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Lessons on the deep blue sea

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God uses the weak

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Storms in the churches; calm confidence in the Lord

Rev. Vernon Ibe



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Meditation

Rev. Kenneth Koole, minister emeritus in the Protestant Reformed Churches

Lessons on the deep blue sea

And straightway Jesus constrained his disciples to get into a ship, and to go before him unto the other side, while he sent the multitudes away.... But the ship was now in the midst of the sea, tossed with waves: for the wind was contrary. And in the fourth watch of the night Jesus went unto them, walking on the sea. And when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, It is a spirit; and they cried out for fear....

Matthew 14:22-33

Men of faith crying out for fear. How can that be?

And yet it happened.

And it still happens, does it not?

Life is full of storms, winds that blow contrary, the deep blue sea of life boisterous and tumultuous. And often it seems that this Jesus is absent just when one needs Him most. In the gospel account, He is conveniently back on dry land, or, as the case may be, in heaven today, safely out of harm's way while we are being overwhelmed and ready to be swamped. Thus one may judge. So it seemed to the disciples. And so it seems to us.

The year of our Lord 2022 dawns. The church of Christ waits her Lord's coming and return. He tarries long. And while we wait, life deals us many blows—tests and trials, griefs and sorrows, scorn and loss. Has He, in the safety of His abode, forgotten us while we are beset with troubles on every side?

So one might conclude in the midst of life's storms.

The disciples were out on the deep blue sea, storm driven.

When Christ comes walking to them, the disciples were at the point of being overwhelmed. They had been rowing vigorously, getting nowhere. Who even knew what direction the shore? Their boat was ready to be swamped and they to perish in the depths. Where was Jesus when they needed Him? That was the question.

The disciples had been in storm-tossed seas before. They, after all, were fishermen. Seas were not always calm. But they had always been close enough to shore to make a dash for safety as the storm arrived. Not this time.

On a previous occasion the twelve had been caught out on a tempestuous sea, but Jesus had been with them asleep, recovering from His exhausting and demanding ministry. Once they awoke Him, alerting Him to what threatened them, He had but spoken a few words, "Winds, cease! Sea, be calm!" And so it was. And all was well with their souls, their lives spared.

But not this time. They were alone on the storm-tossed sea.

Where was Jesus when they needed Him most? Did He not know they were in danger? Did He not care?

In times of crisis, the question arises. If He really does care, if our lives and well-being are really as important to Him as He claims, why allow this to happen, this evil, this threat to peace, safety, and unity, this threat to life itself? Why allow this suffering, this racking pain of body to ourselves or a loved one, or this loss upon loss, this loneliness and pain of heart?

The disciples were full of fear and, at the same time, undoubtedly aggravated with Christ. Do not forget, they were not out on the deep blue sea by their own choice. They were out there because Christ had sent them out upon the sea. As verse 22 states, "Jesus constrained his disciples to get into a ship." The word *constrained* has to do with force and authority. It carries the idea of Christ laying hands on some of them, pushing them in the direction of the boat, and then pushing the boat off the shore onto the lake to head for yonder shore.

Their Lord wanted them out on the lake. That is why they were out there.

And then, He had sent the storm. This was not by chance or happenstance.

He would not only have known the storm was brewing, but He has gathered it according to His sovereign will.

As the disciples had exclaimed in astonishment at an earlier occasion, "Lo, the winds and waves obey him!" Their Lord had the power not only to calm the wind and waves, but to call them to gather themselves together, to become boisterous and rage and dash against that frail craft, threatening their very lives. Jesus may Him-

self have been apart from them on shore, but surely He was not unaware of the fury of this storm and in what jeopardy their lives were. And yet, for all His declared love for them, He does not calm the waves and silence the storm; He lets it rage.

The question surely arose, “Why did He not come with us, knowing this evil was to occur? Has He abandoned us now?” How aggravating. “Where is this Jesus when we need Him? Faced with what would overwhelm us, will He now leave us to our own devices, expecting us to survive and overcome these evils on our own?”

As the storms of life arise and batter us on every side, the cry goes up, “Why Lord, why?” And more can be expected this coming year, maybe some of even greater intensity in the lives of some, working loss and sorrow of one sort or the other.

And Jesus’ promised coming? When? When it’s too late? So it seems.

And yet, for all what it seemed, Christ had a purpose in sending the twelve out on the deep blue sea while He remained behind, and then loosing upon them this raging storm, leaving them, seemingly, all alone in the midst of its fury.

In the first place, Christ was teaching them the nature of His kingdom, the kingdom for which they were to serve as its heralds and messengers. And it was not to be of an earthly sort.

The incident of the disciples at the ‘mercy’ of the raging sea cannot be understood apart from what had just preceded it, namely, the wonderful multiplication of the loaves and fishes and the feeding of the 5,000. The disciples had done their best to stir up the crowd to nominate Jesus on the spot to be their King. “A loaf of bread for every cupboard, and ‘fishes’ [!] for every pot.” To be provided by Jesus upon request without any labor to be expended. The King of bread and affluence. What more could a nation want! Remove Herod. This is your Christ, the Messiah. Caesar himself will be powerless against Him. Our Jesus has angels enough to destroy any Roman army that might challenge Him, as well as being able to fill your bellies with bread and grant earthly peace and Jewish dominance once again.

“It is time to make Israel great again.”

Sound familiar? From various evangelical pulpits this is the so-called ‘gospel’ of the day.

Does this sound like the Christ mankind needs, whom we need, as we face the future? It did to the disciples at that point in their apostolic preparation.

It is these fishermen being prepared to be “fishers of men” whom Christ compels to enter the boat and shoves out to sea. And He then gathers and sends upon them the raging storm.

According to verse 26, they were filled with fear (literally, with terror!) when they saw a figure walking on the water. They thought it to be a spirit, a ghost from the dead, come to take them to the abyss and filling them with dread.

Why?

After all, their bellies are filled with bread. Materially, they had more than heart could wish. A few hours earlier all had been well with their bodies. Health and wealth, their Lord Jesus popular with the nation as never before, and peace and dominance looming on the horizon. Is that not what life and the promised kingdom are all about?

Then came the storm, and they were looking death in the face. And now the question was, Bellies full of bread or not, what about their souls? When one stares the abyss of death in the face, a belly full of bread (or a bank account with a sizable surplus) is not of all that much use and comfort, is it?

That reality dawned on the disciples out on the deep blue sea, storm driven.

The Jesus, the Messiah, they so sorely needed had to be more than an earthly king, more than one that provided bread in abundance and earthly prosperity, ending national strife.

Peace of soul, assurance of God’s favor, and victory over evil requires more than an abundance of bread and of fishes in the midst of this life’s raging powers and threatening evils. That to the disciples was made plain.

What they needed was Jesus as Savior, but not from poverty and ill health. They needed a Messiah to save them from the guilt and power of sin, one to give them confidence they were right with God with no need to fear some superstitious spirits of the dead coming to take them to the abyss. Not bread for the belly, but atoning blood for their sins; and not fish and beef roast in abundance to sustain earthly life, but the life of Christ Himself and His Spirit providing a spiritual life that death could not touch.

This was the gospel they themselves needed in the midst of life on the deep blue sea with all its uncertainties and threatening evils. And this was the gospel they were to bring to all the nations of the world.

Such is the lesson Jesus is driving home.

This Jesus, this Jehovah salvation, comes walking to them across the water with the words, “Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid.”

Another lesson. He was not personally with them in the boat, therefore (to their thinking), “He has forgotten us or does not know in what danger we are, what evils are threatening us. He must not really care. And even if he does, what can he now do about it?”

Was that true?

“Oh, ye of little faith.”

Having sent them out onto the Sea of Galilee, He went apart into the hillside to pray. About what and for whom? About the work that was laid upon Him by His Father, who, let us remember, was also the Father of those beloved but sometimes exasperating disciples given to Christ. He, in fact *they*, Father and Son, had them and their salvation in mind the whole time, and He, which is to say *they*, knew exactly the disciples’ predicament and fears.

And having strengthened Himself for His future work through prayer (a reminder to ourselves as we face the uncertain future of this coming year), Jesus proceeds to go to His disciples in a wonderful and awesome way. He comes walking across the water. With slow and measured steps, unimpeded by the raging sea, He proceeds, His eye upon them the whole way.

And drawing nigh, He calms their fears. “Be of good cheer, it is I,” not some ghost come to haunt you in your fears. Implying, of course, “Whether you knew it or not, I have been with you the whole time. I am reminding you once again, I am the Son of God (cf. v. 33). And

you belong to me body and soul. You have nothing to fear. You are as secure as if on dry land, and already on yonder shore.”

Do we hear His voice through the raging storms? Do we?

In the year of our Lord 2022, we will face what Jehovah God is pleased to send us. He pushes our frail barks out onto the deep blue sea of life. Who knows what storms we will face, winds that are contrary (to our desires) and fearsome evils. Maybe death itself or pain and suffering with who knows what loss of health and mobility.

But in the midst the storms of life as one may cry from the depths, let us be assured of this, our Jesus knows us and hears us in His abode. And as we cry out, He will come walking across the waters with the word of the gospel, “Be not afraid; be of good cheer; it is I. I am here, close by, and all the powers of darkness and of death cannot separate you from my love nor from the salvation I have worked for you and begun in you.”

I say again, hear His voice, “Be not afraid. Held by my hand, all is well with your soul.”



Editorial

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

Synods 2020/2021 and “in the way of repentance” (4)

Last time, (Dec. 15), I defined repentance as the believer’s sorrowful turn from sin unto God in the seeking of remission. Now I want to go to the Scriptures to elaborate.

A right understanding

First of all, genuine repentance begins in the renewed mind as the seat of true spiritual knowledge and understanding. This is evident from one of the key biblical words for repentance (*metanoia*) which, as you might recall, means, “change of mind.” The turning of repentance commences when the spiritually enlightened mind apprehends both the awful reality of sin and the wonder of God’s mercy in Christ.

