

The Standard Bearer

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Dayspring from on high

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Forgiving myself?

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Meditation

Rev. John Marcus, pastor of Peace PRC in Lansing, Illinois

Dayspring from on high

...the dayspring from on high hath visited us, to give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

Luke 1:78b-79

Christmas is a season in which we see many glittering lights and enjoy visits with friends and relatives. But how much more glorious is the Light that God sent forth to shine in darkness! And, how much more wonderful is that visit of the Dayspring from on high!

Zacharias had not been able to speak because he doubted God's word when the angel first announced that he and Elisabeth would have a son. When their baby was born and believing Zacharias wrote "His name is John," his mouth was immediately opened and he praised God.

He does not merely praise God that he and Elisabeth had a son after so many years; rather, he praises God for His covenant faithfulness in visiting His people. Jehovah God had kept His promise to send the Messiah, the Dayspring from on High. The birth of John (the Baptist) meant that the birth of the Dayspring was just a few months off. The Dayspring was ready to give His glorious light.

Wonderful visit!

The wonder that we celebrate this season is that the Dayspring has visited *us*! Jesus Christ, the Lord God, has come in the flesh.

That is what Zacharias was celebrating on the day he spoke the words of our text. For thousands of years, God had declared through the prophets that He would send a Savior into the world. Zacharias adds his voice to the chorus of all those prophets: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for he hath visited and redeemed his people, and hath raised up an horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David; as he spake by the mouth of his holy prophets, which have been since the world began: that we should be saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all that hate us; to perform the mercy promised to our fathers, and to remember his holy covenant" (Luke 1:68-72).

Since the world began, God has proclaimed essentially one word of promise through the mouth of His prophets. He promised to send the seed of the woman who would crush the serpent's head. God made essentially the same promise to our father Abraham in Genesis 17. Zacharias was familiar with Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah. We find the very last prophecy concerning Christ in Malachi 4:2: "But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise...." Malachi depicts Christ as a rising Sun.

That and many other prophecies were being revealed as Zacharias spoke. For thousands of years, God promised to send a Savior for His people. Now, the promise had become reality. Undoubtedly, Zacharias knew that his son once leaped in Elisabeth's womb at the presence of the Messiah, who was yet in Mary's womb (cf. Luke 1:44). Now, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Zacharias declares that the promised Dayspring has come.

A dayspring refers to the rising sun. As the sun comes from below the horizon, pierces through the fog and scatters the darkness, so too the Dayspring, who is pure light and perfectly righteous, came to dispel the dark and dismal shades of sin and death. This Dayspring comes "from on high;" that is, He comes from heaven. The Dayspring is God Himself come in the flesh.

Jehovah God Himself has visited us! That is why Zacharias says, "Blessed be the *Lord God of Israel* for *he* hath visited and redeemed his people" (Luke 1:68). "Visit" in the original has the idea of coming and making a careful inspection with a particular purpose. We read of God visiting Israel in Exodus 3:16: "The LORD God of your fathers...appeared to me saying, I have surely visited you, and seen that which is done to you in Egypt." When God visited Israel during their bondage, He saw their taskmasters, heard their cry, and set Himself to deliver them. So it is with the Dayspring; He came down from heaven and visited us. Not only did He see our misery, He experienced our misery as He took on human flesh. Already in Bethlehem, when there was no room in the inn, He felt that misery. Visiting us, He was in all points tempted like as we are, yet

without sin. Especially as He was forsaken on the cross, Jesus experienced our misery.

The Dayspring did not visit the earth for every man, woman, and child. Luke 1:68 says that God “visited and redeemed *His people*.” Verse 73 speaks about the oath that God made “to *our* father Abraham,” the father of all believers. The Dayspring visited *us*, who are God’s elect and set Himself to give us light.

Glorious light!

The visit began with the true Light coming into the world; but His visit did not end there. The Dayspring continues to shine in darkness and gives to us glorious light. Zacharias says that the Dayspring visited us “to give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death” (Luke 1:78).

But, before we appreciate that glorious light, we must see our gloom. Only as we begin to fathom how deep is that darkness in which we sat can we appreciate the glorious light that visited us in Bethlehem. That darkness is so deep that it is called “the shadow of death” (Luke 1:79). The darkness is a picture of our condition by nature as we are afflicted by the chains of sin. In Adam, we all fell into that bondage. By ourselves apart from grace we are dead in sin, unable to do any good, in the grips of death. By nature, we dwelt in that hopeless, dark shadow of death (cf. Ps. 107:10ff.).

Such was the darkness of our bondage that only the cross of Christ could deliver us from it. Only through the darkness that Christ suffered on the cross could we be freed from the punishment that we deserve for our sins. As Jesus was surrounded by darkness, cursed and forsaken by the Father, suffering His infinite wrath, He satisfied God’s justice in our place.

Why did the Dayspring from on high, the Light of the world, suffer such darkness? He came “to give light to those sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death.” As a light shining into a dark place, the Dayspring shines His grace towards us. No matter how thick the darkness, the Dayspring overcomes it. The light shines out bringing healing to us.

The Dayspring overcomes the darkness of sin, first by taking away the guilt of sin, granting us the verdict of righteousness in God’s sight. Secondly, He breaks the power of sin so that we are free to walk in His glorious light. After giving us that new freedom, He also guides

“our feet into the way of peace” (Luke 1:79). God establishes harmony between us and Himself on the basis of Christ’s perfect righteousness. The way of peace is the pathway that leads to peace now and perfect peace that we will experience in heaven.

We never would desire that way of peace as we were by nature. But the Dayspring brings us into that way. The Spirit of Christ continues to work in our lives to guide us along that way so that we walk in harmony with God in righteousness and holiness. The Dayspring began to shine in Bethlehem, but He continues to shine on us and causes us to bear fruit.

What a glorious light is that Dayspring!

All because of His tender mercy!

What drove the Dayspring to shine upon us so graciously? It is “through the tender mercy of our God” (Luke 1:78). God sent His only begotten Son to be born in Bethlehem and to die on the cross on account of His tender mercy. Our salvation and every blessing connected to our salvation has its fountain in the tender mercy of God.

Mercy is the tender affection of God whereby He pities us in our misery and desires to deliver us from it. God saw us sitting in darkness and pitied us. Mercy is why He sent the Dayspring to bring us out of our darkness. Not just mercy, but “tender mercy.” Literally, “bowels of mercy.” Ancient people saw a connection between the innermost organs of a person and the mercy

they showed, probably because when one feels great pity it affects them inwardly. And so too God’s mercy towards us is not a cold, calculated determination to deliver us. Rather, His mercy reaches to the very core of His being, affecting Him to such a degree that He sets Himself to save us.

Two thousand years ago God manifested His covenant mercy in Bethlehem when He kept the oath that He swore to our fathers. He caused the Dayspring from on high to visit us.

The light of the Dayspring from on high has shined upon us in this life. We have covenant fellowship with our God. But, the brightness of that Dayspring will reach its fullness when God takes us to glory. Then we will see His light in all its fullness. How glorious is that tender mercy of God manifested in the Dayspring!

Why did the Dayspring from on high, the Light of the world, suffer such darkness? He came “to give light to those sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death.” As a light shining into a dark place, the Dayspring shines His grace towards us. No matter how thick the darkness, the Dayspring overcomes it. The light shines out bringing healing to us.



Editorial

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

Forgiving myself?

If you have ever heard someone cry, “I just can’t forgive myself!” or if you have heard that in your own soul and thought it to be proper, it would be wise to test that concept with Scripture. The biblical doctrine of forgiveness is assaulted by more than a few false doctrines, and the doctrine of *self*-forgiveness is one of them.¹ Added to the biblical doctrine of vertical forgiveness that God grants men, and the biblical doctrine of horizontal forgiveness that men grant to other men, is the *unbiblical* doctrine of a ‘reflexive’ forgiveness that a man grants to *himself*. When God’s forgiveness does not relieve his conscience and the testimony of his brother’s forgiveness does not give him peace, he turns to himself to be forgiven.² Thus, the expression, not uncommon even among orthodox Christians, “I just can’t forgive myself.”

But is this so wrong? Some sins have such unimaginable consequences that they may tempt a man to imagine that he needs something more than God’s forgiveness to give him peace.

At work a Christian married man is attracted to a married woman not his wife, she’s attracted to him, and they fall into the sin of adultery. Though his marriage survives, hers does not. Her husband divorces her and her children are so angry they scatter because of mom’s sin. With a foolish and selfish act, the Christian man destroyed a home and family. Soon, he is truly sorry with godly sorrow, believes that God forgives him and his wife forgives him, but he cannot, he thinks, forgive himself. He lives the rest of his life with a heavy burden: he destroyed a family.

A mom’s back pain tempts her to take one more pain pill than the doctor prescribed. As the day progresses, she succumbs to the temptation to have a small drink

before she picks up her daughters from piano lessons. On the way home she misses a stop sign, plows into a truck, and as a result one of her daughters dies and the other is forever crippled. She is sorry, believes God forgives her, finds forgiveness from her husband and surviving daughter, but cannot, she thinks, forgive herself. Knowing what she did, how can she live?

One can imagine many other nightmares, as many real as hypothetical, that tell of damage that cannot be repaired, wounds that cannot be healed, hurt that will never abate, debt that cannot be paid. And you were the cause of it all. God may forgive, but can you ever live with yourself again?

These are the questions of Christianity. The doctrine of forgiveness could not get more practical than right here and getting the doctrine correct could not be more important than right here.

The origin of the teaching of self-forgiveness would be an interesting study, but what helped popularize it in modern Christianity is Lewis B. Smedes’ *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don’t Deserve*.³ First published in 1984, it was reprinted twelve years later and sold over 500,000 copies. Smedes was nurtured and trained in the Reformed tradition. From 1957 to 1970 he taught at Calvin College and then for 25 years at Fuller Theological Seminary in California, instructing two generations of young people and future preachers in the doctrine of self-forgiveness.

