (Word) was Jesus Christ come in the flesh. The fifth emphasized that when the church father Cyril had said there was only one *physis*, which word was now being used to refer to a nature, Cyril had been referring to a person. The sixth emphasized that Mary was the Mother of God, as the Creed of Chalcedon had said,

but went so far as to call her the "ever-virgin."

Some of these pronounce anathemas on any who teach a wrong view of the person and natures of Jesus Christ. Worthy of note is that the Council recognized that a man might use the terminology that the church has adopted, but give this terminology a different meaning. For instance, one might readily say that Jesus has two natures, but then teach that the two are not united in the one person. Or he might say that Christ must be worshiped in two natures, but then teach that one kind of worship is to be given Him in His human nature, and another in His divine. The Council specified that a man must use the right words in the right way: he must mean what the ecumenical councils said they mean, not something different (anathemas 6-9).

Some of the statements pronounce anathemas on anyone who defends the heretical views of Arius, Apollinaris, Nestorius, Eutyches, and Origin (anathema 11), or who will defend the men whose writings the Fifth Ecumenical Council condemned (anathemas 12-14).

How to evaluate the Council, and notes regarding its aftermath, must wait for the next article.

**Imagine what church history would have been like if the great creed of Chalcedon was declared to be in error, and retracted! That creed set forth the firm foundation for all later development of the doctrine of Christ's person and natures. But the pope's arm was being twisted to overturn it.**



## A word fitly spoken

Rev. Justin Smidstra, pastor of First Protestant Reformed Church in Holland, Michigan

### Sun

Few things cheer us like the sunrise stretching its colorful wings across the morning sky, or the warmth of the sun at its midday zenith. In the colder months the sun rises late and sets early. Gray clouds cover its face. We miss it! The sun is a creature of peculiar glory and importance (I Cor. 15:41). God made it so.

God created light on the first day. On the fourth day God made the sun to be “the greater light to rule the day” (Gen. 1:14). God issued the sun its abiding command to shine upon the earth and divide day from night. With the sun, God governs the rhythms of life. Each day God brings out the sun “as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber” and a “strong man to run a race” (Ps. 19:5-6). At sunrise man goes forth “unto his work and to his labour until the evening” (Ps. 104:23). At sunset man retires to rest. God commands the sun to give light and warmth to the earth. There is “nothing hid from the heat thereof” (Ps. 19:6). God uses sunlight to cause the plants to grow and His creatures to flourish. Human life “under the sun” is full of toil and vanity (Eccl. 2:11). Nevertheless, “truly the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun” (Eccl. 11:7). No other light can compare with the glory of the sun in its strength. A little time under its gaze tans the skin (Song of Solomon 1:6), but its sustained gaze scorches with burning heat (Jonah 4:8). The believer knows the Lord of the sun. He rests assured: “The Lord is thy shade upon thy right hand. The sun shall not smite thee by day” (Ps. 121:5-6).

God created the sun to signify spiritual things too. In the sun, the eyes of faith see a dim reflection of God Himself, who *is* light (I John 1:5). The radiant sun reveals God’s glory, the shining forth of His infinite perfections. The psalmist says: “The LORD God is a sun and shield: the LORD will give grace and glory” (Ps. 84:11). God’s favor is likened to the shining countenance of the sun; His judgment to the darkening of the sun (Joel 2:10). As the sun endures through the ages, we catch a glimpse of the eternal changelessness of God (Ps. 72:5). Fallen man, by nature lost in spiritual darkness, makes the sun an idol to worship (Deut. 4:19). He stretches out his hands to the light-bearing creature instead of the God who “prepared the light and the sun”

(Ps. 74:16). Though he lives under the sun’s light, man sits in spiritual darkness under the shadow of death (Is. 9:2). This darkness the light of the sun cannot dispel. Only the light of divine grace can.

The gospel’s good news is that God made the light to shine in the darkness! God sent the Light of the world, Jesus Christ, to save His people from their sins. “The people which sat in darkness saw great light” (Matt. 4:16). Jesus Christ “the dayspring from on high hath visited us” (Luke 1:78-79). Christ is the Sun of righteousness arisen with healing in His wings (Mal. 4:2). Christ entered our darkness to be our Sun and Shield. He veiled His divine glory behind His assumed humanity, though a glimpse of it broke through on the Mount, where “his face did shine as the sun” (Matt. 17:2). Jesus came in the likeness of sinful flesh, yet His whole life glowed with holiness pure as sunlight. Christ humbled Himself to the death of the cross. On Calvary, the Sun of righteousness was lifted up for the salvation of sinners. As Christ outstretched His arms upon the crossbeam, He outspread His healing wings over His people. Then, for three hours the sun was darkened. God poured out His wrath against our sins upon the crucified Christ (Luke 23:45). God turned the light of His countenance away. God withdrew the warmth of presence. In the cold, lonely dark the Christ suffered the fullness of hell and merited eternal life for us. To human eyes it appeared the Sun of righteousness had set. But then came the dawn of resurrection Sunday! The Sun of righteousness arose, the Victor over death’s dark domain! The Bridegroom came forth from the grave’s chamber, as the strong man, who finished the race! Up from the grave, the Sun of righteousness ascended into heaven. He poured out His Spirit through whom He shines His healing rays upon His church. Christ our righteousness! Brilliant as the sun! He has redeemed His bride and clothed her with the sunlight of His own righteousness (Rev. 12:1).

We live in dark days. But the Sun of righteousness is rising again. This last sunrise of the Sun of righteousness shall usher in the dawn of eternal day. The Second Coming of Jesus Christ! Every eye shall see Him on the clouds of glory. His countenance shall be as “the



sun shineth in his strength” (Rev. 1:16). The wicked shall not stand before His heat but be destroyed by the brightness of His coming (II Thess. 2:8). “Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (Matt. 13:43). Then shall the church be gathered into the city that has “no need of the sun” be-

cause “the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof” (Rev. 21:23). This is our sure hope, people of God! Let us watch and wait for our Sun of righteousness. “From the rising of the sun unto the going down of the same the LORD’s name is to be praised” (Ps. 113:3).



