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The path of light

Gerrit Vos

A crisis of authority: Honoring elders

Rev. Joshua Engelsma

Habakkuk: God's judgment and salvation

Rev. Ronald Hanko

Coram Deo

Rev. Jonathan Mahtani

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Meditation

Gerrit Vos (1894-1968) was a minister in the Protestant Reformed Churches, serving the congregations of Sioux Center (IA), Hudsonville (MI), Hope (Redlands, CA), and Edgerton (MN).

The path of light

This meditation was originally written in Dutch and entitled Het Pad Des Lichts. It can be found in the September 15, 1949 issue of the Standard Bearer. Translator, Prof. B. Huizinga.

But the path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day. The way of the wicked is as darkness: they know not at what they stumble.

Proverbs 4:18, 19

Time and time again we read in God's Word of the way, the path, or the walk of the Christian, and also of the wicked. Life is often presented as a way on which we walk.

So also in our text. The text is full of imagery. There is the way and the path, the light and the darkness, the shining of that light more and more until the perfect day, and also that terrible stumbling of the wicked. All imagery.

When God's Word speaks of our *way*, then such imagery refers to our full life here on earth. That comes out clearly from verse 23, where we read, "Guard your heart above all that is to be guarded, for out of it are the *issues* of life." Pay attention to *issues*, for there again is the idea of the path or way. And that same text shows us that our path is more than merely our outward revelation of speech and action. The text indicates that the path begins in the depths of the heart, and out of the heart are the issues of life.

The idea of being on a path or way is threefold.

First, man is a traveler. Man goes on and on. He goes on from a child to a boy, to a young lad, to a man, to a gray beard, and then he falls into the grave and his journey on earth is finished.

Second, there is also direction in his life. A path or way has direction; it goes somewhere. It goes to the north or to the south, to the west or to the east. There is direction in your path. Usually that direction is quite clear for those who see you striding down your path, unless you are a successful hypocrite. There are people who are on the way to hell, that is to say, as far as their heart is concerned. But they have the ability to cover up the life of their hearts. And people say of them that they are walking to heaven. Jesus spoke of them when He said that they appear beautiful to people but their heart is full of abominations. Poor people!

But even those kinds of people experience that there is direction in our lives. It cannot be otherwise. We are created so.

Third, there is a destination in our path. We arrive there soon. In this connection we think of the first Psalm, which describes the path of the righteous and the way of the wicked. And we learn how they turn out. This is absolutely certain: our path ends in everlasting weeping and gnashing of teeth, or it ends in the halls of the palace of God where pure bliss is tasted.

O man! Thou art a traveler who walks on a definite path, who follows a definite direction on your path, who rushes to a certain destination. Is your path light?

What is a path of light?

The text speaks of it. It also speaks of the darkness that is found on the way of the wicked man.

What are light and darkness in this connection?

It is imagery. John uses the same image when he speaks of God, and says, "This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all" (I John 1:5).

And Paul has explained to us the content of that light when he says, "put on the armor of light." And explaining this, he says that we should walk honestly. And John says that whosoever loves his brother abides in the light.

Therefore, the light is all honesty and virtue, indeed it is the very love of God.

And so the children of God are called the children of light. It means that God the Lord has made entry into our hearts by His Word and Holy Spirit.

The opposite is also true. There are people who are called darkness in God's Word. Note well, it is not that the darkness clings to them, but they are darkness. That was also our name by nature, before we were born again. Paul says that: "Ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord"! [Eph. 5:8]

And darkness is figurative language for all filth and sin, all wickedness and unrighteousness.

And both are spoken of here. A path is seen that is only light, yes, even a continual advancing in the shining of that light until the perfect day. But mention is also made of a way that is like darkness, full of abominations and sin.

What an awful contrast there is between those who fear God and those who do not fear Him. The one is compared to a man who is walking on the path of light, and the other to someone who walks in darkness, and therefore must stumble. Terrible thought!

Look around you! What characterizes your path, traveler? Is there the light of eternal life or are there the terrible shadows of everlasting death?

Give the answer to God!

The shining path of righteousness. What is it?

Here you have a beautiful explanation of that light. It is righteousness.

The light path of God's people is the path of righteousness. You can also say it like this, and then it is more accurate: the enlightened path of God's people is their righteous life.

God's people are righteous.

They have been righteous from before the foundation of the world. God has always willed and beheld His people as they shall be for all eternity.