The penitent sinner has the true knowledge of his *sin* (Rom. 3:20). He understands that his sin is *sin*—a vile transgression of the righteous law of God, worthy of ex-

treme, that is, everlasting punishment of body and soul. He understands something of the filthiness, odiousness, and grievousness of his sins before the holy nature of the Holy One. This true and personal understanding of sin is captured in the publican of Jesus’ parable, for no man smites his breast in agony (Luke 18:13), or, as the Form for the Lord’s Supper puts it, “humbles and abhors himself before God,” unless he has first grasped something of the horrible reality of sin—*his* sin. Likewise, this spiritual understanding is captured in the cries of David, “Against thee and thee only have I sinned and done this evil in thy sight!” (Ps. 51:4). Evil! Evil *against* God! Evil in *God’s* sight! The sinner understands that when he has sinned, he has said or thought or done something that is not an excusable mistake but *evil*, and that he is by nature someone *evil*. Additionally, David cried, “Cast me not away from thy presence!” (Ps. 51:11), because he understands that just

one sin is so awful he deserves to be cast away by God and banished from His presence everlastingly in hell.

Furthermore, the penitent sinner understands that to him, and to all those who repent, God is, for the sake of Christ's perfect atoning sacrifice, "The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin" (Ex. 34:6-7). When we plead with penitent David, "Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness, according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions" (Ps. 51:1), we are confident that God *is* tender in mercy *to us*. The call to repentance even includes with it the explicit publishing of this mercy in order to excite the soul unto repentance, "And rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the LORD your God; for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth him of the evil" (Joel 2:13), and, "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon" (Is. 55:7).

That the turning of true repentance begins with this right understanding of sin and mercy indicates that true repentance presupposes and is born of true faith. As Synod 2021 stated, "repentance is always born of faith," and "Repentance arises out of a faith that is persuaded that God is plenteous in mercy and that He abundantly pardons for Christ's sake" (*Acts of Synod 2021*, p. 123). Repentance is the *believer's* sorrowful turn from sin unto God in the seeking of remission.

Without faith in the Word of God, it is impossible for a man to repent because he does not have a true and proper understanding of his sin. He does not believe about his sin what God in His Word says about that sin. When our faith is weak, as David's was while he was on the palace rooftop, then we are tempted and drawn away of our own lusts. Then we think wrongly and in harmony with the Tempter's enticing, "How pleasing and satisfying this will be, and how small a matter this really is, and how I have the right to do this and I deserve this and can explain this." As long as that thinking continues, there will be no turning from sin but only continuance in it. But when there is repentance born of faith, then the sinner understands who he really is before God, just like the prodigal son who "came to himself" (Luke 15:17). We might say of a lawless and impenitent sinner who spurns the admonitions of the Word, "You are out of your mind. This makes no sense. You are like an intoxicated fool, or one of the demons in Jesus' day, a mad man. Don't you see what you

are doing to yourself, your life, others around you, the church, and the name of the Most High? *Come* to yourself!" However, a sinner cannot "come to himself" and stop deceiving himself unless God quickens within him a true faith so that his eyes are opened to who he really is and what he really is doing according to the Word.

Additionally, a mere surface-level recognition of having done something that is not good is not sufficient: faithless Pharaoh, Saul, and Judas Iscariot all uttered the same three words, "I have sinned" (Ex. 9:27; I Sam. 15:24; Matt. 27:4), but they did not truly repent. Although they took the word "sin" upon their lips, their souls were empty of any faith in God's Word whereby they could understand their sin for what it really was.

Nor did those three men believe in the pardoning mercy of God in Christ. Without saving faith and the personal knowledge of God's *mercy*, we might recognize our sin, but we will only have a sense of the dreadfulness of God's wrath and will only regard God as an inexorable Judge. If we did not believe that God made Christ to be sin for us at the cross, we would never return to Him in repentance. Instead we would flee, fashioning coverings of our own making in a desperate attempt to escape the sword of justice. What excites our soul unto genuine repentance is the understanding that no crime of ours against God is too atrocious for His boundless goodness in Christ.

Because true repentance commences with a right understanding of *sin and mercy*, God does not work true repentance merely by means of the strict preaching of the demands of the moral law and its condemnation of sinners. Those who walk down crowded streets holding signs that say, "Repent or perish! Turn or burn!" are missing something. The sinner must hear the gospel of Christ, for Christ "is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world" (I John 2:2). Even in Nineveh when Jonah preached "Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown," Jonah delivered a gospel word of mercy and it was revealed to Nineveh in Jonah's person (Matt. 12:41). Jonah himself was a sign of God's miraculous and gracious deliverance in Christ (for more, recall "A greater than Jonah," *Standard Bearer*, Nov. 15, 2021).

A deep feeling

Secondly, the turning of genuine repentance includes the intense feeling of sorrow in the heart. This sorrow is not the false sorrow of the world (II Cor. 7:10), which is the sorrow of getting caught, of being made to suffer consequences, of suffering public humiliation, of losing worldly goods and privileges, or simply a sense of self-pity. Rather, the penitent sinner has a broken spirit and

contrite heart (Ps. 51:17) because he knows his sin is committed against *God* (Ps. 51:4). His heart breaks in utter agony because he knows that his sin is nothing less than a hideous return of base ingratitude unto his faithful God and Father for all His goodness. The penitent sinner mourns over his sin (Joel 2:12; Zech. 12:12) and often that inner sorrow and profound sense of grief comes to expression in sackcloth, dust and ashes (Job 42:6; Jonah 3:6; Matt. 11:21), tears (Luke 7:38) and bitter weeping (Matt. 26:75). Beware, however, for Esau is proof that tears do not guarantee genuine repentance (Heb. 12:17). Genuine sorrow includes a deep feeling of guilt (Luke 18:13), helplessness (Ps. 51:11-12), and shame (Ezra 9:6, “blush to lift up my face to thee;” Dan. 9:7, “confusion of faces”) in which the sinner abases himself (II Chron. 7:14). The degree of sorrow may differ from one soul to the next according to age, character, and circumstances, but there is no repentance without godly sorrow, for “*godly sorrow worketh repentance*” (II Cor. 7:10).

A turn away

Third, repentance is fundamentally a turn, a *turning away from sin*. Scripture often emphasizes this truth with the call “repent and turn,” where “turn” emphasizes the point that to repent is to *turn away from sin*. Ezekiel 14:6, “Therefore say unto the house of Israel, Thus saith the Lord GOD; Repent, and turn yourselves from your idols; and turn away your faces from all your abominations.” Ezekiel 18:30, “...Repent and turn yourselves from all your transgressions; so iniquity shall not be your ruin.”

Whatever intense feelings of shame, guilt, sorrow, and grief one might possess over his sin, he has not truly repented if there is no turning from sin. The turning is not a mere external and temporary reformation of conduct whereby the slanderer retains his venomous heart but closes the door of his filthy mouth for a while, or the harlot retains her flaming heart of lust but stays off the streets for a week or two. This turn from sin is a deep, internal turning of the mind and heart. Jehovah declares, “Turn ye to me *with all your heart*” (Joel 2:12). With a heart of love for his covenant God, the penitent sinner hates his sin as God hates it (Amos 5:5; Ps. 119:128, 163) and even loathes himself as a sinner (Ezek. 36:31; Job 42:6). In his heart he turns away from his sin as something despicable and loathsome to him.

This turning includes a forsaking of sin so that when the sinner turns to God and cries for pardon, he has turned *from his sin*. He does not seek pardon from God like a shameless hypocrite clutching his sin tightly in his bosom or trying to conceal it behind his back. “He that

covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy” (Prov. 28:13; see also Is. 55:7). In genuine repentance there is always an irrepressible desire to create as much separation as possible with one’s sin, all sin, the life of sin, and the way of sin. How vividly this forsaking is illustrated in the prodigal son (Luke 15:11ff.). He was wallowing like a pig in the filth of his iniquity, but when he arose to go pour out his penitent soul to his father, he left his wicked ways behind in hatred for them. The sinner’s forsaking of his sin within will be unmistakably evident to all around him in the holy life that follows his repentance and restoration as the fruit thereof. According to the Canons of Dordt, restored sinners “more diligently work out their own salvation with fear and trembling” (V.7), have regard for piety, and are “careful and solicitous to continue in the ways of the Lord” (V.13).

A turn unto

Whatever turning from sin there might be in repentance, it is not true repentance if there is no turning *unto God*. Repentance is not turning away from sin unto a pope or any other man, a church or any other institution, but *unto God*. God is the One with whom we have to do, and the One against whom we have sinned. Paul preached “repentance *toward God*, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 20:21). The Lord Himself declared in Joel 2:12, “Turn ye *even to me* with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning.” Even when sin is committed against another, such as David murdering Uriah, that sin is ultimately committed against and must be brought before and confessed to God, even as David cried, “against thee and thee only have I sinned and done this evil in thy sight” (Ps. 51:4).

The penitent sinner who turns to God in true repentance always takes words with him. Hosea 14:1-2, “O Israel, return unto the LORD thy God; for thou hast fallen by thine iniquity. Take with you words, and turn to the LORD: say unto him, Take away all iniquity, and receive us graciously: so will we render the calves of our lips.” The penitent sinner says with the prodigal son, “I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before thee” (Luke 15:18). The penitent sinner confesses his sins to God (Ps. 32:5; Prov. 28:13; I John 1:9). He makes no excuses but acknowledges, “Woe is me for I am undone” (Is. 6:5), and I “am no more worthy to be called thy son” (Luke 15:21). The words he takes concern no one but himself personally, “Is it not I that commanded the people to be numbered? Even I it is that have sinned and done evil indeed” (I Chron. 21:17).

Turning to God, the penitent sinner cries, “Have mercy upon me, O God” (Ps. 51:1), “Forgive” (Matt. 6:12), “God be merciful to me a sinner” (Luke 18:13). Coming to God in faith seeking remission, the penitent, heart-broken sinner renounces all his works and worthiness, disavows all confidence in himself and anything he has ever done, and casts himself wholly upon the Lamb of God: “Jesus, thou Son of David, have mercy on me” (Luke 18:38). The penitent sinner has “repentance to-

ward God, and *faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ*” (Acts 20:21).

Does not Scripture’s presentation of repentance make you say, “Astounding. Simply astounding. No wonder the angels of heaven rejoice. And my own repentance... how weak it is. I need to repent of my sickly repentance.”

And, what explains this wonder of repentance? Next time, the sovereign and glorious grace of God.

Editor’s note

At the annual RFPA society meeting this past September, a decision was made to print in the *Standard Bearer* my address entitled “2021 in the PRC: Whom the LORD Loveth, He Chasteneth.” However, in my preparation I never intended the speech to be published in written form, nor was I of a mind to do so after the

meeting. What I wanted to communicate to the churches, I wanted to *speak*, and I did. Therefore, I inform the readers that with the concurrence of the RFPA Board I will not be publishing my speech in the *Standard Bearer*. Those interested in the speech can access the RFPA’s YouTube channel.