## Taking heed to the doctrine

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# Antinomians? Without a doubt (4)

Previous article in this series: October 1, 2022, p. 10.

**A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger. He that refuseth instruction despiseth his own soul: but he that heareth reproof getteth understanding.**

**Proverbs 15:1, 32**

### Introduction

Martin Luther’s objections to indulgences, voiced publicly when he nailed the Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg, were the spark that led to the Reformation. Luther’s opposition to indulgences was not limited to the irreverent claims made by the indulgence peddlers as, for example, that they were effective to forgive a man even if he had violated the virgin Mother of God (Thesis #75). His opposition was not only against the unbiblical teaching of the meritorious value of good works, which was the basis for the sale of indulgences. But he also opposed the sale of indulgences because they promised God’s forgiveness apart from and before the sinner’s repentance. Luther opposed the so-called “God-first theology” that is being promoted as the gospel by the RPC (Reformed Protestant Churches).

From the beginning, Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses are concerned with repentance: “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said ‘Repent,’ he intended that the entire life of believers should be repentance” (Thesis #1).<sup>1</sup> Luther’s distress was that “[t]hey preach no Christian doctrine who teach that contrition [that is, repentance] is not necessary in those who intend to buy souls out

of purgatory or to buy confessional privileges” (Thesis #35). In Thesis #36, he asserts that “[e]very truly repentant Christian has a right to full remission of penalty and guilt, even without letters of pardon.” Take note that the “truly repentant Christian” has “a right to full remission,” that is, forgiveness of his sin “even without [the pope’s] letters of pardon.” If those who are repentant have a right to the full remission of their sins, forgiveness clearly follows repentance. Luther goes on to contend that “[i]t is very difficult, even for the most educated theologians, at one and the same time to commend to the people the abundance of pardons and also the need of true contrition” (Thesis #39). “Very difficult” is an understatement; it is impossible.

The theology that the RPs are promoting is not consistent with the gospel of the Reformation, but contrary to it. Luther was prompted to oppose the sale of indulgences because it corrupted the Bible’s teaching about the relation between repentance and forgiveness. Those in purgatory could not repent, so that apart from their repentance “letters of pardon” were purchased for them. And those who purchased indulgences for themselves did so prior to and apart from their own repentance, as a kind of insurance policy that paid out when they sinned. Rome’s false teaching about the relation between forgiveness and repentance contributed to the neglect of genuine repentance prior to the Reformation.

It is not my intention in this article and the next, however, to concentrate on Luther’s opposition to the wrong view of repentance in the church of his day. Instead, I will focus on the teaching of John Calvin. The Reformed tradition is the tradition that traces back to Calvin. What did Calvin have to say about the relation

<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, *Martin Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses*, intro. and ed. Stephen J. Nichols (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2002). References to the theses will be from this booklet.

between repentance and forgiveness? How would he evaluate the “God-first theology” of the RPC?

I have before me a stack of 3 x 5 note cards over two inches thick (yes, I do research the old-fashioned way) of random quotes from Calvin that address the relation between repentance and forgiveness. I must of necessity be selective in the quotations that I use; there are far too many to use in the limited space of a couple of articles. I intend to appeal to Calvin’s witness in four distinct areas: his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, his commentaries, his prayers, and comments taken from notes in *The Geneva Bible*, many of which were done by or taken from Calvin.

### Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*<sup>2</sup>

“With good reason,” says Calvin, “the sum of the gospel is held to consist in repentance and forgiveness of sins” (3.3.1). He goes on to insist that “both repentance and forgiveness of sins...are conferred on us by Christ, and both are attained by us through faith” (3.3.1). Applying the exhortation in Hosea 6:1, “Come, and let us return unto the Lord: for he hath torn, and he will heal us; he hath smitten and he will bind us up,” Calvin says that “the hope of pardon is added like a goad, that men may not sluggishly lie in their sins” (3.3.2). If pardon of sin is a hope set before us and if it functions as a goad to prevent us from going on in our sins, it ought to be clear that repentance is first and after genuine repentance follows forgiveness. Citing the example of David, who “when he was rebuked by Nathan...acknowledged his sin of adultery” and yet “at the same time he awaited pardon,” so does also the repentant child of God await pardon, Calvin insists.

In connection with repentance, Calvin underscores the necessity of confession of sin. While confession of sin to men is not always necessary, confession to God is always necessary for forgiveness. Says Calvin, “yet to confess to God privately is a part of true repentance that cannot be omitted. For there is nothing less reasonable than that God should forgive those sins in which we flatter ourselves” and

“which we hypocritically disguise lest he bring them to light” (3.3.18). The “way of confession is prescribed by God” as the way in which He is pleased to forgive our sins. “[S]ince it is the Lord who forgives, forgets, and wipes out sins, let us confess our sins to him in order to obtain pardon” (3.4.9). Clearly, Calvin teaches that forgiveness follows upon genuine confession of sin.

The title of section nineteen of book 3, chapter 3 is, “Repentance and forgiveness are interrelated.” Calvin begins by reflecting on John the Baptist’s preaching “a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.” “What else is this,” he asks his readers, “than that they, weighed down and wearied by the burden of sins, should turn to the Lord and conceive a hope of forgiveness and salvation?” Commenting on Acts 5:30-31, Calvin uses the words of the passage to describe the purpose of Christ’s death, resurrection, and exaltation: “God raised Jesus...to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.” Besides taking note of the apostle’s teaching that God gives repentance, notice the order: repentance first followed by forgiveness. He concludes section 19 by affirming that “because the proper object of faith is God’s goodness, by which sins are forgiven, it was expedient that it should be carefully distinguished from repentance.”