And the fountain of it is the love of God. We see that in Romans 8. There it is easily ascertained: "For whom He did foreknow [and that is the foreknowledge of eternal love] them He also justified." It has been only light for God's people from all eternity. Jesus also said that in His high-priestly prayer when He said, "They were thine...." See that now you have been the possession of God from all eternity. And that was the possession of eternal love, for the Old Testament prophet sings of that love: I have loved you with an eternal love! Oh, why do people refuse to sing of that love today? That is why people no longer see the distinction, the frightening distinction between the church and the world. Men can no longer see the difference between the light of life and the horrible darkness of death!

God's people are righteous.

The eternal love of God willed them in that love as righteous.

And when history came, and with history the terrible sin and guilt that embraced all of God's people with a deadly embrace, so that they were all guilty and unrighteous, then God sent His Son. He came, He suffered, He died, He arose, He returned to heaven, and His people were righteous: the eternal righteousness was revealed in time. Read the weighty words of Paul in the last verse of Romans 4, "raised for our justification."

God's people are righteous. They walk on a path of light.

So it is, that the Savior who justified them by all the labor of His soul comes by the Holy Ghost and His Word, and makes them righteous in their deepest heart. He puts sin to death and makes them alive according to His

Word. And their name that was formerly "children of wrath" is now "righteous ones" again! Hallelujah!

But the wicked and the devils do not believe it.

And God's people themselves have times when they do not dare to believe it.

There are times in history when the whole world and the devils abuse God's people and call them *unrighteous*. And they go on in sorrow.

And that is why the righteousness of God's people shall soon be shown to all. God will turn their hearts inside out in the day of days and show them that in their deepest heart they were always righteous, which righteousness is revealed and realized through the cross. Then the people of God shall shine as an adorned Bride, like a dove in silvery white and with gold on its feathers. Sing about it!

The path of the righteous man is only light.

The character of that path is that it shines.

The path is as a shining light.

So it is: God's Word is living and powerful. If that Word of God, by the Holy Ghost, has found you and converted you from death to life, then everything will be different. Paul exclaims in jubilation, "Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature; old things are passed away, behold all things are become new"! [II Cor. 5:17]

Shining more and more!

A process is set in motion at regeneration and conversion, and the end of it is the full day. And that is to dwell in the Father's house with God above.

You continue on your path, shining unto the perfect day.

On the way home, what is that?

Negatively, you know the truth of sin. You learn to know sin for what it is: a monster! And therefore you learn to hate that sin and you learn to run away from it. Read the context and you will see that is exactly what the chapter of my text is all about. Your path is a shining path also in this, that you are known as someone who has a great hatred for all sin.

And positively, you learn to know the good, loving and pursuing it.

The Word of God, applied by the Holy Spirit of the glorified Christ, heals your spiritual infirmities and makes you walk in the light of life. You learn that the only purpose of this great universe with its vast history is the praise of the Lord. That is the deepest heart of all God's people. There may be difference; there *is* difference. But all God's people have this, and they finally come to this conclusion: God, my God, I will yet praise! In that their path shines most gloriously.

O yes, the path of the righteous is as a shining light.

It also continues to shine. And you can see that

prophecy in their lives as they continue to the perfect day of eternal life. Each of them shall soon appear before God in blessed Zion.

Yes, my brother, I know, sin and darkness torment you. And sometimes we are so terribly wrapped up in sin and filth that we are ashamed of ourselves before God and man. But I just want to ask one question: Is that your life? What do you think about your dreadful sin? I will tell you. This is your judgment about yourself: O God, be merciful to me the sinner!

Then God heard! He is worthy of my life!

And Jesus whispered, “This one went down to his house justified!”

O it is blessed to walk on a shining path.

Do you not sing about it? “How blessed is the people that hear Thy joyful sound, they walk in the light of Thy divine countenance!”

It is blessed to walk on the shining path.

But what shall we say of the poor wretches who walk on the path of wickedness?

We must say what God says of them.

It is this: the way of the wicked is as darkness.

That is, in one word, dreadful!

The darkness is sin, filthiness, vanity, hideousness. The works of darkness are revealed. You can read the catalogue in God’s Word and in many places. The most extensive catalogue to read is probably in Romans 1:29-32. One shudders when reading it. And if we read that catalogue, then we shudder most of all because we discover that all those sins are still found in us. The “motions of sin” always remain in us. And they remain there until sanctification obtains its perfect work.

Now then, there are people who have darkness as

their principle of life. And that is pitiful. Take note, that here also we must descend into the deepest heart to find the beginning of their path. And there in the deepest heart is sin and vanity. Their sin takes many forms; and in some of those forms God’s people have been led astray throughout the ages. Sometimes those certain forms of sin were said to be good works. But it is all foolishness; the path of the wicked is only darkness.