Prof. B. Huizinga



Search the Scriptures: Bible characters

Mr. Kyle Bruinooge teaches New Testament history at Covenant Christian High School in Grand Rapids, Michigan

The tent-making ministry of Aquila and Priscilla

And found a certain Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, lately come from Italy, with his wife Priscilla; (because that Claudius had commanded all Jews to depart from Rome:) and came unto them.

Acts 18:2

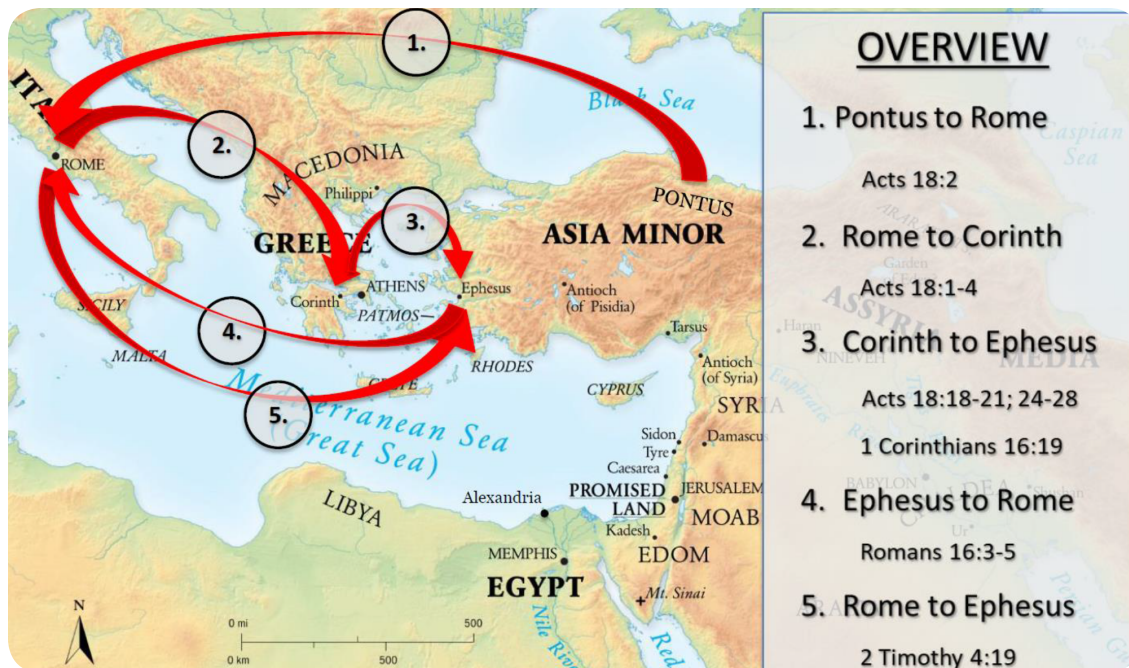
Vocation—resurrected and restored during the time of the Protestant Reformation—was long ago used in the spread of the gospel. A simple trade—tent making—brought together a devout Jewish couple with the apostle Paul. Their names were Aquila and Priscilla—used by God to encourage Paul and assist in the work of the missionary program.

Aquila was originally from Pontus, a Roman province east of northern Galatia, its northern border being the vast Black Sea (Acts 18:2). Pontus attracted others interested in the gospel that were present at Pentecost (2:9). Additionally, Peter mentions the “elect” from Pontus in the opening benediction of his first epistle (I Pet. 1:1-2).

Interestingly, in the six references to Aquila and Priscilla in the New Testament, three of those references mention Priscilla first (Acts 18:8; Rom. 16:3; II Tim. 4:19). While it may be unnecessary to analyze this pattern, it is worth noting the possibility of Priscilla’s personality possessing strength and energy because of her being named ahead of her husband in these instances.

Nonetheless, Priscilla dedicated herself to supporting Aquila in his trade of tent making, walking by his side in their travels throughout the empire. Not a blind following, but a commitment to supporting the gospel ministry throughout the various church communities where their imprint was made.

Perhaps marrying in Rome, Aquila and Priscilla made their home and built their trade in a city that housed some 20,000 Jews during the early reign of Emperor Claudius (AD 41-54). Over halfway through his reign (c. AD 49), Claudius evicted the Jews from Rome, demonstrating a leanness of the Jewish people and their customs (certainly a personality trait of Claudius, a



OVERVIEW

1. Pontus to Rome

Acts 18:2

2. Rome to Corinth

Acts 18:1-4

3. Corinth to Ephesus

Acts 18:18-21; 24-28

1 Corinthians 16:19

4. Ephesus to Rome

Romans 16:3-5

5. Rome to Ephesus

2 Timothy 4:19

Tarsus (Acts 9:27-30; Gal. 2:1). Tent making was necessary for Paul on the mission field. He worked so that he could both eat and give to those in need, be a positive example to the Christians, and to reduce his burden on the churches (II Thess. 3:8-10). His usual schedule was making tents in the morning, and preaching and teaching in the evenings (Acts 19:9; 20:33-35).

Tent making for Paul was more than

man consumed with skepticism and paranoia). In God's providence, the decision of this ungodly emperor set off a series of travel stops for these simple tent makers.

From Rome they set sail for Corinth, the center of commerce and trade, but also the 'sin city' of the Roman Empire. Strategically located along the isthmus, it brought in traffic of all kinds at the southern point of Achaia (Greece) where the Adriatic and Aegean merged with the tempestuous Mediterranean. The city had a reputation for immorality, to such a degree that "to Corinthianize" became associated with fornication, a term coined to describe a perverse and gaudy lifestyle. In this metropolis Aquila and Priscilla settled to carry out their trade.

Shortly thereafter and certainly not coincidentally, the apostle Paul was traveling south to Athens on his second missionary journey. As he observed a city overtaken in idolatry, he experienced disappointment and dejection with the philosophers on Mars Hill (Acts 17:16-34). Leaving Athens, the next target was Corinth.

The forty-five-mile trek from Athens to Corinth was one of foreboding, for Paul was still reeling from the Athenian indifference to the gospel, but also realizing the monumental task before him: preaching the gospel to the Corinthians. Additionally, Paul's great burden of reaching the Corinthians was heavier, for he was traveling alone (Acts 17:14-15).

For this reason Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling" (I Cor. 2:3).

God certainly prepared Paul for this providential meeting with fellow tradesmen, for he had spent ten years after his conversion honing this skill in his native

just necessary work in Corinth. We know from the New Testament that Paul worked in Galatia, Corinth, Thessalonica, and Ephesus in this trade (I Thess. 2:9; II Thess. 3:7; Acts 20:31-35; I Cor. 4:12; 9:6). His skill was used for the benefit of church planting, and tent making must be included in Paul's preparation which made him "all things to all men" (9:22).

As a Roman citizen, he had a high social status, freedom to travel, and right of appeal (Acts. 16:37; 25:11).

As a Greek intellectual, he understood the language, culture, and religions of those to whom he preached the gospel (Acts 17:28; 21:37).

As a Jew, he had knowledge of the Scriptures and could apply them to their fulfillment in Christ (Rom. 8:4; Gal. 5:14).

In addition, as a tent maker, he could appeal to the common man, showing by his work ethic the *reason* for our vocation and its pointing to the source of all things. Jesus Christ, the source of not only our daily bread, but of our lives, requiring us to be crucified with Him (Gal. 2:20). In this way, new converts would have been led to the lordship of Christ.

Through God's leading of Paul in the tent-making trade, he was led to *specific* tent makers, and it would have been immediately evident that they had much more in common than simply their skill in making tents (Acts 18:3).

In their early discussions it became clear that they shared a love for Jesus Christ. It seems that Aquila and Priscilla had an understanding of the gospel prior to meeting Paul, for their origins were Rome and Pontus. The Roman church can be dated further back than the churches established on the missionary journeys; there-

fore, it seems likely that Aquila and Priscilla were members of a Christian community in Rome prior to coming to Corinth (Rom. 16).

This prior knowledge would have encouraged, refreshed, and sustained Paul as he battled the challenges of spreading the gospel in Corinth (Acts 18:9-11; II Tim. 1:16).

Imagine these three tent makers for a moment. Laboriously working the thread through the canvas, and discussing the things of God. While the Corinthians were passionate about athletic competition (I Cor. 9:24-25), we can be fairly certain that Paul, Aquila, and Priscilla cared nothing about reliving the latest chariot race as they toiled. Rather, they edified each other as they recounted their experiences and testified of God's faithfulness and mighty works of salvation. These testimonials confirmed that the Lord was blessing their work.

After a period of eighteen months together in Corinth, Paul crossed the Aegean Sea, taking Aquila and Priscilla to Ephesus, the largest city in Asia Minor (Acts 18:11, 18). His purpose was to complete his second missionary journey, returning to Antioch to report on the establishment of the new churches (18:21-22). While Paul bid them farewell, Aquila and Priscilla remained in Ephesus for a time, and God used their testimony and knowledge to correct the theology of a brilliant man there.

His name was Apollos. He had previously studied in and come from the great city of Alexandria (Acts 18:24). His love for learning brought him to Ephesus, and he was given permission to speak in the synagogue. He certainly had gifts: eloquence of speech, knowledge of the Scriptures, aptness to teach, boldness in his delivery (18:24-26); but a key component was missing: "the things of the Lord." Apollos was preaching the "baptism of John," but was missing the finished work of Jesus Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

How puzzled Aquila and Priscilla must have been as they sat and listened to Apollos. To preach *without* Jesus Christ is a contradiction in terms; yet, it was not surprising that such a practice was common in a place like Ephesus. Many religious sects converged here, and one of them was a Jewish group that hung on to the message of John the Baptist, showing ignorance of the work of Christ.

Therefore, a learned man like Apollos needed correction from the pew. How humbling! Patiently and faithfully, Aquila and Priscilla showed him the complete gospel of salvation, and Apollos received it in the same spirit in which it was given. In this way God used *lowly* tent makers to bring a brilliant man to fuller faith.

After their stay in Ephesus, these tent makers were back in Rome. After the death of Claudius in AD

54, Nero came to power. Paul's final chapter in Romans (written in AD 57) brings greetings to Aquila and Priscilla along with several others in the Roman community (Rom. 16:3). Here Paul identifies them as his "helpers in Jesus Christ," but then in the next verse says, "Who have for my life laid down their own necks; unto whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles" (Rom. 16:4). The specifics are beyond us, but we see clear dedication and compassion of this couple for their dear friend Paul, putting their own lives in jeopardy for him.