### Necessity of repentance does not imply that repentance merits

In section 20, book 3, chapter 3, Calvin is concerned to deny the charge that insistence on the necessity of repentance implies that the sinner’s repentance merits God’s forgiveness. This is the same objection raised by the RPs. The necessity of repentance “is not so laid down as if our repentance were the basis of our deserving pardon.” And a little later in section 21,

**The necessity of repentance “is not so laid down as if our repentance were the basis of our deserving pardon.” And a little later...Calvin writes: “Not that repentance, properly speaking, is the cause of salvation, but because it is already seen to be inseparable from faith and from God’s mercy.”**

Calvin writes: “Not that repentance, properly speaking, is the cause of salvation, but because it is already seen to be inseparable from faith and from God’s mercy.” Still later, after reminding his readers “that forgiveness of sins can never come to anyone without repentance,” Calvin again adds that “at the same time that repentance is not the cause of forgiveness of sins” (3.4.3). Only if forgiveness follows repentance would the concern be raised, “Does this not imply that repentance earns

2 All references to the *Institutes* are from the edition edited by John T. McNeill and translated by Ford Lewis Battles, vols. 20 and 21 of The Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960). As is traditional, citations will be made by book, chapter, section.

forgiveness?” Such a concern would never be raised if forgiveness preceded repentance. In that case, no right-thinking person would ever suggest that man’s repentance earns God’s forgiveness. The concern is raised because repentance precedes forgiveness. And that is irrefutably Calvin’s teaching, “that forgiveness of sins can never come to anyone without repentance, because only those afflicted and wounded by the awareness of sins can sincerely invoke God’s mercy” (3.4.3).

In *Institutes* 3.3.25, Calvin contrasts sham repentance with true repentance. He begins by considering the hypocritical repentance of Ahab and Esau. Such examples of insincere repentance ought to teach Christians “more readily to apply our minds and efforts to sincere repentance, because there must be no doubt that...God, who extends his mercy even to the unworthy when they show any dissatisfaction with self, will readily forgive us.” Thus, our pride is reproved and we are encouraged with God’s “readiness to give pardon.”

Calvin promotes this same theme in his comments on the sinful woman who anointed Jesus’ feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair, to whom Jesus said, “Thy sins are forgiven” (Luke 7:48). “The Lord clearly testifies in what way she obtained forgiveness of sins” inasmuch as Jesus said to her, “Thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace” (v. 50). “By faith, therefore, we gain forgiveness; by love we give thanks and testify to the Lord’s kindness” (3.4.37). If we are to be encouraged with God’s willingness to forgive the sins of those who truly repent, God’s forgiveness must follow our repentance, as indeed it does.

### Petition for forgiveness

The petition for forgiveness, both in the prayers of believers individually and in the public worship of the church, arises to God’s throne of grace out of the awareness of the divine order, that God’s forgiveness follows on our repentance. So Calvin recommends the “custom observed with good result in well-regulated churches: that every Lord’s Day the minister frames the formula of confession in his own and the people’s name, and by it he accuses all of wickedness and implores pardon from the Lord” (3. 4.11). Thus, “after pardon of sins has been obtained, the sinner is considered as a just man in God’s sight. Therefore, he was righteous not by approval of works but by God’s free absolution” (3.11.3).

In book 3, chapter 20, Calvin begins his consideration of the truth concerning prayer. He warns that “the godly must particularly beware of presenting themselves before God to request anything unless they

yearn for it with sincere affection of heart” (3.20.6). This applies in a special way to the petition for the forgiveness of sins. We must recognize our urgent need for forgiveness, lest we “leave off praying” for it. “For when should the many sins of which we are conscious allow us nonchalantly to stop praying as suppliants for pardon of our guilt and penalty? When do temptations yield us a truce from hastening after help?” (3.20.7). “To sum up,” Calvin concludes, “the beginning and even the preparation of proper prayer is the plea for pardon with a humble and sincere confession of guilt” (3.20.9).

The title of section 9, chapter 20, book 3, is: “The plea for forgiveness of sins as the most important part of prayer.” Calvin references the statement of the apostle John, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (I John 1:9). When he comes to consideration of the fifth petition, Calvin devotes several paragraphs to the qualification that is contained in the petition, “as we forgive our debtors.”

[W]e ought not to seek forgiveness of sins from God unless we ourselves also forgive the offences against us of all those who do or have done ill [to us]. If we retain feelings of hatred in our hearts, if we plot revenge and ponder any occasion to cause harm, and even if we do not try to get back into our enemies’ good graces, by every sort of good office deserve well of them, and commend ourselves to them, by this prayer we entreat God not to forgive our sins. For we ask that he do to us as we do to others (3.20.45).

Once again it ought to be clear that forgiveness follows repentance. If God does not forgive our sins so long as we refuse to forgive those who sin against us, forgiveness does not take place in eternity but in time. The fifth petition of the Lord’s Prayer makes no sense if forgiveness takes place in eternity. Thus, “[t]he sins of the saints are pardonable, not because of their nature as saints, but because they obtain pardon from God’s mercy” (2.8.59).

It ought to be clear that they who are teaching that forgiveness precedes repentance, that the sinner’s repentance follows upon God’s forgiveness are not building on Calvin. Neither can they argue that they are developing further the teaching of Calvin. In reality, they are rejecting and opposing Calvin. Calvin had it all wrong; they have it right. Rejecting Calvin, they make plain that they are laying another foundation than the foundation of the Reformed tradition that traces back to Calvin.



## When thou sittest in thine house

Mrs. Margaret Laning, wife, mother, and grandmother in Hull Protestant Reformed Church of Hull, Iowa

# Praying for our prodigals

“We lift up our child in prayer, Lord. Help us, for we do not know what to do. Our child is walking in sin, will not meet to talk with us about it, and is listening to and giving in to spiritual enemies. We cry out for Thy mercy. Thou alone hast power to change the heart...”

Such is a prayer of Christian parents who have a wayward child. Who else can set such a one free? “Bring thy son hither.... And Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, and healed the child, and delivered him again to his father” (Luke 9:41-42).

Oh, the power of Jesus to do the impossible! Only He can release prisoners out of bondage and darkness. Our prodigals are in deep trouble, besieged, yet unwilling to discern who the enemy is. “For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers...” (Eph. 6:12). We pray our dear children, for whom we now mourn, be brought to repentance. How we desire to rejoice as that father!

