

The Standard Bearer

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Encouragement for pilgrim laborers

Rev. Dennis Lee

My heart desires thy peace: Understanding and supporting victims of sexual abuse

Prof. Brian Huizinga

The *ordo salutis* Regeneration: “Begotten again unto a lively hope”

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News from the seminary

Prof. Ronald Cammenga

The Protestant Reformed Churches: Their beginnings

Prof. Russell Dykstra



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Meditation

Rev. Dennis Lee, pastor of Kalamazoo PRC in Kalamazoo, Michigan

Encouragement for pilgrim laborers

They that sow in tears shall reap in joy. He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him.

Psalm 126:5, 6

Songs of hope for life in the valley! That is what Psalms 120-134 are all about. Well known by us as the “Songs of Degrees” or “Songs of Ascent,” they were songs especially to be sung by the Old Testament pilgrims as they journeyed from their homes to Mount Zion and Jerusalem for corporate worship. As these saints sang them along their travels, the LORD Himself ministered hope in their hearts. Each song bore its own unique message of hope for the traveling pilgrim. How blessed these pilgrims were as they made their way onward and upwards towards Zion, as the Spirit lifted up their spirits through the knowledgeable and heartfelt singing of these songs!

We New Testament saints who no longer live in the age of types and shadows but in the age of reality and maturity can still most certainly appreciate and learn from these songs. For Jehovah, our unchanging God, is pleased to minister that same hope in our hearts along our pilgrim’s journey to heaven, a journey pictured by the Old Testament saint’s pilgrimage to earthly Jerusalem.

Psalm 126 is a song of encouragement for pilgrim laborers. It ministered hope in the hearts of the pilgrim who sang it with understanding.

Dear reader, are you a pilgrim laborer hard at work for the Lord? Are you therefore not in need of encouragement?

The LORD knows our need! He understands this abiding need for the faithful pilgrim laborer in every age! Our faith is weak. Our strength is limited. The labors we perform are demanding, unceasing, and can take their spiritual toll upon us. One way in which He meets our great need for encouragement and hope is through the singing of this blessed song, especially its final two verses.

“They that sow in tears....”

Those words speak of a sorrowful sowing that immediately draws our attention to the great and abiding need of the faithful pilgrim laborer for encouragement! Here, the Holy Spirit sketches the familiar figure of farming.

The farmer is the one doing the sowing. Think of him going to the field in early spring with the ground still hard and frozen from the winter season. Before he can even get to the labor of sowing, he has a lot of other work to do!

To begin with, he has to clear the stubble. This refers to the mess left behind from the previous growing season. In those days there was a lot of hard work to be done throughout the entire field. Unlike our modern farming machines guided with smart technology, at that time everything had to be done by hand. Nor is that all. After the farmer was done with clearing the stubble, he still had to prepare the land. That too demanded a lot of hard, manual labor.

Only when both of those tasks were accomplished, could the farmer finally begin the work of sowing. This required hours and hours of back-breaking work, performed under the heat of the sun—day after day after day! And then, there was the watering, the weeding, and the constant, unceasing care of all that is growing on the field.

And all of this toil of sowing was necessary! It was all in order to feed the farmer and his family!

We can imagine the *difficulty* of the work—day after day—week after week—during the planting and growing season, can we not? And who knows what other difficulties the sower faced with each different growing season and each passing day? Every day was different!

Nor is that all. There was also *sacrifice* involved. Note the word “precious”: the sower is sowing *precious* seed! How was this seed “precious”? Call to mind that sowing takes place in spring. By that time, the remaining amount of grain left from the last season was getting low. Therefore, it is not hard for us to imagine the farmer saying to his wife in relation to one of the remaining bags of grain still available: “Don’t use this! I need it for planting.” How *precious* then, was the

seed being planted—so that *sacrifice* was involved in this labor of sowing!

The farmer sowed in tears! Great was his need for encouragement!

The same could be said of the Old Testament pilgrim in his labor of rebuilding Jerusalem—the city, the walls, and most of all the temple! This undoubtedly was the labor that the psalmist set forth in this inspired song when he spoke of “the captivity of Zion” being turned (cf. v. 1). To be sure, there was heartfelt ecstasy and joy when ungodly Cyrus made the astounding decree that the Israelites, held in captivity in Babylon, could now return to Jerusalem.

But that joy soon vanished. Joy was turned to sorrow when they realized so few were actually willing to make their way back to Jerusalem. Joy was turned to sorrow when they realized just how difficult and dangerous their journey back home would be. Above all, joy was turned to sorrow when they finally arrived in Jerusalem and were greeted by a scene of utter devastation and destruction: the ruins of the city, the walls broken down, and most of all, the once-glorious temple built by Solomon completely destroyed.

Before the work of rebuilding could be done, all the rubble of the ruins had to be cleared. Preparation was needed in terms of planning, organizing, and gathering the materials needed for rebuilding. Only then could the actual work of rebuilding begin! And when it did, it was back-breaking work characterized by a labor with both sword and trowel—trowel for rebuilding, and sword for protection—against opposition and enemies who attacked them. Long hours of labor were required each day, over many days, weeks, and months! The work was *difficult*, to say the least! Moreover, *sacrifice* was involved—especially for those who lived not in Jerusalem but in neighboring cities. These men had to give up operating their businesses for a time in order to labor in Jerusalem. This was sorrowful labor. They too labored in tears!

Dear reader, you identify with such sorrowful labor, do you not?

I assume that you love the LORD. I assume that you desire to see your personal life, your marriage, your home, your family, your relationships, your job, your learning, the service you give in the church and denomination you belong to—indeed your church and your

denomination—truly prosper and be pleasing unto the LORD! Those descriptions of labor—of difficulty, of sacrifice, of laboring in tears—describe well the reality and experience of all who care deeply for the cause of the LORD in our spheres of life!

Especially is this so in our times, and in the context and circles of most who are reading this meditation! Churches torn and divided. Relationships of families and extended families broken. Victims of abuse still hurting. And so much more! Through it all, the *regular* labors of kingdom laborers—already difficult without the heavy troubles—continue, yea must continue! Meetings are

long. Sleep is lost. Sacrifices have to be made. And in some instances, labors continue with fewer laborers: “O, send us more laborers, LORD!”

We too labor and toil in tears! How needful for us that there be encouragement!

The LORD provides that here in the form of a promise of joyful reaping in these verses.

We spoke of the farmer who began the sorrowful labor of sowing in spring. Can we imagine the great joy the farmer has when he reaps his full harvest in summer and fall? The joy of that complete reaping and harvest erases all past sorrows and wipes away all tears of the sorrowful sowing of the past. All of that is forgotten! There is fullness of joy!

So too was the great joy of the Jerusalem rebuilders when she—the city, the walls, and especially the temple—was finally rebuilt! O, the joy of Jerusalem when her temple worshipers finally gathered back at the temple for joyful worship unto Jehovah!

Indeed! *They that sow in tears, shall reap in joy. He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him.*

The ultimate fulfillment of this encouraging promise is through the chief gospel and kingdom Laborer and Sower, our Lord Jesus Christ. It was *He* who sowed with deepest grief and tears at Calvary. And it is *He* who will reap with fullness of unfathomable joy when *He* shall come again, gathering all who love Him with glorious souls and bodies unto life in the new, heavenly, and everlasting Jerusalem! In that day, all we who labor in tears in this present life will share in that joy completely, and all tears of sorrow will be wiped away.

The farmer sowed in tears! Great was his need for encouragement!...We too labor and toil in tears! How needful for us that there be encouragement!



Editorial

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

My heart desires thy peace: Understanding and supporting victims of sexual abuse

Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse was seldom talked about in the past. For many believers it was a terrible sin included in a list of other gross sins abhorred by God, but, generally speaking, it was not studied, understood, explained, or discussed. It was mostly a dark abstraction. A level of ignorance prevailed. Such quietness is not good because it can give perpetrators their edge, exacerbate the suffering of hurting victims, and create an environment in which it is less likely that parents will have healthy discussions with their children about how their growing bodies relate to other people.

In the last two or three decades, sexual abuse has gradually emerged as a subject of focused study within the Christian church, including within conservative Reformed Christianity. The good fruit has been an increased awareness, the proliferation of helpful resources, the exposure of the sin as not just a “world” or “Roman Catholic” problem, prayers of lamentation, the calling of perpetrators to repentance, and a beginning attempt to help those who have been oppressed. In fact, as I put the finishing touches on this article, the churches in Classis East of the PRC are preparing for an unprecedented prayer service later tonight, January 31. Classis has called a special day of prayer (Church Order, Art. 66) in response to recent and past cases of abuse in our own denomination.

If our heart desires peace in the church, then we pray that God will lead the church in the way of His Word, for only in the way of obedience to Scripture does Jerusalem enjoy peace and unity within her walls. God’s Word calls us to love our neighbor as ourselves (Matt. 22:39), and to reflect the love of God who is “a refuge for the oppressed” (literally, *the crushed*, Ps. 9:9). God calls us, particularly as officebearers, to “defend the poor and fatherless, do justice to the afflicted and needy, deliver the poor and needy, rid them out of the hand of the wicked” (Ps. 82:3-4).

Sometimes the brother or sister we are called to love, defend, and protect is a weak one in the church who through no fault of their own was subjected to an evil

crime against God and their own body and soul by a powerful one perpetrating the assault of sexual abuse. The way to enjoy blessed peace in the church is to rid the wounded from the hand of their wolf-like oppressor and administer care to those hurting sheep.

But how do we do that?

For the content of this article I am indebted to many discreet and thoughtful Protestant Reformed members in West Michigan and beyond. These brothers and sisters have been walking alongside victims of sexual abuse, and they met with me and a colleague of mine to share with us their insights, as they have seen much more than most of us will ever see, and they know through loving experience much more than most of us will ever know. What a victim cannot always articulate, those close to them are often better equipped to do by the strengthening hand of God. Having listened, now I write to share with you so that together we can continue to learn how to help *all* the hurting souls in the church so that *all* God’s children can lay down in peace and sleep (Ps. 4:8).