And the characterization of that darkness is that they always stumble.

How is that? What do they stumble over?

And here is the answer: over the truth of God and of Christ.

Now it makes no difference how that truth comes to them.

The truth may come to them through the things that God has made as a loudly spoken word in the creation around us and in us; they stumble over it. Read Romans 1. They make a god of those creatures.

Or that truth comes to them in the circles where God reveals Himself to His people; they stumble.

Once it happened that the most terrible stumbling came. God’s Word came to this earth; and that is Jesus. The wicked saw Him, heard Him, touched Him, and they stumbled over Him. They hanged Him on a cross.

And the text says, “they know not at what they stumble.”

You can see that now in their bragging which they call singing. You can see that they do not know at what they now stumble, and certainly not over which they shall soon stumble when they fall into the everlasting depths, the depths....

O, that we then walk on the path of Light: and that is God in Jesus Christ, the Lord!

It is lovely to serve the Lord, to fear and to praise Him!



Editorial

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

A crisis of authority: Honoring elders

So far in this series of editorials I have noted two dangers regarding authority in the church, set forth positively the fundamentals of God-given authority in the church, and laid before those in authority in the church the calling to model Jesus Christ in servant-leadership. I began with the calling of officebearers toward the members

intentionally: officebearers must take the lead in caring for the members and ought not give occasion for the members to dishonor them. Having made that point first, now in this concluding article I want to address those who are under authority in the church regarding their calling toward their officebearers.

I believe it necessary from the outset to head off a potential objection. The potential objection is that, since I am an officebearer, I cannot address those who are not officebearers because I cannot fully appreciate the way in which my authority is perceived by those under it. This objection is easily answered. The apostle Paul occupied a position of authority in the church, yet he addressed those under authority as to their callings (cf. I Thess. 5:12-13). The apostle Peter occupied a position of authority in the church, yet he addressed those under authority as to their callings (cf. I Pet. 5:5). The inspired writer of the book of Hebrews occupied a position of authority in the church, yet he addressed those under authority as to their callings (cf. Heb. 13:7, 17). Certainly those in authority ought to be sensitive to the way in which others experience their authority, but this does not preclude them from addressing the callings of the Word of God to those in the pew.

Honor

The fundamental calling of members toward their officebearers is that they honor them. In I Thessalonians 5:13, the apostle Paul calls the members of the church “to esteem them [their elders] very highly in love for their work’s sake.” The fifth commandment of God’s law, which addresses all relationships between those in authority and those under authority, is this: “Honor them!” Lord’s Day 39 of the Heidelberg Catechism, in its explanation of this commandment, begins: “That I show all honor...to...all in authority over me...” The Westminster Larger Catechism begins the same way: “The honor which inferiors owe to their superiors is, all due reverence in heart, word, and behavior...” (Q&A 127).

The honor that we owe to our officebearers begins in the heart. It is an attitude of the heart whereby we hold them in high esteem and value them highly. We have a mindset of respect and reverence for them.

This attitude of the heart will be demonstrated in our *words*. Honoring officebearers means that we may not bad-mouth them, belittle them, or speak ill of them. And this does not simply mean that we may not say these things to their face, although that is true, but it also means that we may not whisper these things to others after church, or over the phone, or in our home, or on social media.

Our attitude of honor will also show itself in our *actions*. We do not throw them dirty looks, roll our eyes at them, or act like we could not care less about what they have say. We do not slam the door in their face, refuse to talk to them, ignore their calls and text messages, or sinfully try to undermine their work in the church.

There is a danger that we adopt a sinful, critical spirit toward our officebearers, always complaining about the minister, or carping about the elders, or running down the broader assemblies. Not only is this spiritually unhealthy for one’s own soul, but this also has the potential to breed bitterness in our children and misery in the church. The warning of Galatians 5:15 is appropriate: “But if ye bite and devour one another, take heed that you be not consumed one of another.”

It is striking that in I Thessalonians 5:13 we are told to esteem our officebearers “very highly.” In the original, the Holy Spirit uses a unique phrase that could perhaps be conveyed as “beyond superabundantly.” The language conveys the idea of rising at least three steps beyond an ordinary level. You can have an ordinary level of something, and beyond that there is “abundance;” but beyond “abundance” is “super-abundance,” and beyond “super-abundance” is “beyond super-abundance.” That is the kind of honor that we are called to show to our officebearers: esteem them beyond superabundantly. It is certainly wrong to think, “I do not honor the elders at all.” But it is not enough even to think, “I have sufficient respect for the elders.” The Holy Spirit says, “Esteem them even higher than that! Go another level higher! And another level after that! Honor them very highly!”