In God’s inscrutable wisdom, He sees fit to give some Christian parents a prodigal. Such a one was baptized in the name of our triune God and instructed and brought up according to His Word. Such a one has a loving Christian family and faithful church. Yet, the child wastes it all to serve sin.

If you are such a parent, I am so sorry for your deep pain. Remember you are not alone. Your congregation and others who support you surely uphold your family in prayer. Most especially our merciful heavenly Father cares exceedingly and powerfully. He is compassionate, saving each tear we cry to Him. He alone can change the hardened heart.

So we ask His blessings upon our vastly imperfect labors to help our child—our expressions and acts of love, brotherly scriptural admonitions, and reminders of God’s merciful forgiveness. Most importantly, that He kindle in our hearts a holy zeal in our prayers. Even if our child cuts off all ties, we still have that.

James points out that Elijah was a man of prayer. “The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much” (James 5:16b). He prayed in faith earnestly, fervently, and with energy. His prayers were not just going

through the motions, mind-wandering, sleepy kind of praying. Though he was a sinner like we are, he was focused, persistent, and zealous. Such is the work of the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit in us.

“Elijah was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain: and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit” (James 5:17, 18).

At first glance, Elijah’s prayer concerning rain seems an unlikely example in the book of James. Surely he prayed for what seems impossible, even undesirable. Yet, as we read in I Kings 17 and 18, Israel was walking in some very serious sins. Elijah lived in a time of great apostasy, including Baal worship promoted by the likes of King Ahab and Jezebel. In obedience to Deuteronomy 28 and II Chronicles 6:26, 27, Elijah prayed that the rain would stop. For three and a half years a famine swept over the wasted land.

Centuries later, we hear of another famine. This one in the parable of the prodigal son told by Jesus in Luke 15:11-32. “Prodigal” means waster and he was a waster of so many things. He left his faithful father to pursue sexual sins and drunkenness. He wasted his father’s inheritance, squandered all his money, and despised the gifts and talents God gave him for the service of others. In God’s providence the son found himself in the throes of famine, living in a pigpen.

Such is the misery of sin. To make things worse, most prodigals listen to all the wrong people and receive bad advice. Meanwhile, they might block communication with their Christian family and other believers or at least demand no speaking about sin. Caught in a seemingly impossible situation, we pray that our wayward one be as the prodigal who “came to himself,” desiring the good counsel of the Lord once again. “Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. But his delight is in the law of the LORD; and in his law doth he meditate day and night” (Ps. 1:1, 2).



I dare say, it is not most parents' inclination, nor mine, to desire our children to go through extremely tough times. Parents are protectors, always ready to fix problems. Yet our heavenly Father always knows what is best, even if the rain must stop. We trust Him to use the means He chooses, commending our dear children to His care. If He sees fit to send a dearth or any sort of trial for a season, perhaps He will use it for a prodigal's repentance.

There is a joyful second half to both these stories. The Holy Spirit worked through means, through prayers and famines, pricking hearts. Sometimes God's people can be so hardened in sin that nothing seems to work. Yet desperate times serve to be shocking and sobering, dampening fleshly lusts. When God shows tough love to His people, it is a mercy.

Blessed be our God who works in the heart true repentance. The prodigal son's life changed far more than turning from a certain sin. He turned to God. He realized just how much his father loved him and how blessed he had been in his father's house. We understand the earthly father in the parable represents our heavenly Father. The Holy Spirit brought to his heart and mind God's unconditional love for him. With spiritual eyes open he repented and once again experienced God's favor, forgiveness, and sweet communion.

Bear with me, I think there is an application here for earthly parents of wayward children. It is good to keep communication lines open as much as possible. We do not want them to forget our love and the blessed life at home. Your love is a sure warrant for your repentant wanderer to dare step through your doorway once again.

Augustine's widowed mother, Monica, would not give up on her prodigal son. When he ran off, she followed. When he came home, she exhorted him. All the while she prayed. The Lord blessed her labors. After many years of living in sin, Augustine repented and served the Lord with all his heart. Truly, he is an example of this verse: "There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth" (Luke 15:10). He included in his book *Confessions* his early

life and the important role his mother had. For roughly 1,600 years she has been an encouraging example for Christian mothers all over the world.

As parents, *we* stand in need of prayer, not only our prodigals. We can become discouraged and our prayers wane. We cannot allow bitterness to take root, nor pride. God is sovereign in salvation. We do not know whether our child is an elect or reprobate. There have always been Cains and Abels, Jacobs and Esaus since the Fall.

We are undeserving of having any believing children. Yet we pray for them as long as they live. God is so gracious. We cannot lose sight of all our undeserved blessings and salvation in Christ. In humility we pray, "Thy will be done." Our confidence rests in Him for the good of His people and for His glory.

Parents of wayward children need an abundance of

peace. Keep having frequent devotions, meditating on God's goodness in the Scriptures. It is easy to become so overwhelmed that getting adequate sleep is difficult. Before bed think upon comforting verses, such as: "I will both lay me down in peace, and sleep: for thou, LORD, only makest me dwell in safety" (Ps. 4:8). Put away damaging fear and worry, "For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind" (II Tim. 1:7). Life cannot come to a standstill—spend time with your spouse, family, and friends in Christ.

Look for opportunities to be

a witness for Christ in the lives of others. Pray for an extra measure of His Spirit, trust Him, and as a sister in Christ reminded me, "Be still, and know that I am God" (Ps. 46:10). We have work to do—not that God needs us, but that He has called us. Take care of yourself and one another while we wait on the Lord with ready open arms.

"To thee I stretch my hands,  
Let me not plead in vain;  
I await as weary lands  
Wait for refreshing rain."

(Psalter #390, "Earnest Desire and Supplication")

**We understand the earthly father in the parable represents our heavenly Father. The Holy Spirit brought to his heart and mind God's unconditional love for him. With spiritual eyes open he repented and once again experienced God's favor, forgiveness, and sweet communion.**

**... there is an application here for earthly parents of wayward children. It is good to keep communication lines open as much as possible. We do not want them to forget our love and the blessed life at home. Your love is a sure warrant for your repentant wanderer to dare step through your doorway once again.**



## I believe

Prof. Cory Griess, professor of Practical Theology in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary and member of First PRC, Grand Rapids, MI

# What is gender dysphoria and its common expressions? (4, concluded)

Previous article in this series: November 1, 2022, p. 69.