It is difficult to know what most mean by “forgiving yourself” because most merely use the expression without defining it; but we can learn from Smedes. For him, forgiving yourself is not reminding yourself to listen to God’s declaration of your righteousness in Christ (which would be commendable but is not called “forgiving yourself”) but is “your decision to live as though your sins of yesterday are irrelevant.” To forgive yourself is not to listen to the gracious judgment of a mer-

1 In the last two editorials (Nov. 1 and Dec. 1) we explained the “sin of forgiving” those who were not sorry for their sin. Forgiving oneself is another “sin of forgiveness.”

2 Creative wickedness has no bounds. When it has its way, yet another false doctrine is added: Man must forgive *God* for the evils of which He is allegedly guilty.

3 San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1984. My quotations come from chapter 8.

ciful God, but to “ignore the indictment you level at yourself.” Forgiving yourself is to “rewrite the script of your life” as though your sin did not happen. When a man forgives himself, he experiences a “release by discovering that his terrible past is irrelevant to who he is now and is going to be in the future. He is free from his own judgment.” Smedes is confident that “even the worst of us can find the power to set ourselves free.” He judges that forgiving yourself is “almost the ultimate miracle of healing.” Because self-forgiveness is man’s work, man performs this ultimate of miracles.

The error of this false doctrine, first, is apparent if one who bases his faith and life on the Bible’s teachings simply reads his Bible, because self-forgiveness cannot be found there. Not a word of it. Not in one verse. It cannot even be “deduced from Scripture” by “good and necessary consequence.”⁴ That Scripture says not a word about forgiving ourselves ought to be enough to reject the idea. In Smedes’ book Scripture is conspicuous by its absence.

Scripture’s teaching is not that I justify myself, but that God’s righteous servant will justify me (Is. 53:11). Scripture does not teach that my sense of guilt is removed by my forgetting my past but by God casting my sin “into the depths of the sea” (Mic. 7:19). I do not find in the Bible that my decision about my past gives me peace, but that faith in Christ does (Rom. 3:28, 30; 5:1). Even children know that the horror of their past is not erased when they consider it irrelevant, but when God says that He “remembers it no more” (Jer. 31:34). The approval I need does not come from myself but from God, when I cry out “send thy approval from on high, my righteousness make clear!” (Psalter 31; Ps. 17).

Second, the error of self-forgiveness is in Smedes’ definitions. No one can “re-write the script of his life” any more than he can deny where he was born and raised. Asking someone to “make a decision to live as though your sins of yesterday are irrelevant” is like asking a woman to decide to live as though her being a white female is irrelevant. Who can convince anyone, much less himself, that “his terrible past is irrelevant to who he is now and is going to be in the future”? The error of it is in the reading of it.

Third, most seriously, the error of self-forgiveness is that it robs God of His glory. God has not asked you to remove your guilt or make a decision to free yourself from your past. Forgiving us is His business, not ours. He has provided His Son to remove our guilt, cover us in His blood, declare to us that He does not see any sin in us but only the perfect righteousness and holiness of Christ. May you decide that this is not enough to ease your guilty conscience? May you conclude that you need your own declaration of innocence? Is God’s forgiveness good, but just not enough? The blasphemy of self-*salvation* could not appear more clearly than in the false doctrine of self-forgiveness. Man will take the honor from God and give it to himself, reduce God’s forgiveness to a secondary place and elevate his to prominence. It is awful to imagine someone saying that he cannot live without forgiving himself, and he just cannot forgive himself. But it is worse that someone would dare take to himself what belongs only to God.

So now where? It is relatively easy to say that self-forgiveness is wrong. It is far harder to minister to the heavy grief of one who has destroyed someone else’s life. The doctrine of self-forgiveness was not shaken out of some theologian’s sleeve as he was sitting in his ivory tower with a determination to develop false doctrine. It came as the result of the great struggle in the heart of great sinners how to live with a good conscience before God and with peace in the world. Smedes and others got it wrong. But what must be said to a troubled soul that just cannot find relief?

First, and of primary importance, by faith lay hold of the full sufficiency of Christ’s perfect sacrifice. We must say to such a repentant sinner: Look carefully and see clearly what the Lord Jesus Christ endured when He came to make perfect satisfaction for all your sins. The power to go on in life is by embracing what Jesus has done and will continue to do for you. Look to Jesus, not to yourself. You are not to reassess your past as irrelevant, but to assess Jesus Christ and your relationship to Him. Drink fully the truth that He spent His life bearing the burden of your guilt and your shame... not the guilt and shame of little offenses, but the guilt and shame of murderers of fathers and mothers, of prostitutes and sodomites and kidnappers (I Tim. 1:9, 10), and every other sinner imaginable. Live under the shadow of His cross where He hung, full of our shame and disgrace. Embrace the cover of His righteousness that He provided as the *fullness* of your salvation. Bask in the light of His countenance as He looks you in the eye with the love that brought Him to the cross, for you.

⁴ Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 1, section 6, says, “The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit or traditions of men.”

We need Christ. He will suffice for all our guilt. Do not turn to self-forgiveness. Remember our song: “My cry for help is turned to praise, for *He* has set me free.” In other words, burdens are lifted at Calvary. Oh, the glorious thought: “...my sin, not in part, but the whole, is nailed to the cross, and *I bear it no more.*” No more! No more bearing the sin! No more!

Second, grasp the full depth of the awful sin. Here we go back a step. It may well be that a person embraces Christ fully, genuinely, and is still troubled. Even then, he must not turn to self-forgiveness. There may be another reality to consider. It is possible that his repentance is genuine insofar as it goes, but that it *goes* only so far. It does not go as wide and deep as it needs because he does not grasp the breadth or depth of the sin. Sorrow for sin, although it is real, is not sufficient because we have not thought through either the extent of the damage that was done, or the sinful patterns that allowed us to fall into the sin. Thus, we have not yet heard the fullness of forgiveness from our gracious God. We removed only *part* of the sliver embedded in our flesh.

The man whose adultery wrecked another family committed not only the act of adultery, but many other sins. Confession for him might include confession of a multitude of sins: sinful diminishing of love for his own wife, lack of love for the other woman’s husband and family, perhaps carelessness with drink, or neglect

of prayer and devotions. The woman who killed one daughter and maimed the other can confess the sin of an extra pill and a foolish drink before driving, but there may be many other things that led to the extra pills and a drink in the middle of the day. Or she may not realize the depth of the hurt she caused her husband. When the realization of sin grows, when our sorrow for it goes deeper and hatred of it more passionate, the mountain of God’s grace will become larger in our eyes, and more precious. What may seem counter-intuitive in this situation—looking further at our sin—may be what the burdened sinner needs *in order that he may see Christ more clearly.*

Third, it is always good to live in deep humility. Which is not to say in guilt. There is a difference between retaining guilt and retaining humility. A humble sense of our abiding sinfulness is healthy. Constant awareness of how damaging sin is can be sanctifying. We never want to get near such sin again. We realize that, if we were left to ourselves, we would return like a dog to the vomit. A walk in humility is of great value.

Fourth, continued consciousness of sin’s permanent damage leads us to long for Christ. The sense that what is broken can never be repaired on this side of eternity will lead us to look more intensely for the Lord’s appearing. He will make all things new. He will make the darkness light. “Come, Lord Jesus.”

Letters

Reporting sexual abuse (revisited)

Dear readers,

In the November 1 issue of the *Standard Bearer*, a reader submitted a letter that asked about “reporting sexual abuse.” The editor responded by showing that consistories must make careful judgments about whether a sexual *sin* should be reported or not. This response caused concern in another reader because the original letter was about sexual *abuse*, and therefore the editor’s response should have limited itself to sexual *abuse*, not sexual sin generally. The concerned reader’s fear was that those who have been sexually abused/assaulted would now hesitate to report their assault for fear of being examined with a multitude of questions rather than being believed.

The *SB* wants to be of help to all readers, especially to those who have been damaged by the horrible sin of murderous sexual abuse. We want nothing to be misunderstood and, most importantly, want nothing to be written that will be hurtful.

We are sorry that the response *broadened* the question to “sexual sins” without making that clear. On the one hand, this *broadening* of the question allowed the use of the word “perpetrator” for someone who commits sexual sin but might not have committed sexual assault/murder. But usually, the designation *perpetrator* is for someone who has murderously and criminally assaulted another. That was not the intent in the letter. In addition, the broadening of the question left open the possible misunderstanding that some sexual abuse must be reported to authorities and other sexual abuse not. Our apologies for both.

To be clear: All cases of sexual *abuse*, that is, sexual sin that is murderous (and a *crime*), must be reported to the authorities. In these cases, the elders will consider the sin to be a public matter and report it to the congregation. The former editorials and the special issue of May 1 made this clear. There should be no question about this.

The November 1 response was making the point that

some sexual *sin* is not always obviously sexual *abuse* or criminal. In these cases, the elders must be very careful in making the judgment. Does this particular sexual sin rise to the level that requires it to be reported to the police and publicized in the congregation? In some cases, it would be very wrong for them to do so. Elders must exercise wisdom and care in all their work, especially in such sensitive cases. There should be no question about this either.

In other words, the November 1 response should not be read to mean that *some* sexual abuse (murderous assault, crime) should be reported and publicized, but that *other* sexual abuse (murderous assault, crime) should not be reported and publicized.

We hope this clarifies the matter for our readers.

Prof. B. Gritters



All around us

Rev. Nathan Decker, pastor of Grandville PRC in Grandville, Michigan

Christian school in Florida under pressure stands strong

As a Christian pastor and preacher, a common theme upon which I ponder is how believers in the church, myself included as a minister of the gospel, will experience the attack of the enemies of Christ. The Scriptures are clear: “Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution” (II Tim. 3:12). In describing the citizens of the kingdom of God, Jesus says: “Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness’ sake: for their’s is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:10). The entire teaching of the New Testament Scriptures on the last days and the coming of Antichrist and his kingdom is a testimony to the pressure and hurt that the people of God will experience as they anticipate the coming of our Savior. The truth of the Scriptures in this regard is clear.