Some things to understand

Disclosing

First, we must understand that it is terribly difficult for a victim of sexual abuse to disclose their abuse. For a victim to get to the point where he or she is willing to open up and talk to anyone is a huge step, because victims hide their abuse with ferocity. They are resolved to bury all of it as a deep secret. To *think* about telling fills their soul with anxiety; actually *telling* fills their soul with shame. But there is something even more painful and damaging—being doubted, or worst of all, blamed. In that case, some say it would be easier to be raped again. If victims see other victims disclose and not be treated with the compassion and care of Christ, they become still more determined to hide their abuse.

Abusers

Second, we must understand that abusers, regardless of their level of intelligence, are expert manipulators and calculated in their every move. Some even use their

apparent lack of intelligence as part of their deception. They can play stupid before their elders in order to generate sympathy and attempt to fool the elders into thinking they are poor, wounded, humble, repentant sheep.

It is excruciatingly painful for a victim of sexual abuse to see an abuser manipulate a consistory. The victim was groomed, manipulated, and deceived, sometimes for years, and in their own mind they can rationalize that horror somewhat, and make sense of it, because they are, after all, nothing but a small, frail, naïve, vulnerable, little sheep or lamb. “But,” thinks the victim, “officebearers—ministers and elders—who have been appointed by God to rule in the church as undershepherds of Christ, they will never be deceived and fooled.” Sometimes we are. God help us.

Often we are vulnerable to deception because the gospel of forgiveness courses through our veins and we earnestly desire reconciliation. We know our God is able to do exceeding abundantly above all we ask or think, and that with Him nothing is impossible. With all our hearts we want and pray for the restoration of the lost soul of the abuser. We are eager to see signs of God’s gracious work of repentance and we fear spurning the fruits of the Spirit. But in our eagerness we can fall for sham repentance, and too easily accept cheap words and big tears that are not followed with a demonstrable amendment of life and a willingness to accept consequences. Fooling the officebearers is not only damaging to the abuser’s own impenitent and deceitful soul, but also damaging to the victim, because then it seems that there is no hope for justice and truth in this world, not even in the church. If God’s servants cannot see through the deception, then who can?

After the abuser has been named publicly in an announcement by the consistory, and the congregation has been exhorted to admonish and pray, it is also devastating for a victim of sexual abuse to hear church members defend the abuser and even herald all the supposedly good things he or she did in the past. When this happens, then the one whom church members rush to defend is the one who systematically oppressed the victim with idolatrous, perverse, merciless, selfish, and abominable desires and actions. Is *that* not deemed bad enough for fellow saints to condemn so that they seek the perpetrator’s repentance? It is also profoundly injurious when church members call into question the veracity of consistorial announcements about abuse, so that the conversations after church go like this: “That cannot be true. Mr. ____, or Mrs. ____, or Rev. ____ never would have done that. There must be more to the story. The truth will come out.” To say nothing of the open opposition to the consistory in its work, that kind

of talk cuts a victim to the quick and sends a very clear message: “Your reality is not possible in our church. Maybe somewhere else, but not here.”

Lifelong Effects

There can be lifelong effects for victims of sexual abuse, and that underscores their need for love and support. Physically, their bodily health can deteriorate and their sleep can be interrupted by nightmares. The brain of one who was abused as a child can be affected for life due to the trauma.

Psychologically, some victims hate and are scared of their own bodies, and may even practice self-harm or turn to drugs and alcohol. They commonly obsess over and look to take control of different matters in their life, because for so long their abuser controlled them. For the rest of their lives, victims can fear that others will doubt them, and thus they feel overwhelmed if they ever sense you are calling into question the veracity of their words. For example, in an ordinary conversation, suppose one says, “Great news, I just saw the price of unleaded gas dropped 40 cents!” and you say, “What? No way! 40 cents? I can’t believe that.” Most people would think nothing of such an exchange; but this can go through the mind of a victim due to the trauma they have experienced: “Are you doubting me? Are you calling into question what I saw and reported? Do you also doubt everything that has happened to me in my abuse and what I reported?”

Emotionally, there may be fear, hate, antagonism with loved ones, or rage issues. Victims can go into a talespin at just the sight of their abuser, even years down the road, and engage in erratic and strange behavior.

Socially, a victim, with a firm resolve never to be hurt again, can create a hard, inflexible exterior that in turn leads to relational difficulties and loneliness.

Spiritually, victims can struggle to see the goodness of their sovereign God who ordained this evil. Is He trustworthy? Why did He not stop this? Does He hear prayer? If their abuser used Scripture to manipulate them, they are left even more confused.

Some ways to show love and support

Suffering victims and their families need the love and support of the congregation. There is an outpouring of support for a church member who is diagnosed with cancer and subjected to wearying rounds of chemotherapy. Cancer patients and others with similar infirmities will testify of the waves of support that come in from the congregation, and they receive that love as the grace of God which helps carry them along. The church would not be the church if dear saints with heavy afflictions did not feel the outpouring of congregational love and

support. However, survivors of abuse and their close loved ones usually do not have that kind of experience.

I believe the explanation is due largely to the fact that the average church member is intimidated by this dark and daunting subject, and even now, with the topic gaining more attention, people are still unsure of themselves. Even if we know someone who has been abused, the subject seems too personal, too sensitive, and too complex to broach. Furthermore, we wonder if it is even okay for us to know that our brother or sister in the church was abused, since we read about how hard it was for them to disclose in the first place. And if we *do* know, and we are sure it *is okay* that we know, and we *want to* offer expressions of love and care, we feel completely unqualified to speak. We believe it is safer to avoid direct communication, rather than offer well-intended encouragement that ends up hurting rather than helping the victim. Even close family members of abuse victims relate that they still do not understand all the triggers that will set off their loved one due to the profound effect abuse has upon the person.

Here are some ways to show love and support. First, the best thing for anyone to do is gain a measure of knowledge. When our hearts are willing to help, but our tongues, hands, and feet are paralyzed in trepidation, then we need education—not expertise, just basic knowledge. With knowledge comes confidence, and then we are better equipped to help. If someone gives you a beautiful, potted, ornamental plant for your house, but you do not know anything about it, you might kill it with too much or not enough sunshine, or with too much or not enough water. Plant care, and to a much greater extent, people care, requires knowledge.

Second, if you do know someone who is suffering from the effects of their sexual abuse, and their path often crosses yours or they live in your sphere of life, a simple but genuine expression like, “I am thinking of you” or “I am praying for you” is not intrusive but meaningful. Often it is good not to assume we know exactly what to say and do, but to ask in sincerity, “How can I help?” Those simple words go a long way and reflect the heart of Christ our merciful Helper (Heb. 2:18).

Third, if we have established a close enough relationship with the victim to know a little bit about their life, and we learn that he or she has an exhausting week that includes meetings with a consistory, work on a police report, or a court date, then tokens of love and support at that time are much appreciated.

Fourth, pray for victims. Do not say, “I am praying for you,” and then not pray. *Pray*. For those who lead congregational worship, congregational prayers that customarily include petitions for the elderly, the sick,

the grieving, those with wayward children, and those with upcoming surgeries, could also include petitions for other members of the congregation who are deeply hurting in ways we do not even know about, including those who have been abused.

Fifth, it is good for preachers (and elders) to know their congregation, and to be reminded that the most powerful expression of love that any victim can receive is the preached Word of God, including the Word of God wisely applied to abuse when appropriate. There is power in the pulpit. When victims hear that the Word of God not only proclaims mercy for those afflicted with cancer or wayward children, but also for *them*; and when they hear that God not only condemns sins like cursing or Sabbath-desecration, but also the sin of *abuse*, they are strengthened. More than any counseling and all the private expressions of care and support, the gospel of Jesus Christ is powerful to bind deep wounds and gently heal broken hearts. It also gives hope for an everlasting future in which all this darkness is no more.

Sixth, it is good for consistories to know that when they are working with a victim, victims deeply appreciate timely and clear communication so they know where things stand. Good communication is mercy to the victim so that they do not have to bear the burden of prolonged periods of silence in which they are left in the dark or even come to hear about their case in some round-about way.

Seventh, it is an enormous encouragement to victims when the whole church—not only the consistory, but everyone, including the distressed family and friends of the abuser—stands for truth and justice, and seeks to hold the abuser accountable and call him or her to genuine repentance.

Conclusion

Sexual abuse is war, insidious war against the weak. An abuser is not like an enemy soldier outside the camp, but something of a terrorist from within who blends in with the civilians and uses calculated violence and deceit to fulfill his or her base and self-serving designs. Peace in the church always comes in the way of warfare, for Israel of old, and for the church today. Therefore, in our desire for Jerusalem’s peace, we pray that God will give us resolve, strength, circumspection, pity, and grace in the name of our Head Jesus Christ, so that we may wage a holy war against the evil of sexual abuse. The church that loves victims of sexual abuse works to assure them that they have support and refuge in the church, while perpetrators will not be supported in their sin, and so long as they continue impenitently will find no refuge in the church.



All around us

Rev. David Noorman, pastor of Southwest PRC in Wyoming, Michigan

A “Gay Rights Strategy” in action

The strategy itself

It seems that no matter where one turns, the LGBT influence is everywhere. Every day there are new articles and reports defending, promoting, or flaunting the LGBT lifestyle or various forms of LGBT activism. For Christians who affirm biblical perspectives of sexuality and gender, it can be overwhelming. We cannot escape it; neither can our children.

A recent article from *World* offers an explanation of the prevalence of the LGBT influence today by reflecting upon “the astounding success of a gay rights strategy.”¹ The author, Thaddeus Williams, writes from a Christian perspective and calls for Christians to examine whether we have succumbed to this unbiblical influence. Here is William’s summary and commentary on an influential gay rights strategy:

Last month—November 2022—marked the 35th anniversary of one of the most culture-reshaping articles in modern history. In 1987 a neuropsychiatrist named Marshall Kirk and a public relations consultant named Hunter Madsen (under the *nom de plume* “Erastes Pill”) teamed up to write “The Overhauling of Straight America.” This article would later balloon into the 400-page tome *After the Ball: How America Will Conquer Its Fear and Hatred of Gays in the 90s*. Kirk and Madsen laid out a six-phase strategy that goes a long way toward understanding the mainstream messaging about sexuality of our own day.