The specific travels of Aquila and Priscilla demonstrate the promotion of peaceful travel in the Roman Empire. The Romans wanted to maintain peace within as they continued to expand without. To this end travel became more common and safe, and Aquila and Priscilla benefited. So did the gospel. The Word went forth as Paul and other missionaries traveled the innovative roads built by the Romans.

The great paradox of this time in the history of the church is that a polytheistic, pagan empire protected the very religion that was a threat to its polytheism. And so the seeds were planted.

Aquila and Priscilla played a small yet significant role in the "photosynthesis" of the first century (I Cor. 3:9-10). Through their travels, they refreshed missionaries, corrected the theology of Apollos, and through it all ministered and testified to the truth of the resurrected Lord. Lowly tent makers they were, and yet, their vocation was part of God's plan to glorify His name and benefit the church.

The home of Aquila and Priscilla was also significant. We read that their home was used for the purpose of the church coming together in Corinth and Rome for worship (I Cor. 16:19; Rom. 16:5). They also used their home to provide safety for Paul and nurse him back to health. This fact strengthens our confidence that they were used mightily by God in the service of the church.

From Rome to Corinth to Ephesus, and back to Rome (AD 49 to 57). Finally, one more trip is revealed in Scripture: a journey all the way back to Ephesus. The final reference in the New Testament to Aquila and Priscilla is a greeting Paul brings to them in II Timothy 4:19: "Salute Prisca and Aquila, and the household of Onesiphorus." As was written in a previous *SB* article (April 1, 2021), Paul writes this letter from a cold, dark dungeon in Rome as he anticipated execution under cruel Nero. He wrote to his beloved "son" Timothy (Phil. 2:22), who was faithfully laboring in Ephesus. This letter can be safely dated to AD 67.

As Paul writes this final letter, prepared to retire

his pen and lay down his life for the glory that awaits, he remembers his dear friends Aquila and Priscilla. I imagine him shivering in that cold dungeon in Rome, yet remembering with fondness those crisp mornings in Corinth making tents. And now he writes one final greeting to these Christians whom he loved.

Whether they made any final journeys after Ephesus we are unaware, but we can be confident they continued

faithfully in whatever the Lord had planned for them. An eternal reward, to be sure, was planned for them.

Now, *together* with Paul and the church of all ages, they sit round about the throne of the King, saying, “Alleluia; Salvation, and glory, and honour, and power unto the Lord our God” (Rev. 19:1). No more toiling about with tents, for God’s eternal *tabernacle* is with them.



A word fitly spoken

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Hap

Once in a while, you will find a word in the Bible that surprises you because it seems it should not be there. *Hap* is such a word. The King James Version renders this word as *chance*, *event*, or *happly*. “Hap” refers to something that, from our human point of view, happens by chance, an accident, or a seemingly random event. “Hap” is indeed a strange word to find in the Word of the sovereign God! Yet when we read our Bibles, we run into this word more often than we might expect.

When Ruth went out to glean in the sprawling barley fields outside Bethlehem, “her *hap* was to light on a part of the field belonging unto Boaz” (Ruth 2:3). After finding the image of Dagon prostrate before the Ark of Jehovah, and themselves afflicted with emerods, the Philistines wondered whether “it was a *chance* that happened to us” or whether it was Jehovah’s “hand that smote us” (I Sam. 6:9). Solomon reflecting upon man’s powerlessness to control his own destiny, stated “but time and *chance* happeneth to them all” (Eccl. 9:11). In the Parable of the Good Samaritan, our Lord mentioned a priest who “by *chance*...came down...that way” and found the half dead man lying at roadside (Luke 10:31). See also II Samuel 1:6 and Ecclesiastes 2:14.

When the Bible uses a word that at first glance seems out of place, it gives us an opportunity to pause and reflect. Why did the Holy Spirit choose this word? On purpose, of course. To make a point! When the Bible uses the word *hap* or *chance* it is not teaching that there is such a thing as chance or fortune, some independent, capricious power outside of God’s control that shapes the course of human life. Rather, the Bible uses this

word to describe events as they appear to man. Man’s field of vision is so very narrow and his understanding so very small. There are many events in life that appear random to us. Things seem as though they “just happen.” But what man sees as hap is in reality the operation of the hidden hand of God. What man calls chance is in fact the manifestation of the almighty and everywhere present power of God by which He upholds and governs all things. What man sees as happenstance the Bible reveals is providence.

When Ruth surveyed the sprawling barley fields, she chose to glean in Boaz’s field, without knowing who Boaz was and without any plan to meet him. What appeared as chance was in reality the hidden hand of God guiding her. The same hand that plucked her out of Moab and placed her in Bethlehem now led her to light upon Boaz’s field. What appeared to be an unplanned hap was in reality the outworking of God’s eternal plan for Ruth. God had promised to give Israel a king after His own heart. God had ordained that Ruth the Moabitess and Boaz the Bethlehemite would be the great great grandparents of King David. More significantly, God chose Ruth and Boaz to be foremother and forefather of David’s greater Son Jesus Christ. Ruth’s hap of lighting upon Boaz’s field was a link in the divinely assembled chain of events that in the fullness of time would lead to the birth of Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, our Immanuel. Ruth 2:3 emphasizes the point: every *hap*, every seemingly random, unplanned event in our lives, whether good or bad, significant or insignificant, is determined and directed by the sovereign hand

of God, “who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will (Eph. 1:11). The rest of the Bible passages that speak about hap or chance teach this same truth.

Only when you have this understanding of *hap* can you be *happy*. In our English language, the words *hap* and *happy* have the same root. This reflects the age-old notion that happiness and prosperity are the result of fickle fortune. When fortune smiles on you, then you will be happy. A happy person is a lucky person. Man’s unbelief is built into his very language. But God’s Word frees us from this comfort-robbing notion. The eyes of our understanding have been enlightened by the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:18). By faith, we perceive that behind every hap there is the hidden hand of Jehovah working all things for the good of His chosen people. God employs His almighty, everywhere present power to make every

single hap in our lives be subservient to our salvation.

Thus, believer, you can be happy, truly happy, no matter what your hap may be! You are happy because God’s countenance shines upon you in Jesus Christ. You are happy because for Christ’s sake, all things are for you, nothing can separate you from God’s love, and not even a hair can fall from your head without the will of your Father. Truly, “this doctrine affords us unspeakable consolation, since we are taught thereby that nothing can befall us by chance, but by the direction of our most gracious and heavenly Father” (Belgic Confession Art. 12). Let us, therefore, “in all things, which may hereafter befall us...place our firm trust in our faithful God and Father” (LD 10 Q&A 28). We know that “all things come, not by chance, but by His fatherly hand” (LD 10 Q&A 27).



Believing and confessing

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Of the predestination of God and the election of the saints (Second Helvetic Confession, Chapter 10c)

Previous article in this series: September 1, 2021, p. 470.

Admonitions Are Not in Vain Because Salvation Proceeds from Election.

Augustine also shows that both the grace of free election and predestination, and also salutary admonitions and doctrines, are to be preached (*Lib. De Dono Perseverantiae*, cap. 14 ff.).

The matter of the relation between election and admonitions was broached in the preceding paragraph of the Second Helvetic Confession. There Bullinger voiced the objection often raised by the opponents of predestination that the doctrine obviates all warnings, admonitions, and threats. If predestination is true, nothing can hinder the salvation of the elect and nothing can prevent the condemnation of the reprobate. In both cases, admonitions are rendered unnecessary. The argument raised by the enemies of predestination is that since the Scriptures contain innumerable admonitions, the teaching of predestination cannot possibly be true.

What are admonitions? Admonitions include setting

forth our calling as the will of God. They include encouragement to carry out our calling faithfully, along with appropriate incentives. And they include warning against failure or refusal to do our calling as we ought.

In the previous paragraph, Bullinger had pointed to Paul’s statement in II Timothy 2:24-26, “And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves [to the truth]; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth; and that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will.” In the context, the apostle has referred to predestination. He has taught in verse 19 that “the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his.” In verse 20, he has distinguished between vessels of honor and vessels of dishonor. But the reality of predestination does not at all restrict the apostle, here or elsewhere, from making use of warnings and admonitions with respect to those “that oppose themselves,”

whether elect or reprobate. Their opposition provokes the timely and sharp admonition of the apostle. The servant of the Lord must be gentle and must instruct in meekness. But meekness is not weakness, and gentleness does not rule out firmness. Rather than to preclude admonitions, predestination demands them. The predestinating God is pleased to use admonitions in the execution of His decree of predestination.

What the enemies of sovereign grace overlook is that the predestinating God is also the God who has chosen to use means in the execution of His decree of predestination. The decree does not rule out the use of means. The means that God has chosen to use is His word, chiefly the public preaching of His word. One important aspect of that means is the word of admonition, rebuke, and warning.

Although the emphasis in the paragraph is on “salutary admonitions and doctrines” as they “are to be preached,” Bullinger does not intend to confine admonition exclusively to the public preaching. Connected to the public preaching by the ministers of the Word ought also to be the private admonitions of the elders of the church to those who walk contrary to God’s truth and law. Included are the admonitions of loving parents to their wayward children, of caring relatives to wandering family members, of concerned Christian school teachers to their students and former students, of church members who have deep concern for a brother or sister in the congregation.

God uses admonitions to keep His people on the right way and to bring His children back to the right way after they have strayed. At the same time, He uses admonitions to leave the reprobate wicked hardened in their sin and as an aggravation of their guilt.

Whether We Are Elected.

We therefore find fault with those who outside of Christ ask whether they are elected. And what has God decreed concerning them before all eternity? For the preaching of the Gospel is to be heard, and it is to be believed; and it is to be held as beyond doubt that if you believe and are in Christ, you are elected. For the Father has revealed unto us in Christ the eternal purpose of His predestination, as I have just now shown from the apostle in II Timothy 1:9-10. This is therefore above all to be taught and considered, what great love of the Father toward us is revealed to us in Christ. We must hear what the Lord Himself daily preaches to us in the Gospel, how He calls and says: “Come to me all who labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28). “God so loved the world,

that he gave his only [begotten] Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16). Also, “It is not the will of my Father that one of these little ones should perish: (Matt. 18:14).

Let Christ, therefore, be the looking glass, in whom we may contemplate our predestination. We shall have a sufficiently clear and sure testimony that we are inscribed in the Book of Life if we have fellowship with Christ, and He is ours and we are His in true faith.

