

# The Standard Bearer

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## Hope manifested in holiness

Rev. John Marcus

## A crisis of authority: Essentials of ecclesiastical authority

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## Habakkuk: God's judgment and salvation

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## PRC mission conference Not ashamed of the gospel

Mr. Douglas Dykstra

## The evangelistic character of the covenant

Rev. Jon Mahtani

## Echoing the word

Rev. Daniel Holstege



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## Meditation

Rev. John Marcus, pastor of Peace PRC in Dyer, Indiana

# Hope manifested in holiness

**Wherefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and hope to the end for the grace that is to be brought unto you at the revelation of Jesus Christ; As obedient children, not fashioning yourselves according to the former lusts in your ignorance: But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation; Because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy.**

**I Peter 1:13-16**

Every child of God who hopes for heaven will also strive for holiness.

Not because we have to do something to earn our way into heaven, but because God always works in a certain order. Whenever He works to give us the hope of heaven, He also gives us the desire for holiness.

By God's grace we have been begotten unto a lively hope. God is reserving a glorious inheritance for us in heaven and He is preserving us until He brings us there. What a glorious hope we have in Jesus Christ!

Is our hope evident to others? Does our hope manifest itself in holiness of life?

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The text begins with an urgent call for us to hope for the gracious gift that God will give us when Christ returns.

Though we live in a valley of tears, we look forward to the glories of heaven. God's word to us is "hope to the end" (v. 13). Hope completely, or hope perfectly, for the full realization of our salvation. Expect the glory of heaven with absolute confidence. Do not allow even the smallest doubt to creep into your minds.

When the inspired writer says "hope...for the grace" (v. 13), he is talking about the grace that God will give when He takes us to glory. The most basic idea of grace is *beauty* according to God's standards. Secondly, God's grace is His *favor* towards us. Thirdly, grace is *undeserved* favor manifested to us who are sinful rebels by nature. Lastly, and on the foreground in the text, grace is God's *power* that transforms us and makes us spiritually beautiful.

God by His gracious power regenerates us and sanctifies us so that we begin to be spiritually beautiful in

this life. But the text is especially concerned with the grace that will transform us when Jesus Christ appears at the time of His second coming. That is why Peter talks about the grace we will experience "at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (v. 13). When Jesus comes again, God will transform us by a mighty power so that we are perfectly beautiful according to the image of Christ.

The Holy Spirit calls us to hope for that grace. We must not set our hope upon fading beauty, earthly treasure, popularity, or pleasure. We must not set our hope on things here below. Rather, we must hope completely for that glorious day when we will reflect the beautiful image of Christ in glory.

What will it look like when we hope as God calls us to do? We will have girded up the loins of our minds and we will be sober (v. 13). The main exhortation of the text calls us to hope to the end. But, in order to do that we first need to gird up the loins of our minds and then be continually sober.

The picture of girding up the loins was familiar to the first readers of Peter's epistle. Long-flowing robes would get in the way if one wanted to work or run or fight. In order to prepare himself for the task at hand, he would gather up his robe and tie it up around his waist.

To gird up the loins of our minds has the idea of giving effort so that our minds are prepared for the task at hand. We need to be prepared to do what God calls us to do, to endure the trials He sends, and to do battle against temptations. We gird up the loins of our minds by living in the light of God's Word, taking heed to the warnings, dwelling upon His promises and faithfulness. If the loins of our minds are not girded up and our minds are allowed to wander, it will be difficult to hope perfectly as we are called to do. Dear reader, have you girded up the loins of your mind?

If we want to hope perfectly, not only must we have our minds prepared, but we also need to be sober. Being sober is the opposite of being intoxicated. Some get intoxicated with alcohol or pain medication or other drugs, perhaps to escape some kind of emotional pain. But we can also be intoxicated with worldly goals, ideas,

or habits that affect our walk. The desire for riches, pleasure, power, or other fleshly desires can easily intoxicate us, drawing us away or distracting us from our hope of glory.

Therefore, God calls us to gird up the loins of our minds and to be sober so that we hope perfectly for that grace that is to come.

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The result of having a lively hope is that we will follow after holiness, looking forward to glory.

If we confidently expect that God will make us spiritually beautiful when Christ returns again, we will want to be holy in two respects: 1) We will avoid walking in sin, and 2) we will seek to walk in consecration to God.

In the first place, if we “hope to the end,” we will avoid fashioning ourselves “according to the former lusts in [our] ignorance.” God has worked in our hearts the hope of future glory, in which glory He will take away all that is spiritually ugly and stained with sin. We long for the day when we are finally sinless.

Having such a glorious hope, it makes no sense that we would want to keep walking in sin. Why would we allow ourselves to enjoy sin in any shape or form? Having the hope of glory, why would we allow ourselves to follow any of the fleshly desires of our old man? The hope of glory should lead us to hate our sin and flee from it, even the most seemingly insignificant sin. As obedient children, we will not want to fashion ourselves according to the lusts that characterize those who are ignorant of God.

In the second place, hoping to the end will involve a positive consecration to God. If we are hoping for the day when Christ returns and makes us perfectly holy, it makes sense that we would want to be holy in this life. That is why verse 15 adds, “But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation.”

Of course, there is a sense in which God has already made us holy. God set us apart to Himself when He elected us in Jesus Christ before the foundation of the world. He set us apart to Himself when He purchased us with the precious blood of His only begotten Son. God set us apart from those who are spiritually dead when He regenerated us by His Spirit. But the text is not speaking of being holy in any of these senses.

Rather, the inspired apostle is exhorting us to be holy in the sense of striving for holiness of life. The same thought is expressed in I John 3:3: “And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure.” This striving for holiness is expressed as well in Q&A 115 of the Heidelberg Catechism when it says, “Likewise that we constantly endeavor, and pray to God

for the grace of the Holy Spirit, that we may become more and more conformable to the image of God, till we arrive at the perfection proposed to us in a life to come.” By God’s grace, we endeavor to become more and more conformable to the image of God; that is, we endeavor to be holy, praying for grace day by day.

We are called to strive for holiness “in all manner of conversation.” Be holy in every square inch of our lives. Be holy in our personal and family devotions as well as in our worship on the Sabbath. Be holy in the way we speak and act in our family and marriage. Be holy in how we deal with conflict. Be holy even with regard to our eating and drinking (cf. I Cor. 10:31).

Does our hope of glory manifest itself in a life of holiness? Anyone who thinks he is on his way to heaven but has no desire for holiness is fooling himself.

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The reason our hope of glory manifests itself in holiness is that God Himself is holy. Quoting from Leviticus 19, the inspired apostle records God’s word to His people: “Be ye holy for I am holy.”

That God is holy means He is perfectly consecrated to Himself, seeking for Himself the glory He deserves in everything He does. In His holiness, He enjoys perfect covenant fellowship with Himself. Wonderfully, the thrice-holy God brings us into His covenant fellowship, graciously making us His people and making Himself our God.

When we know that grace of God, then it is not burdensome to hear the command, “Be ye holy.” Rather, we delight in the command because we want to be holy as our God is holy. We want to be holy out of thankfulness for who God is and what He has done for us in Jesus Christ. Thankfulness to our God impels us His people to be holy. Dear reader, does thankfulness motivate you to be holy?

Even more fundamental than thankfulness, the reason that hope manifests itself in holiness lies in God’s efficacious calling.

The holy God has efficaciously called us out of darkness into His marvelous light. This very God “which hath called you” (v. 15) always carries on and finishes the work He started. He will not allow His work to go to waste, but will surely carry His work all the way to completion. The God who called us, will also justify us, sanctify us, and will surely glorify us (cf. Rom. 8:30). By His powerful call, God puts us on the way that assuredly leads to glory.

Surely, if God has given us the hope of glory, He will also work in us a beginning of holiness in this life. More and more we will hate our sins and flee from them. More and more we will love God and seek His glory.



And then one day, when Jesus Christ is revealed from heaven, He will give us the grace that He has promised. God will make us perfectly holy in glory.

May God grant that our hope of glory manifests itself in holiness of life to the glory of His holy name.



## Editorial

Rev. Joshua Engelsma, pastor of Crete PRC in Crete, Illinois

# A crisis of authority: Essentials of ecclesiastical authority

Previous article in this series: May 1, 2023, p. 341.

In a few recent editorials, I laid out what I see to be two dangers for the church with respect to ecclesiastical authority. One danger is that those who are under authority in the church adopt a critical, rebellious spirit found presently in the world and express that toward those who are in positions of authority. The other danger is that those who are in positions of authority in the church misuse or abuse their authority to the confusion and hurt of those entrusted to their care. Both I consider to be serious threats to the church of Christ in the world.

Having set forth the dangers, I intend in this and the following two editorials to spell out positively some of the basics of church authority. This editorial will examine the nature of church authority and God's intention with it. God willing, the second editorial will address the calling of pastors, elders, and deacons as they exercise authority in the church, and the third editorial will speak to the calling of church members in relation to their officebearers.

### What do we mean when we talk about *authority*?

Authority is related to, but distinct from, the idea of power. In many cases those who have power also possess authority and those who possess authority have power; yet the two concepts are not identical. Power (or force or might) refers specifically to the actual ability a person has to accomplish a certain task. Authority, on the other hand, refers to the right (or warrant or prerogative) to govern or rule over others. A man might possess the powers of physical strength, sound judgment, good morals, and persuasive speech, but those powers do not make him king. A king might be physically weak, lacking in wisdom, and morally corrupt, but he still possesses the right to rule and is king. Authority is the right one has to rule.

One aspect of authority is that the person who possesses the right to rule has the warrant to make decisions that affect the lives of those over whom he rules. He has the right to make certain laws that govern the lives of others. As we will come to see, he has this right to make laws only within a certain, limited sphere, and he is bound to do so for the good of the ruled rather than in pursuit of his own whims.