First, “talk about gays and gayness as loudly and as often as possible.” Why? Because “almost any behavior begins to look normal if you are exposed to enough of it.... The way to numb raw sensitivities about homosexuality is to have a lot of people talk a great deal about the subject in a neutral or supportive way.”

Second, “portray gays as victims, not as aggressive challengers.” Third, “Give protectors a just cause.” Kirk and Madsen clarify, “Our campaign should not demand direct support for homosexual practices, [but]

should instead take anti-discrimination as its theme.” Fourth, “Make gays look good,” that is, “the campaign should paint gays as superior pillars of society.” Fifth, “make the victimizers look bad.” This is a crucial step to their strategy. They explain:

At a later stage of the media campaign for gay rights... *it will be time to get tough with remaining opponents. To be blunt, they must be vilified...we intend to make the anti-gays look so nasty that average Americans will want to dissociate themselves from such types....* The public should be shown images of ranting homophobes whose secondary traits and beliefs disgust middle America.... [Show them as] bigoted southern ministers drooling with hysterical hatred.

How many script-writers for major films and television shows seem to have torn this page straight from the Kirk and Madsen playbook?

The sixth and final step of their strategy is simple: “solicit funds. The buck stops here.” Indeed, LGBTQ activists enjoy sizeable corporate funding courtesy of such companies as Wells Fargo, Levi Strauss & Co., GE, Walmart, and Verizon. It would seem that Kirk and Madsen’s six-stage strategy to “overhaul straight America” has triumphed.

It is hard to argue with William’s suggestion that this strategy has succeeded in America. What about us—as individuals, families, and churches? Do we *still* hate that sin? Or have we been “overhauled” and learned to tolerate this new perspective of LGBT lifestyles?

The strategy in action

For all the ‘success’ of the Kirk and Madsen strategy, it has not yet run its course. The devil and the world are still at work to promote the ungodliness of the LGBT movement and to vilify all who will stand in the way. Consider a few recent events that illustrate the continued efforts and progress of the LGBT movement today.

- *Conversion Therapy Bans*

In Washington state, a ban on “conversion therapy” was challenged and upheld. Conversion therapy is a term used for therapeutic efforts to cure, repair, or change a person’s homosexual attractions. According

1 Thaddeus Williams, “They must be vilified,” *World*, December 30, 2022, <https://wng.org/opinions/they-must-be-vilified-1672398469>.

to Reuters, the 2018 WA state law “subjects licensed health care providers to discipline, including possible fines and license suspensions or revocations, for trying to change the sexual orientation or gender identity of people under age 18.”² A Christian therapist named Brian Tingley challenged this law on the basis that it violates the freedom of speech and religion. Last year his challenge was rejected, and his request that his case be reheard was denied in January of 2023.

In the island nation of Malta, a recent event may foreshadow the next logical step for the LGBT movement in Europe and North America. *Christian Post* reports, “A Maltese Christian charity worker is facing criminal charges for allegedly discussing and promoting so-called conversion practices after he shared his ex-gay testimony during an online media interview. The case is believed to be the first of its kind.... If found guilty, Grech could face punishment of five months in prison and/or a fine of \$5,000....”³ No one should be surprised when these new laws and policies are enforced closer to home in the near future.

- *USA leading the LGBT charge*

The United States appears to be the country leading the charge in legislating for the advantage of LGBT lifestyles. A study by a medical advocacy group, *Do No Harm*, reviewed policies and practices of twelve countries, including the availability of puberty blockers, cross-sex hormones, and youth gender clinics, as well as parental consent laws. The conclusion of the study is that “the United States is the most permissive country when it comes to the legal and medical gender transition of children.... Only France comes close, yet unlike the U.S., France’s medical authorities have recognized the uncertainties involved in transgender medical care for children and have urged ‘great caution’ in its use.”⁴ In other words, compared to other countries, the United States is recklessly moving forward for the advance of the LGBT movement.

- *The ungodly phenomenon of drag queens*

Besides the legislation and policies that have fallen in

line with the LGBT movement, one can also observe the rapid development of a positive, celebratory perspective of LGBT lifestyles in popular culture. The ‘drag queen’ phenomenon is one example of how far the LGBT influence has advanced in this realm. Basically, drag queens refer to men who dress and act as women, usually in a lurid and suggestive manner. Hermina Dykxhoorn of *Christian Renewal* reflects on the increasing popularity and support for drag queens. She writes, “The phenomenon of Drag Queens is quickly becoming accepted as completely normal. These men, formerly relegated to seedy back alley night clubs, have stepped into the mainstream. They have a series of prime time network TV shows worldwide. They’re entertaining children in libraries and even in both Canadian and American elementary schools.”⁵ Dykxhoorn illustrates this far-reaching support by pointing to Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s enthusiastic appearance on a Drag Queen related show. The title of Dykxhoorn’s article is a sufficient response for now: *How Long, O LORD?*

New stories are published daily as the LGBT movement continues to push forward at all levels of government, against Christian colleges and universities, and in every possible form of mainstream and popular media. The sheer number of these stories is astounding. But that should not surprise us either; it is part of the strategy.

Conclusion

After Williams explains Kirk and Madsen’s strategy and acknowledges its success in America, his conclusion is to the point: “So as Christian institutions around the world are now wrestling with questions of human sexuality, let us ask ourselves with brutal honesty—are our doctrines and practices being shaped more by the Scriptures or by Kirk and Madsen? It’s not just a question of cultural interest. It is a question of life or death.”⁶

The LGBT strategy is being applied with zeal every day, and the earthly progress of the LGBT movement cannot be denied. It is not a matter of “if” these new laws will affect us as churches and as individuals, but “when?” It is not a matter of “if” the LGBT influence is affecting the lives of us and our children, but “in what way?” and “how much?”

I trust that these powerful and wicked influences have

2 Brendan Pierson, “Conversion Therapy ban challenge will not be reheard by appeals court,” *Reuters* (January 23, 2023), <https://www.reuters.com/legal/litigation/conversion-therapy-ban-challenge-will-not-be-reheard-by-appeals-court-2023-01-23/>.

3 Anugrah Kumar, “Christian man facing prison for sharing ex-gay testimony...,” *The Christian Post* (January 22, 2023), <https://www.christianpost.com/news/malta-prosecutes-christian-man-for-sharing-ex-gay-testimony.html>.

4 Joshua Arnold, “Report: U.S. is ‘Most Permissive Country’ for Minor Gender Transition,” *The Washington Stand* (January 17, 2023), <https://washingtonstand.com/news/report-us-is-most-permissive-country-for-minor-gender-transition>.

5 Hermina Dykxhoorn, “How Long, O LORD? Some Stories that Impacted the Culture in 2022,” *Christian Renewal* (January 7, 2023), 20.

6 Williams, “They must be vilified.”

not gone undetected among us, and I pray that it has prompted an urgent and ongoing response among us. Are we guarding our hearts from the perverted entertainment of the world? Are we preparing our children to stand firm in biblical truth? Are we striving, with much prayer, to maintain a holy attitude toward these rebellious and unholy lifestyles? Have we been practicing our apologetics in these areas of human sexuality, so that we stand firm and our witness may serve the glory

of God and the well-being of our neighbors? And not to be overlooked as we strive to stand fast against sin in the world, do we hate and flee from the sinful inclinations of our own flesh?

Let us be holy, for God is holy. Let us be sober, and watch unto prayer. Let us live in hope, and not fear or faint. “Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world” (I John 4:4).



Search the Scriptures

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

Habakkuk: The just shall live by faith (8) Five woes against Babylon

Previous article in this series: February 1, 2023, p. 202.

Habakkuk 2:5-20

We have seen that Habakkuk 2:5-20 is God's Word concerning the punishment of Babylon. God would use Babylon to punish Judah, but in perfect justice He would also punish Babylon for what they did to Judah and destroy them as they had destroyed His people.

God would punish that cruel and hasty nation for their pride and boasting, just as He had once punished Assyria: “Shall the axe boast itself against him that heweth therewith? or shall the saw magnify itself against him that shaketh it? as if the rod should shake itself against them that lift it up, or as if the staff should lift up itself, as if it were no wood” (Is. 10:14). He would punish Babylon for drunkenness, fornication, covetousness, violence, and for ascribing its conquests to dumb idols and not to God Almighty (2:19).

Their great sin would be, however, that they had lifted the sword against God's people who are, even when under God's chastising hand, the apple of His eye: “For thus saith the LORD of hosts; After the glory hath he sent me unto the nations which spoiled you: for he that toucheth you toucheth the apple of his eye” (Zec. 2:8). That God sovereignly used Babylon made no difference. That He had raised them up for His own purposes did not change the matter at all. Isaiah had said so many years before: “Sit thou silent, and get thee into darkness, O daughter of the Chaldeans: for thou shalt no more be called, The lady of kingdoms. I was wroth with my people, I have polluted mine inheritance, and given them into thine hand: thou didst shew them no

mercy; upon the ancient hast thou very heavily laid thy yoke” (Is. 47:5, 6). Especially Habakkuk 2:17 has reference to Judah's suffering.

God's use of Babylon, therefore, is a perfect example of the relation between God and evil. In His sovereignty He raises up evildoers and performs His will through them, but they are left “holding the bag,” always responsible for their own wickedness and never able to find an excuse for it in God's sovereignty or an occasion to blame Him.