It is important to understand why we must esteem our officebearers so highly. The Word of God does not exhort us to honor them because of who they are in themselves, because of certain gifts or qualities or personalities that they may have, because they are always so deserving of honor. Instead, I Thessalonians 5 indicates that we are to honor them “for their work’s sake,” and that work involves their being “over you in the Lord.”

There is only one Lord, Ruler, Overseer, Bishop, Elder, and Head of the church: Jesus Christ. He is Lord of the church because He purchased her with His precious blood and made her His precious possession. He is Lord of the church because He now rules over the church from His throne in heaven by His Word and Spirit. The church does not belong to the minister or the elders or even the confessing members of the congregation; the church belongs to the Lord. That being the case, the Lord of the church is pleased to exercise His government of the church through elders. He calls and appoints them to office, He gives them His spiritual power and authority, and He governs through them in the church.

This is the reason why we must esteem our officebearers: they are representatives of the Lord among us. To esteem them is to esteem the Lord. To dishonor them is to dishonor Christ.

For their work's sake, honor your officebearers very highly!

Submission

The honor that we owe to our officebearers takes the form of *submission* and its close counterpart *obedience*. Hebrews 13:17 says, "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves...." Lord's Day 39 says that the believer's calling is to "submit myself to their good instruction and correction with due obedience." The Westminster Larger Catechism says we owe them "willing obedience to their lawful commands and counsels; due submission to their corrections."

The idea of submission is that one person willingly places himself under the authority, oversight, and protection of another. It is the attitude of the one who says, "I am under their authority, and I am glad for it and desire it." Members are called to submit themselves to the loving leadership of their officebearers.

Closely related to submission is the idea of obedience. Submission refers specifically to the attitude of the heart, and obedience refers narrowly to the outward actions. Submission is the source out of which flows true obedience. Obedience refers to doing what those in authority say, following their rules. We are called to show honor to our officebearers by our obedience to them.

We are called to submit to and obey the *instruction* of our officebearers. We listen to them as they teach us from the Word of God, believing what the Word of God teaches us to believe and living out what the Word of God calls us to practice.

We are also called to submit to and obey the *correction* of our officebearers. When we do wrong and corrective discipline is applied, we must not respond in hatred and rebellion. We are called to submit to this discipline as the chastening of God for our sins. The submissive attitude responds by saying, "I know that I've sinned, I'm sorry, and I'm willing to bear the consequences!"

Our obedience to the instruction and discipline of the officebearers is not blind and universal. If our officebearers would teach us the lie, then we do not believe that instruction. If they would discipline us for living godly, then we do not follow their leading. Acts 5:29 sets forth the well-known principle: "We ought to obey God rather than men." If our officebearers would seek to lead us astray, we respectfully seek in the proper way to correct and help them.

The Word of God exhorts us members of the church: Submit to and obey the lawful instruction and correction of your officebearers!

Fidelity

The next aspect of the calling of members toward their officebearers is perhaps surprising and not often considered. That aspect is the responsibility to be faithful to our officebearers. Lord's Day 39 says that the honor we owe to those in authority over us to "show all...fidelity" to them. To show fidelity is to demonstrate faithfulness, to be loyal to them. The Westminster Larger Catechism again uses very similar language when it says that we owe to our superiors "fidelity to, defence, and maintenance of their persons and authority."

As we have a certain measure of loyalty to our parents, and as we have a certain measure of loyalty to our homeland, so we ought to have a loyalty to our officebearers. This loyalty shows itself in a proper defense of them and their office. Not only do we refuse to speak evil of them, but we also defend their name and office when others take aim at them.

Again, there are limits on the fidelity and loyalty we show to our officebearers. The fidelity required does not mean that we follow them even if they are leading us astray. We show loyalty to them as they lead us in faithfulness to God's Word.

But the point must be taken to heart: honor for our officebearers requires fidelity to them and defense of their persons and authority.

Patience

A fourth aspect of the calling of members to their officebearers is that they are called by God to bear patiently with their officebearers in their weaknesses. Lord's Day 39 says, "...and also patiently bear with their weaknesses and infirmities, since it pleases God to govern us by their hand." The Westminster Larger Catechism says, "...bearing with their infirmities, and covering them in love...."