Another aspect of authority is that the person in authority has the right to demand obedience to the laws he makes and conformity to the decisions he takes by those under his authority.

He also has the prerogative to enforce those laws and decisions by exercising discipline upon those under his rule who disobey and do not conform.

### What gives one person the right to rule over another?

The right that one person has to rule over others is not ultimately based on superior strength, knowledge, or experience. Authority is not ultimately based on what family or level of society that person is born into. It is not ultimately conferred upon him by majority vote or the consent of the ruled. All authority is conferred upon men by God.

What stands behind this reality is the foundational truth that God is *the* Authority. He possesses all authority, and there is no authority outside of Him. He alone possesses the right to rule over all things. He is the only One in the universe with the right to make laws for how His creatures are to behave. He is the only One in the universe with the warrant to demand obedience to His laws and conformity to His will. He is the only One in the universe who has the prerogative to correct and punish those who disobey and refuse to conform to His law. Psalm 103:19 says of God's universal rule,

“The LORD hath prepared his throne in the heavens; and his kingdom ruleth over all.” God holds all authority because He is God alone. His eternal deity is His right to rule. He also possesses all authority because as the omnipotent God He created all things. Because He called the whole universe into existence, He has the right to do with the universe and all the creatures in it as He pleases.

It is significant for what we will say later about those in earthly positions of authority to note here that the triune God has entrusted all authority to the incarnate, crucified, and risen Jesus Christ. In Matthew 28:18, Jesus says of Himself, “All power [the Greek word here literally means authority] is given unto me in heaven and in earth.” Ephesians 1:20-22 says that God “set him [Christ] at his own right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come, and hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church.” The triune God exercises His sovereign authority over the universe through the Mediator, so that our Lord and Savior holds sway over all things in heaven and earth.

The fact that God possesses all authority means that no man has authority in himself. All human authority is derived authority. If a person is in a position of authority here on earth, he has received that authority from God in His providence. Lord’s Day 39 of the Heidelberg Catechism in its explanation of the fifth commandment ends by saying that “it pleases God to govern us by their hand [the hand of those in authority].” In the end God is the One who governs, but He is pleased to do so by conferring authority on certain persons.

### **What are the different spheres of authority ordained by God?**

God has conferred authority to mankind in four main spheres of earthly life.

The first and most basic sphere of earthly life is the sphere of the home. The home is foundational to every other sphere of life. In the home, God has conferred authority on the husband to serve as the head and leader of his wife (Eph. 5:23). In the home, God has also conferred authority on fathers and mothers with respect to their children (Eph. 6:1-3). Since we believe that the Christian school is an extension of the believing home where teachers stand in the place of parents, we hold that God has conferred authority upon Christian school teachers over the students.

Extending out from the home is the sphere of the church. The local congregation is the gathering of be-

lievers and their seed in a particular locale. In the church God has conferred the right to rule to officebearers over the members of the congregation. Particularly, God has conferred this authority upon men who serve in the office of elder (or, ruling elder). Hebrews 13, speaking of elders, says in verse 7, “Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God...” and again in verse 17 says, “Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account...” (cf. also Belgic Confession, Arts. 30 and 32).

A third sphere of earthly life is that of labor and the workplace. The Bible speaks of the authority of masters over slaves (for example, Eph. 6:5-9; Col. 3:22-4:1), which today addresses the authority God has conferred to employers over their employees.

A fourth and final sphere of earthly life is the state. God has given the right to rule to those in positions of government—kings, presidents, senators, judges, mayors, police officers—over the citizens of the country. Romans 13:1 says in reference to magistrates, “Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power [literally, authority] but of God: and the powers [authorities] that be are ordained of God.”

In considering these different spheres of authority, it is necessary to recognize that their authority is limited. All authority is limited to the boundaries of its own specific sphere. For example, husbands are called to lead their own wives, not the wives of every other man. For this reason, wives are repeatedly called to submit to *their own* husbands (cf. Eph. 5:22; Col. 3:18; Tit. 2:5; I Pet. 3:1), rather than to every husband generally. Parents have authority over their own children, not the children of every other home.

Not only is authority limited to its own sphere, it is limited in that sphere to the specific calling given them by God. For example, in the workplace, employers do not have authority to dictate every aspect of the life of their employees. Their authority is limited to the workplace and the work that is conducted there. In the sphere of the state, those in positions of government do not have unlimited power, but are limited to the calling God has given to the government. That calling is to wield the sword-power for “restrain[ing]” the “dissoluteness of men” and seeing that “all things [are] carried on...with good order and decency” (Belgic Confession, Art. 36; cf. also Rom. 13:3-4). This means the government does not have the authority to interfere in the business of the church, specifically her sacred calling to worship God and preach the gospel. And the church may not allow the state to intrude where it does not possess authority.

## What is the purpose of God in conferring authority?

When we talk about authority, we must go beyond the fact of God's conferring authority on some and consider what His purpose is in conferring that authority.

God's purpose with authority is that it be an instrument to care for and protect others. God confers authority on some so that they use that authority for the good of those under authority. Those in authority are called to rule in love, using their position to bless those under their care, by protecting them from harm and seeking their welfare and flourishing. They do that by establishing rules that are in harmony with and reflect the law of God, and by giving instruction and counsel regarding those rules. They do so by correcting those who do wrong, and by being fair and just in their correction. They do so by showing themselves to be honorable, trustworthy, and blameless, thus removing barriers that the ruled might have in trusting and following them.

God's will for husbands is that they use their authority not to serve self but to bless their wives and promote their well-being by "instructing, comforting, protecting" (cf. the Reformed "Marriage Form"). God's will for parents is that they use their authority to bless their children and promote their well-being. God's will for elders is that they use their authority to bless the members of the church and promote their well-being. And the same goes for employers toward their employees and for magistrates toward their subjects.

Because God's design for authority is that it serve the well-being of the ruled, the Scriptures warn repeatedly

against leaders who are self-serving. In Matthew 20:25-28, Jesus contrasts a sinful view of authority ("they that are great exercise authority upon them") with the proper view of authority ("whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant").

Inasmuch as those in authority serve the well-being of those under them, they reflect the sovereign God.

## What are the implications of this for those in authority and those under authority in the church?

The following two editorials will spell out in further detail the implications of these truths about authority, but I want to conclude this article by giving a taste of what those implications are for life in the church.

First, these truths about authority have an important implication for those who are under ecclesiastical authority. The implication is that they are to honor the elders in their speech and attitudes, as unto Jesus Christ, the Head of the church. They are to view the authority of the elders with gratitude, as the God-ordained instrument for protecting the church and promoting her welfare.

Second, these truths about authority have an important implication for those who hold special office in the church. The implication is that they are to be humble servants. Rather than being filled with pride at the office they hold, they are to be humbled that God would have them be representatives of Christ. Rather than using their office to serve their own agenda, they are to serve the church by instructing, comforting, and protecting. More on this next time.



## All around us

Rev. Daniel Holstege, pastor of the Wingham PRC in Wingham, Ontario, Canada

## Hit the pause on artificial intelligence! News from various denominations

### Hit the pause on artificial intelligence!

In an open letter published last March and signed by over a thousand of the world's artificial intelligence (AI) experts, including the wealthiest man in the world, Elon Musk, we read the following:

AI systems with human-competitive intelligence can pose profound risks to society and humanity, as shown

by extensive research and acknowledged by top AI labs. As stated in the widely endorsed Asilomar AI Principles, *Advanced AI could represent a profound change in the history of life on Earth, and should be planned for and managed with commensurate care and resources.* Unfortunately, this level of planning and management is not happening....

Contemporary AI systems are now becoming human-competitive at general tasks, and we must ask ourselves: *Should* we let machines flood our information channels with propaganda and untruth? *Should* we automate away all the jobs, including the fulfilling ones? *Should* we develop nonhuman minds that might eventually outnumber, outsmart, obsolete and replace us? *Should* we risk loss of control of our civilization?

Therefore, we call on all AI labs to immediately pause for at least 6 months the training of AI systems more powerful than GPT-4....

Humanity can enjoy a flourishing future with AI. Having succeeded in creating powerful AI systems, we can now enjoy an “AI summer” in which we reap the rewards, engineer these systems for the clear benefit of all, and give society a chance to adapt. Society has hit pause on other technologies with potentially catastrophic effects on society.”<sup>1</sup>

OpenAI, a leading developer of AI cofounded by Elon Musk in 2015, launched the latest and most powerful artificial intelligence system in the world last November (2022). They call it ChatGPT, and no doubt some of you have already used it. The release of ChatGPT into the public domain sent shock waves of excitement and terror through the world because of the amazing level of intelligence it displayed.<sup>2</sup> The new development has demonstrated for many that “artificial *general* intelligence” (AGI), which they say will surpass human intelligence, is not as far distant as they once thought. The fear is that the rate of development is accelerating so fast that humanity could be inadvertently creating a “humanoid race” that will wipe out their creators. Musk, whose Tesla company is developing humanoid robots, is one of many voices identifying AGI as one of the greatest existential threats to humanity today, up there with pandemics, religious extremism, and nuclear war.<sup>3</sup> Hence the call for a pause on all AI development.

Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Meta Platforms (formerly

Facebook, Inc.), has publicly disagreed with Musk on many issues (they recently challenged each other to a cage fight!) and has a much more positive outlook on artificial intelligence. His company has said in response to the open letter and the call for a pause on AI development: They will not be doing that.<sup>4</sup>

As Christians, we must obviously evaluate artificial intelligence carefully. While we may find good uses of this technology, let us be bold to condemn all evil uses (for example, asking ChatGPT to write a term paper for us and lying to our teacher that we wrote it). Since the days when elite developers like Jabal, Jubal, and Tubal-cain walked the earth, the wicked world has always pressed technological developments into the service of sin. The development of AI runs parallel to a shocking development of moral degeneration throughout the world today and the rise of an antichristian civilization. Indeed, the idea of artificially intelligent humanoid robots walking and talking, calls to mind the biblical prophecy that in the last days mankind will make an image of the man of sin, a likeness of that man who will epitomize sinful man, and that image will come alive and have the ability to talk and kill those who do not worship the beast (Rev. 13:14-15).