This paragraph of chapter 10 of the SHC deals primarily with the *assurance* of election. How may we be assured of our election? Can the elect child of God live in the assurance of his election by God? Do only a select few among believers ever attain the full assurance that they have been chosen by God? These are the questions that Bullinger faces in the present paragraph.

His response is straightforward and biblical. The child of God is assured of his election by faith. Faith is assurance. At the same time, that the child of God believes confirms him in the assurance of his election, for faith is the outstanding fruit of election. The preaching of the gospel “is to be heard” and “it is to be believed.” This is the call or command that comes to sinners in the preaching of the gospel. Further, “it is to be held as beyond doubt that if you believe and are [by faith] in Christ, you are elected.” They who believe are without doubt elect, since faith is the inevitable fruit of election. One cannot be an elect child of God and never come to faith. The elect child of God cannot live his entire life in doubt, constantly despairing that he is an elect child of God. God is both the Author and Finisher of our faith, bringing us to faith and confirming us in faith.

Because faith in Christ assures of election, Bullinger concludes by saying, “Let Christ, therefore, be the looking glass, in whom we may contemplate our predestination.” What a beautiful and apt metaphor. He compares Christ to a looking glass—a mirror. The eyes that behold the face of Jesus Christ in the looking glass are the eyes of faith. Faith sees Christ and believes on Christ. Faith does not behold oneself in the mirror, but Christ alone. Believing on Christ, “we may contemplate [be assured of] our predestination.”

Bullinger adds: “We shall have a sufficiently clear and sure testimony that we are inscribed in the Book of Life if we have fellowship with Christ, and He is ours and we are His in true faith.” The “book of life” is a biblical expression. It is found in Philippians 4:3 and

several times in the book of Revelation, where it is also referred to as the “Lamb’s book of life” (3:5; 13:8; 20:15; 21:27; 22:19). It is called the “book of life” inasmuch as those whose names are written in this book are chosen unto life—eternal life. Thus, the expression refers to the elect of God; the names of the elect are inscribed in the book. The book is God’s book and God Himself has “written” the names of the elect in this book.

It ought to be evident that there is no literal “book of life” somewhere in heaven in which names of people are inscribed. Figuratively, the expression refers to God’s eternal counsel, particularly His counsel of election. The expression underscores that God’s decree of election is an unchangeable decree. The names of the elect are “written.” The number of the elect is fixed and definite. That “names” are written in the book indicates also that God’s election is personal and individual. God has chosen particular persons who are His elect people. Your name is personal to you; it stands for you and refers to you. When you sign your name, your signature represents you personally and no one else. So does also your name in the Lamb’s book of life. Only they whose names are written in the book of life enjoy everlasting life. All whose names are not written in the book are rejected and reprobated.

Those whose names are in the book of life “have fellowship with Christ, and He is ours and we are His in true faith.” This is the fruit of election. Those, therefore, who enjoy fellowship with Christ and who are united to Him by true faith, must have their names written in the book of life. Even if there were a literal book into which we could peer in order to find our name written, it would be altogether unnecessary. Fellowship with Christ and union to Christ by faith are undoubted testimonies to our election.

Temptation in Regard to Predestination.

In the temptation in regard to predestination, than which there is scarcely any other more dangerous, we are confronted by the fact that God’s promises apply to all the faithful, for He says: “Ask, and everyone who seeks, shall receive” (Luke 11:9-10). This finally we pray, with the whole Church of God, “Our Father who art in heaven” (Matt. 6:9 ff.), both because by baptism we are ingrafted into the body of Christ, and we are often fed in His Church with His flesh and blood unto life eternal. Thereby, being strengthened, we are commanded to work out our salvation with fear and trembling, according to the precept of Paul.

In the concluding paragraph of chapter 10 of the SHC, Bullinger addresses a sore temptation regarding

predestination. At the same time, this temptation involves not a use but an abuse of the truth of predestination. Temptation is always temptation to sin. The sin to which some might be tempted would not, of course, involve a legitimate application of predestination. Then it would not be sinful. Rather, it involves a contradiction of the truth and a sinful perversion of predestination.

The temptation is a denial of predestination *practically*. If someone confesses that they believe the truth of predestination but exhibits this practical temptation in their walk of life, they in effect deny predestination. There are always two ways to deny the truth: theoretically and practically. It is possible to deny God’s providence by trusting in fortune or chance. It is also possible to deny providence while faithfully professing it. That would happen if despite one’s outward confession, he did not trust himself or his family to the care of his gracious and loving heavenly Father. It is this sort of practical denial that forms the “dangerous” temptation regarding predestination that Bullinger is concerned to address.

The temptation is that we become careless and indifferent to the means by which God is pleased to carry out His decree of predestination. That might not be immediately evident from what Bullinger has to say in this last paragraph. But a careful reading of what he says will bear this out. One of the main temptations is that we do not remain constant in our use of prayer. We do not take seriously Christ’s command in Luke 11:9-10 to ask, seek, and knock. In this passage, Jesus is commanding His disciples to pray, with the added assurance, “For everyone that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.” *Only* they who ask receive; *only* they who seek find; and *only* they who knock have it opened unto them. We must ask; we must seek; and we must knock. To take the attitude that since God has predestinated us to salvation, we need not pray as the means by which God is pleased to give us what we need spiritually and physically is to tempt God.

Bullinger reaffirms the necessity and importance of prayer in the life of the elect people of God when he refers to the Lord’s Prayer: “This finally we pray, with the whole Church of God, Our Father who art in heaven” (Matt. 6:9 ff.).

Besides the importance of prayer in the life of the elect, Bullinger also affirms the place of the sacraments in the corporate life of the people of God. He has earlier referred to the chief means of grace, the preaching of the Word of God. Now he adds to the preaching baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Shutting the door firmly against the dangerous, practical denial of predesti-

nation, Bullinger quotes “the precept of Paul” in Philippians 2:12-13, “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.” That God works in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure does not remove but validates the calling, “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.”

Reformed believers must never waiver in their confession of God’s sovereign predestination. Neither must they allow themselves carelessly to fall into the practical and dangerous temptation to set aside the means by which God is pleased to execute His decree of predestination. Decree and means always belong together.



Ministering to the saints

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

Luther burning the papal bull: Encouragement to flaunt church discipline? (2)

Previous article in this series: December 15, 2020, p. 135.

On December 10, 1520, Martin Luther burned the bull of Pope Leo X threatening Luther with excommunication. In these articles we are answering the question how this event is relevant for us.¹

The last article explained why Luther did what he did. Luther understood that Rome was not the church of which Christ was the Head and in which He worked for the salvation of His people. A proper understanding of the doctrine of the church is necessary for us to appreciate the discipline of elders (in the case of a true church) or to ignore their threats (in the case of a false church). We also noted the five reasons Luther himself gave for his actions in his tract “Why the Books of the Pope and His Disciples Were Burned by Dr. Martin Luther” (1520).² By burning the papal bull Luther was making a strong statement about his view of Rome and the pope, but was not flaunting the discipline of a true church of Christ.

Now we ask, What is it *positively* to follow Luther’s example? And how does Christ, in the work of discipline, speak and work through the true church?

Following Luther’s example

If one is indeed a member of a false church, and is

excommunicated for teaching or believing the gospel of sovereign grace and the sole headship of Jesus Christ over His church, then one follows Luther’s example by ignoring that word of discipline, and by joining a true church of Jesus Christ where the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached, the sacraments are rightly administered, and church discipline is properly exercised.

Members of true churches also follow Luther’s example when we apply the principle that he was underscoring. That principle is that God’s revelation in Scripture, which regards what we must believe and how we must live, matters above all. Any church leader who speaks, acts, or threatens contrary to what Scripture says is spiritually harmless to us. In fact, he himself is in spiritual danger, not those who oppose him.

We implement this principle by knowing and loving truth and righteousness. We implement this principle by rejecting false doctrines, practices, and worship—publicly and firmly. How well do we recognize false doctrine in distinction from true? Of course, we know of some false doctrines, such as a conditional covenant and common grace. But can we detect any false doctrine, by comparing what we read and hear to the doctrines of sovereign grace? Do we live as though God’s Word is really our only authority for faith and life? Have we burned any books in our lives that need burning, that is, do we reject the wrong ideas that men invent, and do we not tolerate them in our homes?

Following Luther’s example by applying this principle to our own lives requires us to examine all parts of our

¹ This article, and the previous one, is the written and abridged version of a lecture that I gave in October 2021 in Loveland, CO and Hull, IA.

² In *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 31, *Career of the Reformer (1)*, ed. Harold J. Grimm (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 383-395.

lives, to detect error in our own thinking and lives, and to reject it in our own lives first of all.

The weight of church discipline

None can truly claim to follow Luther's example who views as an insignificant matter the discipline of a true church of Jesus Christ, administered because of censurable sin that a member has committed. Church discipline, administered properly and because of censurable sin, is weighty and serious! The weight of the discipline is this: through the church as His agent, Jesus Christ declares the sinner to be outside of the kingdom of God, until he or she repents.

This is the teaching of God's Word in Scripture, as summarized in Lord's Day 31 of the Heidelberg Catechism. Especially three passages of Scripture speak to this point. The first is Matthew 16:18-19. To Peter, who confessed that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God, our Savior pronounced a blessing, and then said (*italics mine*): "And I say also unto thee, that thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and *whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.*"

Later, speaking to all the disciples, Jesus prescribed the steps we must take when a brother sins against us. First, we must go to him alone; if he does not repent, we must go with one or two more; and if he still does not repent, we must tell the church. Then Jesus said again: "Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matt. 18:18). Later, having risen from the dead and appearing to His disciples, Christ said: "Receive ye the Holy Ghost. Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained" (John 20:22-23).

These words of Jesus regard the authority He gave His disciples, as representing the church, to exercise the spiritual censure of church discipline. That He gave this instruction three different times indicates that He meant to be clearly understood regarding this matter.

Note three points of instruction from these passages. First, they teach that Jesus gave the power to open and shut the kingdom not to Peter only, but to all the apostles, and to the church as represented by the apostles. This explanation differs from Rome's. Rome explains Matthew 16:18-19 as teaching that the keys were given to Peter alone, and therefore to Peter's successors, the popes. Thus Rome ignores the fact that in Matthew

18:18 and John 20:23 Jesus was speaking to all the disciples. She also ignores the difference in the gender³ of two words in Matthew 16:18, both of which mean "rock." When Jesus said "Thou art Peter," He used the Greek word *petros*, meaning "rock," in the masculine gender, referring to Peter, the man. But when He said "upon this rock I will build my church," Jesus used the word *petra* meaning "rock," but in the neuter gender. The word cannot refer to Peter; it must refer to the confession that Peter made.