But in meditating upon and teaching that truth, the question is faced: how *specifically* might we as Christians begin *actually* to experience the pressure and persecution? It is easy to point out how the general direction of our nation and our government’s policies are becoming increasingly anti-Christian, paving the way for such persecution. That line of thinking, although accurate, places the opposition in the future. But what about now? How might we experience it today, and what must we be prepared for? Those questions are more challenging to answer, as many who read the *Standard Bearer* still experience freedom from overt persecution against the church.

In light of these questions, I would like to comment briefly on events regarding Grace Christian

School, located in Valrico, Florida. I knew nothing about this school before reading about what happened there, which is partly what drew me to this story. From everything I could ascertain, there was nothing unique about the school. It was an ordinary private Christian school with policies and practices that the school believed conformed to the Word of God. What occurred at the school took place simply because an NBC news reporter chose to write a story about the school and its policy, resulting in a firestorm. One of the lessons to be learned, of which we are becoming increasingly aware in this age of social media and connectivity, is how almost anyone (news reporter or not) can cause a stir publicly concerning nearly anything. This tactic may be increasingly used to pressure and hurt Christian institutions and God’s people.

The title of the NBC article was “Florida Christian school says it will only refer to students by ‘biological gender,’ asks gay and transgender students to leave.”¹ The reporter wrote the story after receiving a copy of an email from the administrator, Barry McKeen, written to the parents of students outlining the school’s standing policy regarding human sexuality. The following are pertinent parts of the email, some of which were quoted in the NBC article:

We believe that God created mankind in His image:

¹ <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/florida-school-will-only-refer-students-biological-gender-rcna43545>.

male (man) and female (woman), sexually different but with equal dignity.

Therefore, one's biological sex must be affirmed, and no attempts should be made to physically change, alter, or disagree with one's biological gender—including, but not limited to, elective sex reassignment, transvestite, transgender, or non-binary gender fluid acts of conduct (Gen. 1:26-28). Students in school will be referred to by the gender on their birth certificate and be referenced in name in the same fashion.

We believe that any form of homosexuality, lesbianism, bisexuality, transgender identity/lifestyle, self-identification, bestiality, incest, fornication, adultery and pornography are sinful in the sight of God and the church (Gen. 2:24; Lev. 18:1-30; Rom. 1:26-29; I Cor. 5:1; I Cor. 6:9; I Thess. 4:2-7). Students who are found participating in these lifestyles will be asked to leave the school immediately.

As is evident from these quotations, the policy is an explanation of the Word of God concerning human sexuality. It is a policy that had been in place for many years at the school. The parents were aware of the meaning and implications of the policy. It was a policy the school took seriously to conform to in teaching and practice. And it is a policy, or one similar in content, that many Christian schools would have throughout the country. Here is the point: all it took was a reporter to get his hands on the email, talk to a few former students at the school who confirmed by experience the veracity of the policy, and write a public article. The result: an otherwise normal Christian school is brought into the spotlight, and the pressure of the world is experienced in a very real way.

The school administrator chose not to talk on the record to the reporter. However, he issued a Facebook video message in response to the NBC article, outlining where the NBC article contained truth, correcting what was false, further explaining the school's position, and making clear that he stands first before God and His Word of truth. The school generally, and the administrator specifically, experienced severe pushback. Commenting on the aftermath, the administrator indicated that the school "fielded hundreds, probably thousands, of phone calls Thursday, Friday, over the weekend,

with just some of the most outrageous things: People threatening to burn my house down, threatening to kill my family."² The school for a short period even had to bring in a "massive law enforcement" presence to protect students and staff from potential threats.³ In the end, the school remained firm in its position.

Here are a few concluding thoughts.

The first is the necessity of understanding that this could happen to any school or Christian institution at any time. This does not mean we fear the "what if." But it does mean that we live in the consciousness that, in this age of social media and the rapid spread of information, it could happen anywhere over the truth of human sexuality or any other biblical truth.

The second, in light of the above, is that we would do well to reflect on what we would do if pressure from the outside came upon the Christian institutions of which we are part. It is impossible to prepare thoroughly for the unknown. But that does not mean there is no wisdom in considering carefully how we would respond. Would we talk to the press officially? If so, why? If not, why? How would we communicate the truth boldly and with conviction, in a spirit of love and humility, acknowledging our sinfulness and need for Jesus Christ?

And third, remember that these situations are always opportunities, not to be squandered or misused. These are God-given occasions to direct other people's eyes away from the institution and people that are being pressured and to the Lord Jesus Christ and the truth that reflects His glory. Christians, in the face of pressure and persecution, exhibiting Christ-like humility and Spirit-empowered boldness is the shining of gospel light. And these are opportunities for that light to shine most brightly.

May God grant us grace, in all circumstances and at all times, to let our light shine.

Here is the point: all it took was a reporter to get his hands on the email, talk to a few former students at the school who confirmed by experience the veracity of the policy, and write a public article. The result: an otherwise normal Christian school is brought into the spotlight, and the pressure of the world is experienced in a very real way.

2 <https://www.dailysignal.com/2022/08/25/god-has-spoken-church-run-school-stands-firm-amid-death-threats>.

3 <https://www.foxnews.com/us/christian-school-refuses-change-long-held-policy-excluding-sexual-behavior-alleged-death-threats>.



Search the Scriptures

Rev. Ronald Hanko, minister emeritus in the Protestant Reformed Churches and member of Covenant of Grace PRC in Spokane, WA

God's second answer to Habakkuk's perplexity (1)

Previous article in this series: November 1, 2022, p. 60.

And the LORD answered me, and said, Write the vision, and make it plain upon tables, that he may run that readeth it. For the vision is yet for an appointed time, but at the end it shall speak, and not lie: though it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry. Behold, his soul which is lifted up is not upright in him: but the just shall live by his faith.

Habakkuk 2:2-4

In Habakkuk 1:12-2:1 the prophet had expressed puzzlement over God's use of Babylon, that "bitter and hasty nation" (1:6), to punish Judah. He understood that Judah deserved punishment and had himself wondered why that punishment seemed to be delayed. Babylon was a nation even more wicked than Judah, a nation wholly given to idolatry. It seemed to Habakkuk that though Judah could hardly be called righteous, in God's use of Babylon, it was a case of the "wicked devour[ing] the man...more righteous than he" (1:13).

Habakkuk had given up all efforts to solve his difficulties through his own struggles and had turned the matter over to God. That is the point of chapter 2:1. Calvin calls the tower of which Habakkuk speaks, "patience that ariseth from hope," and adds:

And the Prophet by tower means this, that he extricated himself from the thoughts of the flesh; for there would have been no end nor termination to his doubts, had he tried to form a judgment according to his own understanding; *I will stand*, he says, *on my tower*, and *I will set myself on the citadel*. In short, the sentence carries this meaning—that the Prophet renounced the judgment of men, and broke through all those snares by which Satan entangles us and prevents us to rise above the earth.¹

The first part of God's answer to Habakkuk in chapter 2:2-4 is the heart of Habakkuk's prophecy. In the second part of God's answer, verses 5-20, God would

tell Habakkuk that Babylon, too, would come under His timely and just judgment; but more important is God's word in verses 2-4, especially the words of verse four. That word of God, meant not only for Habakkuk but also for Israel, is a word of God for all ages and in all circumstances: "the just shall live by his faith." The importance of that word of God can be measured by the fact that it is quoted three times in the New Testament: Romans 1:17, Galatians 3:11, and Hebrews 10:38.

The quotations from the New Testament show that the reference is to the wonderful Reformation doctrine of justification by faith alone. Galatians 3:11 says, "But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident: for, The just shall live by faith." Paul in Galatians is dealing with that doctrine of justification by faith over against the heresy of justification by works and quotes Habakkuk to prove that we are justified by faith without works.

There are other aspects of our justification. God eternally decreed the justification of His people (Num. 23:21). Christ died for their sins and made a full atonement for their sins, the basis of their justification. But the words "live by faith" in the passage show that passage is speaking of justification *by faith*. When those who are saved believe God, He counts it to them for righteousness, imputing to them through faith the satisfaction, righteousness, obedience, and holiness of Christ. This is what the Westminster Confession of Faith calls our actual justification (11.4).

That the just *live* by faith means, then, that they are no longer under condemnation and in peril of the judgment of God, but have peace with God through the work of Christ, have the righteousness of Christ imputed to them through faith, and are counted for Christ's sake as though they never had nor had committed any sin. They who, under the judgment of God, were as good as dead and who were reckoned so, are by faith reckoned among those who are able to live before Him.

Though the emphasis of the passage is on justification by faith, God, speaking to Habakkuk, certainly also means to emphasize the truth that it is out of that

¹ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1950), 56-57.

justifying faith that those who are justified live their lives, facing trials by that same justifying faith, and living in all circumstances in the confidence that they are righteous before God.

They live believing that nothing can separate them from the love of God, that they are more than conquerors in the face of persecution and death. Even when all things seem to be against them, they believe that nothing can be against them. They live at peace with God, with themselves and with others, being justified by faith; and living by faith, their faith is not without works—is not dead, but alive.

They live by faith and not by sight in a wicked world, even when it seems as though the wicked prosper in their wickedness and the church will be swallowed up by wickedness. They live by that faith in their homes and in marriage, teaching their children and making God's Word the focus of their lives, and making their homes and marriages different from the marriages and homes of the ungodly. They live by faith in their work, laboring for the kingdom of God and doing their work honestly and diligently, believing that Christ uses their work for God, as unimportant and menial as it may sometimes seem.

By that justifying faith they enjoy peace and assurance and answer the accusations of their own conscience and of the world as Romans 8:33, 34 teaches them to do: "Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth. Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us." Always and in all things the just lives by his faith.

This is evident in the example of Habakkuk who, through his questioning and perplexity, came by faith to the confession of chapter 3:17, 18, "Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation."