### Sex and gender are one

The teaching of Scripture is that gender is inextricably bound to one's biological sex. The proper relation between sex and gender is that gender is the *proper social expression* of one's sex. The Scriptures know of two genders, and both are determined not by one's feelings but by one's sex. That God created gender to be an expression of one's sex is *implied* in what we saw in the previous article, "male and female created He them." Yet, the Scriptures go on to draw out the reality of gender in three main ways. First, by setting forth commands for different *roles* of males and females that are specific to their sex. Second, by revealing a general pattern of *characteristics* given to males and to females according to those roles. Third, by calling *sin* the attempt of a member of one sex to present himself/herself in behavior or appearance as though he/she were the opposite sex.

### Gender roles in Scripture

First of all then, there are *commanded gender roles* in Scripture that are tied to one's sex. Traditional gender roles are not merely a social construct originating in the minds of dominating men. It is true that there can be *aspects* of what are *thought of* as traditional gender roles that are socially constructed and are not necessarily biblical. But the traditional roles themselves are not purely cultural or subjective. These gender roles are a God-given calling. And just like the calling to carry out your work does not change even if you do not particularly like part of the job, so too the God-given gender roles do not change depending on how one feels about all or part of them.

Because of the central place marriage, family, and church have in life, the differing gender roles are most frequently discussed in the Bible in the context of these relationships. With regard to marriage, Ephesians 5 is the classic passage, teaching that husbands lead and love their wives, nourishing and cherishing them as Christ does the church. Wives submit themselves to their husbands, showing them honor and respect as the church

does to Christ. With regard to the family, the apostle Paul says Timothy must charge the older women to teach the younger "to marry, bear children, and guide the house" (I Tim. 5:14). The apostle explains that the woman's role in child-bearing both sanctifies and preserves her (I Tim. 2:15). In I Thessalonians 2:7 the apostle assumes the role of a nursing mother is to "cherish" her children. The Greek word means to promote the children's development as only one with a specific tenderness can.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, in I Thessalonians 2:11 the apostle assumes the father leads the children spiritually with exhortation, comfort, and positive incitement. The father is the "head" (Eph. 5:23) of his wife not only but also of the home. In this word we perceive shades of authority, responsibility, leadership, management, and pointing the way forward. In the church, men hold the positions of authority and teach, while the apostle declares that the woman who attempts this herself is a usurper (I Tim 2:11-15). The roles are quite clear. One is head, the other is help.

According to Scripture itself, these roles trace back to the creation of men and women as differently sexed human beings. The New Testament constantly refers the church back to the creation of the first man and woman (Matt. 19:4; I Tim. 2:13-15; Eph. 5:31). In Genesis 2:28 God gives both Adam and Eve the calling to be fruitful and multiply, yet they have different roles in fulfilling this command. God created one to inseminate and one to gestate (Gen. 4:1). Together they have dominion over the creation, but even in this shared duty, each has his/her own role. Before Eve was created, God gave to Adam alone the command to "dress" (cultivate) the garden and to "keep it" (protect, Gen. 2:15). God created Adam first and then gave to Adam the task of naming the animals and his wife as a sign of his headship and authority. Out of this comes his role in mar-

<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, the same word is used of the role of the husband in Ephesians 5:29, not with respect to his children, but with respect to his wife. The role that a mother has with respect to her children is similar to the role the man has with respect to his wife!

riage, family, and church in the rest of Scripture. Eve is created second, and God explains that she is a help, meet (fitted) for Adam. She is taken from Adam's rib, as Matthew Henry put it once, near his heart for him to love and cherish, under his head, for him to lead and for her to support. The Fall is itself a failure of the male and female to perform their roles. Adam should have rebuked Satan and protected his home as he was called to do as head (3:6 indicates he was not far away). Eve should have deferred to her husband instead of taking the leadership role from him.

Even the punishment God gives after the Fall teaches us the roles of Adam and Eve. God walks into the garden calling for Adam, not Eve, for he is ultimately responsible. Furthermore, the curse for sin actually highlights the roles of male and female. Adam's calling continues as the breadwinner, only now he must fulfill that role "in the sweat of his face" (Gen. 3:19). Eve's calling continues as a help to her husband and a keeper of the home, only now she will do that with a rebel's temptation, and with an accompanying pain and sorrow (Gen. 3:16). The roles do not melt away after the Fall; rather, God firms them by His words.

Of course, God does not give every man or woman marriage and/or children. The gender roles are more expansive than these states of life. Men are providers, protectors, and guiders of life in every way and at every opportunity. Women are helpers here, there, and everywhere. The roles are tied to maleness and femaleness.

### Gender characteristics in Scripture

Second, the Scriptures indicate the distinction between male and female gender by delineating general *characteristics* of men and women that accord with the roles. Here, let us start with the male and female bodies. Though the bodies are not gender, the bodies indicate how each sex is to express itself (which is gender). Furthermore, the physical differences between men and women fit their God-given roles.

Let me put it this way: If you were going to create a being whose gender role is to be the provider, protector, leader of wife and family and church, what kind of body would you give that being? And if you were going to create a complementary being to that first one, whose role it is to be a helper, generally by bearing children and guiding the house, what kind of body would you give that being? Would you not give the first being a body that is generally larger, stronger, and more muscular? Maybe you would create a chemical called testosterone and give the male 1,000% more of it than the female, so that he generally is larger, more driven, and dominant.

Would you not give the second being a body that can gestate children within herself? Would you perhaps give her a smaller frame and a voice with a higher pitch than the male so that she is not as intimidating to the children? Maybe you would give her a greater amount of a chemical called estrogen, so that among other things she develops a way to supply nutrition to the young she bears. And maybe you would make this nutrition that comes out of her almost miraculous: a perfect combination of nutrients for young, with the ability to mix in antibodies as needed when environmental circumstances threaten. Perhaps you would make it so that oxytocin is released in the little one when he sucks those nutrients from his mother, binding him to his mother so that he is psychologically open to being nurtured by her.