In Jeremiah 25:9-12 God speaks of Nebuchanezzar as His servant in the destruction of Jerusalem, but also threatens to punish Babylon. He says,

Behold, I will send and take all the families of the north, saith the LORD, and Nebuchadrezzar the king of Babylon, my servant, and will bring them against this land, and against the inhabitants thereof, and against all these nations round about, and will utterly destroy them, and make them an astonishment, and an hissing, and perpetual desolations. Moreover I will take from them the voice of mirth, and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom, and the voice of the bride, the sound of the millstones, and the light of the candle. And this whole land shall be a desolation, and an astonishment; and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. And it shall come to pass, when seventy years are accomplished, that I will punish the king of Babylon, and that nation, saith the LORD, for their iniquity, and the land of the Chaldeans, and will make it perpetual desolations.

That is the sovereignty of God in relation to evil.

God's judgments on Babylon are announced in a series of five woes, five promises of calamity and ruin, promises that would certainly be fulfilled, since God's words are never in vain. These five woes can be described thus, each woe perfectly corresponding to Babylon's crimes:

Verses 6-8, the first woe: Rich with the spoil of many nations, great Babylon will find itself the spoil of the nations;

Verses 9-11, the second woe: Covetous of power and ease and of the wealth of the nations, Babylon will forfeit all, even its own soul;

Verses 12-14, the third woe: Proud of its greatness and achievements, bloody Babylon will find itself nothing more than a means to the establishment of God's everlasting kingdom;

Verses 15-17, the fourth woe: Shameless in wickedness, drunken and fornicating, Babylon will find itself put to shame, left naked and covered in its own filth;

Verses 18-20, the fifth woe: Worshiping lies, idolatrous Babylon will find itself deceived and helpless.

So surely were these five woes fulfilled that many things threatened in them can be referenced to events from the reigns of Nebuchanezzar and Belshazzar as recorded in the book of Daniel and in the prophecies of Isaiah and others against Babylon.

The woes are introduced in verse 5 by a description of a man, drunken, proud, restless, covetous, and an oppressor of others, a man who does not stay at home, but is always abroad seeking mischief, a portrayal of Babylon that stands in sharpest contrast to the just who simply and humbly live by faith. Just as Mystery Babylon is pictured in Revelation 17 and 18 not only as a city but also as a woman, a queen, so Babylon here is not only a city but a man, fabulously rich and powerful.

Many of Babylon's sins are mentioned in the verses that follow, but it is interesting that Babylon is first described as a man drunken and proud. How could one not think of the night of Babylon's fall when at his feast

of wine, Belshazzar had the temple vessels brought out that he might use them to drink to his gods. How appropriate that he who at that drunken feast "enlarged his desire as hell, and was as death," who committing gross sacrilege with the temple vessels, was that very night slain by the Persian conquerors of Babylon and went to hell.

It is likely, in light of Revelation 17 and 18 and its description of Mystery Babylon, that the Word of God through Habakkuk does not only have in mind physical drunkenness and the pride it engenders, but spiritual drunkenness as well. For like Mystery Babylon, the city of old was also "drunken with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus" (Rev. 17:6) and proud in her rebellion against God: "How much she hath glorified herself, and lived deliciously, so much torment and sorrow give her: for she saith in her heart, I sit a queen, and am no widow, and shall see no sorrow" (Rev. 18:7).

In Habakkuk the first woe is put as a taunting proverb in the mouth of those who had suffered violence and oppression under the domination of Babylon. Perhaps Habakkuk had in mind the taunting proverb of Isaiah 14:3-6:

And it shall come to pass in the day that the Lord shall give thee rest from thy sorrow, and from thy fear, and from the hard bondage wherein thou wast made to serve, that thou shalt take up this proverb against the king of Babylon, and say, How hath the oppressor ceased! the golden city ceased! The Lord hath broken the staff of the wicked, and the sceptre of the rulers. He who smote the people in wrath with a continual stroke, he that ruled the nations in anger, is persecuted, and none hindereth.

In that taunting proverb, put in the mouths of the nations that Babylon conquered, Babylon is mocked for becoming the spoil of those whom she spoiled, all her wealth turned to dirt. The reference

to Babylon lading itself with thick clay (2:6) suggests the Word of God in Isaiah 47:1 "Come down, and sit in the dust, O virgin daughter of Babylon," a word fulfilled when the Babylonians were led captive by the Persians,

Many of Babylon's sins are mentioned in the verses that follow, but it is interesting that Babylon is first described as a man drunken and proud. How could one not think of the night of Babylon's fall when at his feast of wine, Belshazzar had the temple vessels brought out that he might use them to drink to his gods. How appropriate that he who at that drunken feast "enlarged his desire as hell, and was as death," who committing gross sacrilege with the temple vessels, was that very night slain by the Persian conquerors of Babylon and went to hell.

chained and filthy slaves, and the city was left nothing more than mounds of dirt. Nebuchanezzar himself was “laden with thick clay” when he became as a beast of the field for seven years (Dan. 4), a foretelling of what would happen to his empire.

Habakkuk says that Babylon’s judgment would come suddenly, and so it did. “*In that night* (the night he saw the handwriting on the wall) was Belshazzar the king of the Chaldeans slain. And Darius the Median took the kingdom, being about threescore and two years old” (Dan. 5:30, 31). Thus was God’s word through Habakkuk exactly fulfilled.

The man of verse 5, rich with unlawful gain would have to pay with heavy interest (the word “bite” in 2:7 often refers to creditors and usury as in Deuteronomy 23:19, 20) his violent appropriation of that which was not his, and his creditors, the nations he had spoiled, would dun him, vex him, for payment. God Himself would foreclose on Babylon’s debts. So Babylon would be for booty and for spoil, who had spoiled the nations and who had the vessels of the Lord’s house in its treasuries.

The second woe builds on the first. The picture drawn is of a man, mad for wealth, who by theft and dishonest gain, by plundering the stone and timber of other houses, amasses sufficient wealth to build himself a mansion on the top of a hill, “setting his nest on high,” thinking that then he will be free from all cares, “delivered from the power of evil.”

Such a man, Habakkuk says, only brings “shame” on his own house, and the stones and timbers he had plundered would cry out against him. His “nest” would become a nest of wild birds: “There shall the great owl make her nest, and lay, and hatch, and gather under her shadow: there shall the vultures also be gathered, every one with her mate” (Is. 34:15). Thus Babylon’s covetousness would come back to haunt it and Babylon’s house would be left desolate. Having hoped for soul ease, Babylon would find that not only had its house been foreclosed upon but also its very soul was forfeit (the word “sinned” in 2:10 can have that sense).

So it is always with covetousness. It is covetousness that says, “Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry” (Luke 12:19). It is the covetous to whom God says, “Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided? (Luke 12:20). Like Babylon, “So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.”

Reading these verses brings Nebuchanezzar to mind:

“Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for the house of the kingdom by the might of my power, and for the honour of my majesty? (Dan. 4:30). Forfeiting his soul, he became for seven years like a beast when “he was driven from men, and did eat grass as oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, till his hairs were grown like eagles’ feathers, and his nails like birds’ claws” (Dan. 4:33). Worse, he would be “brought down to hell, to the sides of the pit” (Is. 14:15).

The third woe adds more detail to the picture being drawn. The man of the second woe, covetous, dishonest and interested only in ease, finds the truth of Psalm 49:9-11: “Their inward thought is, that their houses shall continue for ever, and their dwelling places to all generations; they call their lands after their own names. Nevertheless man being in honour abideth not: he is like the beasts that perish,” so “the fool and the brutish person perish, and leave their wealth to others.”

In the third woe of Habakkuk 2:12-14, however, the emphasis is not on Persia and its conquest and spoiling of Babylon, but on the wonderful and comforting truth that the nations serve the coming kingdom of God and that their wealth will be the everlasting inheritance of the righteous. Nebuchanezzar’s dream of the great image of which he was the head of gold was only a reminder that “in the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed: and the kingdom shall not be left to other people, but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever” (Dan. 2:44). The stone, cut out without hands, would “brake in pieces the iron, the brass, the clay, the silver, and the gold” (Dan. 2:45).

Habakkuk 2:13, then, describes the vanity of human efforts and pride in the face of God’s sovereign use of all things for the coming of His kingdom: “Behold, is it not of the LORD of hosts that the people shall labour in the very fire, and the people shall weary themselves for very vanity?” Nebuchanezzar and his people labored in the fire that would destroy them, and wearied themselves in vain, for God was already using Babylon for His own purposes and kingdom.

Indeed, as the Lord of hosts, God claims all Babylon’s wealth and power as His own. Babylon’s conquests and glory had all been obtained with “borrowed capital,” and all would have to be repaid with interest. So it is always. The world’s accomplishments in science and medicine, culture and the arts are all obtained with the borrowed capital of the gifts and abilities God gives them. All must be repaid and will be repaid in the great day of reckoning.

(to be continued)



Taking heed to the doctrine

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

The *ordo salutis* (2)

Regeneration: “Begotten again unto a lively hope”

Previous article in this series: December 15, 2022, p. 132.

Introduction: What regeneration is

In the first article of this series we defined the *ordo salutis* as the logical order in which the Holy Spirit of Christ applies those benefits of salvation decreed by God in election and purchased by Christ on the cross. The order has eight steps: regeneration, calling, conversion, saving faith, justification, sanctification, preservation, and glorification. In this article I will explain the first step, regeneration.

The following is a definition of regeneration: *Regeneration is the work of God by the power of the Holy Spirit to plant into the heart of the spiritually dead sinner the principle of the life of Jesus Christ.* The essence of regeneration, then, is the planting of life into our hearts.

I must add one word of explanation before I proceed. In regeneration we have the life of Jesus Christ *in principle*. There is a lot of confusion about that term “in principle.” Some people use the term to mean “in theory,” “theoretically,” or “hypothetically.” Then the meaning would be, “In theory we have new life, but not really.” Others have suggested that “in principle” means “legally, or from a legal point of view.” Then the idea would be, “God views us as if we were alive, but we are really not alive—we are still dead.” In both cases, the idea is “not really.”

That is *not* the meaning of “in principle.” The term means “as a beginning.” If we have the principle of the life of Jesus Christ, we have begun to live and *we continue to live*. What has happened, has happened really, truly, even victoriously, but only *in principle*, as a beginning.