It is evident too that Habakkuk's concern was for Judah and God's people there. He was concerned among other things with God's use of Babylon to chastise them and his concern must have been, then, that they would not survive and that God's cause would be destroyed. In chapter 1 he mentions Babylon's irresistible power and the speed and completeness of their conquests. Would they do to Judah as they had done to the nations? "They take up all of them with the angle, they catch them in their net, and gather them in their drag: therefore they rejoice and are glad. Therefore they sacrifice unto their

net, and burn incense unto their drag; because by them their portion is fat, and their meat plenteous. Shall they therefore empty their net, and not spare continually to slay the nations?" (1:15-17). Habakkuk as prophet had to tell the faithful in Judah that, being justified by faith and living out of that same faith, they would get through those difficult times that were coming.

This emphasis on a living faith is evident also in Hebrews 10:38 where a living faith is contrasted with the drawing back of some, a reference to their lack of steadfastness in not holding fast their profession. They had forsaken the assembly of saints, had despised God's law, and had fallen into willful sin (Heb. 10:19-35).

Habakkuk 1:4, part of the passage quoted in Hebrews, draws a contrast between those whose souls were lifted up and were not upright, who lived by sight, and those who lived by faith. The former were those who do not live their lives by faith. Calvin describes them thus:

The meaning then is, that a proof of this fact exists evidently in the common life of men—that he who fortifies himself, and is also elated with self confidence, never finds a tranquil haven, for some new suspicion or fear ever disturbs his mind. Hence it comes that the soul entangles itself in various cares and anxieties. This is the reward, as I have said, which is allotted by God's just judgment to the unbelieving.²

In Hebrew 10:38, 39, those whose souls were lifted up and not upright were those who drew back unto perdition. Those who believe are different. They have peace in a world that knows no peace. They live a life of holiness in a world that hates holiness and a holy God. Their life is in every respect different from the lives of the ungodly. They do not draw back but go on unto perfection, following the examples of the great cloud of witnesses of Hebrews 11.

It must be so, for justifying faith is the gift of God and cannot be dead. It must be living, and living faith is not a faith without works. Those works never added anything to the righteousness of Christ, nor are they anything of which we can boast. They are only ever the fruit of God's grace but, as fruit, are the proof and evidence of a justifying faith. Those who have faith are faithful, or, as the Westminster Confession of Faith has it: "Faith, thus receiving and resting on Christ and His righteousness, is the alone instrument of justification: yet is it not alone in the person justified, but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but worketh by love" (11.2).

2 Calvin, *Twelve Minor Prophets*, vol. 4, 72.

The just live by faith in that by faith they are justified and without condemnation, but that justifying faith becomes the principle of their whole existence and of everything they do. Thus it was in the days of Habakkuk. Thus it was in the days when Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians. Thus it is today. Habakkuk's perplexity was real, but he by faith was able to say, "Yet will I rejoice in the God of my salvation." Judah would soon be carried into captivity, but those who lived by faith, even as they hung their harps on the willows, looked forward to the day when the Lord would turn again the captivity of Zion. In these evil days, seeing the end approaching and days of evil undreamed coming, the just still do and will live by faith, lifting up their heads and hands in the hope of Christ's soon return.

God, through Habakkuk, says "Behold!" It is nota-

ble that the proud cannot be justified, for justification by faith leaves us with nothing in which to boast. Even more amazing, though, is the truth that the just live by faith. Their justification is a miracle. That their faith, the same faith that justifies them, upholds them, and governs their life is the work of the Spirit of God and is equally a miracle. By faith they persevere through many trials and enter finally the everlasting kingdom of God. Faith is the victory that overcomes the world (I John 5:4). By faith they subdue kingdoms, work righteousness, obtain promises, and stop the mouths of lions. Through faith they quench the violence of fire, escape the edge of the sword, out of weakness are made strong, wax valiant in fight, and turn to flight the armies of the aliens (Heb. 11:33, 34).



Taking heed to the doctrine

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The *ordo salutis* (1) Salvation's unbreakable chain

An introduction to soteriology

As I begin writing for a new rubric, I intend to treat Soteriology or the doctrine of salvation. Soteriology is the fourth of the six loci of dogmatics, where loci is the plural of locus, which means "place." The Essentials of Reformed Doctrine students, usually tenth and eleventh graders, learn the six loci of dogmatics as Theology, Anthropology, Christology, Soteriology, Ecclesiology, and Eschatology, or the study of God, man, Christ, salvation, the church, and the last things.

Salvation is that great work of God in which He, through Christ and by the Holy Spirit, delivers His elect people from the greatest misery of sin and death and brings them into the enjoyment of the greatest blessedness, namely fellowship with Himself in the everlasting covenant of grace. Salvation is a wonder of grace.

God's work of salvation is treated in different loci. In Theology we learn about the God who is Savior and we study God's decree to save His people, the decree of eternal, unchangeable, unconditional election. In Anthropology we learn about man who is in need of salvation because he is a fallen, guilty, and corrupt creature, and who is the object of God's salvation. In Christology we

learn about Christ the Mediator who by His lifelong obedience, sufferings, and death has purchased salvation for His people. In Ecclesiology we learn about the church to which God is pleased by His Word and Spirit to unite those whom He saves and where they are nourished in that salvation through the means of grace. And in Eschatology we learn about the perfection of that salvation, first in the soul in the intermediate state of glory, and then in the body and soul in the new heavens and new earth in which righteousness shall dwell. The whole Bible, and every doctrine, is connected to our salvation.

Soteriology, though, is where salvation is treated at length. In Soteriology the decree to save is not treated. That belongs to Theology, as God's work in eternity. In Soteriology the purchase of salvation is not treated. That belongs to Christology, as the work of the Mediator in time. In Soteriology the application of salvation, which is the saving work of the Holy Spirit, is treated.

Indeed, we understand salvation from three perspectives. First, God decreed salvation before the foundation of the world. Canons 1, 7 says about the elect, "God hath decreed to give [them] to Christ, to be saved by Him." "Election," says Canons 1, 9, "is the

fountain of every saving good, from which proceed... gifts of salvation.” Second, Christ purchased and accomplished salvation at the cross. Third, the Holy Spirit applies the benefits of salvation decreed by God and purchased by Christ to the individual elect sinner. In a sense, then, we were saved in eternity (God decreed our salvation); we were saved at the cross (Christ purchased our salvation); we are being saved in time (the Spirit applies salvation to us); and we will be saved on the Last Day.

The main topic, then, in Soteriology is how the Spirit applies salvation to us. God decreed it. Jesus Christ purchased it. How does it become ours?

The answer of Arminianism is that God wills that everyone should have salvation, that Jesus Christ has made salvation possible for everyone by dying on the cross for everyone, and that it now depends on the sinner’s response whether he will have salvation or not. Or the Arminian will say that the Holy Spirit is working to apply salvation to everyone, but that the sinner must by the power of his freewill cooperate with, or at least not resist, the grace of God.

The answer of Reformed Soteriology, which is also the answer of the Bible and the Reformed confessions, is that the application of the benefits of salvation to the elect, for whom God has decreed salvation, and for whom Jesus Christ has purchased salvation, is entirely the work of God. Thus, there is perfect harmony in the work of God. God chose or elected a certain, definite number of people; the Spirit applies salvation to them, and only to them. Jesus Christ, the Mediator, purchased salvation for a certain, definite number of people (those only whom God elected); the Spirit applies salvation to them, and only to them.

The *ordo salutis*

Moreover, the Spirit, who is the Spirit of Christ, applies the benefits of salvation in a certain order, which theologians call the *ordo salutis*, a Latin phrase meaning “the order of salvation.” That order includes eight steps: regeneration, calling, conversion, saving faith, justification, sanctification, preservation, and glorification. It is my intention to explain and apply these eight steps, not merely so that we know what they are but so that we marvel at them, rejoice in them, and ascribe all glory to God for them, with the result that we live in holiness out of thankfulness for them. Then we will echo the song of heaven: “Salvation to our God, which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb.... Blessing, and glory, and wisdom, and thanksgiving, and honour, and power, and might, be unto our God for ever and ever. Amen” (Rev. 7:10, 12). “Alleluia:

Salvation, and glory, and honour, and power, unto the Lord our God” (Rev. 19:1).

The *locus classicus*, the classic place or classic passage, on the *ordo salutis* is Romans 8:29-30. Although the apostle lists only three of the steps in verse 30—calling, justification, and glorification—he does establish an order. Calling comes before justification; justification comes before glorification; and glorification follows both calling and justification. The other steps of salvation are implied: calling implies regeneration, conversion, and faith; justification implies faith; glorification implies both sanctification and preservation.

The apostle teaches that the steps of the *ordo salutis* are the works of God: “whom he [God] did predestinate, them he [God] also called: and whom he [God] called, them he [God] also justified: and whom he [God] justified, them he [God] also glorified” (v. 30). We did not predestinate ourselves—God did that. We did not call ourselves—God did that. We did not justify ourselves—God did that. We did not glorify ourselves—God did that (or God will do that, since glorification is a future blessing, one as certain as God’s decree to glorify us). We also did not regenerate ourselves, convert ourselves, work faith in ourselves, sanctify ourselves, or preserve ourselves. All glory to our gracious God!

The Canons call the *ordo salutis* “this golden chain of our salvation” (Canons I, Rejection of errors, 2). The chain is golden, for it reveals the glory of God. It is a chain because it is unbreakable. Notice the wording of Romans 8:30: “Whom he did predestinate, them he also called; and whom he called, them he also justified; and whom he justified, them he also glorified.” It is not this: “Of those whom He predestinated, He called only some; of those whom He called, He justified only some; and of those whom He justified, He glorified only some.” The chain is solid: If He foreknew you, He also predestinated you; if He predestinated you, He also called you; if He called you, He also justified you; and if He justified you, He also glorified you, and will glorify you. Thus, Paul triumphantly exclaims, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?” (v. 35).