What an affront to the being to whom God gave the superpowers of a uterus and two life-supporting breasts to claim that a man can accomplish what she can! Perhaps the result of giving her this kind of body means that she is more vulnerable than the man in some ways. No matter, you have given the other being the calling and ability to protect and provide for her.

In addition to the bodily characteristics that are different between males and females, there are other characteristic differences. These too, match the scriptural gender roles. I Thessalonians 2:7 indicates that there is a natural gentleness, a nurturing characteristic in a woman that is especially drawn out of her by motherhood. There is also an intense sacrificing, a giving of whole self in that nurture (v. 8). In contrast and complement, the apostle says men possess a natural drive to lead by exhorting, comforting, and charging (I Thess. 2:11). Men also possess a deep desire to see justice prevail (v. 10). Women tend to be more emotional with more changeable moods, as even their monthly cycle tends to ensure. Men tend to be more emotionally stable, but less attuned to emotional needs.

Of course, there are exceptions and different people manifest different characteristics on a spectrum. Nevertheless, these things are generally true. Sometimes nurture and circumstances hide gendered characteristics until God's providence brings them out in the right situation. There are also people who work to hide certain characteristics in order to reject "the mold." Nonetheless, differing physical and psychological characteristics between males and females point to a God-created gender that is bound to one's sex and roles given to each.

### Presenting oneself as the opposite gender is sin

Third, the Scripture explicitly teaches that to attempt to present oneself as a member of the opposite sex in behavior or appearance is sin. This prohibition began

in the Old Testament already. Deuteronomy 22:5 states, “The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman’s garment: for all that do so are abomination unto the LORD thy God.” There is no nuance of meaning here. A man may not wear women’s clothing, nor vice versa. That is, one’s gender (social expression of his/her sex), here manifest in dress, is tied to one’s sex.

This passage is instructive because it indicates that there were people in Israel who were tempted to present themselves as another sex and gender. Perhaps this was due in large part to the cultural influence of the pagans who had any and all sexual perversions as part of the worship of their gods (some say the worship of various idol gods included transgenderism, even to the point of castration). Nonetheless, there were some for whom becoming transgender was a temptation. The Scriptures resolutely forbid these individuals to act on this temptation.

Someone might argue that this is an Old Testament law. The Old Testament also gives obsolete laws, such as the law that you may not build a new house without a railing along the roof (Deut. 22:8). True, but....

We distinguish three types of laws in the Old Testament. First is the *moral* law (Ten Commandments) that is eternal for all times, all places, and all peoples. Second are *civil* laws. There are principles found in these laws that can help us make applications of the moral law to life today. However, these laws are applications of the moral law specifically to Old Testament Israel’s life as a nation. These laws are not strictly applicable to the New Testament church because the church is no longer a state. Third, there are *ceremonial* laws. These laws are specific to the church living in the age of types and shadows. Jesus Christ (the reality to which these ceremonies pointed) fulfilled these laws, and they fall away as laws for the practice of the New Testament church.

How does one know which Old Testament laws are which? Most of the time the answer is straightforward. For example, the law regarding the railing around the roofline of the house is a civil law, applying the sixth commandment (“Thou shalt not kill”) to Israel’s life as a nation. All ten of the Ten Commandments are expounded in the New Testament as the enduring law of God. In addition, the New Testament makes some specific, authoritative applications of the Ten Command-

ments to New Testament life. Sometimes the New Testament applications of the moral law are the same as the applications of the moral law in the Old Testament. That is a clue that these laws are moral and enduring. For example, the New Testament explicitly forbids homosexuality and homosexual desire in Romans 1:24-32. This lets us know for certain that Leviticus 20:13 (“If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination”) is an enduring truth, part of the seventh commandment of the moral law.

What about the Old Testament law regarding transgenderism? We could almost assume that this too is part of the moral law even before we examine the New Testament to see if this prohibition is repeated. Nonetheless, the New Testament does indeed repeat the prohibition found in Deuteronomy 22:8. First, the apostle Paul says in I Corinthians 11:14-15

“Doth not even nature itself teach you, that, if a man have long hair, it is a shame unto him? But if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her: for her hair is given her for a covering.” Whatever else this passage might mean, it certainly communicates that there is a *natural* difference between men and women and that men are not to present themselves as women, neither are women permitted to present themselves as men.

In addition, the apostle speaks explicitly of men who present themselves as females in I Corinthians 6:9 and 10, “Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God.” The Greek word for “effeminate” in this verse refers to men who present themselves as females, sometimes to the point of castration. The one who does this unrepentantly shall not “inherit the kingdom of God.”

By speaking of specific roles for males and females, by describing God-given characteristics for males and females that match these roles, and by forbidding any expression of oneself as a member of the opposite gender, the Bible ties gender and sex together. In God’s good design they are both objective and fixed. This is what the Bible means when it says, “Male and female created he them.”

**This passage is instructive because it indicates that there were people in Israel who were tempted to present themselves as another sex and gender. ...there were some for whom becoming transgender was a temptation. The Scriptures resolutely forbid these individuals to act on this temptation.**





## Strength of youth

Rev. Heath Bleyenberg, pastor of Immanuel Protestant Reformed Church in Lacombe, Alberta

## Spiritual maturity

**But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ"**

**Ephesians 4:15**

There is something terribly wrong with that child who forever remains a child. Year after year that child does not grow. The parents rightfully become very concerned. They plead with the doctor "Our child is not growing. There's no development at all! What could possibly be wrong?" That's a real fear for parents. Every father and mother knows that fear when they bring their child to the doctor with such a serious condition.

Are you growing? Are you maturing? Are you developing?