Second, these passages speak of the power of discipline. Matthew 16 and 18 refer to a binding on earth and in heaven, and to a loosing on earth and in heaven. John 20:23 uses different words to express the same idea. Comparing the passage in John to the two in Matthew, we see that John explains the "whatsoever" of Matthew 16 and 18 to refer to *sins*: "Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained." To bind sin on earth is to bind the sin and its guilt to the person, that is, to retain it, to declare that the person is guilty of sin in the sight of God. To loose that sin on earth is to declare to a person on earth that God has forgiven their sin, and sent its guilt away. This declaration is that of Christ, through the church as she exercises Christian discipline.

Third—and here is the essential point—these passages teach that what the church does on earth has implications for heaven: what is bound or loosed on earth is bound or loosed in heaven. Of course, that is true only when the church properly does the work of discipline, in the name of Jesus Christ. *When* the church does so properly, the work of the church in time carries through into eternity!

The explanation for this weight

To this some object. How can the work of the church carry through into eternity? How can men (elders, themselves sinners in need of salvation) make decisions regarding other sinners that have consequences for eternity? Some of these objections appear well-motivated: they underscore that only God and Christ determine the eternal destiny of any individual. Other

3 In many languages, Greek included, nouns have gender. Gender in this sense is not a biological category; it is only a grammatical category. For example, the nouns "book," "heaven," and "joy" all have some associated gender—either masculine, feminine, or neuter. Knowing the gender of any given noun in a sentence helps the Greek reader understand which nouns, pronouns, and adjectives are related or unrelated to each other. Even though gender is only a grammatical category, the name of a male will always be in the masculine form, and the name of a female always in the feminine form.

objections are intended to undermine the practice of church discipline by insisting that God loves all and always forgives everyone's sins. Some say that when the church teaches that her work of discipline carries through into eternity, she is spiritually abusive, is trying to scare people into obedience to her, and is deceiving people into supposing that Christ will honor her work. All these are misunderstandings, if not a complete dismissal, of the real point of these passages.

The phrases "shall be loosed" and "shall be bound" in Matthew 16:19 and 18:18 express a peculiar Greek construction, in which the future tense and perfect tense⁴ are combined. It is like speaking of something that will happen in the future as having already happened: literally, "will have been bound," and "will have been loosed." By using the future tense, Christ speaks of what will be true in heaven to eternity. By using the perfect tense, Christ is saying that what will be true in heaven is true already now, and has been true already in the past. Even before the elders apply discipline to a member, Christ has already rendered a verdict. God has eternally decreed either to bind a man's sins on him, or loose those sins from him. And Christ's crucifixion and death has already removed the sins of God's elect, so that they are loosed from us, or not done so, so that they are bound to us.

This is the word of the gospel to believers: our sins are removed now! And when we are in heaven, we will enjoy the full benefits of our sins having been removed. God will not change His mind! But this is also the word of warning to the impenitent unbeliever: God has already bound their sins to them, and sees them as guilty. What He will say in the Judgment Day to the unconverted unbeliever is exactly what He says today to the unconverted unbeliever, and accords with how He saw that unconverted unbeliever from eternity past.

⁴ This construction is called the future perfect periphrastic. The Greek perfect tense is unique; it refers to an event that has been completed in the past, but its effect continues in the present. For example, the Greek past (aorist) tense is sufficient to say, "I poured water into your cup." Especially the past (aorist) would be used if the cup was no longer full—if the water had spilled out, or someone drank it. But to say, "I poured water into your cup," and imply that the cup was still full, the Greek uses the perfect tense. The future perfect periphrastic speaks both of a past event, the effect of which continues in the present, and of how that event's effects will continue into the future.

Although the gospel declares this, some in the church will not acknowledge it. Being members of the church outwardly, they claim that they are going to heaven. Yet they live in sin or unbelief, making it necessary for the church to discipline them. By that work of discipline, Christ says to them, "Your sins are bound on you now, and will be to all eternity, if you continue impenitently in sin!" By His grace, some who are under the church's discipline are brought to genuine sorrow and repentance. To them Christ says, "Your sins are loosed from you now, and will be to all eternity!"

To restate, the word of discipline that the church pronounces is not first of all a promise about what will be true someday, and what Christ will do in the Judgment Day. First of all, it is a word about what Christ has done in the past and is doing today. The word about the future, about the Judgment Day, is that what Christ will do then accords with what He has done in the past and is doing in the present. For Christ uses the keys of the kingdom, working through elders of true churches, to declare to the impenitent that their sins are bound, and to the penitent that their sins are loosed by Christ's blood and Spirit.

So it is wrong to think that the work of the church in time is determinative for the future. It is not true that Jesus Christ looks at what the church has done, and then decides to honor it. Rather, Jesus Christ works in and through His church to guide the church to declare what He declares, so that the sinner knows in time that he

will go to heaven or to hell, in the way of faith and obedience or unbelief and disobedience.

Understanding these texts this way, we ought never flaunt the discipline of the true church of Jesus Christ. We must recognize why Christ commanded His church to exercise it, and we must honor it, be humbled by it, and enforce it in our own relationships with those under discipline. The urgency of this is that their very soul's salvation is at stake.

Luther understood this. Of course, the church since Luther's day has grown in her understanding of these truths; but Luther understood the essential point. He understood that Rome's excommunication of him was empty, because Rome was empty. He also understood that the true church, preaching the gospel, did have the power to do church discipline. He was not flaunting that discipline.

This is the word of the gospel to believers: our sins are removed now! And when we are in heaven, we will enjoy the full benefits of our sins having been removed. God will not change His mind!



When thou sittest in thine house

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

God uses the weak

Dalton is my friend, though he never talks to me. Perhaps I should qualify that statement. Once in a while he says, “Skid loader.” Usually he holds up his necktie and gives me a big smile. He might like ties as much as skid loaders. Even so, they make great conversation openers. Hard to miss, built like a linebacker with boundless enthusiasm to connect with others, he has landed a soft spot with everyone at church. Dalton is special, but that is not what makes him really special.

Dalton is blessed to have been raised by his loving Christian parents and family. Though we may try to understand, only those with special needs children can truly understand. The constant care required can be exhausting. Yet, these parents are the first to attest that their child is a great blessing from the Lord. In a day when selfishness abounds, these selfless parents are shining lights of God’s grace. As for their dear covenant children, we are no better than they. Rather, we are to esteem them better than ourselves as members of one body who will one day inherit all things.

There came a time when Dalton was nearing adulthood and needed specific training suited just for him. He was sent to live at a school some distance from home where he did not know a soul. Just how much he understood why he must go and for how long is unknown. Would he be afraid, even angry? We were praying for him.

When his parents visited, they learned how Dalton was adjusting. “You will not believe what he does!” exclaimed the staff. “During free time he sits on the edge of his bed and watches your church services on the DVD player.” His parents had sent the DVD’s packed in his bags. For someone who had limited attention to learn how to speak or for staying on task, this was astounding to the staff. They observed him watching the entire service, from start to finish, and frequently too. No one was telling him to do this.

“Oh, you must be Dalton’s pastor,” a couple of staff members said to my husband as we walked into the school. “We recognize you from your picture! Dalton likes to walk around pointing at it.” It turns out Dalton’s parents sent the church pictorial directory with him too. The staff was getting to know our whole congregation.

Instead of self-pity among strangers, Dalton turned to his heavenly Friend, Jesus Christ. He was not bitter but friendly to those around him. We might read books, attend lectures, or workshops on how to evangelize. We might encourage our young people to do the same. Yet, we can learn something from Dalton and others like him as well. Though short on words, his love and delight for God and His covenant friendship came through loud and clear. Do we and our children listen with eagerness to His Word in the preaching? Do we love our church and value each member as precious? This will not go unnoticed. Just as people observed the ordinary apostles with no special training, they marveled and “...took knowledge of them, that they had been with Jesus” (Acts 4:13).

In a world filled with hopes of perfect children and designer babies to excel in high positions, Dalton graduated from a rudimentary school happily waving to friends and family. What makes Dalton so special is who he is by God’s grace. Some might consider him a rather unlikely evangel, but should we be so surprised? After all, whom do we think God uses?

For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: but God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; and base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: that no flesh should glory in his presence (I Cor. 1:26-29).

God uses the weak to confound the mighty. Why else did He send poor, destitute Gideon to lead in victory an army reduced to just 300 men? Why else did the young shepherd boy’s father not even think to call David into his house when Samuel came to anoint the king of Israel? Why else could this amateur youth slay Israel’s over-sized archenemy with a homespun slingshot and stone? Why else did Mary sing, “He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree”? Why else did her son, Jesus, need to be born

in a stable, choose lowly fishermen to be His apostles, or say, “Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings thou hast perfected praise”? Why else does He use any of us sinful ‘nobodies’ to serve Him? Throughout Scripture the message is, “...Not unto us, O LORD, not unto us, but unto thy name give glory...” (Ps. 115:1).

God uses the weak. How does this affect our parenting? The world would think we have lost our mind. Their view of self-esteem is glorying in oneself, not in God. This is what they believe gives them motivation in life. They pump themselves up with confidence in themselves, ready to climb over others up the social ladders. Such parents want their children to stand out for their beauty or whatever they excel in. Sadly, these children learn that this is the way to receive their parent’s approval. So goes the cycle of selfishness, pride, and conditional “love.”

How our believing children view themselves is important. Some may mistakenly feel they have nothing to offer or are too timid to get involved. Sometimes I wonder, even among adults, if this is why some rarely speak in Bible study. The Reformed faith is so God-glorifying, humbling, and comforting. Yet, if the environment becomes thick with an overly critical spirit, it can be a problem. It should not surprise us when safety is sought in silence. Do we value each other enough to think the best and promote a relaxed discussion? Do we take the time to understand what is expressed? Each child of God is valuable and someone to learn from. May our children learn by our example of how God’s truth should never be misused in pride.

Scripture is the best place for our children to learn who they are. There are many verses to show them. Here are just a few:

...I am fearfully and wonderfully made... (Ps. 139:14).

But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light (I Pet. 2:9).

...I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee (Jer. 31:3).