Election: The fountain of every saving good

Behind the golden chain of salvation is God’s eternal decree. If salvation is a stream of God’s blessedness, election is the fountain from which that blessedness, which is salvation, flows to us. Election, as we noted earlier, is “the fountain of every saving good” (Canons 1, 9). Why do we possess salvation or any benefit of salvation? Because God decreed that we, in distinction from others, should have salvation and every benefit of salvation. God has, says Canons I, 6, a decree to

save His people. “According to which decree” [God] takes certain steps in time, namely, “[He] softens the hearts of the elect, however obstinate, and inclines them to believe.” If He inclines them to believe (step #4 of the *ordo salutis*), He gives the other blessings of salvation also, all of which flow from the eternal decree of election.

Behind God’s electing choice according to Romans 8:29 is God’s foreknowledge: “Whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate.” Many are confused by that term “foreknowledge” in the Bible. The Arminian teaching is that God foresaw that certain people would believe and persevere and based on that foreknowledge He chose them. The Canons oppose that idea: “Election was not founded upon foreseen faith...as the prerequisite, cause, or condition on which it depended” (Canons I, 9).

In the Bible, knowledge of persons is often the intimate knowledge of love. Foreknowledge of persons, therefore, is the intimate knowledge of prior love, of eternal love. We could paraphrase verse 29: “Whom he foreloved, he did predestinate.” God’s choice of His people is rooted in His eternal love of them. Election, then, is not a cold, hard, abstract decree, but it is a warm, loving choice. We must not fear, but delight in, God’s loving choice that we should be His people. “According as he hath chosen us in [Christ] before the foundation of the world that we should be holy and without blame before him in love:

having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ unto himself according to the good pleasure of his will” (Eph. 1:4-5). God’s choice—God’s predestination—of us to be His adopted children is in love.

We know that foreknowledge is not a reference to God’s prescience (His knowing or predicting beforehand what we will do) for two reasons. First, verse 29 does not say, “What he knew beforehand” or “Whose faith he foresaw,” but “Whom he did foreknow,” where the word “whom” is a reference to persons. God foreknew persons; He did not foresee actions. According to Canons I, 7 God has “chosen...a certain number of persons to redemption in Christ.” Arminianism, which the Canons oppose, teaches an election of conditions. “Election,” argued the Arminians, “does not consist in this, that God chose certain persons rather than others, but in this, that He chose out of all possible conditions...the act of faith.” Our fathers reject that error,

calling it “injurious” (Canons I, Rejection of errors, 3). Second, God never simply knows an event beforehand. He foreordains that event. God’s foreknowledge is never merely information that He has in advance, but is causative. God ordains what He foreknows. God foreknows what He ordains. Therefore, if God knows that we will believe in Jesus, it is only because God has chosen to save us by giving us faith. We never believe independently of God’s decree to give us faith. “Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world” (Acts 15:18). “That some receive the gift of faith from God...proceeds from God’s eternal decree... according to which decree He...inclines [the elect] to believe” (Canons I, 6).

The goal: The glory of God in Jesus Christ

The goal of our salvation is not our everlasting happiness, although we will be everlastingly blessed, but it is the glory of God in the exaltation of Jesus Christ. Foreknowledge, which is God’s eternal love, is the reason for God’s eternal predestination of us: “Whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate” (v. 29). The goal of that predestination is not that *we* be something, but that *Jesus Christ* be something. The goal is that Jesus Christ be “the firstborn among many brethren” (v. 29). Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God, and God in His inscrutable wisdom, abundant mercy, and infinite love determined that Jesus Christ have many brethren.

Of course, God does not need many children—or any children. Of course, Jesus Christ does not need many brethren—or any brethren. The triune God of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is perfectly self-sufficient and infinitely glorious. God willed to have many brethren. God willed to make Jesus Christ the firstborn, the preeminent son, the Lord. The apostle calls him “the firstborn of every creature,” that is, exalted over every creature and “the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence” (Col. 1:15, 18).

If we are really Christ’s brethren, of whom He is firstborn, we must be like Him. That is the goal of our salvation: predestinated “to be conformed to the image of [God’s] Son” (Rom. 8:29). We lost the image of God in our fall in Adam into sin. That image is restored and perfected in us through God’s work of salvation. And it begins with the first step of the *ordo salutis*, regeneration, to which we turn our attention next time.

Election, then, is not a cold, hard, abstract decree, but it is a warm, loving choice. We must not fear, but delight in, God’s loving choice that we should be His people. “According as he hath chosen us in [Christ] before the foundation of the world...in love” (Eph. 1:4-5).



Go ye into all the world

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The Belgic Confession and missions (2)

Previous article in this series: September 1, 2022, p. 472.

In our previous article we noted that when Reformed churches are criticized for a lack of missionary zeal, the blame is often directed against the Reformed creeds, and more specifically, against the Belgic Confession. The reason for the latter is because the Belgic Confession is the most comprehensive summary of Reformed doctrines, and the critics judge this defining creed to be deficient in the area of missions. In fact, some will even say the Belgic Confession hinders mission work because the creed is overly doctrinal and overly polemical. The claim is that doctrine, and thus also the confessions, are antithetical to and thus do not aid the spread of the gospel. The Reformed creeds are considered a hindrance to missions—documents that squelch missionary zeal.

These accusations are thoroughly false. The Reformed creeds are not a liability to missions, but an asset. And that is especially true of the Belgic Confession. In numerous ways this creed demonstrates a missionary awareness and specifically addresses the church concerning her calling to bring the gospel to all the nations of the world.

In this article we hope to see that the missionary character of the Belgic Confession is evident, first of all, from the history surrounding the writing of this creed, and specifically from the purposes for which it was written.

The Belgic Confession was written at a time when Reformed churches and believers were severely persecuted. The man behind that persecution was King Philip II of Spain. He considered himself a defender of the faith (the Roman Catholic faith) and was determined to do this by eradicating all heretics (all who opposed or differed from the Roman Catholic religion). He targeted the Reformed, considering them rebels and revolutionaries. Under these trying circumstances for the faithful, a pastor by the name of Guido de Brés composed, in 1561, the Belgic Confession of Faith.

One thing to keep in mind is that although Guido de Brés was its chief author, the creed was generally accepted among the Reformed at that time. This is indicated by its original subtitle, which states that it was “made with common consent (agreement) by the believ-

ers who are scattered throughout all the Netherlands.”¹ It is also indicated by the opening words of Article 1 (which words are repeated throughout), namely, “We believe....” This confession was not merely the expression of the faith of one man, but it set forth (even prior to it being officially adopted in 1566) the faith of many Reformed believers and churches in the Netherlands.

One of the purposes de Brés had for writing the Belgic Confession was to present it to King Philip II. The goal was to demonstrate to the king, and thereby to all Roman Catholic authorities, that the Reformed believers were not rebels as charged, but law-abiding citizens. The aim was to persuade the authorities to be more tolerant toward the Reformed.

But that was not all. In addition to the goal of convincing the authorities concerning their legitimacy and pleading for fair treatment, de Brés and the Reformed churches also intended to give a witness to the authorities and to the Roman Catholic Church of the truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This arose from the fact that they did not regard Roman Catholics as fellow Christians, but as those who were unfaithful and apostate. The Roman Catholic Church and her members were therefore legitimate objects of mission work. Rome consisted of those who had departed from the faith and were lost in unbelief. The Romish church and her members needed therefore to hear the true gospel of Christ.

That this was their perspective concerning Rome is clear from what was stated in the letter that accompanied the copy of the Belgic Confession that was given to King Philip II:

From this Confession we trust that you will see that we are wrongly called schismatics, promoters of disunity, rebels and heretics, for we not only uphold and profess the chief heads of the Christian faith, comprehended in the Symbol and Common Creed [the Apostles’ Creed], but also the whole teaching, revealed by Jesus Christ, for our life, justification, and salvation, proclaimed by the evangelists

¹ P. Y. De Jong, *The Church’s Witness to the World* (St. Catherine: Paideia Press, 1980), 33.

and apostles, sealed with the blood of so many martyrs and preserved true and complete by the primitive Church, until at length it was perverted through the ignorance, greed and ambition of the ministers, who have corrupted it with human inventions and traditions contrary to the purity of the gospel, by which our adversaries deny that it is the power of God for the salvation of all believers.²

Convinced that the Roman Catholic Church needed to hear the truth, the Reformed saw to it that the Roman Catholic rulers received the Belgic Confession. Soon after it was written, various copies were produced, and one was given to the Spanish king. This was done with a missionary purpose—that the king and all in the church of Rome might be instructed in the truth of Scripture, turn from their idolatry and wickedness, and heed the command to believe in and serve the only true God.

The Belgic Confession, along with the petition that was sent with it to the king, did not have the desired effect of persuading the authorities to be tolerant of the Reformed. The persecution continued. But this does not take away from the fact that the Reformed had a missionary purpose in writing and publishing this confession. Note the following:

Today, various kinds of documents—tracts and pamphlets, for example—have a missionary purpose.... We might be tempted to think that these sorts of publications are a modern phenomenon. Very few people pause to consider that missionary documents were also written and published during the Reformation. One of those is the Belgic Confession.³

2 As cited in Daniel Hyde, *With Heart and Mouth: An Exposition of the Belgic Confession* (Grandville: Reformed Fellowship, 2008), 502.

3 Wes Bredenhof, *To Win Our Neighbors for Christ: The Missiology of the Three Forms of Unity* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2015), 7.

This answers to the charge that is often leveled at the Reformation and at the Reformers that they lacked missionary zeal and were only interested in themselves. The fact that one of the purposes of the Belgic Confession was that it give a testimony to the Roman Catholic Church of the truths of the gospel shows that the Reformers were mission minded from the very outset. Through this confession, they sounded out the gospel truth to the ungodly and to those caught up in false religion.

This is supported by the fact that the Belgic Confession is a creed. The name “creed” literally means “I believe.” As the history of the writing and distribution of the Belgic Confession shows, the Reformed churches were making a public declaration of their beliefs. What leaves no doubt about this is the fact that the words “we believe” occur some 34 times in this creed, along with the fact that at least 30 articles (out of a total of 37) begin with those words.