But as Christians, we must remember that the Highest Intelligence, who created the universe, is our God who sits in the heavens and reigns over all, and He laughs at the heathen as they rage and imagine a vain thing and set themselves against Him and His Christ (Ps. 2:1-4). Our God is still in the heavens doing whatsoever He pleases (Ps. 115:3). Even if the new idols of man have mouths that actually speak, ears that actually hear, and hands that actually touch, we ought to keep on trusting in the Lord, for He is our help and our shield (v. 9). We do not fear what the world fears, that is, human extinction at the hands of robots, because we know that our God works all things together for good to us who love Him, and Christ comes quickly and the new Jerusalem with Him where we will dwell with God forever (Rom. 8:28, Rev. 21:3).

## News from various denominations

The annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), the largest Protestant denomination in America, took place in June in New Orleans. Rick Warren, whose Saddleback Church was recently ousted from the SBC for ordaining a woman into the office of teaching pastor, was given the floor for three minutes to plead with the 12,000 plus delegates to reverse the decision. Warren

1 <https://futureoflife.org/open-letter/pause-giant-ai-experiments>. Examples include human cloning, human germline modification, gain-of-function research, and eugenics.

2 For example, ChatGPT could make a sermon on a specified text of Scripture in the style of a specified preacher whose sermons can be accessed online, and fool a general audience. But we know that authentic preaching is a spiritual activity of a man sent by Christ. No robot will ever be able to preach in the true sense of the word. See Russell Moore, *Christianity Today*, “AI Might Teach, But It Can’t Preach,” January 26, 2023 (<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2023/january-web-only/chatgpt-artificial-intelligence-ai-preach-sermons-church.html>).

3 <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/30/technology/ai-threat-warning.html>.

4 <https://www.foxbusiness.com/technology/facebook-chief-zuckerberg-consumed-race-launch-ai-snob-musk-backed-pause>.



argued that the issue of women's ordination ought not to divide the denomination. Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, was given the floor to give a three-minute rebuttal. Mohler argued that the idea of women pastors was a fundamental issue that violates "both the doctrine and the order of the Southern Baptist Convention." The overwhelming majority of the delegates (88%) voted to uphold the removal of Saddleback Church and went on to begin a two-year process to add language to the denominational Constitution that will allow only men to be pastors.<sup>5</sup> For the time being, officially anyway, it appears that the SBC will hold the line against the inroads of the liberal thinking that puts women into office and then brings in a host of other unbiblical ideas.

The second largest Protestant denomination in America, the United Methodist Church (UMC), is going through a massive split due to differences on homosexuality. In January of this year, *Christianity Today* reported that the huge schism some anticipated turned out to be smaller than expected. Only about 1,800 churches (!) had disaffiliated with the LGBT-affirming denomination by that time, and they were mostly in the conservative south of the country.<sup>6</sup> But the numbers have grown. As of June, more than 5,800 of the 30,000 churches (20%) have withdrawn from the denomination, including many from the north.<sup>7</sup> The UMC has adopted a plan that gives churches until the end of this year to disaffiliate and keep their properties. So the exodus will likely continue. Most of the churches leaving the UMC are joining a newly formed Methodist denomination called the Global Methodist Church, which began in 2022 with a plan "to uphold traditional, conservative Wesleyan theology but run on a lighter, leaner infrastructure that emphasizes grassroots accountability and ministry connections."<sup>8</sup> Since Wesleyan theology is Arminian, there is no indication that this more conservative denomination has come any closer to the truth of the gospel than the liberalizing one from which it came.

In June, the delegates to Synod 2023 of the Christian Reformed Church gathered at Calvin University. Among other things, the synod had to deal with repercussions from decisions of Synod 2022. As you may recall, Synod

2022 adopted as the official position of the CRC that the sexual sins forbidden by the seventh commandment according to Lord's Day 41 of the Heidelberg Catechism include "homosexual sex."<sup>9</sup> Synod 2022 also directed the Neland Ave CRC in Grand Rapids to rescind its decision to ordain a lesbian deacon back in 2020. Neland did not do so, but appealed to Synod 2023 with the support of Classis Grand Rapids East. All eyes were on synod again this past June to see whether it would uphold the previous year's decisions. It did. Synod 2023 rejected the appeal of Neland by a vote of 124 to 47 (with six delegates not voting). Synod instructed Neland to rescind the appointment of any others in same-sex relationships whom they may have put into office. However, an overture requesting synod to discipline Neland and Classis Grand Rapids East failed.<sup>10</sup>

A synodical delegate from Classis Niagara in Ontario, Canada who attended Neland Ave CRC when he was a student at Calvin College opined that Synod 2023 was "no shining city on a hill—far from it.... We're a microcosm of our wider culture, right here, deeply divided, politically maneuvered and maneuvering. We're stuck in our own echo chambers. As a gathered assembly, I'm concerned that we have grace on our lips and contempt in our hearts. We're not listening." He was later one of several delegates who turned in his credentials and walked out of the assembly in protest.<sup>11</sup> When immature children do not get their way, they sometimes do things like that. When spiritually mature adults do not get their way in the church, they either acquiesce to what the majority decides or protest in the proper manner. But one thing this delegate said is clearly true: the CRC is deeply divided on whether or not to be LGBT-affirming and does seem to be a microcosm of the wider culture when it comes to the battle between righteousness and unrighteousness in this regard.

5 <https://ministrywatch.com/ouster-of-saddleback-and-fern-creek-from-sbc-over-women-pastors-is-affirmed>.

6 <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2023/january/umc-churches-leave-global-methodist-denomination-schism.html>.

7 <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2023/july-august/unit-ed-methodist-church-split-complication-court-georgia-lg.html>

8 <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2022/april/global-methodist-church-launch-conservative-umc-lgbt-split.html>

9 However, as reported by John VanDyk of *Christian Renewal*, "Rather than accepting the result of 2022 a number of local churches decided instead to wave the pride flag, by taking up the tag line on websites and street signs of churches that their congregation is 'welcoming and affirming.' They include: Eastern Avenue CRC, Grand Rapids..." ("House Divided: Overtures to Upend the CRC Synod 2022 Human Sexuality Decisions," *Christian Renewal*, June 3, 2023). The church of which Herman Hoeksema was the pastor some one hundred years ago now affirms and celebrates sexual perversion.

10 <https://ministrywatch.com/christian-reformed-synod-orders-church-to-rescind-deacon-in-same-sex-marriage>.

11 <https://www.thebanner.org/news/2023/06/synod-2023-rejects-neland-avenue-crcs-appeal>. I have been told that most of the Christian Reformed Churches here in Ontario, Canada are on the liberal side.





## Search the Scriptures

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

# Habakkuk: The just shall live by faith (11) God's judgment and salvation (1)

Previous article in this series: June, 2023, p. 394.

*A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet upon Shigionoth. O LORD, I have heard thy speech, and was afraid: O LORD, revive thy work in the midst of the years, in the midst of the years make known; in wrath remember mercy. God came from Teman, and the Holy One from mount Paran. Selah. His glory covered the heavens, and the earth was full of his praise. And his brightness was as the light; he had horns coming out of his hand: and there was the hiding of his power. Before him went the pestilence, and burning coals went forth at his feet. He stood, and measured the earth: he beheld, and drove asunder the nations; and the everlasting mountains were scattered, the perpetual hills did bow: his ways are everlasting. I saw the tents of Cushan in affliction: and the curtains of the land of Midian did tremble. Was the LORD displeased against the rivers? was thine anger against the rivers? was thy wrath against the sea, that thou didst ride upon thine horses and thy chariots of salvation? Thy bow was made quite naked, according to the oaths of the tribes, even thy word. Selah. Thou didst cleave the earth with rivers. The mountains saw thee, and they trembled: the overflowing of the water passed by: the deep uttered his voice, and lifted up his hands on high. The sun and moon stood still in their habitation: at the light of thine arrows they went, and at the shining of thy glittering spear. Thou didst march through the land in indignation, thou didst thresh the heathen in anger. Thou wentest forth for the salvation of thy people, even for salvation with thine anointed; thou woundedst the head out of the house of the wicked, by discovering the foundation unto the neck. Selah. Thou didst strike through with his staves the head of his villages: they came out as a whirlwind to scatter me: their rejoicing was as to devour the poor secretly. Thou didst walk through the sea with thine horses, through the heap of great waters. When I heard, my belly trembled; my lips quivered at the voice: rottenness entered into my bones, and I trembled in myself, that I might rest in the day of trouble: when he cometh up unto the people, he will invade them with his troops.*

Habakkuk 3:1-16

Chapter 3 of Habakkuk concludes the prophet's dialogue with God. The dialogue began with Habakkuk reminding God of Judah's sins and wondering why God did not punish them (1:1-4). God answered, telling Habakkuk that the Babylonians were coming. God would use them to chastise Judah (1:5-11). God's answer only increased the prophet's concern. He wondered how God in His holiness could use the wicked Babylonians, since that cruel nation was even more wicked than Judah (1:12-17).

Thinking he had said too much and been too forward with God, Habakkuk decided to stand aside silently and wait for God's answer (2:1). God's second answer confirmed the coming of the Babylonians. God, however, assured Habakkuk that the just would live by faith—that justified by faith in Christ, God's people would not come under His destroying wrath (2:2-4). Habakkuk understood then, that whatever happened could only be God's loving and saving chastisement.