God loves our covenant children who are precious in His sight. May they know our love for them is unconditional as well. Their value is not based on their looks or accomplishments, but whose they are. That is the greatest “self-esteem” anyone can have.

Does knowledge of our sinfulness and failings harm our children’s view of themselves? Not in the least, for they know they are sinners saved by grace. We need God’s strength in our daily battle against our old man of sin. Our children have a sinful nature that desires

all the glory. So do we. We need to help them, not contribute to it. How much do we focus on and compliment them for their good looks or accomplishments? Not that we cannot say anything about those things, of course. Yet, should we not notice and emphasize God’s gift of grace in their lives?

“You have been sharing your toys this morning.”

“I saw you listening well in church today.”

“I noticed you are treating your siblings with kindness.”

“I appreciate how you apologized without being asked to.”

“I saw you open the door for that widow.”

“I’ve noticed you are reading the Bible on your own without us reminding you.”

“It means a lot that you include your classmates, especially those who are lonely.”

At times it pleases God to use trials to teach us our weaknesses more deeply. He did so with the apostle Paul. He had a thorn in his flesh that he asked the Lord to remove. The Lord answered, “My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness.” How did Paul respond? “Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ’s sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong” (II Cor. 12:9, 10).

If the world thinks they have motivation, we have far more. What can anyone do apart from our mighty God? Self-glorying is empty. Of ourselves we are weak ‘nobodies,’ but that is exactly whom God uses. For it is God’s “power that worketh in us” (Eph. 3:20). That should give us solid confidence—in Him.

God uses the weak to confound the mighty. There is no limit to what He can do. Whether our Lord gives us much or little, we confess, “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me” (Phil. 4:13). Children like secrets. Is this not a wonderful secret to talk about with them? The secret to being content in every living situation is knowing that Christ strengthens us.

Dalton may not have been able to express that in words, but he certainly experienced God’s strengthening hand while away from home. He was a faithful witness. If someone were to observe your family or mine for a time, especially the way we deal with difficulties and one another, would they conclude the same? Only by the power of God’s grace working in us. To God be the glory!

All that I am I owe to Thee,
Thy wisdom, Lord, hath fashioned me;
I give my Maker thankful praise,
Whose wondrous works my soul amaze.

(Psalter #383)



Pertaining to the churches in common— Sister churches—PRC in the Philippines

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

Storms in the churches; calm confidence in the Lord

Dark clouds were above the horizon of Asia Pacific, specifically in the islands of the Philippines, when the storm of schism hit the Protestant Reformed Churches in America (PRCA).

The schism that has crept into the PRCA due to the controversy that started back in 2016 made a great wave of impact that reached the ears of God's people here in the Protestant Reformed Churches in the Philippines (PRCP hereafter). Since then, many of the brethren and sisters in Christ waited for the development and eagerly anticipated the conclusion of the controversy. For that reason we know and understand that the storm is imminent in the PRCP too.

The saddest day in our history as a small band of Protestant Reformed Churches on this side of the world has come. On May 16, 2021, the Protestant Reformed Church in Bulacan (now, First Reformed Protestant Church in Bulacan), sent a letter to the Classis of the PRCP, withdrawing its membership from the federation. And as I write this article, the First Reformed Protestant Church in Bulacan has been accepted by the Reformed Protestant Churches in America as their official sister church.

It is not my intention to recount the details of Bulacan's decision to withdraw its membership from the PRCP, neither to discuss whether their reasons of departure were legitimate. Nonetheless, it will suffice to say that there is no valid reason to leave the denomination as far as the orthodoxy of our ministers in relation to their preaching and teaching in our churches is concerned! For the record, there was and there is no controversy in the PRCP.

Be that as it may, we know that just like every storm, such schism and secession have their aftermath. The turbulent and raging seas of words that were tossed to and fro brought so much hurt to everyone. Some who were really affected evacuated and sought refuge from the neighboring churches where they could be nourished with spiritual food and their weary souls cared for.

But sad to say, we lost some as well, because the raging torrents and strong winds led some to depart from our midst. From three seminarians, we are down to one; from four churches, there are now only two, the Berean

PRC in Antipolo City and Provident PRC in Marikina City (Maranatha PRC in Valenzuela disbanded in March of the same year). And with Rev. L. Trinidad now retired, that means there is now only one active minister in the federation. The official mission labor of the PRCP in Albueva, Leyte went also with Bulacan. All forty-two or so families expressed in their letter that they were in full agreement with the decision of Bulacan's withdrawal from the PRCP.

With this disastrous storm that had struck both the PRCA and the PRCP, the damage that it created among colleagues in the ministry, by families torn apart, and by friends made enemies, cannot be calculated. Countless stories of pain and broken hearts cease not.

What now?

The rainbow comes after the storm. We know that all things, even the storms, are in the hands of God. For He is the One who is in sovereign control over all the events in time and history. And whatever He has purposed and decreed will surely come to pass.

This is not the first time we hear of a controversy within a federation of churches, let alone in the Protestant Reformed Churches in America (PRCA). Certainly, this will not be the last one, though some, if not all, might be praying that it would be so. The reasons are understandable. We understand this as well, however, that we shall enter the kingdom of God through many tribulations.

The Word of God is clear. Our endeavor as individual saints and as Protestant Reformed churches, daily and continually, is "earnestly to contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 1:3). The "faith which was once delivered unto the saints" is clearly and beautifully expressed in the Three Forms of Unity. Its principles are likewise explicit in the Church Order of Dordt, 1618-19. The Formula of Subscription is to the point in ensuring that all faithful officebearers (in any Reformed churches established by God in Christ through the sovereign power of the Holy Spirit) will do well to take heed (by the grace of God) to these aforesaid doctrines and not to militate against them. They are to defend them and to write well about them, and to preach and teach about them so that the body and bride

of Christ is built up and nourished well in that faith once entrusted to the saints!

We are all clear and together on this! But the church is not infallible. Nor are the men in the ministry. The elders and all leaders in the churches are weak and sinful men besides. We need to live in the consciousness not of our own power to do and follow what is right, but of God's power in us through the operation of the Holy Spirit who works all His good pleasure upon us for His glory and for the honor of Christ Jesus our Lord.

What now? This is an important question, and the answer is not that difficult to discern. It is also clear from the Word of God: "Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:13-14).

Learn well the lessons of the past, take them to heart, but do not dwell on them for it will take you nowhere. And besides, our calling is to aim for the goal, personally and ecclesiastically, namely, Christlikeness. Our desire for each one of us is this one thing, to press on in and by the grace of God to hold forth "the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."

Let us walk together in this endeavor, my co-bondslaves in Christ. The road may be dusty and rough and at times too impossible to tread upon, but the work is His and not ours! The road to Golgotha was yet more severe than we ever thought and Christ "for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb. 12:2).

This is our answer for "what now!" *Now* is the time most needful to fix our eyes upon Jesus, the sovereign Savior and Lord of the church! We confess that we are nothing and can do nothing altogether apart from the sovereign grace of God that works powerfully in us that we might be faithful in this endeavor. By nature, none of us will take heed; none will continue to walk in the path of faithfulness. Rather, we will utterly forsake the cross of Christ and follow idol gods! But God, our faithful, covenant-keeping God-Jehovah, gives us the assurance that we will persevere and be faithful till the end, for we rely neither upon ourselves nor upon the PRCA or the PRCP but upon the Rock of our salvation, Jesus Christ, "who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption" (I Cor. 1:31). Jesus Christ—and He alone—is "the author and finisher of our faith," thus the certainty that we will stand sure and secure until He comes again for us lies upon Him and never ever upon us!

Canons of Dordt, Head II, Article 9 speaks to this:

This purpose, proceeding from everlasting love towards the elect, has from the beginning of the world to this day been powerfully accomplished, and will henceforward still continue to be accomplished, notwithstanding all the ineffectual opposition of the gates of hell; so that the elect in due time may be gathered together into one, and that there never may be wanting a church composed of believers, the foundation of which is laid in the blood of Christ; which may steadfastly love and faithfully serve Him as its Savior (who, as a bridegroom for His bride, laid down His life for them upon the cross); and which may celebrate His praises here and through all eternity.

After a storm comes a calm. Of course, we will never fully experience such in the church militant. For this life is full of troubles. What a glorious day that would be when the church is glorified, and we will enjoy that perfect peace! But as long as it is called the day, God's work continues, and we continue in His strength and direction to fulfill His will.

What lies ahead?

Taking heed to our calling to pursue Christ is the steady development of our mission/outreach labors in the provinces, such as one in the northern part of Luzon. Berean PRC is holding an outreach in Gabaldon, Nueva Ecija, the All of Grace Protestant Reformed Fellowship, situated in Barangay Bagong Sikat, Gabaldon Nueva Ecija, which was closed in 2014 and re-opened in 2017. We hope that God would sustain the work there and cause it to grow numerically and spiritually, so that a church may in the future be organized and instituted, if it is His will.

Likewise, Provident PRC is busy with ongoing church-extension labor in Guguinto, Bulacan. The pastor of this group is Ronil Domingo, a former pastor of one of the churches of the Brethren. But they are now separated from the Brethren and reforming. The work began in 2018, and on behalf of Provident PRC, Rev. Daniel Kleyn goes there one Sunday a month (every second Sunday) to preach and teach (a Heidelberg Catechism sermon, a textual sermon, and a class on the Church Order).

The work in our Seminary continues with one student. Bro. Ace Flores is in his second year of training in the Seminary. Bro. Ace and family are members of the Provident PRC. We heartily thank God for sustaining Bro. Ace and family during the time of the tumultuous tide brought by the secession of Bulacan from the federation. We know that it is only by the grace of God that we all now stand upon the truth of God's sovereign, particular, efficacious grace in the cross of Jesus Christ!

What lies ahead of us all is the realization of God's promise: "For the promise is unto you, and to your

children, and to all that afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call” (Acts 2:39). God promised to realize His everlasting covenant of grace only to all His chosen saints in Christ, including the elect children of believers—not only then and today but until all of them are taken into His fold.

Not only those who are near and around Jerusalem, but even those from afar, even to the Far East in Asia Pacific and throughout the land of the living and the dead, God gathers, defends, and preserves His people to the end, that they may dwell with Him forever in His kingdom for Jesus’ sake!

Here in the Philippines, we average at least 16 to 20 storms per year from January to December. And during the times that a storm passes by us, we know that God is at work to keep our heads bowed down with grief—and yet not without His consolation in the cross of Christ, which is our only comfort whether the weather is stormy or peaceful!