What further confirms the missionary character of the Belgic Confession is that the early editions were accompanied by a small booklet in which de Brés, among other things, directed his readers to the duty of witnessing before men. He did so by quoting five passages of Scripture that address the missionary calling of the church, namely Matthew 10:32-33, Mark 8:38, I Peter 3:15, Romans 10:10, and II Timothy 2:12.⁴ This illustrates that the Reformed churches realized they were (so to speak) on a mission field, surrounded by many God-given opportunities to do mission work.

Next time, the Lord willing, we will explore the actual content of the Belgic Confession to learn even more concerning the missionary character and significance of this creed.

4 P. Y. De Jong, *The Church's Witness*, pp. 34-35.



All Thy works shall praise Thee

Mr. Joel Minderhoud, science teacher in Covenant Christian High School and member of Hope PRC in Walker, Michigan

As the mountains...so the LORD

As the mountains are round about Jerusalem, so the LORD is round about his people from henceforth even for ever.

Psalm 125:2

It is good for God's people to know and to be reminded

that the Almighty, unchanging God is ever round about His people. Especially is this true when we reflect over the year that is passing. Most readers of the *Standard Bearer* are well aware of recent distress in the churches—of deep wounds congregations and

families endure, inflicted by the schismatic departure of some. Adding to this distress is the growing number of vacant pulpits in the churches. Besides trouble in the church institute, news of cancer and even the death of dear family members deeply grieves many of God's people. In society at large, the church observes a marked advancement in sin and a society that more and more approves and even delights in such iniquity. Throughout the world Christians are threatened by military force and face persecution and fear in war-torn countries.

The list could go on of disappointments, sufferings, and trials that the child of God has endured or will endure in the year to come. Most grievous to us are our own sins and sinfulness. O what griefs we bear! In all of this God strengthens His people with the comfort and hope of protection and refuge as those who are forever precious to Him in Jesus Christ. As the mountains surround Jerusalem, *so the Lord* surrounds His people, from henceforth and even forever. Jehovah, the unchangeable God of the covenant, is our Rock and Refuge. In life and in death, in sickness and sorrow, in famine, in persecutions, in peril, in sword and schism, we are more than conquerors through Christ Jesus—the immovable Rock.

Throughout Scripture God repeatedly directs us to consider the mountains, the hills, and the rocks to be reminded that He is a God of power and strength, far above all we could ever comprehend. As the steadfast and unchanging God of the covenant, He cares for and protects His people. So let us examine the “mountains” to further our understanding of this God-given picture and the reality to which it points.

Immovable

Which by his strength setteth fast the mountains; being girded with power (Psalm 65:6).

Mountains are majestic landforms that are often characterized by rugged terrain and steep slopes. Covering about 25% of the earth's land mass and found in every continent, mountains are not an obscure landscape feature. Their majesty and beauty are heightened by the fact that they are immovable and virtually impenetrable objects. Much of what makes a mountain immovable and impenetrable is related to its rock and mineral composition. To understand the rock and mineral composition of mountains, we first must understand some geology of earth's surface.

The most common igneous rock on earth's surface (and therefore also of mountains) is granite. In geological terms, an igneous rock is described as molten

(liquified) magma that has solidified and hardened over time, whether slowly below the crust of the earth or rapidly when spewed out of the bowels of the earth in volcanic eruptions. Using the spectacles of Scripture, we deny the claims of the world that igneous rocks and mountains formed over hundreds of millions of years. Rather, we confess that God created the heavens and the earth roughly 6,000 years ago and that the monumental upheaval and destruction of the world-wide Flood, some 4,500 years ago, has dramatically shaped and formed what we observe today, particularly regarding mountains and rocks.¹

As the most abundant rock in earth's crust, granite is found in abundance in common geological formations across the globe. In North America, for example, granite composes many of the mountains and rock formations, such as Pike's Peak (Colorado), Mt. Rushmore (South Dakota), and El Capitan and Half Dome (Yosemite Valley, California). In addition to many mountain formations, granite is the prominent rock that makes up the bedrock of the Canadian Shield—a large plateau that covers more than 40% of the land area of Canada and extends even into the northern parts of New York, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota.

A chief characteristic of granite is its strength and stability. Part of what makes granite so strong and stable is the presence of the quartz mineral. Quartz is a unique mineral. It is composed of silicon and oxygen atoms that form a very stable and sturdy hexagonal crystalline structure. Because of the nature of the atoms from which quartz is formed and due to the stable crystal structure in which the atoms are arranged, quartz is physically and chemically resistant to weathering. In ‘geological-speak’ we might describe quartz as being “inert” (resistant to weathering), having a “high hardness rating” (resists abrasions), and “strong” (able to bear significant weight). It is these characteristics that make granite so strong and sturdy—characteristics we associate with mountains being immovable and impenetrable.

In addition to a mountain's strength, its sheer massive size and rugged terrain makes mountain ranges in many cases impassable. Pioneers had to find the easiest path around or through the ranges. Because granite is such a strong rock, attempts to carve a path *through* mountains proved to be all but impossible until the invention of dynamite. Throughout history, every generation knew from experience that mountains are a strong

¹ Those interested in further study of a biblical explanation of mountains and rocks would do well to read Henry M. Morris and John C. Whitcomb, Jr.'s *The Genesis Flood* (1961).

fortress and a nearly impenetrable obstacle. Truly the mountains are set in their place by God who is “girded with power” (Ps. 65:6). As God’s children we confess: “The LORD is a great God...in his hand are the deep places of the earth: the strength of the hills is his also” (Ps. 95:3-4).

Protection

Because mountains are so massive and impassable, they have naturally served as boundaries between nations and as a means for political protection. In biblical times, Jerusalem was situated upon a hill. To the east was the Kidron Valley and to the west and south was the Hinnom Valley. Together these valleys created a defensive belt from the east around to the west along the southern border of Jerusalem. Throughout its history, Jerusalem was well protected in the hill country of Judah. When the Israelites tried to conquer the land of Canaan, they failed to drive out the Jebusites from the hill country of Jerusalem (Josh. 15:63). The Jebusites continued to control Jerusalem until King David and his men conquered it (II Sam. 5:6-10). So protected was Jerusalem that Israel regularly sang in their songs of ascent, “As the mountains are round about Jerusalem, so the LORD is around his people from henceforth even for ever” (Ps. 125:2).

God’s glory and our refuge

We marvel at the rugged beauty and lofty heights of the mountains. Our small minds can only take it all in from a distance. These massive, majestic structures—immovable, impenetrable fortresses against the canvas of the surrounding sky—draw from us a response each time we see them of how great our God is. He formed these mountains. He “weighed the mountains in scales, and the hills in a balance” (Is. 40:12). Girded with power, He fixed the mountains in their place. “O LORD our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!” (Ps. 8:1). “Praise the LORD from the earth...mountains, and all hills.... Let them praise the name of the LORD: for his name alone is excellent” (Ps. 148: 7, 9, 13).

These immovable and impenetrable mountains are a gift to God’s people. Every time we see the mountains or read of them, not only do we exclaim praise to God for His beauty and majesty revealed therein, but we are given a reminder that, for us, God is an immovable, steadfast refuge in the trials of life. Every child of God faces trials in his earthly pilgrimage. What did you face in the past year? What will you face in the year to come? Looking at the mountains with the spiritual eyes of faith through the lens of Scripture, we are assured that as the mountains surrounded and protected Jerusa-

lem, all the more God Almighty surrounds us and is a refuge for us in the day of trouble.

Throughout history, God’s saints faced trials. Surely they endured sickness, disease, famine, and death. Yet, above all of these, the Psalms repeatedly express the cries of God’s people who endure the attack of the enemy. The enemies of the psalmist (and of us) are those who oppose the church and the cause of Christ, including our own sinful flesh. “O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death” (Rom. 7:24)? We have that sinful nature that clings to us all our life long. O how we desire to be delivered from our sin and sinfulness! O how we long for deliverance from our spiritual foes—the devil, the world, the temptations that are all around us, and our own sinful nature.

In such oppression from our enemies, we cry to God for protection. It is vain to look to ourselves or other finite, weak creatures. Let us cling to Christ—our immovable, steadfast Cornerstone (I Pet. 2:6, 7) upon which the church is built; the spiritual Rock from which we drink (I Cor. 10:4). Let us look to God Almighty who is our immovable Rock and Fortress.

When my heart is overwhelmed: lead me to the rock that is higher than I. For thou hast been a shelter for me, and a strong tower from the enemy (Ps. 61:2, 3).

They only consult to cast him down from his excellency; they delight in lies: they bless with their mouth, but they curse inwardly. My soul, wait thou only upon God; for my expectation is from him. He only is my rock and my salvation: he is my defense; I shall not be moved. In God is my salvation and my glory: the rock of my strength, and my refuge, is in God. Trust in him at all times; ye people, pour out your heart before him: God is a refuge for us (Ps. 62:4-8).

For who is God, save the LORD? And who is a rock, save our God? God is my strength and power: and he maketh my way perfect (II Sam. 22:32-33).

What fears do you face as you begin a new year? In what storms and troubles do you find yourself? *God* is our refuge! God protects His church! As the mountains provide strong protection, all the more God Almighty protects His church. Let us go forward in the year to come with confidence, that though there be sorrows and trials, God Almighty does and will protect us!

“Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea; though the waters thereof roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with the swelling thereof” (Psalm 46:2-3).



Strength of youth

Rev. Ryan Barnhill, pastor of Heritage Protestant Reformed Church in Sioux Falls, South Dakota

Knowing the enemy (2)

Previous article in this series: October 15, 2022, p. 43.

May 2, 2011 was the day U.S. SEAL Team Six killed the murderer of thousands, Osama bin Laden. The raid was conducted in a compound in Pakistan in the dark. Using night-vision goggles, the SEALs made their way to the third floor, where they found bin Laden in a bedroom. The rest is history.

The American public hears much about the raid itself, being a defining moment in U.S. military history. But what people are not always aware of is the knowledge and planning that were required before ever carrying out the mission. Was bin Laden even in this compound in Pakistan? What was the layout of this compound? Who might be in the area when it was raided? What were bin Laden's distinguishing facial features, so that he would not be confused with someone else? I imagine that the message from higher command in preparation for the raid was, "Know...the...enemy!"