God answered Habakkuk further by telling Habakkuk that not Judah but the Babylonians would come under His destroying judgment, as the ungodly always do (2:5-20). But not wanting Habakkuk and His people to focus on Babylon and its coming judgment, God also spoke both of a blessed future for His people (3:14) and of His own sovereign dominion of all things (3:20). "Focus on Me and on what I will do for you," God says. That is just what Habakkuk does in chapter 3.

Chapter 3 of Habakkuk is very different from the rest of the book and from anything else in the fifteen other major and minor prophets. It is so different from the rest of Habakkuk that many Bible critics do not believe it was written by him or originally part of his prophecy. They are wrong. The third chapter has appeared as part of the book going back to the Intertestamentary Period, but more importantly, the book would not be complete without its third chapter. Chapter 3 is a fitting and necessary conclusion to the dialogue between God and the prophet recorded in the previous two chapters. In chapter 3, Habakkuk, having questioned God's ways

in chapter 1 and received God's answer, prays for God to do His will and submits wholeheartedly to the sovereign will of God.

He submits not only for himself but for the nation. Having heard in the final verse of chapter 2 the truth that God was in His holy temple, the prophet prepared the prayer and song of chapter 3 to be sung in the temple in the presence of God, though also later in captivity in Babylon. Questioning and complaining must cease (2:20), but Habakkuk understands that to say nothing would be as sinful. God must still be worshiped, and Habakkuk helps the people to worship the God of judgment and salvation in chapter 3.

The people would need Habakkuk's prayer when the Babylonians came. As Calvin put it,

Let us then bear in mind, that the way of fostering true religion, prescribed here to the miserable Israelites while dispersed in their exile, was to look up to God daily, that they might strengthen their faith; for they could not have otherwise continued in their obedience to God. They would, indeed, have wholly fallen away into the superstitions of the Gentiles, had not the memory of the covenant, which the Lord had made with them, remained firm in their hearts: and we shall presently see that the Prophet lays much stress upon this circumstance.<sup>1</sup>

Chapter 3, though, is not just Habakkuk's gift to the people. It is part of the inspired Word of God through the prophet and comes to people as a gift of God. God would fulfill His word and send the Babylonians, but He would not forget His people or cast them off. He would provide for them in Babylon and this prayer is proof of His faithfulness. It was given through the prophet, as Calvin says, "that the prayer might have some authority among the people; for they knew that a form of prayer dictated for them by the mouth of a Prophet, was the same as though the Spirit itself was to show them how they were to pray to God."<sup>2</sup>

That the prayer was meant for public worship is evident from the first and last verses of chapter 3. The word *Shigionoth* in verse 1 is a word also found in the heading of Psalm 7 and may be a musical directive for public singing. The word *selah*, is found three times in the chapter, as in many of the Psalms and is also understood by many to be a musical notation, perhaps on the order of a musical rest. Verse 19 dedicates the song to

the chief temple singer and gives further instruction for musical accompaniment when sung in worship.

The chapter, then, forms a public poetic prayer but, like many of the Psalms, it is a prayer that is also a song (five Psalms are called prayers: 17, 86, 90, 102, 142). There are other songs in the prophetic books, notably Isaiah 5:1-7, but that song is very different and was probably not meant to be sung in the temple as this was. There are other prayers, too, but no others in the prophetic books that were meant to be public prayers.

As a prayer and song, chapter 3 is a nice reminder that when we sing the Psalms we are also praying to God and when we pray we are not just asking but praising God. As Lloyd-Jones says: "Prayer is more than petition and includes praise, thanksgiving, recollection and adoration."<sup>3</sup> Even when we ask for things, we ask by way of acknowledging God to be the overflowing fountain of all good and the One upon whom we depend for everything.

Habakkuk 3 is a song and prayer of submission to God's revealed will concerning the coming of the Babylonians. In response to Habakkuk's questioning, God did not change His purpose or tell Habakkuk that He would send some lesser chastisement on Judah. He had said (2:3), "the vision is yet for an appointed time, but at the end it shall speak, and not lie: though it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry." He did not amend what He had said about the coming of the Babylonians one word. He is Jehovah, who changes not.

But the prophet changed. Puzzled, troubled, questioning God's ways and His very character, Habakkuk had expected to be reproved (2:1). He had not been reproved but given a word of comfort and peace (2:4, 14, 20), a word that he could pass on to Judah, though God maintained His Word. Believing God's Word, though still afraid, Habakkuk submits to the will of God and prays that God's will be done. He not only submits to God's will, however, but recollects God's past dealing with His people and pleads that God would remember mercy, as He had done in the past. Then, having submitted to the will of God and prayed for mercy, he ends his prophecy with a joyful confession of trust in God.

In chapter 3 Habakkuk sees the coming of the Babylonians in a different light from chapter 1. He sees their coming in the light of God's ancient dealings with Israel, and verses 2-16 are a description of those ancient ways. In chapter 3 Habakkuk trusts that God will deal with His people as He dealt with them in the past, punishing them for their sins but always being merci-

1 John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets*, trans., John Owen (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1950), vol. 4, 133.

2 Calvin, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets*, vol. 4, 133.

3 D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *From Fear to Faith: Studies in the Book of Habakkuk* (London: Intervarsity Press, 1970), 57.

ful. Habakkuk sees the coming of the Babylonians as a continuation, a revival, of God's past work: "Revive thy work in the midst of the years;" and as God's continuing to make Himself known as the God of His people, though in fearful ways: "In the midst of the years make known."

Those ancient ways include Israel's deliverance from Egypt, their wilderness wanderings, their entrance into Canaan, the conquest of the land under Joshua and the days of the judges. Habakkuk, however, does not speak of those days chronologically and historically, but generally and with the focus on God Himself, His power and righteousness and faithfulness and mercy. That history with its focus on God and His ways is the fabric of which chapter 3 is woven.

These historical allusions are not presented in any particular order and sometimes include different events. They are all woven in one fabric that depicts God as the covenant God of His people, but always as a God of judgment and salvation. Woven into that fabric are a number of themes: God's presence among His people as their Deliverer and Savior, His chastisements for their sins, His faithfulness and mercy to them in chastising them, His sovereign use of the nations to chastise them, His punishing of the nations for their part in those chastisements, and His sovereign use of the creation, the rivers, seas, mountains, and hills in all these works among the nations and with His people.

A brief outline of verses 1-16 shows this:

- v. 3—Mount Sinai and the wilderness wanderings
- v. 4—The giving of the law and God's revelation at Mount Sinai
- v. 5—Egypt's plagues and the judgments on Israel during the wilderness wanderings
- v. 6—Israel's battles in the wilderness and in Canaan
- v. 7—Gideon's battle against the Midianites
- vv. 8-10—The passage through the Red Sea, the crossing of Jordan, and Barak's and Deborah's victory over the Canaanites
- v. 9—The miracle of water from the rock at Rephidim and Kadesh
- v. 11—Joshua's battle against the Canaanites
- vv. 12-14—Israel's battles in the wilderness and especially in Canaan
- v. 15—The Red Sea
- v. 16—The conquest of Canaan

There are echoes of other songs in Habakkuk's prayer and song. It echoes Exodus 15:1-21, the song of Israel at the Red Sea; Deuteronomy 32:1-43, the song Moses taught Israel before his death; and Judges 5:1-31, the song of Deborah and Barak after their victory over the Canaanites as well as many of the Psalms. Compare, for example, Exodus 15:6 with Habakkuk 3:4,

Exodus 15:8 with Habakkuk 3:15, or Exodus 15:14-16 with Habakkuk 3:7. Compare Deuteronomy 32:8 with Habakkuk 3:6, Deuteronomy 32:22-24 with Habakkuk 3:5, or Deuteronomy 32:40-43 with Habakkuk 3:12-14. Compare Judges 5:5 with Habakkuk 3:3, 10 or Judges 5:20-21 with Habakkuk 3:8-10.

There are two reasons for these similarities. Habakkuk, like most of the Jews, would have known these other songs from his childhood and their words would have been deeply rooted in his soul. But also, these songs are all similar in that they have the same great theme, the Lord's coming for judgment and for salvation.

Habakkuk weaves this historical fabric with its different themes to show that God's ways are everlasting (3:6); that His ways in sending the Babylonians to chastise Judah, and then judging the Babylonians for their part in those chastisements, are no different from His past ways and dealings with His people. Habakkuk is pointing out that God always comes both for judgment and for salvation, judgment of His people's sins as well as the sins of the nations, but in and through it all He comes for the redemption of His chosen people. Judgment must begin at the house of God, but Zion is redeemed with judgment.

The themes of Habakkuk 3:1-16 are the same as those of Psalm 89:30-34, "If his children forsake my law, and walk not in my judgments; If they break my statutes, and keep not my commandments; Then will I visit their transgression with the rod, and their iniquity with stripes. Nevertheless my lovingkindness will I not utterly take from him, nor suffer my faithfulness to fail. My covenant will I not break, nor alter the thing that is gone out of my lips." They are the themes of Isaiah 43:1-4, "But now thus saith the LORD that created thee, O Jacob, and he that formed thee, O Israel, Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine. When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee. For I am the LORD thy God, the Holy One of Israel, thy Saviour: I gave Egypt for thy ransom, Ethiopia and Seba for thee." They are the great themes of the whole Old Testament.

At the heart of those themes is the gospel promise of the coming and work of Christ in whom God will in wrath remember mercy, use the nations for their deliverance and salvation, and scatter the nations forever (John 12:31). In sending Christ, He provides a foundation for chastisement that saves and does not destroy. In Christ He provides a righteousness that belongs to His people through faith, that preserves them from His destroying



wrath, and that even in chastisement delivers them from the wrath to come. In Christ Zion is redeemed with judgment.