Storms in the churches are good indicators that God’s work of sanctifying us continues until the notable day of the Lord comes to take us with Him in glory! They are not pleasant, and at times, if not all the time, unwanted and undesirable. But God must work His way through them for our good and to keep His name holy in our midst! For He alone is worthy to receive all our praises, love, service, and gratitude for so great and enduring mercy upon us all in Christ alone and for His sake only!

O God, be merciful, be merciful to me.

For man with constant hate, would fain my ruin see.

My many enemies against me proudly fight;

To overwhelm my soul they watch from morn to night.

What time I am afraid I put my trust in Thee;

In God I rest, and praise His word, so rich and free.

In God I put my trust, I neither doubt nor fear,

For man can never harm with God my helper near.

(versification of Psalm 56, Psalter #151,
stanzas 1, 2)



News from our churches

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

Trivia question:

An SB reader in the UK sent in a note asking about the role of the rector in the PRC seminary (answer at the end of the news).

PRC news (Denominational)

- **Minister calls:**

From her trio of Revs. N. Decker, M. Kortus, and C. Spronk, Doon PRC (IA) extended a call to Rev. Spronk on November 29.

Hudsonville PRC called Rev. C. Spronk on November 21 from a new trio of Revs. R. Barnhill, D. Noorman, and C. Spronk. He was to give his reply on December 19.

Covenant of Grace PRC (Spokane, WA) announced a new trio of Revs. J. Holstege, J. Langerak, and D. Noorman. On November 28 the congregation voted to call Rev. J. Langerak, currently pastor of Heritage PRC in Sioux Falls, SD.

- **Missions**

Rev. D. Holstege finished his labors in the Philippines at the end of November, which included preaching farewell sermons in the Berean PRC and in Provident PRC. He and his wife returned to the States on December 2 and now await permission to enter Canada and take up the ministry in Wingham (Ontario) PRC.

From a recent Georgetown PRC bulletin concerning her work in Vellore, India: *The Tamil translations of Heidelberg Catechism and Church Order have been finalized and ap-*

proved by Pastor Paulraj. While the Church Order is ready to print, some page layout needs yet to be done. Proof reading and editing of the Tamil translation of Canons of Dordt is under way. A harmonizing of the Three Forms of Unity is also being done so that the whole 3FU will have the same flow of language and terminology. The translation into Tamil of the 2nd chapter of Rev. Bruinsma’s studies in Doctrine is underway. Pray for this work of translation. Pray for our beloved brothers and sisters in India in the PRCV and English church. Let us join in these prayers for this pastor and these labors, as well as for our fellow saints there.

- **Seminary**

The PRTS finished the regular classes of the first semester on December 10, with exams held December 13-17. May the Lord bless the faculty and students as they break for the weeks of Christmas and New Year. The 2022 Interim will begin January 3, with Prof. R. Dykstra teaching his final one (History and Principles of Christian Education) in place of Prof. Gritters who is part of a delegation to Covenant PRC in Ballymena, Northern Ireland.

- **Sister-church visitors**

In contrast to last year when no annual sister-church visits could be made due to the pandemic, visits are being made to Covenant ERC in Singapore (Prof. R. Dykstra and elder D. Kregel) and Covenant PRC in Northern Ireland (Prof. B.

Gritters and elder S. Miedema) for December and January respectively. May the Lord bless these visits and use them for the mutual good of our sister-church relationships.

PRC news (Congregational)

Sunday School Christmas programs were back on the calendar in the last few weeks in many of our congregations! How we missed them in 2020 and what a delight to hear our SS children praise their Savior in song and verse once again. “Out of the lips of children....”

Calvary (IA) PRC: Calvary hosted the area Ladies League Speech on December 9. Rev. A. Brummel spoke on “Mary the Mother of Jesus: Inspiration for Today’s Women.” A collection was taken for Sioux Falls PR School. The meeting was open to all ladies high-school age and older, who enjoyed dessert and fellowship afterwards.

Crete (IL) PRC: The Crete YPS hosted a Christmas Sing-spriation on Sunday evening, December 12.

Edgerton (MN) PRC: The Edgerton PRC Young People hosted their annual Christmas Singspiration on Sunday December 19 at First Reformed Church in Edgerton. A collection was received to offset the cost of attending the Young People’s Convention.

Faith (MI) PRC: After a year of postponement due to the pandemic, Faith PRC’s Steering Committee for the 2022 PRYP’s Convention is busy planning and preparing for this summer’s annual young people’s event. It will be held, Lord willing, August 1-5 at beautiful Camp Cedarmore in Bagdad, KY. The chosen theme is “Rejoicing in Our God” based on Psalm 63. Visit the convention website for more updates and ongoing information: prcconvention.com.

Georgetown (MI) PRC: On December 12 the Georgetown PR Church Choir led the congregation in an evening of Christmas praise. Special numbers included audience singing, a piano solo, and several selections by the Voices of Victory.

Hull (IA) PRC: The annual Young People’s Christmas Caroling was held on Saturday afternoon, December 18. The congregation was also invited and encouraged to join for a wonderful time of fellowship and singing praises.

Immanuel PRC and First PRC-Edmonton (CAN): An evening of Christmas praise for the women of Lacombe and Edmonton was held on Thursday, December 16, at Immanuel PRC. The evening began with singing and special numbers and was followed by fellowship, refreshments, and a version of the ladies’ annual Christmas cookie exchange.

Providence (MI) PRC: The GLOW girls met on Saturday morning December 18 to decorate cookies to give away. The Young People went Christmas caroling on Wednesday evening, December 22.

Evangelism news

Loveland PRC’s Evangelism Committee is sponsoring a special Bible study at Colorado State University in Fort

Collins, just north of Loveland. This note was in her bulletin at the end of the first semester there: *The evangelism committee encourages our young adults and particularly those of college age to attend our last CSU Bible study of this year on December 7th, at 6:00 P.M. in room 308 in the Lori Study Center. Pizza will be served.*

Zion PRC’s Evangelism Committee is holding a community Bible study on the gospel of John at the public library in Jenison, MI. According to a recent conversation with her pastor, Rev. J. Holstege, there have been several regular visitors who attend for which they and we rejoice.

Trivia answer:

The *rector* of the PRC seminary (currently Prof. R. Cammenga) is a faculty position and not to be confused with the *registrar*, as it often is. Each professor serves a three-year term and is appointed by the PRC Synod. Perhaps to appreciate the rector’s work, we do well to publish his list of duties. And then you will understand why he also receives help from the secretary!

1. Call and preside at faculty meetings: last Friday each month; prepare agenda.
2. Schedule all chapel exercises (give opening devotions/chapel at first meeting of the year); practice preaching exercises (in conjunction with all faculty); daily devotions (assign to students; remind of limits).
3. Practice preaching: preside at practice preaching sessions; keep record of grades; inform students of grade.
4. Arrange all pulpit supply as requested by the churches.
5. Arrange all catechism supply (and faculty visits of students’ teaching).
6. Report monthly for the faculty to the TSC; be present at their meetings.
7. Carry on correspondence related to the seminary.
8. Report annually to Synod (Rector’s Report).
9. Approve the registrar’s schedule of classes each semester (in conjunction with faculty).
10. Assign mentors for the students.
11. Internships: Arrange and supervise. Write host consistory and pastor, making the request, and informing of their responsibility.
12. Graduates: Recommend to TSC that N. N. be examined at synod. Recommend to TSC that the examination be arranged: schedule, sermon texts, texts for exegesis and translation.
13. Arrange promotion of the seminary with schools.
14. Write news from seminary for the Standard Bearer.
15. Inform consistories and churches of student licensure.
16. Keep registrar informed of decisions and actions of the faculty that would be helpful for him to know.
17. Report to supervising consistories of non-PRC students of the student’s progress (get student’s written permission to release grades).
18. Opening devotions at fall picnic.

Announcements

Resolution of sympathy

The Council and congregation of Georgetown PRC express their Christian sympathies to Marilyn Decker, Doug and Deb Altena, Tim and Kathy Decker, and grandchildren in the death of their husband, father and grandfather, **Prof. Robert Decker**, who died at the age of 80 on May 5, 2021. We give thanks for his many years of dedicated service to the gospel ministry and the Protestant Reformed Seminary. “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, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you” (I Peter 1:3, 4).

Rev. Carl Haak, President

Kevin Timmerman, Assistant Clerk

Wedding anniversary

Lord willing, on January 16, 2022, our parents, **Jim and Char Schipper** will celebrate their 65th wedding anniversary. We, their children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren give thanks to our God for the many years He has given them together. We are so grateful to our God to see His covenant blessings given to us in our generations. We pray for God’s continuing care over them. “But the mercy of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear him, and his righteousness unto children’s children” (Psalm 103:17). “The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places; Yea, I have a goodly heritage” (Psalm 16:6).

Gordon and Nancy Schipper

Randy and Lindy Looyenga

Dan and Julie Kaiser

Nathan and Jill Kamps

15 grandchildren (one in glory)

19 great grandchildren

Grandville, Michigan

Classis West

Classis West of the Protestant Reformed Churches will meet in Redlands, CA on Wednesday, March 2, 2022, at 8:30 A.M. the Lord willing. All material for the Agenda is to be in the hands of the stated clerk by January 31 (30 days before classis convenes). All delegates in need of lodging or transportation from the airport should notify the clerk of Redlands’ Consistory.

Rev. J. Engelsma, Stated Clerk

Classis East

Classis East will meet in regular session on Wednesday, January 12, 2022 at 8:00 A.M., in Providence Protestant Reformed Church, Hudsonville, MI.

Rev. Clayton Spronk, Stated Clerk

Teacher needed

Covenant Christian High School is seeking applicants for several positions for the 2022-2023 school year. We are seeking applicants for teaching positions with needs in many different subject areas. We are also seeking applicants for a full-time Guidance Counselor position, and a full-time Librarian/Media Specialist. Those interested in more information about these positions should contact Rick Noorman at ricknoorman@gmail.com or John DeVries at westmichiganrealestate@gmail.com.

Reformed Witness Hour

reformedwitnesshour.org

Rev. W. Bruinsma

January 2—By Faith Jacob Blesses Joseph’s Sons
Hebrews 11:21

January 9—Joseph’s Command Concerning His Bones
Hebrews 11:22

January 16—The Faith of Moses’ Parents
Hebrews 11:23

January 23—By Faith Moses Forsakes Egypt
Hebrews 11:24-26

January 30—By Faith Moses Endured
Hebrews 11:27