How much more must we know our enemy, Satan! He's a murderer, watching to ruin the church and every member of it, and by his wicked stratagems to destroy all. He's a lion, seeking whom he may devour. Against him we must fight. We are called to do so by God. But we must not enter the battle without knowledge. Know the enemy!

In the last article, we established the fact that we are in a spiritual warfare and that we have enemies. In future articles, we will address our spiritual battle particularly against Satan. But before we arrive at those articles concerning our battle against Satan, we should know something about him. What is his identity? His background? His purpose? His tactics? To find out, let's go to our warfare manual, the Bible, and to the confessions that summarize it.

Knowing the enemy

Identity: The world trivializes Satan when it portrays him as a pitchfork-wielding, angry red dragon, or when it speaks of him and his demons merely in terms of haunting homes and making scary noises in the

night. We must look past the cartoons and cut through the sensational to see his true and full identity.

Satan is a wicked spiritual being who is an enemy of God, the church, and every good thing. Satan is a fallen angel who is a murderer. This is language borrowed from our Belgic Confession, Article 12. Read that article in its entirety. This reprobate, depraved spiritual being is invisible, which means warfare against him is not like fighting against flesh and blood. Though he is invisible, he is real. He also has names. Among the many names he has, the most familiar are "Devil" (slanderer) and "Satan" (adversary), telling us already something about who he is and what he is about.

Satan has a whole army of devils or demons at his command. Unseen, but a reality, these fallen, depraved angels form a swarming host to assist their commander-in-chief in his devilish purposes. Ephesians 6:12 indicates that there is a certain classification to this reprobate host: "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities [rulers], against powers [authorities], against the rulers of the darkness of this world [world powers of the darkness of this world], against spiritual wickedness in high places [spiritual forces of wickedness in heavenly realms]." A powerful army this is, and one to take very seriously!

Background: The Evil One has a history. In the beginning, God created, and all that God created was good. Included in this good creation of God was the innumerable company of angels. The one whom we now identify as Satan, was originally a good angel, quite possibly the head of the angelic realm. But he fell. When, exactly, we cannot tell. The angel's name was Lucifer, and his sin against God was pride (Is. 14). In his pride, he rebelled against God, and took with him a third of the angels (Rev. 12).

Part of Satan's background is his deceptive activity on earth soon after his rebellion in heaven. Satan used the serpent to tempt our first parents in the garden of Eden. Regarding the tree of the knowledge of good and

evil, the father of lies uttered the ultimate lie to Eve: “And the serpent said unto the woman, ye shall not surely die: for God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil” (Gen. 3:4-5).

Satan kept active through the Old Testament. He busied himself with temptation and evil on earth (Job 1; I Chron. 21:1). The Murderer knew the Mother Promise (Gen. 3:15), and his violent eye scanned the Old Testament landscape to devour the seed of the woman. But also, in the old dispensation up until Christ’s ascension, the Deceiver had access into heaven. You can read of this in Revelation 12. Satan and his hosts engaged in a war of words against Michael and the good angels. Satan and his depraved angels accused the saints already in heaven that they had no right to be in heaven because their sin had not been paid for, and that they instead belonged to Satan. Michael and the angels defended the right of the saints to be in heaven, a defense based upon the promise of God to send the seed of the woman. When Christ ascended into heaven, carrying His blood there (the basis for the saints to be in glory!), Satan and his hosts were expelled.

This brings us to the New Testament. Satan has redoubled his efforts upon the earth, attacking the body of Christ yet in this world. He goes forth in his fury, his attacks, and his temptations. Who can forget the story of Ananias and Sapphira, that couple in the early New Testament church who sold a possession for a certain amount of money, and then brought *part* of that money to the apostles’ feet, pretending as if they had brought *all* the money? Significantly, Peter said to Ananias, “Ananias, why hath Satan filled thine heart to lie to the Holy Ghost, and to keep back part of the price of the land?” (Acts 5:3). The Tempter walks about also today—need I say more? And then, expect in the last seconds on history’s clock that the Antichrist himself will arise, the very product of Satan (Rev. 13:1-4).

Purpose: Satan is the great adversary of God, Christ, and the church, and comes against God’s cause with malicious intent. Ephesians 6, the main passage on our spiritual warfare, reminds us of this fact. I Peter 5:8 warns us, “Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour.” A lion, over four foot tall, weighing above four hundred pounds, walks slowly through the prairie grass, muscles rippling under his skin. He is hungry, desperate, savage, and scanning for his prey. Spotting a zebra, he leaps out of the grass, baring his teeth with ferocity and roaring as he runs, his aim to pounce upon and devour his striped victim. As a lion, so the devil. He walks about the earth, roaring;

that is, he has a raging fury. He seeks, as one on the hunt. Once he finds, he desires to devour, that is, he desires the perishing of souls.

Now you can understand why the Belgic Confession, Article 12, says what it does about the devil’s purpose: “The devils [and by implication, *the* devil] and evil spirits are so depraved that they are enemies of God and every good thing, to the utmost of their power, as murderers, watching to ruin the church and every member thereof, and by their wicked stratagems to destroy all....”

Tactics: When you read “tactics,” think *procedure, method, calculated plan*. Ephesians 6:11 tells us about the “wiles” of the devil: “Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.” These wiles are carefully calculated plans to deceive us. The devil always works in a calculated way to make sure that what he does is as effective as possible. Always, the goal Satan has with these plans is to deceive. “[W]iles” is plural, indicating that the Evil One has *many* methods according to which he seeks to deceive.

What are some of his tactics, all of which have as their goal to deceive and harm? He sends harsh persecution, threatening with torture, separation from family, and even death; or, perhaps it’s a persecution of the softer variety, but intimidating and full of pressures, nevertheless. At other times, he issues forth a flood of worldliness and pleasure-madness. Sometimes he brings accusations against us concerning our sins, throwing into our face the youthful sins that we have committed. Allying himself with our sinful nature, and knowing the flowing hormones of the teenage years, he also speaks to us with the soft and smooth voice of temptation. Another tactic is introducing false ideas into the church disguised under Reformed language, but ideas which are, in reality, aligned with the ungodly culture.

Having proper perspective

Limited: Certainly it is true that the devil is powerful. We must be very sober about the devil, and not at all minimize him. He is real, he is ferocious, he has evil intentions.

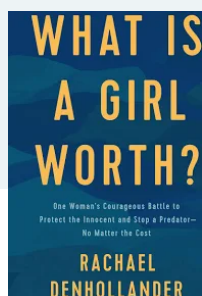
But he is limited. Satan is not sovereign over all things. The Evil One is not on the throne over the universe, controlling all things and ruling over them. Our *Almighty God* is absolutely sovereign. *God* sits eternally on His throne, controlling all things and ruling over them through the Lord Jesus Christ whom He has exalted to be at His right hand. Satan—in every respect—is under this sovereignty. The demons—as to their every

move—are under this control. Although the God in heaven is not responsible or to blame for this world of darkness, not one thing happens in the world of darkness apart from heavenly appointment. And the Christ at God's right hand not only rules over all things, but is working it all for the good of His beloved church and the approach of His second coming! We need to be sober about Satan's power, yes; but we need not be fearful.

Defeated: We recognize that we are in a spiritual warfare against a very real Satan. We are called to watch and be ready every moment.

But we must also remember: he is defeated. This is

exactly what gives us joy, comfort, and courage in the fight: Satan is not, neither will he ever be, victorious! Christ has gone before us and has inflicted a blow to Satan's head—and, as you know, head wounds are deadly wounds. This bruising of the serpent's head, promised in Genesis 3:15, Christ carried out at His cross when He paid for our sins. One day our Savior will come again to realize the victory in its fullness. In the meantime, Christ shall not lose even one of the sheep given Him of the Father—not to Satan, not to anything. Christ is victorious, dear reader—and you have the victory in Him. Fear not!



Bring the books...

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

The following book is reviewed by Mrs. Cherith Guichelaar, pastor's wife and mother in Grace PRC in Standale, Michigan.

What Is a Girl Worth? One Woman's Courageous Battle to Protect the Innocent and Stop a Predator—No Matter the Cost by Rachael Denhollander. Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Momentum, 2022. 352 pp. Paperback, \$17.99.

Rachael Denhollander's book *What is a Girl Worth?* sat on my shelf for months before I finally decided to read her autobiography. Where I was intrigued by her story, I was nervous her memoir would not provide the type of education on abuse and trauma that I was looking for. But as Rachael's gentle spirit, devastating abuse, beautiful faith, and fierce love pulsed in my ear, I was drawn into her history from beginning to end. Her book is a rare gem, proving to be one of the most heartbreaking and inspiring works I have ever read. I found myself lying awake at night, the author's questions nagging within, "Who is going to find these little girls? Who is going to tell them how much they are worth? How valuable they are, how deserving of justice and protection? Who is going to tell these little girls that what was done to them *matters?*" (p. 312).

What is a Girl Worth? records the events that led Rachael Denhollander to speak out against her abuser. The book describes the way our culture looks at, treats, and abuses females, and even children. It also lays out how we do not listen, believe, or properly engage with victims/survivors. Denhollander expertly and passion-

ately describes the dynamics and effects of abuse, and immediately tackles ignorant questions such as, Why don't victims speak up sooner? She says, "The truth is, I *did* say something sooner—many of us did. But as survivors of sexual assault will tell you, saying something is one thing. Being heard—and believed—is another" (p. 1). She also states, "The idea many people want to cling to—that survivors just don't know how to speak up—simply isn't true. It's a notion we need to let go of and instead do a better job understanding what really keeps victims silent" (p. 5).