Habakkuk's prophecy in chapter 3 reaches not only to the coming of Christ, but also all the way to the end of time. Always God brings salvation through judgment for His church—typically in the Old Testament, redemptive-

ly in the coming and work of Christ, by reformation of His church through the New Testament era, and finally in the events of the end times. Always the nations are part of His work, sovereignly used by Him and sovereignly judged by Him, but out of it all His people and His church, righteous in Christ, emerge purified and ready to live with Him in eternal fellowship.



## Pillar and ground of truth

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

## The Council of Nicea (787): Background

How many ecumenical councils have been held?

The Roman Catholic church gives the number as twenty-one, the last being the Vatican Council (1962-65). Protestants consider only the first seven to be ecumenical.

We come now to the Seventh Ecumenical Council. It was quite different from the first six in two ways. First, the issue it faced was very different. The first six councils dealt with doctrinal issues: Is Christ God? Is the Holy Spirit God? How can Christ be both human and divine? Is Christ one person or two? Does He have one nature or two? Does He have one will or two? The main issue at the Seventh Council was how God is to be worshiped.

In addition, the first six Ecumenical Councils developed truth by giving right answers to the questions. By contrast, the Seventh Ecumenical Council made wrong decisions. Councils can err.

### The broad issue

The broad issue faced by the Seventh Council was whether God could be worshiped through artwork that depicted Jesus, such as paintings, mosaics, and statues. These art forms were called *icons*, a word derived from the Greek word for images.

That *God* could not be depicted by these art forms, the church understood. The second commandment prohibits making images of God. Because God is invisible, it is not possible to make an image of Him, nor can His glory be portrayed in an image. But depicting *Jesus* was another matter, the church thought; after all, Jesus was truly human.

This point—the humanity of the divine Son of God—is the point of connection between the Seventh Council and the first six. The first six Councils emphasized that Jesus was truly God, and therefore was to be worshiped. At the same time, He was truly man, and paintings, mosaics, and statues of Him represented Him as a man. So could God be worshiped by using pictures of Jesus?

Some said that to use such pictures in worship was certainly wrong. The second commandment forbids making images of God, and Jesus is God. Besides, the second commandment forbids the worship of God by images, icons, artwork. Some went so far as to destroy the icons in churches, or call for their destruction. These were called iconoclasts.

Others said that while most images could not be used in worship, images of Jesus were a different matter. The second commandment still applied, and its prohibition of the use of images in worship still meant that the church could not use images of creatures in worship. But Jesus was Himself the image of God! God had provided an image of Himself in Jesus Christ. For this reason, the church could use artistic depictions of Christ as a means to worship God. This group had two subgroups: some said that the images of Jesus could be used to teach, but should not be worshiped; others said that the images of Jesus could be worshiped, because in that image Jesus Christ was Himself present with His church.

### Notable men

Opposing the practice of worshiping icons were Emperor Leo III (reigned 717-741) and his son, Emperor Constantine V (reigned 741-775). These were the

highest political figures of the day. Their appeal to the second commandment suggests that they were godly men, concerned for truth. But was there more to it? As emperors, were they trying to control the church by dictating how she should worship?

Favoring the practice of worshiping icons were the Pope and the Patriarch, that is, the bishops of Rome and Constantinople. These were the highest ecclesiastical figures of the day. They differed from each other in one respect: the Pope and the churches in the West permitted three-dimensional depictions (statues), while the Patriarch and the churches in the East permitted only two-dimensional (paintings and mosaics).

John of Damascus (c. 675-749) was the leading theologian who defended the use of icons. He argued that Christ is the image of God, and Christians also bear the image of God. God had prohibited the use of images in Israel's worship, because He had not yet provided the image they were to use. Now He had provided His image, so that image may be used in worship.

This set the stage for the Seventh Ecumenical Council. The emperors opposed images; the church favored their use, and theologians defended them. The matter was not only theological; people took sides on the issue, and it threatened the peace of the empire.

So the Seventh Ecumenical Council was called.



## Strength of youth

Rev. Ryan Barnhill, pastor of Heritage PRC in Sioux Falls, South Dakota

## Battling the devil (4) Defense in the war

Previous article in this series: March 15, 2023, p. 280.

We are in a war—spiritual warfare, very real warfare.

Preparation for this warfare is so important. We addressed last time how we can be ready for battle against the forces of darkness. The two preparatory pieces of armor are mentioned in Ephesians 6:14a and 15: “Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth...and your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace.”

Now we turn our attention to another crucial aspect of the warfare—defense. The defensive pieces of armor in Ephesians 6 are the breastplate of righteousness, the shield of faith, and the helmet of salvation.

### Breastplate of righteousness

The Roman soldier had a breastplate that protected him. The breastplate was metal or very tough leather that covered the soldier from neck to navel. One part covered the front of the body, and the other part covered the back. The breastplate was designed to protect the vital organs of the soldier. Should the enemy shoot an arrow or thrust a spear, the breastplate would protect such vital organs as the soldier's heart, lungs, and kidneys. It was therefore crucial for the soldier's protection to have this breastplate on when he went to war.

The apostle Paul uses this to illustrate for us the

breastplate of righteousness, a piece of the armor of God that is for our defense or protection (Eph. 6:14b).

We have vital organs, although we are not referring to the kind inside our physical body. Instead, the Bible often speaks of the heart, not the one pumping inside the chest but “heart” in the sense of the variety of parts that make us up—the whole inner person. We have our thinking, reasoning, and understanding. We have a will by which we choose, determine, and desire. We have emotions or affections. We have a conscience. For our thinking, our will, our emotions, and our conscience we need protection.

We have for our defense the breastplate of righteousness, or the breastplate that is righteousness. Righteousness is one of God's attributes (Ps. 11:7; Ps. 116:5). Everything God wills and does is always in line with the standard for what is right—and God Himself is that standard. But we are sinners, and according to the righteousness of God we must be driven from God's presence into death. That is why it is so comforting that Scripture teaches righteousness also as a gift of God that He has prepared in Christ for His people. We call this gift *imputed* righteousness; the breastplate is this imputed righteousness (Rom. 3:28; Phil. 3:9). This righteousness is the obedience of Christ, an obedience that includes His paying





for our sins and His spotless keeping of the law in our place. This righteousness is imputed or reckoned over to our account. Perhaps you best know this as justification by faith alone, which Lord's Day 23 gloriously explains this way: "...God, without any merit of mine, but only of mere grace, grants and imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ; even so, as if I never had had nor committed any sin: yea, as if I had fully ac-

complished all that obedience which Christ has accomplished for me; inasmuch as I embrace such benefit with a believing heart." It is *this* imputed righteousness that is the shining breastplate for our protection!

And we need that protection! The defense provided by the breastplate is necessary because of the Devil and his hosts, the adversaries of God who work with careful calculation in an attempt to deceive us. Satan attacks us with arrows and spears of lying accusations. He aims at our vital organs, seeking to rip them up with the accusation that we are terrible sinners whose destination is hell. He tries to convince us that hardships and chastisement in our life are evidence of God's punishment of us.

But those arrows and spears of accusation fall blunted and broken as they crash against the breastplate of righteousness. When Satan accuses you, throwing the sins of youth in your face and arguing that you are hell-bound, you can shout, "Christ is my righteousness!" The arrows of accusation strike that breastplate, falling to the ground cracked in half. When Satan comes to you in the hard times, seeking to convince you that these hardships are the evidence of God punishing you, you can say, "Christ's righteousness has been imputed to me, and God views me as clothed in those white robes!" The spears thrust by Satan bounce, bent and mangled, off the breastplate. Having on the breastplate of righteousness, you shall stand.

## Shield of faith

Crucial among the Roman soldier's pieces of armor was the shield. In the days of old, soldiers would sometimes use a large, oblong, four-cornered shield, four feet long and two and a half feet wide, covered in leather. In Ephesians 6:16, the Greek word for "shield" comes from the word "door," the reason being that the shield resembled a door. Like the breastplate, the shield too was used for the soldier's protection. The shield was necessary because the enemy would dip arrows or darts into (or fill them with) a flammable substance, set them on fire, and send them sailing with the hope that they would slice through their target. A shield blocked and extinguished these fiery projectiles.

Readers in the ancient world were well familiar with such a shield, and the apostle draws from it to help them and us understand something about faith: the shield of faith, or the shield that is faith (Eph. 6:16).

So, what is faith? Faith is a gift of God—a gift given to us for Jesus' sake. Faith is first of all the living, spiritual, and unbreakable bond that unites us to Jesus. This bond becomes activity. The shield is this activity of faith. Our Heidelberg Catechism helpfully describes this activity in Lord's Day 7: true faith is "a certain knowledge" and "an assured confidence." Faith is knowledge, intellectual knowledge, to be sure, but always a spiritual and warm knowledge of the heart. Faith is also confidence, a trust or conviction that is based upon knowledge. Faith (knowledge and confidence) always has an object—the Bible in its entirety, and especially the promises of God's Word that center in the glorious salvation God accomplishes in Jesus Christ.

This shield of faith is critical in the warfare. Ephesians 6:16 refers to the "fiery darts of the wicked." The wicked, or wicked one, is the Devil: he is himself wicked and he is wicked also in terms of what he does. What does he do? He shoots fiery arrows or darts of temptation at us. Temptation is the wicked one's attempt at alluring us into sin; a *fiery* temptation in the sense that it is intensely strong. Satan seeks to penetrate us with flaming projectiles of temptation, trying to set us ablaze with lust. Many are such temptations—daily, hour by hour, even minute by minute. And you can be sure that Satan knows which arrows and darts to shoot toward *you*.