Biblical figures used to explain regeneration

The word *regeneration* with respect to our salvation occurs only once in the Bible: “the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghost” (Tit. 3:5). Rather than use the word regeneration, the Bible employs figurative language to describe what regeneration is.

First, the Bible speaks of begetting, giving birth, and a new birth. The classic passage on the new birth is Je-

sus’ instruction to Nicodemus the Pharisee. In John 3:3 Jesus declares, “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” In John 3:5 he adds, “Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.” And in John 3:6 Jesus explains, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”

Peter exclaims, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (I Pet. 1:3). And he gives further instruction in verse 23: “Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth forever.”

“Begotten, born of God, born again,” then, is the language used.

These passages use verbs that mean “to give birth,” “to bear children,” “to beget.” The activity is that of a father or a mother, usually, a father. That activity is the imparting or giving of life. When Jesus said to Nicodemus, “Ye must be born again,” he meant, “Life must be given to you; life must be imparted to you.” He was not calling Nicodemus to do anything to be born again. When Peter writes that God has “begotten us again,” he means that God has given life or imparted life to us.

Moreover, the term that Scripture uses is born or begotten *again*. We were born into this world with a certain kind of life: physical, earthly life. We must be—and, by God’s grace, we are—born again with new life: spiritual, eternal life. That word *again* also means *from above*, because the source of the new life is heaven. In addition, that life is described in terms of a seed. In I Peter 1:23 we are “born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible.” In I John 3:9 we read, “His seed remaineth in him.” A seed is potential life or the beginning of life. Plant a seed into the ground, and it germinates, grows, blossoms, and bears fruit. When God plants the seed of new life in our hearts, it does not lie dormant, but it begins to grow. In that seed of regeneration is contained in principle, as a vital, living beginning, the life that we will enjoy forever in heavenly glory.

Second, the Bible speaks of the gift of a new heart. The Old Testament especially uses that rich imagery. In Ezekiel 36:26-27 we read, “A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them.” In Jeremiah 31:33 we read: “I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people.” In Deuteronomy 30:6 God promises: “And the LORD thy God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live.”

In these passages God promises to do something to our hearts: either to completely replace our hearts (a heart of stone replaced by a heart of flesh), to write His law on our hearts, or to circumcise our hearts. Circumcision is the cutting away of the evil, polluted, defiled flesh. That is deeply significant, of course, because the heart is the spiritual center of our being: it is the source of our thoughts, our affections, and our will. If the heart is changed, the will, the mind, the soul, and the affections/emotions are changed. Therefore, regeneration is a radical (“pertaining to the root”) change or transformation in the heart.

Third, the Bible speaks of a resurrection from the dead or the gift of life to the dead. The prophets use this terminology also. Ezekiel 16:6 states, “And when I passed by thee, and saw thee polluted in thine own blood, I said unto thee, when thou wast in thy blood, Live; yea, when I said unto thee when thou wast in thy blood, Live.” The symbolism is of God breathing new life into a dead baby lying in its blood. Ezekiel 37:5 describes regeneration in these terms: “Thus saith the Lord GOD unto these bones, Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you, and ye shall live.”

That is why the New Testament uses the word “quicken.” To quicken is to make alive. To quicken is to bring to life that which was dead: “And you hath he quickened who were dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1). Regeneration is the breathing of life into a spiritually dead sinner.

Fourth, the Bible speaks of “a new creation.” The New Testament uses that terminology. “If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new” (II Cor. 5:17). “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10).

To recap: *Regeneration is the work of God by the power of the Holy Spirit to plant into the heart of the*

spiritually dead sinner the principle of the life of Jesus Christ. The wonder of God is described as a new birth, a new heart, life from the dead, and a new creation. As the Canons of Dordt, III/IV, 12 express it, “It is evidently a supernatural work, most powerful, and at the same time most delightful, astonishing, mysterious, and ineffable; not inferior in efficacy to creation or the resurrection from the dead, as the Scripture inspired by the Author of this work declares.”

The source of regeneration

Peter connects our regeneration to the resurrection of Jesus: “[He] hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (I Pet. 1:3). That is intriguing. We should ask, “What is the connection between our regeneration and the resurrection of Jesus?”

Without Jesus’ physical resurrection, our spiritual resurrection (regeneration) is impossible. Jesus’ physical resurrection is the source of the spiritual life worked in us at regeneration. When God quickens us or makes us alive, He works in us the life of Jesus Christ. That is deeply mysterious: Jesus Christ lives in us by His Spirit. “Christ liveth in me,” says Paul in Galatians 2:20. Christ by His Spirit is the source of our power to live as Christians (see Rom. 8:9-13). But the point is simply this: If Jesus were still dead, He could not give us His life. “We are also by His power raised up to a new life” (Heidelberg Catechism, A. 45).

Jesus’ resurrection from the dead also presupposes something else: *the cross*. We have been begotten again by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, who at one time was dead because He died on the cross. The cross and subsequent resurrection, then, are the source of the new birth, the new heart, the life from the dead, and the new creation. Without the cross and the resurrection, it would be impossible for guilty sinners to be granted the grace of regeneration. In other words, Christ by His death on the cross and His glorious resurrection from the dead has purchased the life of regeneration for us. God sends the Holy Spirit into our hearts to grant us the new birth because Jesus Christ suffered, died, was buried, and rose again. As guilty sinners, we do not have the right to life, but we deserve to be dead and under the power of death forever. “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (I Pet. 1:3).

Regeneration, then, is the work of God by the power of the Holy Spirit to plant into the heart of the spiritually dead sinner the principle of the life of Jesus Christ

and the source of that life is the crucified and resurrected Savior Jesus Christ.

Regeneration: The work of God, not the work of man

Canons, III/IV, 12 speaks of “the Author of this work.” Regeneration is not the work of man. Regeneration is not a cooperative effort between God and man. Regeneration is only, and entirely, *the work of God*.

Proof that regeneration is the work of God alone is found in I Peter 1:3: “Blessed be...” Who? “Blessed be I, who have regenerated myself”? “Blessed be I, who have cooperated with God in my regeneration”? “Blessed be I, who have not resisted God’s desire to regenerate me”? “Blessed be I, who have yielded to God’s regeneration”? Certainly not—God forbid! “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ...which hath begotten us again.” The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the triune God. The three persons of the Godhead give us the grace of regeneration, but especially on the foreground is the Holy Spirit. That is Jesus’ teaching also in John 3: “Except a man be born of water and *of the Spirit*” (v. 5). “That which is born *of the Spirit* is spirit” (v. 6). “The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, or whither it goeth: so is everyone that is born *of the Spirit*” (v. 8). The Spirit, then, the Spirit of Jesus Christ, earned on the cross, is the Spirit of regeneration.

The necessity of regeneration: Man’s spiritual death

The work of regeneration must be the work of God alone because before regeneration we are spiritually dead. Therefore, only when God has mercy upon us are we regenerated. That is exactly what I Peter 1:3 says: “Blessed be...God...*which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again.*”

Spiritual death is the condition of everyone who is not regenerated/born again. Consider a number of passages that teach the reality of spiritual death:

And you hath he quickened who were dead in trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1).

Having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart, who being past feeling have given themselves over unto lasciviousness to work all uncleanness with greediness (Eph. 4:18-19).

And you that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works (Col. 1:21).

And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him (Col. 2:13).

From these passages we learn what spiritual death is. It is to be cut off from the life of God, so that one is an enemy of God; it is to be unable to do anything good and to be inclined to all wickedness (that is, to be totally depraved); and it is to be actively, viciously evil. Spiritual death is not inactivity, but it is the absence of, and inability unto, any *positive* spiritual activity. One who is spiritually dead cannot believe, cannot repent, cannot feel true sorrow over sin, cannot hunger and thirst after righteousness; one who is spiritually dead hates God and his neighbor with his whole heart, soul, mind, and strength. In a word, one who is spiritually dead is “darkness.”

The explanation for regeneration: God’s mercy

The explanation for regeneration, then, is not some work of man, but *the mercy of God*. Without the mercy of God, we would stay spiritually dead, which is what we deserve to be. Remember that our first father Adam was not created spiritually, dead; he was alive. Adam knew God, he delighted in Him, and he lived with Him to serve Him and praise Him. But Adam sinned; he plunged himself and the whole of his posterity (including us) into death. Part of that death is that we are born dead in trespasses and sins, which is the result of the just judgment of God. It is not merely a tragedy that we are born spiritually dead, but it is God’s punishment on the human race. We deserve it.

The difference, then, between the spiritually dead and the regenerated is God’s mercy: God has mercy on whom He will have mercy. Peter begins by praising God for His mercy: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ which *according to his abundant mercy* hath begotten us again.” God’s mercy is His compassion or pity upon the miserable; and who is more miserable than a sinner dead in sin and under the wrath of God? God’s mercy is no impotent, powerless pity; it is a mighty power to lift the miserable out of their misery and to bring them into the enjoyment of blessedness. What is more blessed than to enjoy in the soul everlasting life, the very life of Jesus earned in the cross and resurrection? That is mercy; that is abundant mercy!

The fruit of regeneration: Life

The fruit of regeneration is, quite simply, life. Peter speaks of a “lively” (living) hope. This means that we who are regenerate are no longer dead in sins, but alive to God. In fact, we are the very opposite of dead *in sin*: we are dead *to sin*. By virtue of regeneration, the new

life of Jesus Christ, sin no longer has power over us; it does not have dominion over us and it cannot enslave us. “How, then, shall we, who are dead to sin, live any longer therein?” asks Paul in Romans 6:2. Or, as Peter writes, “We, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness” (I Pet. 2:24).