There is something terribly wrong with that child of God who is a perennial spiritual infant. Why is there that lack of development and maturity? Perhaps there is hardly, if any, interest in spiritual things. Perhaps that person has become enamored with worldly matters and now has little time to devote to godly matters. And there is a host of reasons for this spiritual stagnation. We do well to examine our hearts and put the finger on those compartments in our lives where we know we have not been faithful as we ought.

A prolonged season of little spiritual growth is an indication that a terrible condition has begun to set in—spiritual complacency. Spiritual complacency is the sin of being indifferent and apathetic to spiritual matters. One might say to that spiritually complacent person, "You really ought to exercise yourself in godliness." But then the response is given, "It's not that big of a deal. I'm fine where I'm at." If left unchecked, this attitude betrays an indifference toward God Himself. The Jews in Jerusalem after the captivity were self-satisfied and at ease in life. They said "The Lord will not do good, neither will he do evil" (Zeph. 1:12). It's the spiritual shrugging of the shoulders whereby one says, "Who is God? Really, who is He? You understand at this point in my life I don't want to be bothered by God and what He does and doesn't say. I'm fine and happy doing my own thing." That's the sad spiritual condition the Bible describes as becoming "settled on their lees" (Zeph. 1:12).

### The exhortation to grow

The Word of God exhorts us to grow spiritually. Ephesians 4:15 calls up to "grow up into him in all things." That is our calling as members of the body of Christ whether we are children, young people, fathers and mothers in the home, or elderly saints. This is our calling together as a local congregation. This is our calling as a denomination of churches. Grow up in the Lord Jesus Christ!

It is not the will of God that we forever remain infants in the faith. Paul describes the church in Corinth as infants. "And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ" (I Cor. 3:1). This is no commendation on the part of the apostle. As of yet the Corinthians were carnal, having not yet fully grown up, and Paul feeds them with milk and not meat. But it must not remain that way! The Corinthians must in time grow up.

Paul writes to the Ephesians, "That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive" (4:14). The desire of the apostle is that the Ephesians will advance out of spiritual infancy and grow up in the Lord Jesus Christ.

To "grow up" (Eph. 4:15) is a word that means "to increase and become more." It is a word used in connection with the physical body growing and maturing (Luke 2:40). As applied to plants we must "consider the lilies how they grow" (Luke 12:27). In a figurative sense it applies to spiritual realities: "increasing in the knowledge of God" (Col. 1:10); the whole body being nourished by Christ the head "increaseth with the increase of God" (Col. 2:19); "As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby" (I Pet. 2:2). Spiritual growth is increasing in our knowledge of God and maturing in all our holy living as we are fed by the word of the gospel.

### Growing up in Christ

We are interested in a very specific kind of growth.

Spiritual maturing is a growth in the Lord Jesus Christ. “But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ” (Eph. 4:15).

To be sure, we need growth in every area of our lives. We need to grow in our prayer life. We need to grow in our study of the Word of God. We need to grow in watching our tongues and only speaking that which is edifying to the neighbor. We need to grow in our marriages. We need to grow in performing more and more good works to the glory of God’s name.

These are all good things. We need to increase in them. But without first growing up into the Lord Jesus Christ, all those other things become impossible. Growth in Jesus Christ is first and foremost.

To “grow up” in Christ means that we increase in certain respects regarding Christ. We must increase in our knowledge of Christ as the Son of God who is at the very heart and center of the counsel of God regarding all things (Eph. 1:10). We must grow in our conscious dependence upon Jesus as the Good Shepherd who cares for all His sheep. We must grow in our boldness to declare to all and sundry the wonderful things my Savior has done for my soul (Ps. 66:16)—remission of sins, righteousness, being made children of God, and heirs of eternal life.

Growing up in Christ is not simply an intellectual knowledge. There are those kind of people. They have that intellectual knowledge. But they use that knowledge simply for the sake of winning a theological argument and having the satisfaction of wiping the floor with their opponent. That is not a growing up in Christ, simply that intellectual knowledge.

But growth in Christ is a knowledge that sinks down deep into my heart so that I confess with the apostle, “Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ” (Phil. 3:8).

To grow up in Christ means that we love Him. We serve Him. We worship Him. We identify with Him. My life is wrapped up in the Lord Jesus Christ who loved me and laid down His life for me.

### **Desiring this spiritual growth**

This spiritual growth and maturity in Christ becomes the deep desire of the child of God. God unites us to Jesus by a true and living faith and makes us willing in the day of His power (Ps. 110:3). The result being

that we desire Jesus all the more! We want to be as close as possible to our Savior and live with Him in close fellowship and communion. And not only with Him, but with all the other members of the body. This desire for spiritual growth becomes the active pursuit of godliness in our lives.

So important is this desire for spiritual maturity that it becomes one of the criteria for those who would be proper partakers of the Lord’s Supper. The Heidelberg Catechism in Q&A 81 allows those only to the Lord’s Supper who “earnestly desire to have their faith more and more strengthened, and their lives more holy.” The impenitent, spiritually complacent person has no business coming to the table of the Lord. He is at worst a hypocrite, or at best one who does not turn to God with a sincere heart (Q&A 81). But the fervent desire of the Christian as he approaches the table and goes out in all of life is this: “I want my faith more and more strengthened. I want my life more holy. I want to grow up in the Lord Jesus Christ and arrive at even a more mature faith.”

This spiritual growth becomes our lifelong desire. A little boy can grow up into a man and say, “Now I’m all grown up. I’ve arrived. My years of growing up are over.” But we can never say that from a spiritual point of view. Never can we say, “I’ve had a nice little growth spurt. I’ve been diligent in what’s required of me. And I think I’ve arrived. I’m pretty content with my spiritual condition at the moment.” That’s not the mark of spiritual maturity. That’s the mark of immaturity and pride. “Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall” (I Cor. 10:12). Spiritual growth in Christ and maturing in the faith is a lifelong process.

Are you growing? Are you maturing? Are you developing? You haven’t fallen into spiritual complacency and lethargy have you?

“When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.” There’s nothing wrong with being a spiritual infant. That’s how we all start off. But it is not the will of God that we remain infants in the faith year after year. We must grow up in Christ “till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ” (Eph. 4:13).