But what a protection we have when we by grace take up the shield! *Taking up* the shield is putting our confidence in God's Word. Satan's fiery temptations are quenched or extinguished upon contact with the shield of faith. Let me give you but one example of how the shield functions, and then you can think of additional examples that might apply to you. Dad and mom left

the house to be with another couple for the evening. They will not be home until 10 or 11. The siblings have also left to be with friends. Now it is just you at home... with your phone. Satan has prepared his fiery arrow for just a moment as this, alluring you to access pornography. In the stillness of the empty house, you take up the shield, looking with the eye of faith at I Corinthians 6:19-20: "What? Know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's." Satan's blazing arrow of temptation strikes the shield—extinguished, broken! Taking up the shield, you stand!

### Helmet of salvation

The warrior in Rome's battles also needed a helmet for protection of his head. The helmet consisted of thick leather overlaid with metal, decked with plumes of hair on the top. Whether for protection against flying objects, or for defense in hand-to-hand combat, the Roman fighter needed his helmet.

Once again, Paul draws from warfare in his day to teach about another aspect of defense in the spiritual battle, the helmet of salvation.

As the helmet protected the Roman soldier's *head*, so the helmet of salvation protects the Christian soldier's *mind* and the *thoughts* of his mind. Our mind and its thoughts are a major part of our life, and our thoughts influence everything we say and do. This mind needs protection.

This protection comes from the helmet of salvation, or the helmet that is salvation. First, salvation is rescue from the great evil. The great evil is sin. Sin is horrible. Sin angers the holy God. There is sin's guilt, power, shame, punishment, and consequences. Sin is the great evil, a fact that Jesus established in His public ministry time and again (Luke 5:31-32; 19:10). Salvation is *rescue* from this great evil, which God in Christ accomplishes. Second, salvation is deliverance unto the great good, which is covenant fellowship with God (Rev. 21:3). Salvation is *deliverance* to this great good, which God through Christ brings about.

Salvation is a very broad word. Ephesians 6:17a is referring to one specific aspect of it, *future* salvation,

especially the day of Christ's return. We should interpret Ephesians 6:17a in light of I Thessalonians 5:8: "But let us, who are of the day, be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love; and for an helmet, the hope of salvation." Notice that the helmet is referred to in I Thessalonians 5:8, but with the added word "hope"; this is salvation that is *expected in the future*. This is also the meaning of "salvation" in Ephesians 6:17a. What will that future and last day be like? It will be the day of all days! Christ will come back personally, bodily, visibly, audibly, and gloriously. On this day He will raise our dead bodies and transform them from corruptible to incorruptible, conduct the final judgment, make all things new, and bring us into the better paradise to live with Him forever.

This helmet is so important for the defensive aspect of the battle. Satan is the adversary who lurks and attacks. We have been noticing the different ways he attacks,

and here we would like to emphasize that he takes aim at our mind and our thoughts.

The helmet defends us against these satanic attacks. Ephesians 6:17a speaks of *taking* this helmet of salvation; this taking is the activity of faith, which, like all of salvation itself, is a gift of God. Perhaps you

have recently experienced a break-up, a friendship that has gone sour, disappointing academic results, or a rough home life with parents. Satan takes aim at your mind, trying to sow bitter thoughts during your time of suffering. But having your helmet on, you believe that "...our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory" (II Cor. 4:17). Future salvation! This helmet protects us from bitterness. Perhaps Satan focuses on your thoughts, seeking to influence your thinking to be more worldly. He wants you to adopt the mindset that life consists in eating, drinking, making merry with endless entertainment, and indulging in a multitude of distractions. But you have the helmet on! While you live in the world, your gaze is not fixed here below but on what is above, on the pleasures that are forevermore in glory where there is blissful fellowship with God! Taking the helmet of salvation, we are protected from worldly-mindedness.

Aren't you thankful for this armor of God?

Defense in the warfare! So very vital. But so is offense. That is next time.

**As the helmet protected the Roman soldier's head, so the helmet of salvation protects the Christian soldier's mind and the thoughts of his mind. Our mind and its thoughts are a major part of our life, and our thoughts influence everything we say and do. This mind needs protection.**





## PRC mission conference 2023—overview

Mr. Doug Dykstra, former secretary of the PRC Domestic Mission Committee and member of Faith PRC in Jenison, Michigan

# Not ashamed of the gospel

“Not Ashamed of the Gospel: Rekindling Zeal for Evangelism and Missions” was the general title of the mission conference held on May 4 and 5, 2023 at Trinity PRC in Hudsonville, Michigan. Trinity PRC and Grandville PRC evangelism committees teamed up with the Domestic Mission Committee to host this conference. A copy of Rev. J. Kortering’s book *Evangelism in the Established Church* was distributed to the attendees to encourage them in their personal evangelism. Tables of books were presented in the narthex area of the church by the Reformed Free Publishing Association and the Reformed Book Outlet.

The goal of this conference was to point us to the words of our Savior and His call that the church of God must go out to proclaim the good news of the gospel in all ages and in all places that we have opportunity with the zeal of a people transformed by grace! Rev. J. Mahtani directed our attention, the first evening, to “The Evangelistic Character of the Covenant” by demonstrating from Scripture that the covenant is not limited to those already in the instituted church but those who are yet “afar off” (Acts 2:39). They too are in God’s covenant but must be called through the preaching. Does that not motivate us to the calling to do the work of missions? The second evening, Rev. D. Holstege focused



on the calling that each of us as members has in his speech entitled “Echoing the Word: The Power of God in Preaching and Evangelism.” He likened our efforts in evangelism and witnessing to the echo in a canyon of the voice of preaching. What we hear in the preaching of Christ crucified and the work of salvation in us must be echoed by our witness. He finished by providing good points of application. You can read both speeches in this issue of the *Standard Bearer*.

Breakout sessions were held immediately after the main speech of the evening. Attendees were able to choose the first evening from a session entitled “The Individual’s Role in Mission Work” directed by Mr. P. VanDerSchaaf or one entitled “Fishers of Men” by our missionary Rev. J. Laning. These sessions sought to encourage discussion by the attendees regarding a number of questions posed by the leaders. The second evening, attendees could choose between a breakout session entitled “Driven by Compassion” by Mr. Deane Wassink or another entitled “Meekness in Evangelism: Having a Heart for People Just Like Us—But Without Jesus” led by Rev. D. Lee. The numbers of attendees were evenly divided amongst these excellent breakout sessions. These breakout sessions could only be successful with the good participation of







the attendees, and they did not disappoint. Perhaps this format could be included in future conferences.

Reports by the attendees indicated that the goals of the conference were met. The discussions and speeches prompted self-examination and provided incentive to be

more faithful in the calling to witness and evangelize. May God be magnified in our feeble efforts to preach the gospel to the covenant people that are yet afar off and as we echo that glorious gospel to those who cross our path.



## PRC mission conference 2023

Rev. Jonathan Mahtani, pastor of the Hope PRC in Grand Rapids, Michigan

# The evangelistic character of the covenant

**For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call.**

**Acts 2:39**

Although Protestant Reformed people have a correct understanding of the covenant in many regards, I believe our lack of zeal and activity in missions and evangelism is due, at least in part, to an underdeveloped understanding of the covenant. Deficiency in outreach is likely due to a deficiency in understanding God's covenant of grace. I plead for humble and honest self-examination regarding our view of the covenant especially as it relates to missions.

There are many misconceptions of the covenant. Some merely think of "Covenant" as a good name for a high school. Some think of "covenant" as equivalent to "election." While it is true that only the elect are

members of God's covenant, it is confusion to conflate the two. Perhaps the most common misunderstanding about the covenant in our circles is that the covenant means "children" or that the covenant is God's salvation of the children of believers. Although it is true that the salvation of our children is one of the comforting promises of the covenant, this is a myopic view of the covenant that leads to great deficiencies in our calling of missions. The truth is that the covenant is just as much for those gathered through missions and evangelism as it is for children growing up in the church. God's covenant has an evangelistic character.

Review with me the definition of the covenant of grace: The relationship of friendship and fellowship that God unconditionally establishes and maintains with His elect people. It is not a cold contract or agreement between two parties, but it is a warm personal relationship of fellowship. Out of pure, unconditional

love, God has from eternity chosen the members of that covenant. In time, He sent Jesus Christ His Son to earn the rights for all His elect to be in that covenant. Then, sometime after each of us was conceived in sin as an enemy of God, He sent His Holy Spirit to join us to Christ so that we might enjoy His friendship and fellowship through faith alone.

Dear reader, do you have and experience this friendship and fellowship with God that we call the covenant? That is a critical heart question. I am not asking whether you can repeat the correct definition of the covenant. I am not asking whether you have been catechized in the doctrine of the covenant. Nor am I asking if you belong to a church that holds to the right teaching of the covenant. I am also not asking if you can explain the significant decisions of Synod 2018 regarding our experience of the covenant. I am asking if *you* have this relationship with God in Jesus Christ. Is He someone you hear speak to you by His Spirit and Word? Is He someone you respond to in prayer as you rest in His lovingkindness? Is there a living conversation that takes place between you and your God? First things first: If the covenant is not fellowship experienced in the souls of Protestant Reformed people, but merely a doctrine of the intellect about which you are correct, then there will be no missions and evangelism. The very power of evangelism and missions is from living fellowship with God in Jesus Christ.

Now I mentioned previously that this covenant that we know and enjoy has an *evangelistic* character. I have chosen that description for three reasons. First, that word *evangelistic* should bring to mind the gospel. *Evangelistic* is from the Greek noun which means “gospel” or “good news.” The content of the gospel is the covenant. The gospel is Immanuel—God with us. The gospel is that God the Son has come in the flesh that we His enemies might be made God’s sons and daughters. This wonder of the covenant is the gospel. It is “good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people” (Luke 2:10b). The covenant is evangelistic because it *is* the gospel.