This does not mean, however, that we who are regenerate are free from sin. In fact, regeneration is only the beginning of our struggle with sin. That is because we still have the sinful flesh, which is that nature that we received from Adam. In regeneration God plants the principle (beginning) of the life of Jesus Christ into our hearts, but He does not remove, or even improve, the flesh, the sinful nature, or the old man of sin. The fundamental difference is this: regeneration brings about a struggle, which is not present in the unregenerate. The unregenerate do not love God, they do not have sorrow over sin, they do not believe in Jesus Christ; but we do, while our sinful flesh within us opposes the life of Jesus

Christ. “For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other, so that ye cannot do the things that ye would” (Gal. 5:17). Our flesh is still totally depraved; that is why there is in us every imaginable sin and vice. The difference is that we now, by virtue of the work of regeneration in us, hate that sin and vice. Our sin is *against our will* in us: we desire to do good, but the flesh hinders us.

Peter directs us to our hope: We are “begotten again unto a lively hope” (I Pet. 1:3). That hope is the promise of good things to come. It is the promise of future, final, perfect salvation, when we shall receive the full inheritance. Regeneration is only the beginning, only a seed. That seed is incorruptible, and it can never perish; and one day, after a lifetime of growth, it will blossom into everlasting life and glory.

Next time, we will consider the calling by which God brings the life of regeneration planted into our hearts to conscious expression.



Pertaining to the churches in common PR Theological Seminary

Prof. Ronald Cammenga, rector and professor of Dogmatics and Old Testament in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary and member of Southwest PRC in Wyoming, Michigan

News from the seminary

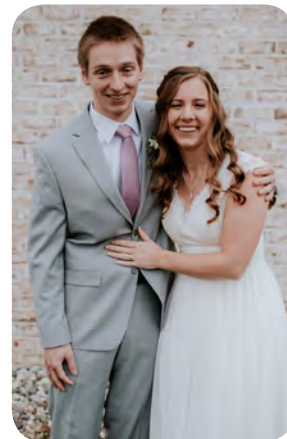
As is our custom during each new semester, we submit a report to the readers of the *Standard Bearer* on the goings-on at the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary. We understand that the members of the Protestant Reformed Churches and the readership of the *Standard Bearer* are supporters of PRTS and are interested in being updated on the life of our theological school. At this point of the second semester of instruction, although much continues as it did in the first semester, there are some developments worth reporting.

Staff and students of PRTS

One development is that we have a new secretary—kind of. The smiling face of Miss Sharon Kleyn, which faculty, students, and visitors first see behind the front desk when they enter the seminary, is now the friendly face of Mrs. Sharon Koerner. She has retained her first name but traded her surname. It is, of course, one-and-

the-same secretary that we have had for several years, but during the break between semesters she became the wife of our fourth-year student, Mr. Matthew Koerner. Hopefully, Sharon’s interaction with many ministers in our denomination has prepared her for a place in the parsonage of one of our vacant churches. We wish Matt and Sharon all the best as they begin their married life together.

Matt has returned to the seminary after his internship at Hope Protestant Reformed Church in Walker, MI. There he participated in all the different aspects of the work of a minister, under the supervision of Hope’s pastor, Rev. Jonathan Mahtani. He made and preached a dozen or so sermons, taught catechism, led Bible studies, visited the sick and



shut-ins, attended Consistory and Council meetings, participated in family visitation, and attended the meeting of Classis East as an observer.

Since the inception of the internship and its addition to the program of study at the seminary, it has proved invaluable in preparing our graduates for the work of the ministry. In addition to all the classroom instruction that they receive over the course of four years, the internship gives our students a hands-on taste of the day-to-day work of the pastorate. In my own experience, when there was yet no internship program, the first Consistory meeting that I attended was the one I led as a newly ordained minister. Now our students are much better prepared to take up all the different aspects of the work in which they will be involved for the rest of their lives.¹

Matt is not only finishing up his course work at the seminary, but also preparing for his examination before the PRC Synod 2023. The Lord willing, he will sustain his examination in June and be made eligible for a call later this summer. With the present number of vacancies, even the addition of one man, the Lord willing, will afford some welcome relief.

Mr. Arend Haveman is our third-year student. Many of you have become acquainted with him because he has spoken a word of edification in many of our congregations. The exciting development in Arend's life is the arrangement of the details of his internship, which will begin on July 1, 2023. The faculty is grateful that the Pittsburgh Protestant Reformed Church consistory has agreed to supervise Arend's internship. We are especially grateful that Pittsburgh's pastor, Rev. Wilbur Bruinsma, has agreed to mentor Arend for the six months of the internship (see footnote 1). Rev. Bruinsma has many years of experience as both a pastor and missionary. His expertise and wisdom make him an excellent choice for our internship program.

Mr. Aaron Van Dyke is in the second half of the second year of seminary training. In the first semester, he got his initial taste of delivering a sermon in Practice Preaching. In each semester of their training, minus the semester when they are on their internship, every student makes, delivers, and revises two sermons. In time, after they are licensed to speak a word of edification in the churches, these sermons become the arrows in the student's quiver that he delivers in the public worship services of the churches.

¹ If anyone is interested to learn the requirements of the internship for the supervising consistory and pastor, as well as for the student, you can consult the webpage of the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary (prcts.org). Find the tab for the seminary catalog and the section that deals with the internship program.

Our first-year student is Mr. Bruce Feenstra. Having been brought up in sunny southern California, Bruce is getting his first taste of the cold, snow, and clouds of Michigan's winters. By all accounts, he is managing to survive. As a first-year student, Bruce is not yet teaching catechism or leading worship services in the churches. All that, the Lord willing, is in his near future. He is in the process of making his first sermon as a partial requirement of the second semester of his homiletics course with Prof. B. Gritters. Bruce does lead a Bible study and is involved with the Young Calvinists group.

Seminary professors

Prof. R. Cammenga is in the process of giving over his courses to his replacement, Prof. B. Huizinga. Next year will be his last as an active professor teaching regularly in the seminary. He is concluding the last part of his three-year term as the seminary's rector. Besides the courses that he continues to teach, he is active in writing, teaching catechism, working with and visiting contacts in various parts of the world, especially recently in Mexico, and preaching in the churches. He serves on the Dutch Reformed Translation Society. He has also served as steady supply for the Hudsonville PRC in their extended vacancy. For over two-and-a-half years he has preached the Heidelberg Catechism for their Sunday morning worship services.

Prof. B. Huizinga has been taking over more and more of the Reformed Dogmatics (systematic theology) and Old Testament departments. Teaching all the classes in these two departments is one thing. Quite another are all the hours upon hours that go into becoming thoroughly acquainted with the areas in which these courses are found and preparing the classroom lectures. On top of his seminary courses, Prof. Huizinga serves as one of the editors of the *Standard Bearer*, leads the Monday night class for young adults at Hope PRC, preaches regularly, and lectures throughout the churches.

Prof. B. Gritters is in the second of the five years of transition to his replacement, Prof. C. Griess. He continues to teach his entire course load until next year when the Lord willing, Prof. Griess will begin to take over some of his courses. Between the first and second semesters, one of the professors teaches an interim course, which is an intense course on a topic related to but not ordinarily covered in the regular curriculum. It fell to Prof. Gritters to teach this year's interim. He once again taught the interim he has developed on Reformed Christian Ethics. Besides the students, a good number of visitors attended the classes (see photo next page). Prof. Gritters also serves as an editor of the *Stan-*



Standard Bearer, preaches regularly, teaches catechism, and frequently lectures. He also is deeply involved in the denomination's Psalter Revision Committee and the Committee for Contact with Other Churches.

Prof. C. Griess is Prof. Gritters' synodically appointed replacement. For the last couple of years, he has been busy with the course work required as he pursues his Master of Theology degree at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary—the other PRTS in the Grand Rapids area. He has of late taken up the research and writing of his thesis, which is going to be in the area of homiletics. Homiletics (preaching) is one of the most important courses in the Practical Theology department of the seminary. His thesis ought to be completed sometime this spring.

Prof. D. Kuiper is now teaching all the courses that were formerly taught by Prof. R. Dykstra, the one whom he replaced at the seminary. The courses that he teaches are in the area of Church History and New Testament studies. Like the other professors, he teaches catechism, preaches frequently, is available for lectures and speeches

throughout the denomination, and is a frequent contributor to the *Standard Bearer*. Prof. Kuiper serves as the editor of the *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* and also serves on the Psalter Revision Committee.

Once again, we end our "News from the Seminary" with the oft-repeated plea

that all continue to pray that God will put the call to the ministry of the gospel in the hearts of young—even not-so-young—men in our churches. With the great number of vacancies and the likelihood of more retirements in the next couple of years, our need is great and will become greater. In so many different ways and by so many different people, the urgent supplication has been made to God. Articles have appeared in the *Standard Bearer* and *Beacon Lights*, ministers have addressed the need in congregational prayers and in sermons, elders have brought the subject up on family visitation, Christian school teachers have prayed and underscored the need to their students, and parents and grandparents have spoken to their children and grandchildren. We must not become discouraged, but persevere in our fervent pleas to God and continue to confront and encourage our young men. May God be pleased to spare us from a famine of the hearing of His Word and continue to supply our need with His faithful prophet-servants.



Pillar and ground of truth

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

The Council of Constantinople (680): Background

The Fourth Ecumenical Council (451) produced the Creed of Chalcedon, which teaches how Christ's two natures are united in the one person of the Son of

God. The Fifth Ecumenical Council (553) upheld the teaching that Christ has two natures, over against the Monophysites, who insisted that He has one nature.

Does one's will belong to one's nature or person? Specifically, does Christ have only one will, a divine will, because He is a divine person? Or does He have two wills, a divine and a human, because He has two natures? That is one of the main questions that the Sixth Ecumenical Council faced when it met in 680.

A new era

Before proceeding, notice that the first five councils were held in the ancient era of church history, while the sixth and seventh were held in the medieval era. Exactly when to mark the end of the ancient era and the beginning of the middle depends on whether one is viewing these eras from the viewpoint of political history, social history, or church history. The year 590 is the accepted date as regards *church* history. In that year Gregory the Great became pope, and his papacy significantly shaped the church for centuries.

What difference does an era make? For our purposes, the important point is that the divide between the church in the West (Europe, centered in Rome) and East (western Asia, centered in Constantinople) was widening. The divide was political and church political; but it was also theological. The church in the West adhered to the Creed of Chalcedon; its view of the Trinity and of Christ was orthodox.