We turn our attention next time, the Lord willing, to the various ways for us to mature spiritually.



## Pertaining to the churches in common— Domestic Mission Committee

Mr. Doug Dykstra, member of Faith Protestant Reformed Church and secretary of DMC

# Domestic mission committee update

Almost two years have gone by since our previous home missionary accepted a call to the pastoral ministry. At that time, he had been laboring to develop a mission field, communicating with various contacts, and assisting the churches in their work of evangelism. In the providence of God, the calling church at that time was not able to continue its work as a calling church. Although that part of the work ceased, the work of the Domestic Mission Committee (DMC) did not end at that time.

In the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC), the DMC is set up to “regulate and supervise all mission activity of the churches in common as prescribed by synod” (Constitution of the DMC). Synod 2021 gave instruction to the DMC to move forward with finding another calling church and continue the work of developing a field. The DMC had to continue to face the question of how to find contacts and how to develop them into a possible field of labor. In keeping with that mandate of synod, the subcommittees of the DMC have been working to develop a new website and a mission manual. They have also been in communication with the Reformed Witness Hour and the evangelism committees of the churches to find localities that may be suitable to invest in radio programming and using other means to develop a field. Most importantly, Zion PRC (Jenison MI) accepted the request of the churches to serve as calling church for the domestic mission labors of the PRC. Let’s take a brief look at some of this work.

The purpose of a new website is more effectively to present the PRC in its witness to the world. By updating the website, it is hoped that more people can be reached and therefore more contacts can be made. This new site will have sections containing content for varying degrees of knowledge. Special focus will be on creating content focused on subjects like Who is God?, our need for God, God’s love for His children, and God’s direction for a Christian life. Another section will deal with an introduction to the Reformed faith and who the PRC are. A third section will have content that our members and friends of the PRC may be interested in. The website is a vital tool to reach people with God’s Word.

A mission manual is being developed. The manual is

needed to provide clear biblical guidelines regarding the development, organizing, and executing the work of domestic missions. The purpose of the manual is to explain mission methodology as it relates to the discovery and development of a mission field with the goal of that field becoming a Protestant Reformed congregation. Biblical guidelines are being written for the various bodies in this work with the goal of assisting our churches in the implementation of the mission policy adopted by Synod in 1965. Good progress is being made. We are grateful to God for the men who have committed much time to writing this manual!

Synod 2022 reinforced the importance of working with the Reformed Witness Hour in providing resources and some direction in the use of radio and podcasts to help in finding those with whom we can work. This is interesting work, but it is also very difficult to know who listens and where they reside. The DMC is grateful for the work of the Reformed Witness Hour Committee. It has a worthy part in the spread of the gospel using radio and podcast.

With gratitude to God, Zion PRC has accepted the work of being a calling church for the domestic mission labor. Thus far, God has not led a minister to accept the call to be a domestic missionary and pick up this work. God will provide in His own time. Meanwhile, the work continues. Not only does Zion PRC do the work of calling a missionary; they are also enthusiastically picking up many facets of the work of developing a field in the short time they have had. Besides the mission work they are doing, the evangelism committee of Zion PRC is in its second year of a leading a community Bible study. The DMC is grateful to God for the enthusiastic work of Zion PRC!

Our Savior commanded in Mark 16:15: “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.” He was speaking to the church of that time, the disciples; but also, to the church of all ages. Therefore, the calling for each of our local churches is to spread

the gospel unto every creature! Not only is the gospel to be preached in the local church but the call is to GO, meaning anywhere there is opportunity, whether in foreign countries or in our own country. That command is not limited to “if we have time,” or “if we have men.” Always, “unto the end of the world,” the command is Go! Although the quantity of work that can be done is limited by the providence of God, yet we must always be busy in the work. Christ says the “harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few,” so the Lord of the harvest gives this command knowing the need for ministers is great. He gave this command to only eleven apostles and they faced a world of work!

This call goes to a local church whose members must be “mission-minded.” Do we desire the salvation of the lost? Do we as members desire that the gospel goes forth? The Thessalonians were known as those who

“were ensamples to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia. For from you sounded out the word of the Lord not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to God-ward is spread abroad; so that we need not to speak anything” (I Thess. 1:7-8). The elect of God in Thessalonica were known for their zeal in spreading the gospel because the “joy of the Holy Ghost” filled them. They had hope in the Lord Jesus (v. 3) and desired to share that. This same mind must be in each of us in our local congregations as we seek to fulfil the commission of our Lord in our churches.

So, we pray that we may be found faithful in continuing the work with joy that our Savior placed before us. You might ask, “What can I do on behalf of the mission work of our churches?” Pray! Pray for the spread of the gospel and that doors may be opened to us.

## Announcements

### Wedding anniversary

With thankfulness to God, we rejoice with our parents and grandparents, **Gerry and Alice Guichelaar**, as they celebrate their 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary on December 14, 2022. We thank the Lord for His covenant mercies shown to us in the gift of God-fearing parents, whose marriage was established in the Lord. “One generation shall praise thy works to another, and shall declare thy mighty acts” (Psalm 145:4).

Ray and Nanda Kikkert

Fred and Emma Lewis (Levi)

Haley, Caleb, Mia

Jurjen and Dinara Guichelaar

Jerian

David Guichelaar

Emily, Ethan

Erik and Cherith Guichelaar

Kennedy, Jayden, Bethany, Mikayla, Alison

Wingham, Ontario, Canada

### Classis East

Classis East will meet in regular session on Wednesday, January 11, 2023, at 8:00 A.M., in the Grandville Protestant Reformed Church, Grandville, Michigan. Material for this session must be in the hands of the stated clerk by December 12, 2022.

Rev. C. Spronk, Stated Clerk

### Reformed Witness Hour

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

#### Rev. W. Bruinsma

December 4—The Messiah Revealed  
Isaiah 40:4, 5

December 11—Your Salvation Comes!  
Isaiah 62:11, 12

December 18—A Prophecy of Praise  
Luke 1:68, 69

December 25—The Branch of Jesse  
Isaiah 11:1