I have used the word *evangelistic*, second, because it should bring to mind both the official preaching and personal witnessing. In the New Testament, there is a Greek verb that refers narrowly only to the official preaching of an ordained minister. But there is another verb in the New Testament that refers to both the work of an ordained preacher *and* the work of God’s people echoing the word in their personal witnessing. That word is “evangelize.” All God’s people have the duty of telling others about this gospel.

Third, and more importantly, I call the covenant

“evangelistic” because there is an outward-looking direction of the covenant. When Protestant Reformed people think too narrowly about the covenant, we think of it as having an inward focus. We think about the promise of God to gather His people from our generations. But that is only half of the truth. If we stop there, with that inward-looking perspective, then we have a deficient view of the covenant. The covenant is the gospel to be both preached and witnessed, not only to our children, but “to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call” (Acts 2:39).

The evangelistic character of the covenant is evident in the first covenant. From eternity, there has been a covenant among the three persons of the Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God has had a close, personal relationship of friendship and fellowship within Himself.<sup>1</sup> Within this family, God has a beautiful inward-looking activity that theologians describe with the Latin term *ad intra*. But thankfully, God does not stop there. He also turns outward (the Latin term is *ad extra*)! He has unconditionally chosen to take puny and putrid sinners like us into His family. That has been in His eternal plan.

“Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (I John 4:10). Looking outward, He sent His only begotten Son. He breathed to His Son, “Go ye into the world,” and His Son willingly took on flesh that He might say to those who of themselves are enemies, “Thou art my people, and I am thy God.” Marvel at this! His covenant has from eternity had an outward, evangelistic character.

Those who have been brought into that covenant must recognize this, for the same Savior who was sent now *sends* us, His disciples. “Then said Jesus to them again, Peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you. And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost” (John 20:21-22). In order that we who are graciously brought into the covenant might reflect that evangelistic character of God’s covenant, Jesus calls and breathes His Spirit upon us. As the Father sent Him, so the Son sends us: “Go ye into all the world” (Mark 16:15).

This evangelistic character of the covenant is found everywhere in Scripture, indeed even in the Old Testament. Although it is true that the covenant revealed to the Old Testament people emphasized an inward-looking view, there was already then an evangelistic char-

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<sup>1</sup> This truth is developed in the book *Trinity and Covenant: God as Holy Family* by David Engelsma (Jenison, MI: RFPA, 2006).



acter. Often quoted to prove the covenant of God with the children of believers is Genesis 17:7. There God said to Abram, “And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee.” However, we do injustice to the character of the covenant by quoting that text out of its context. For in Genesis 17:4-5, God says to Abram, “As for me, behold, my covenant is with thee, and thou shalt be a father of many nations. Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee.” Abraham and the Jewish people with him cherished the promises of God to gather His people from their generations, but they also eagerly anticipated the evangelistic character of that covenant soon to be displayed in the gathering of the Gentiles. When Christ, the seed of Abraham, would come, God would cause all the nations to flow unto the house of Israel (see Is. 2:2-3). The Jews sang and prayed for this to be fulfilled: “Let the people praise thee, O God; let all the people praise thee. Then shall the earth yield her increase; and God, even our own God, shall bless us. God shall bless us; and all the ends of the earth shall fear him” (Ps. 67:5-7). Although the gathering of the nations was not their focus, the Old Testament saints recognized and looked forward to it with the coming of the Messiah.

But we are now no longer in the Old Testament. An insightful elder once observed not so articulately, “Rev., I think sometimes our view of the covenant is Old Testament.” There is some truth to that. We live in the New Testament age where there is supposed to be an emphasis on the gathering of others into the covenant, but we live focused like the Jewish people mainly on God’s covenant with our generations. Broadening our scope, Jesus explained the purpose for which He poured out His Spirit at Pentecost, “But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Then, with that Holy Spirit, He gave the sign of tongue-speaking, a miraculous picture of the gospel going outward to all nations. Explicitly in Acts 2, Peter preached, “The promise is unto you, and to your children,” but he did not stop there. He continued, “... and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call.” Additionally, found throughout the book of Acts is this fact: The healthy New Testament churches like Jerusalem, Antioch, Ephesus, and Thessalonica were the churches that became centers of evangelistic and missionary activity; for especially in the

New Testament, Christ displays the evangelistic character of the covenant.

To those in the covenant, Christ demands, “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost” (Matt. 18:19). Protestant Reformed people are accustomed to hearing that phrase “demand of the covenant,” referring to our calling regarding the education of our children (see Church Order, Article 21). At baptism, therefore, we vow to teach our children according to the Scriptures to the utmost of our power. However, just as much a demand of the covenant is that we go into all the world, teaching and baptizing God’s elect not yet gathered. To the utmost of our power, we must reflect this evangelistic character of the covenant.

This is not only a command but also part of our identity. Those whom God brings into His covenant are given this identity and equipped to live accordingly: “Ye are my witnesses” (see Is. 43:10, 12; Luke 24:47; and Acts 1:8). “Witness” is not only your calling. It is your name. Each member of the covenant has been saved unto this identity. If our church as a whole is a covenant community, she will have an outward-looking, evangelistic character. “Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid” (Matt. 5:14).

Three serious implications follow from this: First, a true Christian will be a witness in both word and deed. A Christian is a prophet (see Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 12). Joined to Christ by faith, every Christian is anointed by Christ’s Spirit to confess His name. A true Christian bubbles over saying, “We cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20). A Christian with no witness is no Christian.

Second, a true church will have this evangelistic character. The first mark of a true church is the pure preaching of the gospel (see Belgic Confession, Article 29). Missions and evangelism pertain to that very first mark: “The promise of the gospel, together with the command to repent and believe, ought to be declared and published to all nations, and to all persons promiscuously and without distinction” (Canons of Dort, Head II, Article 5). A Reformed missiologist, Johannes Blauw, puts it strongly, “There is no other Church, than the Church sent into the world.”<sup>2</sup> A church without this evangelistic character is deficient in displaying the first mark of a true church.

Third, evangelism is a priority of true prayer. Jesus

2 Johannes Blauw wrote *The Missionary Nature of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1974). This quote is from *God’s Missionary People* by Charles Van Engen (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 79.

prayed, “Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word” (John 17:20). When He prayed with His disciples on the night before His death, He prayed not only for those already gathered, but also for those yet to be gathered. Jesus also explicitly taught us this priority in what we call “The Lord’s Prayer.” Contained in the first and second petitions are outward-looking desires. “Hallowed be thy name” means, “that we may so order and direct our whole lives, our thoughts, words, and actions, that Thy name...[may be] honored and praised on our account” (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 47). When we pray, “Thy kingdom come,” included is, “Increase Thy church” (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 48). Jesus shows that true prayer makes evangelism and missions a priority.

That the covenant has this evangelistic character does not mean a neglect of those already in the covenant. I have heard the fearful sentiment that if we focus too much on evangelism and missions, we will neglect and endanger our children and schools. But the covenant has always safely been both inward and outward looking. Evangelism labor and education of children are not mutually exclusive. Let us trust the God of the covenant who has always preserved and grown His church faithful in both.

Let the church as a whole have this evangelistic character. Each member needs to grow in zeal and interest for the mission of the church. Missions and evangelism may not be done by proxy. We may not have a missionary do it for us while we remain uninterested. We may not let an evangelism committee do it in our place, while we distract ourselves with media. If only done by a few, the few will burn out. Missions and evangelism must flow out of the organic life of the congregation. As each individual member makes evangelism a priority, the church will be unified in her mission to show the evangelistic character of the covenant.

Pray earnestly for our churches to grow in this area. Cry out with Psalm 67:1-2, “God be merciful unto us and bless us; and cause his face to shine upon us....” To what end? “That thy way may be known upon earth, thy saving health among all nations.” As God’s face shines upon us, we want to be like little mirrors, though cracked by sin and dimmed by weakness—we desire to reflect His glorious grace to the nations for their salvation. May God answer this prayer and fulfill His covenant promise which is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off.



## PRC mission conference 2023

Rev. Daniel Holstege, pastor of the Wingham PRC in Wingham, Ontario, Canada

## Echoing the word

In her book *Say Among the Heathen the Lord Reigns*, Mrs. Jean Kortering tells the conversion stories of several individuals in the continent of Asia. The first story is about a young girl in Singapore named Poh Li who was raised by a strict Buddhist mother and a father who was a gambler and drunkard. One day, a young woman named Karen of the Covenant Evangelical Reformed Church saw Poh Li in a store studying a picture of Jesus. Karen asked her if she knew who was in that picture, and Poh Li said no. So she started to tell her about Jesus and asked if she would like to learn more. Poh Li said yes, and they began to meet. Karen eventually invited her to church, and she began coming and hearing the preaching of the gospel through Rev. Jason Kortering. But Poh Li’s mother was not happy about it and would cane her legs when she came home from church. The

girl persevered even when she could not come to church for a time, and she grew in her faith.

Several years later, Rev. and Mrs. Kortering saw her again. She excitedly told them that both her parents, to whom she had faithfully witnessed, had repented of their pagan beliefs and ungodly ways and become Christians. “Karen did not know and certainly did not expect that the Lord would use her simple little remark to kindle a flame in Poh Li’s heart and that later the flame would be spread abroad into the lives of so many others. It is God’s work alone that calls His children out of darkness into His marvelous light, but there are means through which He works. May we all be faithful witnesses of the glorious truth that He has revealed in His Word” (p. 35).

Has the gospel come to you not in word only but also

in power, in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance (I Thess. 1:5)? Have you become a follower of the apostles and missionaries and an example to other believers by your sounding out the word of the Lord not only in your local area but everywhere your faith in God is spread abroad (vv. 6-8)? That was true of the Christians of Thessalonica in Macedonia. They appear in Scripture as marvelous examples of the personal evangelism that is the calling of us all. They show forth the relation between official preaching of the gospel and the unofficial witness of all believers.