By contrast, the church in the East would continually refuse to confess that the Spirit proceeded from both the Father and the Son. And the church in the East would continue to debate matters that the Council of Chalcedon had settled. The discussion regarding whether Christ had one nature (Monophysitism) was one of those issues. The discussion regarding whether Christ had one will (Monotheletism) was another.

The issue

One's will belongs to one's nature. We have a human will because we have a human nature. God created humans in Adam with a will. That will became enslaved to sin when we sinned; the will of fallen man is dead.

Jesus has two natures, and therefore has two wills, a divine and a human. To say this is not to suggest that His divine will and His human will might work against each other, or that He might both will something and not will something. Always Jesus' divine will and His human will worked in harmony, seeking the same goal: obedience to the Father and the church's salvation.

That Jesus had two wills Scripture bears out. He came from heaven, not to do His own will, but the will of the One who sent Him (John 6:38). This verse teaches that His divine will was distinct from His Father's. More

clearly indicating that He has a human will is His prayer in Gethsemane, that the cup of agony pass from Him, and adding that He sought not His will, but the Father's will, be done (Matt. 26:39; Luke 22:42). These words Jesus made in His human nature; "my will" was His will according to that nature. And He, as we are called to do, subjected His human will to the Father's will.

The Monophysites still did not like the idea that Christ had two natures, as the Fourth and Fifth Ecumenical Councils had insisted; consequently, they did not like the idea that Christ had two wills.

The backdrop

Whenever Christians disagreed on doctrinal matters, the emperor noticed. He feared a divided empire, and division among Christians could divide the entire empire. He needed a united empire in order effectively to oppose external threats, the armies invading the empire from the east. So, Emperor Heraclius (610-640) tried to placate the Monophysites. He and the patriarch of Constantinople issued a joint statement that said, "All that Christ did was by one divine-human energy." If by one *energy*, then also as a consequence of one *will*. Pope Honorius himself approved this statement.

Those who understood what Chalcedon had done were not pleased. Sophronius, later Patriarch of Jerusalem, was one such. So the Patriarch of Jerusalem disagreed with the Patriarchs of Rome and Constantinople. In 638 Emperor Heraclius, who favored Monotheletism, forbade discussion of the issue. In 648 Emperor Constant II forbade anyone to teach either the one-will view or the two-will view.

But truth cannot be silenced. When people with theological convictions are told not to discuss them, the issues will be discussed. And when those who know their views are orthodox, and that those who want to silence discussion are unorthodox, they will promote the truth. In the end, the truth will prevail.

Maximus the Confessor was one who would not be silent. For defending the truth, and for suggesting that emperors should not be involved in church doctrinal matters, he was exiled, and his tongue and right hand were cut off. From Christ's prayer in Gethsemane, Maximus argued convincingly that Christ had two wills. And he taught that this was an implication of Chalcedon. Although he would die before the Sixth Ecumenical Council was held, he paved the way for the decision it would make.



Pillar and ground of truth

Prof. Russell Dykstra, pastor of Byron Center PRC in Byron Center, Michigan

The Protestant Reformed Churches: Their beginnings

In harmony with the gracious, eternal plan of God, the Protestant Reformed Churches in America approach the one century mark of existence as a denomination. This is amazing, and a reality that can only be ascribed to the grace of God. From every human point of view, these churches should not have continued to this point. Troubles and hardship have been a part of her experience all through her history.

These churches were born in controversy over the doctrine of sovereign, particular grace, resulting in three ministers and their congregations being cast out of the Christian Reformed Church. The subsequent history of the Protestant Reformed Churches is marked by controversy or conflict—one after another. Some were doctrinal—the unconditional covenant of grace, marriage and divorce, and the place of works in man’s salvation. Others were over issues of conscience that might also have had a doctrinal aspect, such as whether a church should have a cross, how to maintain Article 21 of the Church Order on Christian schools, baptism and the Lord’s supper on the mission field, attendance at NAPARC, Psalter revision, and (perhaps saddest of all) whether the aged Rev. H. Hoeksema should be in the geriatric unit of Pine Rest.

Controversies can be of significant profit in sharpening the church’s understanding of doctrine. At the same time, they inevitably inflict wounds, and can result in departures or even schism. The greatest of the departures (schisms) occurred in 1953, when over half the ministers and members departed, eventually to return to the mother church. Departures are painful, leaving wounds in families and congregations that often take a generation to heal, and scars that never go away. The PRC has had many. They have been sharpened; they have been scarred. Through all these conflicts, the Lord graciously preserved the truth in the PRC.

There is more reason to see that the PRC exist only by God’s gracious, preserving power. Before these three churches were even formally organized, one of these ministers (Rev. Henry Danhof) and most of his congregation left, taking two nephews—a minister

and a candidate—along with him. Over the years, the number of ministers who have left the PRC, or were deposed, or who left the ministry under Article 11 of the Church Order, is staggering. Largely due to this, the PRC has through most of its history struggled to fill the pulpits of the churches. Yet, they survive. Gracious is the Lord.

Every member of the PRC, considering his or her own life and heart, knows how gracious God is to continue His covenant with these churches. Each one says with Isaiah, *I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips* (Is. 6:5). The continued perseverance of these churches in the truth is a wonder of sovereign grace. No credit goes to man. That God used men is obvious. God has and continues to do so. But, we say again, in harmony with the gracious eternal plan or counsel of God, the Protestant Reformed Churches approach the one century mark.

Understand, the fact that these churches continue to exist as an institution is not the main element of amazing grace. Many churches have existed far longer than a century. The wonder of grace is that they continue to maintain, preach, teach, and defend the doctrines of sovereign, particular grace. In the history of the church in the new dispensation, it is a rarity indeed that a church maintains these doctrines of grace for a century.

With this in mind, the *Standard Bearer* staff desired that some history of the PRC be part of the offerings in this magazine as we approach this milestone. The purpose is not self-aggrandizement. The purpose is not to extol the virtues of the churches or any leader. Rather, the motive is expressed in II Corinthians 4: 15: “For all things are for your sakes, *that the abundant grace might through the thanksgiving of many redound to the glory of God.*” The glory of God must always be the purpose and goal in recounting history. And specifically here, *through the thanksgiving of many.* We have much reason to give thanks when we consider the truth God has given and preserved. We have *earned* nothing of all that God has given us, otherwise there would be no reason to give thanks. It is His gracious gift and preservation.

Nor is there any justification for pride. As Paul stern-

ly admonished the saints of Corinth, so the Bible reminds the PRC: *For who maketh thee to differ from another? and what hast thou that thou didst not receive? now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it?* (I Cor. 4:7). Anything good found in the PRC, any right doctrine, any blessing of the covenant, any good at all, is a gift from God. And gifts from God are given to bring forth humble praise and thanks to Him, the very opposite of pride.

Yet it is possible that one does not give thanks to God because he is unaware of all that God has given. For example, if a man takes his home, food, clothes, health, and comfortable life for granted, and does not pause regularly in the day to acknowledge the amazing goodness of God in giving all this, he will fail to thank God properly. If the members of the PRC do not recognize the amazing gifts God has given the churches, they will not give thanks consciously, specifically, and out of hearts sincere.

Accordingly, we begin this series to remind ourselves what we have been given, especially in the truths that God entrusted to the PRC. What truths? By the grace of God, from the start, the PRC were led to embrace and maintain 1) sovereign, particular saving grace (over against a non-saving grace for all); 2) the effectual power of preaching (over against a well-meant gospel offer); and 3) the antithesis. God graciously led the PRC to develop the glorious biblical and Reformed doctrine of God's eternal covenant of grace—that warm and comforting relationship of unconditional friendship that God establishes with His people chosen in Christ, the Head and Mediator of the unbreakable covenant (over against a conditional, breakable covenant). The blessings of this covenant are obvious in the churches in the doctrine of marriage of one man and one woman for life (maintained not merely as doctrine, but in practice), the Christian schools, the catechetical instruction, and the youth who worship with their parents morning and evening Sunday after Sunday. The PRC, by grace alone, while maintaining (contra Arminianism) that salvation is all of God, also rejected the Antinomian teaching that the regenerated believer does no good works because God does them *for* the believer.

All these blessings God conferred on the PRC in the course of her history. That is why it is profitable to know the history of the PRC, for it is the recounting of God's gracious dealings in spite of the unworthiness of the people. And fully to understand that history, one must start at the beginning.

The history

That beginning is inseparably connected with a man

named Herman Hoeksema.¹ He was born into poverty in Hoogezand, in the Groningen province of the Netherlands, on March 12, 1886. At age eighteen, he immigrated to the United States (1904), settling first in the Chicago area where he joined the Christian Reformed Church. He quickly learned the English language and excelled in it. After working in the trades a few years, he became convinced that he should pursue the office of minister of the gospel. Four years after arriving in the United States, he moved to Grand Rapids to attend Calvin Preparatory School and Seminary of the CRC (at the age of twenty-two).

He excelled in seminary in the classroom and was appreciated by his fellow students, as is evident from the fact that they elected him president of the student body. While in seminary, he married Nellie Kuiper in a ceremony conducted by one of his seminary professors, Louis Berkhof. When Hoeksema graduated from seminary, he received six calls and accepted the call to Fourteenth Street Christian Reformed Church in Holland, MI.

God endowed Herman Hoeksema with extraordinary gifts for the ministry of the Word. Among his gifts were his insights in theology, his writing skills, debating abilities, his amazing capacity for work, and above all, his ability to preach. Christian Reformed men have noted the same. James D. Bratt wrote in the context of the CRC in 1924 that “Hoeksema and Janssen were two of the boldest and ablest minds in the CRC.”²

History demonstrates that his abilities were outstanding and well recognized. That churches recognized his ability to preach is plain from the fact that in the two and a half years when Hoeksema was eligible for a call in his first charge, he received nineteen calls. The CRC youth respected him. The American Federation of Reformed Young Men's Societies organized in 1919 and promptly elected Hoeksema to be their leader and the editor of their new magazine, *The Young Calvinist*. Within the first six years of his ministry, Hoeksema consented to write regularly for the newly formed *De Wachter* and for the CRC's official publication, *The Banner*, in the rubric “Our Doctrine.”