Denhollander's real and raw experiences of trauma and confusion provide the reader a window into the long-term physical, emotional, and spiritual damage that victims and their loved ones must sift through following abuse. Rachael discusses the embarrassment, shame, guilt, and the often overlooked "freeze" response to fear. One of the most devastating aspects of the abuse for me was how it affected Rachael's faith. She began to write out Bible passages and songs—letting someone else express the depths of hopelessness and grief when she no longer could. She writes, "The book of Psalms, in particular, enabled me to ride the waves of pain I couldn't seem to escape" (p. 95). In addition to all the damage, once Rachael reported her abuse, she recalls "by and large; we as survivors were *told* what was happening to us; we weren't consulted first. We had little to no voice in the process. And after

losing my voice once, losing it again was traumatic and painful” (p. 230). As Rachael struggled through the trauma, she wrote in her journal, “Just when I think it is over, think it is done, I find myself shivering again, in the warmth of the sun” (p. 92).

I was struck by the stark contrast between the faithful sacrificial love of Rachael’s family, friends, church, and advocates over against the selfish desires of her abuser, institutions, coaches, and, unfortunately, at times, the church. Of her family she writes,

A saving grace through my abuse had been my parents’ relationship with each other and me. My mom was an abuse survivor, too, and she didn’t hide that. I knew there were men out there who could walk through the grief and pain alongside survivors, who could help them heal instead of hurt them, because my dad had done that for my mom. From both my dad and my brother, I knew that healthy masculinity was a gift (p. 113).

Rachael’s husband portrayed this Christlike masculinity by consistently walking beside her in patience, encouragement, and compassion.

On the other side, when it comes to the mistakes, lies, and failures of individuals, institutions, or the legal system, Rachael does not shy away from respectfully pointing out where they have gone wrong. For example, when leaders sought to cover up reports of abuse in Sovereign Grace Churches, even going so far as to pray against the survivors, Rachael said,

All the survivors attributed the mishandling of their cases to the church’s theology. They alleged dynamics like an excessive view of pastoral authority; a refusal to engage with secular authorities or abuse educators outside the church; teachings on concepts like unity, forgiveness, and grace that resulted in abusers being “forgiven” while victims were silenced by being characterized as “bitter.” It wasn’t a new story—not to anyone who understood the reasons churches typically mishandle abuse (pp. 140-141).

I appreciated the way in which Rachael consistently draws attention to the fundamental truth that our actions must always be governed by love. She remembers,

The pattern of love that was displayed by Christ on the cross was the one my parents followed. Their love wasn’t obsessed with authority for power’s sake. Instead, it sacrificed daily for us, even in the little ways, like taking time to listen to the concerns of a young child or petulant teen. They taught us that their authority was limited and would only be exercised for the right reasons and in the right way. This meant

that they would discuss with us, hear, and respect our input; and work with us to find a way forward. It didn’t mean that obedience wasn’t necessary or that we were allowed to argue them into changing their minds. Rather, it meant that we could approach them and be heard (p. 11).

From them she also learned that “love would ensure a willingness to hear and see the truth, even if it meant admitting I was wrong. Love would ensure compassion even for those who did wrong, while still enabling fierce pursuit of the truth” (p. 5). Even later, as Rachael wrestled with how God’s love could mesh with the amount of abuse in the world, she came to confess, “Whatever I didn’t understand, whatever answers I hadn’t yet found couldn’t contradict what I *did* know... there is good and evil. There is a God who defines it. He is just. He is loving” (p. 104).

The necessity of protecting the vulnerable is imperative. Denhollander says it well when she writes, “The weight of how we fail our children pressed on me as an attorney for victims who’d been abused by priests told a *Globe* investigative reporter: ‘Mark my words, Mr. Rezendes. If it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a village to abuse one.’ And it does. It always has...it takes a village to stop the abuse too” (p. 268). Denhollander does more than needed in sharing the details of her abuse. And why? Because as she frequently states, “The more you love, the harder you fight” (p. 217).

It is hard to do the right thing. It is hard to educate, protect, and deal with abuse properly. Quoting from the author once again,

Everyone appreciates advocacy when it’s directed to those ‘outside the camp,’ but when it demands that we evaluate our own faith communities, political parties, favorite sports team, candidates, or beloved leaders, we scramble for reasons why things are ‘different’ in that space. This is the blind spot that keeps abusers protected and convinces victims that it’s never safe to speak up (pp. 321-322).

The truth is that there are victims of many forms of abuse all around us. We cannot afford to look away. We cannot afford not to know the signs. We cannot afford to enable abusers. We cannot afford not to know how to respond. We cannot afford not to know what a precious soul is worth.

Like Rachael, we must boldly profess “I care about the survivors. I care about the church. I care about the integrity of the gospel. When we get this wrong, it does terrible damage” (p. 147). We must get this right, admitting where we have done it wrong. May we strive, “to

do what is right, no matter the cost. To hold to the straight line in the midst of the battle...the darkness is there, and we cannot ignore it. But we can let it point us to the light”

(p. 323). “Love is the motivation that will give joy and peace when doing the right thing is hard and hurts” (p. 237).



News from our churches

Mr. James Holstege, member of Southeast Protestant Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan and administrator at Eastside Christian School in Grand Rapids

Remembering the days of old: The Holstege family (1)

As we start this series, we want to take a look into the past, especially around the time when the Protestant Reformed Churches had her beginnings. For those who can trace their family history to the early years, there may well be as many stories to tell as there are members. Moving forward, it is my hope to explore several of these family histories and stories...your stories. As I mentioned in my previous article, I want to hear from you. I want to hear about your family history. We begin with the Holstege family then, because we have to begin somewhere, and I just so happen to be one!

Before we dive into the Holstege family history, as it relates to 1924 and the PRCA, I think it could be beneficial to look back even further in time. Since most, if not all early members of the PRCA were of Dutch descent, it may help us to explore and try to come to some understanding of what conditions and circumstances were like in The Netherlands that prompted many of our forefathers to make the life-changing decision of immigrating to America, the Holstege family being among them.

Our eventual focus will be on my great-grandfather, Lambert Holstege (1880-1950).¹ Lambert was only five months old when he arrived on the eastern shores of the USA in May 1881. He was the youngest traveler in his group, making up three generations coming off that ship in New York. Included were his grandparents, parents, uncles, aunts, siblings, and a cousin. They left behind the humble village of Doornspijk in the province of Gelderland and settled eventually in Ottawa County, Michigan, near Hudsonville.

The little that we know about these Holstege immigrants from Gelderland is that they were simple farmhands or gardeners, laboring for others. They were likely mem-

bers in the Secession (Afscheiding) churches. After getting themselves settled in Michigan, they were able to secure land and proceeded to farm on their own. It appears that most of them joined Beaverdam Reformed Church, and soon thereafter transferred to Beaverdam Christian Reformed Church.

What motivated my forefathers and perhaps yours and many others to pack up and leave for America? Here are a few factors, to consider, which could give us clues.

First, regarding their socio-economic status, they match the description, written in several sources, of those who predominately made up the membership in the Secession churches. Dr. James D. Bratt describes these members as being “...the hired hands, the poorer farmers, and the small tradesmen....”² Bratt also quotes from official government reports which “...described Seceder membership as ‘for the most part...from the lowest ranks, uncultured, the least significant, having no man of name among them.’”³ They belonged to the “*kleine luyden*” (common/small folk). Henry S. Lucas, in his book, *Netherlanders in America*, informs us about the difficult economic conditions in The Netherlands, brought on in part by politics, government policy, and the potato famine.⁴ Added to that, to be a part of the Secession meant enduring persecution, including economic hardships.

2 *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America: A History of a Conservative Subculture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1984), 6.

3 Bratt, 6.

4 The subtitle is *Dutch Immigration to the United States and Canada, 1789-1950* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989), cf. 50-57.

1 Many thanks to Sharon Kraker (Holstege) for the research she has done and was willing to share.

The poor, uneducated citizens of The Netherlands who became part of the Secession, were nevertheless pious, spiritually minded people. They did not like the apostasy and worldliness that had taken over the national state church and the citizenry of the country.

All sorts of spiritual and unspiritual elements were brought together under one roof...Christian discipline grew lax, spiritual life was reprehensible, and rationalistic errors forced their way into the church.... The Reformed doctrines of 1618-1619 were despised. Some of the common people, especially of Gelderland, still maintained the confession of the fathers, but the majority of the leaders were bitterly opposed to it.⁵

The Seceders, then, became less inclined to remain patriotic to their fatherland and more inclined to say farewell.

Also, of interest are some difficult and divisive conflicts that arose among the Secession churches in The Netherlands during the years 1840-1890. For further reading, I refer you to Rev. Joshua Engelsma's recent excellent book titled *Watchman on the Walls of Zion*.⁶

5 Henry Danhof and Herman Hoeksema, *Sin and Grace*, tr. C. Hanko (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2003), 4-5.

6 The subtitle is *The Life and Influence of Simon VanVelzen* (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2021), cf. especially chapter 10, "The Robbers Synod."

Living in Gelderland, the Holstes were under the guidance and care of Rev. Anthony Brummelkamp, who was in charge of the whole province. According to Rev. Engelsma, "The introduction of [the] well-meant offer [of the gospel] was due primarily to Anthony Brummelkamp. Already in September 1841, some of Brummelkamp's parishioners objected to his preaching of the well-meant offer."⁷ Could any of these things have played a role in the Holstege family's decision to leave?

Regardless of how the ecclesiastical events in The Netherlands affected them specifically, they certainly were affected, along with many others who boarded ships for America, starting in 1846 with those who came with the Reverends A. VanRaalte and H. Scholte. After reviewing some of this history, what this does say to me is that those coming to America from the Secessionist churches could have different ways of looking at things, depending upon the geographic location they were from in The Netherlands.

With this background information, we will return to the life of Lambert Holstege, the Lord willing, next time.

7 J. Engelsma, 143.

Announcements

Resolution of sympathy

The Council and congregation of Southwest PRC express our Christian sympathy to Dr. Roderick and Evonne Kreuzer in the death of **Dr. Richard Kreuzer**, Rod's brother, who died at the age of 83. Psalm 48:14, "For this God is our God for ever and ever: he will be our guide even unto death."

Rev. D. Noorman, President
Tom VanderWoude, Clerk

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