The official preaching of the gospel is the chief means God uses to save the lost. Although the preaching of the gospel comes to mankind through mere earthen vessels, “that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us” (II Cor. 4:7), it is “the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek” (Rom. 1:16). “For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God” (I Cor. 1:18).

God makes the preaching of the gospel a power unto salvation for all whom He has predestinated to eternal life out of every nation; for all whom He gave to Christ to redeem from sin and death by dying for their sins and rising again the third day. For God is pleased to give us salvation through faith in the Christ who died and rose again (Rom. 10:9-13), and God is pleased to work that faith in us through the preaching that sets forth Christ crucified and risen as the only way of salvation, and through which Christ Himself calls us to repent and believe on Him (vv. 14-17).

But how shall a man preach except he be sent? Therefore, God calls certain men to devote their lives to preaching and sends them through the church with authority to preach the gospel, both within the church and outside among the heathen. Some preachers spend most of their lives preaching primarily within the church. Others spend most of their lives preaching primarily among the heathen. But even those who labor primarily within the church must “do the work of an evangelist” outside the church in their local area (II Tim. 4:5).

In 2008, Rev. Arie denHartog spoke at a mission conference sponsored by the Domestic Mission Committee of the PRC, similar to the one at which the content of this article was delivered in May. Rev. denHartog called us to pray for boldness for the preaching of the gospel as it goes forth in missions in a day when ungodliness worsens, apostasy runs rampant, and ignorance of Scripture is widespread. Rev. Kortering also spoke at that conference. He called for special training in missions, including the creation of a “culture for missions” in the churches so that the children and youth

grow up understanding the importance of missions. Do we pastors agree, and if so, are we endeavoring to create this culture for missions by our teaching, exhorting, and example as local evangelists?

The preaching we pastors sound forth every Sunday comes not in word only but also in power if the believers who hear it follow our example and sound forth that word wherever they go to the unchurched, as opportunity arises. That was what the Thessalonian Christians were doing. That is what Karen was doing when she responded to a young girl in a store studying a picture of Jesus by telling her about Jesus. Do you do that kind of thing?

The phrase “sounded out” in I Thessalonians 1:8 could be translated “echoed.” They were echoing the word of the Lord everywhere they went. An echo is a unique sound because it is the repetition of an earlier sound. In a canyon, if you shout “hello,” the sound wave goes out of your mouth, reflects off the wall of the canyon, bounces back to your ears, and you hear the echo of your own voice. When the apostle and others preached the word to the Thessalonians, the sweet sound of the gospel went out of their mouths and struck the hearts of the believers. When those believers went about their daily lives, that sweet sound reflected off their hearts and bounced outward, so that others heard the echo.

Like an echo, the sound that came out of them was the same sound they heard from the pulpit, the same word of the Lord. Unlike an echo, the repetition of that sound was not the automatic effect of a physical cause, but it was the result of a powerful, delightful, and mysterious spiritual cause. The Holy Spirit does not deal with us as He deals with the wall of a canyon that mindlessly echoes a sound. Rather, He sweetly bends our will so that we believe the gospel that we hear, and our hearts are ignited with a flame of thankful joy in Christ. He sweetly moves our will so that we respond well when we hear our calling to share that gospel with others, and we become eager to do so, according to our ability. He strengthens us with courage so that we are not afraid of what men may think of us and are not ashamed of the gospel, but we begin to echo it in our daily lives to our unbelieving neighbors.

When believers become faithful in echoing the word, as the Thessalonians were, their preacher may be able to exclaim, “We need not to speak anything!” (I Thess. 1:8). In this comment of the apostle, we not only see the biblical warrant for zealous personal evangelizing by ordinary believers, but also the great effectiveness of such evangelizing. Mind you, this is the same apostle who teaches the primacy of preaching by ordained men

as the power of God unto salvation. But here he rejoices in the echoing of that preaching by unordained men and women. Let us not misunderstand. He was not throwing out the preaching, as if there was no more need for it in Macedonia. Rather, he was taking delight in the fact that the divine power at work in the preaching flowed like an electric current through ordinary believers, so that they too sounded out a witness everywhere they went, and consequently the apostles did not need to speak on every street corner or in every marketplace of Macedonia. God caused a little of the spiritual power that flows through faithful preaching to flow through the faithful echoing of that preaching as well.

How exactly does that work, or what exactly does that mean? Imagine for a moment that you are walking into a large stone church building somewhere in Europe. You immediately hear the echo of the most beautiful singing of a choir somewhere inside the building. You are not hearing the sound directly from the mouths of the singers, but after it has bounced off the walls and through the corridors of the building. You are captivated by that sound and drawn deeper into the building, down the hall, around the corner, because you want to hear the sound more clearly and fully and straight from the mouths of the singers. In a similar way, God uses the echoing of His word by you unordained Christians. He goes before you to prepare the hearts of His elect who are lost in unbelief, so that when they hear you echo the preaching you heard in church, it captures their attention and draws them to hear the sweet sound of the gospel straight from the mouth of the ambassadors of Christ.

Therefore, the echoing of the word by ordinary believers is vitally important for the growth of the church and spread of the gospel. We preachers of the gospel must take the lead in fulfilling the Great Commission in the world and set an example by our own personal evangelizing in the places where we live. But we must spend most of our time in the study, reading our texts, exegeting the Scriptures, and crafting sermons to preach on the Lord's Day. You members of the church, however, go forth into every nook and cranny of society in your daily lives as mechanics, engineers, farmers, doctors, builders, mothers.... You must understand and embrace your calling, as you have opportunity and according to the gifts God has given to you, to confess Christ before men and echo the word of the Lord everywhere you go. If there is no echoing of the word by the mem-

bers of the church in the world, the church might grow from within for a while, but it will become what some have called an "ingrown church."<sup>1</sup> God grant that our churches continue to develop a "culture for missions" so that through our zealous echoing of the word of the Lord, others may be gained to Christ and added to the church from the outside, even as many as the Lord our God shall call.

Practically, there are many ways to echo the word: publishing a magazine, making a podcast, writing a blog, distributing pamphlets, and more. But the most important way, I am still convinced, is personal and even face-to-face interaction with the neighbors in your life. I know that we often do not have great opportunities to speak to our neighbors about our faith. I know that many of our neighbors want us to keep our religion to ourselves. But look for the man or woman who is interested, as Karen noticed Poh Li staring at that picture of Jesus, and do not fail to open your mouth to talk to him or her about Christ. Realize that you need not cast your pearls before the swine who shamelessly express their militant atheism or disdain for Christ, but you may pray for them and let God deal with them as He will. But when God shows you a person with some level of interest in Scripture or openness to hearing the Christian faith, do not fail to follow up and pursue the person with your Bible and a willingness to talk.

Let it be primarily positive at first, not an immediate harsh condemnation of all their errors, but a speaking of the wonderful works of God in Christ in whom we have hope and joy. Let the troubles of your neighbor (cancer, divorce, loneliness) be a point of departure to speak of the comfort that is in Christ alone. Once you have developed some rapport with the person, invite him to church and take him with you to hear the sweet sound from the mouthpiece of the Savior. Remember to pray for your neighbors, not only those who show interest, but also those who do not. May God be pleased to use you to gain others to Christ, and may God be praised through your echoing of His Word.

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1 "An ingrown church is that denomination of churches that has turned in on itself. Its clergy and membership focus the vast majority of their attention on the affairs of their own denomination without paying much attention to what is going on around them, except in a critical way" ("Structure for Domestic Missions," Wilbur Bruinsma, 2019 [DMC Syllabus], 19). Such a church has left its first love, become a cesspool of gossip, complacent about the gospel, and doctrinally imbedded and stagnant (20-23).



## Announcements

### Classis West

Classis West of the Protestant Reformed Churches will meet in Crete PRC (IL), on Wednesday, September 27, 2023, at 8:30 A.M., the Lord willing. All material for the agenda is to be in the hands of the stated clerk 30 days before classis convenes, that is, by August 28, 2023. All delegates in need of lodging or transportation from the airport should notify the clerk of Crete PRC's consistory.

Rev. J. Engelsma, Stated Clerk

### Classis East

Classis East will meet in regular session on Wednesday, September 13, 2023 at 8:00 A.M., in the Trinity Protestant Reformed Church, Hudsonville, MI. Material to be treated at this session must be in the hands of the stated clerk by August 14, 2023.

Rev. Clayton Spronk, Stated Clerk

### Reminder:

Remember that the *Standard Bearer* is published only once a month during the months of June, July, and August.

### RFPA Annual Meeting

**Title of speech:** "Spreading the Reformed Gospel to the Four Corners of the Earth"

**Speaker:** Rev. Daniel Kleyn

**Setting:** Grandville PRC

4320 40th St. SW

Grandville, MI 49418

**Date and time:** September 28, 2023, 7 P.M.

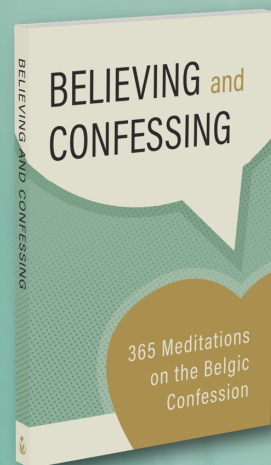
**Extras:** See displays of our current RFPA translations, learn about translated works in progress (made possible by donations and the leveled membership program), and catch up on current mission efforts. Also, 'meet' our translators from Mexico, Brazil, India, and beyond!



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**Rev. Wilbur Bruinsma**

August 6—Lawlessness in Society  
Matthew 24:12, 13

August 13—Economic Imbalance  
Revelation 6:5, 6

August 20—The Gospel Preached to All Nations  
Matthew 24:14

August 27—The Rise of Counterfeit Christianity  
Mark 13:21-23