Ministers and elders early on recognized Hoeksema's

1 Most of the details of Herman Hoeksema's life are drawn from his biography *Therefore Have I Spoken*, written by his daughter-in-law, Gertrude Hoeksema. If you have never read it, you are in for a treat. If it has been a few years (or decades) since you read it, I urge you to read it again, as I did. Also highly recommended, *Just Dad*, written more recently by his daughter Lois Kregel. Very profitable reading. Both are available from the RFPA (rfpa.org).

2 “War of Words, War of Grace: A brief history of the battles that have shaped the CRC,” *The Banner*, December 20, 1999.

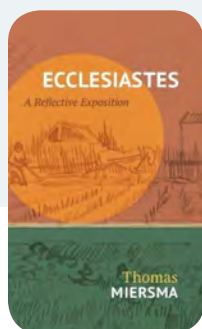
God-given gifts. Synod appointed him to the Curatorium of the Seminary. When a controversy arose in 1918 over a CRC minister (Rev. H. Bultema) teaching premillennialism, the Synod of 1918 appointed Hoeksema to a special committee to study his writings. He led the committee to evaluate and condemn the error on the basis of the Reformed confessions.

In 1920 Hoeksema accepted the call to the Eastern Avenue CRC. He continued his work in the denomination. His new congregation thrived under his bold, insightful, and captivating preaching. Thus it was that in the beginning of 1924 he was the pastor of the largest

CRC in that day with over 500 families and 1300 members. He was a regular contributor to *The Banner*, and a member of the Curatorium of the Seminary. He was unquestionably one of the most capable theologians and preachers in the CRC in that day.

But in 1925, Herman Hoeksema was deposed by Classis Grand Rapids East, and the same was done to the Revs. Henry Danhof and George M. Ophoff in Classis Grand Rapids West. The respective consistories of the three ministers were likewise deposed.

How and why did these depositions come about? We consider that next time.



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 and SB book review editor

The following book is reviewed by Rev. Ryan Barnhill, pastor of Heritage PRC in Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

Ecclesiastes: A Reflective Exposition by Rev. Thomas Miersma. Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2022. 246 pp., hard cover. \$27.85.

How much do you know about the book of Ecclesiastes?

All of you reading this know it is a book in the Old Testament, associated with the king of Israel named Solomon. Most of you know the well-known phrase found in it: “vanity of vanities.” Some readers could come up with a few passages found in the book: “To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven” (3:1); “And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken” (4:12); “Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days” (11:1); “Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them” (12:1).

If pressed for more information about Ecclesiastes, you might admit that your knowledge of the book is limited to the above facts. You might also confess that you are slow to read this part of Scripture because some of its verses and themes puzzle you, and you struggle at times to understand its relevance.

However, giving Ecclesiastes only a glance or skipping it altogether is a mistake. This portion of Scripture is loaded with many treasures. We can be glad that the RFPA has published *Ecclesiastes: A Reflective Expositi-*

tion by Rev. Thomas Miersma, a book that aids us in our study of Ecclesiastes and reminds us of its importance in the church and in the life of the believer.

What makes the RFPA’s newest publication attractive?

First, the book is reflective in nature, as the title itself indicates. Miersma’s work does not read like a dense, technical commentary, hardly understood by many. It reads as a devotional, which is the author’s purpose: “[This exposition] is intended to be read for spiritual instruction, reflection and edification rather than as a formal detailed commentary on the book” (p. 1). You might consider having this book on your nightstand to be picked up and read for fifteen minutes each evening before bed.

Belonging to the reflective nature of this book is the comforting and soul-nourishing gospel that runs like a golden thread through its pages. Allow this sample to whet your appetite: “For one who walks as a sojourner in this life, seeking his life out of himself in God, there is a meaning and joy in this present life.... All that cometh under the sun is indeed vanity. But what God has wrought in his saving work in Christ alone answers that reality of the present vanity under the sun. The light of the sun points to it. The days of darkness press upon us the need for that light of God’s Son and his salvation” (p. 225).

Also in connection with the reflective style of the

book is its many searching and pastoral applications. Would you like to hear more about the tongue and its use? How about “200 percentism” in the church? Or marriage? Or the sphere of labor? Or a proper view of earthly prosperity? Or wisdom and its contrast to folly? The author addresses and applies these subjects, along with many more. Have you ever read the verse “Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days,” and wondered what it meant and how it applied? Miersma gives clear instruction on and application of this verse, and so many other verses, always faithful to interpret them within their context. If you wonder whether applications are made also with young people in view, and whether this is a book they should read, the answer is, Yes! The book of Ecclesiastes itself is in many ways aimed at the youth, and the commentary repeatedly calls attention to that.

Second, the attractiveness of *Ecclesiastes: A Reflective Exposition* is the worldview it gives. Being a faithful explanation of Ecclesiastes, Miersma’s book sets before the believer the proper view of his life in this world. We need today more than ever, dear reader, to be reminded of our world-and-life view. The author says it best, encapsulating the main idea of Ecclesiastes: “God gave us the book of Ecclesiastes to instruct us in spiritual wisdom as those

living in a world fallen in sin and under the curse.... The Preacher searches the life of man under the sun, in order to give us to see with spiritual understanding the way of that life and its value and meaning in a world subject to vanity because of sin.... [The book’s] purpose is not so much to give what is mistakenly called practical instruction or instruction on how to *do* something, but rather to give true practical wisdom by giving us to *see* the realities of life with spiritual discernment. The word of God in the book would give us glasses to see the reality of life under the sun” (p. 7).

If you want to look through those “glasses,” then read Ecclesiastes, and do so with this fine RFPA publication at your side.

Toward the close of Ecclesiastes we read, “...of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh” (12:12). This is true. But this does not apply to *the* book of books: inspired Scripture. Nor does it apply to the book presently under review, which is a faithful exposition of inspired Scripture. Buy it, read it, and profit from it!

Announcements

Resolution of sympathy

The Consistory and congregation of Edgerton PRC wish to express Christian sympathy to the Al Brummel family of our congregation, following the passing of their brother and brother-in-law, **Mr. Isaac Kuiper**. May they find comfort in God’s Word: “Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints” (Psalm 116:15).

Rev. Matt DeBoer, President
Chester Hunter, Clerk

Resolution of sympathy

The Consistory and the congregation of Edgerton PRC wish to express Christian sympathy to the Bleyenbergs families of our congregation, following the passing of their sister-in-law and aunt **Mrs. Rose Bleyenbergs**. May they find comfort in God’s word Psalm 116:15: “Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints.”

Rev. Matt DeBoer, President
Chester Hunter, Clerk

Resolution of sympathy

The Adult Fellowship Society of Hope PRC of Redlands expresses our Christian sympathy to our society members Steve and Beth Potjer, Scott and Emily Gaastra, and Joel and Amy Hendriks, and their families, at the passing into eternal glory of their mother, grandmother, and great grandmother, **Betty VanMeeteren**, at the age of 89. “I know that I shall not be left, forgotten in the grave, and from corruption Thou, O Lord, Thy holy one wilt save. The path of life Thou showest me; of joy a boundless store, is ever found at Thy right hand, and pleasures evermore” (Psalter #28 st. 4, 5).

Marlin Feenstra, Secretary
Pastor Matt Kortus, President

Classis East

Classis East will meet in continuing session on Wednesday, March 15, 2023 at 8:00 A.M., in the Grandville Protestant Reformed Church.

Rev. Clayton Spronk, Stated Clerk

Announcements continued

PRC Synod 2023

All standing and special committees of the synod of the Protestant Reformed Churches, as well as individuals who wish to address Synod 2023, are hereby notified that all material for this year's synod should be in the hands of the stated clerk no later than April 15. Please send material to:

Doug Mingerink Sr.
(dougi@mingerink.com)
or mail to the same at
4949 Ivanrest SW
Wyoming, MI 49418

Teacher needed

Covenant Christian High School in Grand Rapids, MI is accepting applications from members of the Protestant Reformed Churches for teaching positions in the 2023-24 school year. There is a particular need in the areas of English, Social Studies, Health, and Physical Education but applications will be accepted from those with secondary certification in other subject areas. Those who are interested in these positions are encouraged to contact Mr. Rick Noorman, Administrator at ricknoorman@gmail.com, or call 616-453-5048; or Mr. John DeVries, Education Committee, at westmichiganrealestate@gmail.com for more information.

Reformed Witness Hour

reformedwitnesshour.org

Prof. Cory Griess

March 5—Limited Atonement (1)

John 10:15

March 12—Limited Atonement (2)

John 10:15

March 19—Total Depravity (1)

John 6:44, 65-66

March 26—Total Depravity (2)

John 6:44, 65-66

Call to aspirants to the ministry

All young men desiring to begin studies in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary in the 2023-2024 academic year should make application at the March 16, 2023 meeting of the Theological School Committee.

Accompanying the application must be a testimonial from the prospective student's Consistory that he is a member in full communion, sound in faith, and upright in walk, and exhibits the qualities and personality necessary for a gospel minister; a certificate of health from a reputable physician; and a college transcript. Before entering the seminary, all students must have earned a bachelor's degree and met all of the course requirements for entrance to the seminary. These entrance requirements are listed in the seminary catalog available from the school or on the Seminary's website (prcts.org/admissions).

All applicants must appear before the Theological School Committee for interview before admission is granted. In the event that a student cannot appear at the March 16 meeting, notification of this fact, along with a suggested interview date, must be given to the secretary of the Theological School Committee before this meeting.

All correspondence should be directed to the

Theological School Committee,

4949 Ivanrest Avenue SW

Wyoming, MI 49418

Joel Minderhoud, Secretary

The Protestant Reformed Seminary admits students of any race, color, and national or ethnic origin.