Those in authority have many weaknesses and sins, including officebearers. They are sinful men, no different in that regard from any member in the pew. Officebearers may believe they are making a good decision, when in fact their decision is a mistake. They may forget to call, to visit, to follow up, to ask about a situation in our life. They may respond in annoyance, frustration, and impatience.

Members often have a front row seat to the weaknesses and sins of officebearers. The temptation is for members to think, "Because they are such sinners, I do not have to honor and submit to them anymore." But God commands us still to show honor to them, and to do so by bearing patiently with their weaknesses and sins. In love we are willing to suffer long with them

in their shortcomings. In love we confront them when they sin, and in love we forgive them when they confess those sins. Difficult as it may be at times, we still honor and submit to them.

This is another reminder that we honor our officebearers for the sake of Jesus Christ. We are not called to honor them because they are always so deserving of it, but we show honor to them as unto the Lord.

John Calvin captures the above idea well. In writing about the weaknesses that we might see in the church and her officebearers specifically with respect to the mark of Christian discipline, Calvin counsels patience:

This is also a prime requisite for the moderation of discipline, as Augustine argues against the Donatists: that individual laymen, if they see vices not diligently enough corrected by the council of elders, should not therefore at once depart from the church; and that the pastors themselves, if they cannot cleanse all that needs correction according to their hearts' desire, should not for that reason resign their ministry or disturb the entire church with unaccustomed rigor.... "He who diligently ponders these things," Augustine says, "neither neglects severe discipline in the maintenance of unity, nor by intemperate correction breaks the bond of fellowship." ...From this point he [Augustine] concludes with Cyprian: "Let a man mercifully correct what he can; let

him patiently bear what he cannot correct, and groan and sorrow over it with love."¹

Prayer

Finally, members ought to honor their officebearers by praying for them. Paul states it succinctly in I Thessalonians 5:25: "Brethren, pray for us" (cf. also II Thess. 3:1). The Westminster Larger Catechism says that one of the duties we owe to those in authority over us is "prayer and thanksgiving for them."

Officebearers need those prayers. They need those prayers on account of the weightiness of the work. They need those prayers on account of their own weaknesses and sins. They need God to endow them by His Spirit with strength, wisdom, courage, and humility.

Especially when we perceive weaknesses or failures in our officebearers, it is easy to criticize them or complain about them to others. But at those times we ought to open our mouths in prayer to God for them.

This is a great encouragement to officebearers. As it is an encouragement to the members to know that their officebearers pray for them, so it is an encouragement to the officebearers to know that the members pray for them.

Brothers and sisters, we pray for you! Pray for us!

¹ See Calvin's *Institutes*, 4.12.11. I am grateful to my colleague, Prof. Barry Gritters, for directing my attention to this quotation.

Letters

Forgiveness in eternity and in time

In your recent article "Antinomians? Without a doubt (7)" (*SB*, volume 99, July 2023), you remark regarding the eternal nature of the forgiveness of sins: First, "If we present ourselves to God for pardon, it is evident that pardon takes place in time and not in eternity" (p. 424). Second, "If seeking God's forgiveness is to be a response to the experience of His heavy hand on us, clearly God's forgiveness takes place in our lifetime and not eternally" (p. 425). Finally, "For if forgiveness takes place in eternity, what need is there for repentance in the lifetime of the Christian?" (p. 425).

Can you please explain how these reconcile with the historic position of the PRC as stated by Herman Hoeksema and Homer Hoeksema below?

We must understand, too, that in God this act of forgiveness is eternal. In him this act of mercy and grace whereby he ordained his Son to be the head of the church,

so that he might represent them in the hour of judgment and might bear their sins and iniquities and take them away forever, is from everlasting to everlasting.... And therefore, there is, there eternally is, forgiveness with God.... That eternal mercy, the sovereign good pleasure of God, is the ultimate fountain of all the spiritual blessings we have in Christ.... Deny the truth of sovereign, eternal election, and you deny the truth of the atonement of Christ and of the forgiveness of sins. Deny the truth that the blessing of the forgiveness of sins is eternal in God, and you must also deny that there is remission of sins in time.

(H. Hoeksema, *I Believe: Sermons on the Apostles' Creed* [Jenison, MI: RFP, 2023], 272)

In the second place, the article asserts that by such enormous sins the saints incur a deadly guilt. We immediately wonder, of course how this assertion can stand in the light of the fact that in the cross the saints are forever and perfectly justified from all sin, and that by the blood of Christ they are purged from all sin, both

original and actual, whether committed before or after believing. We probably wonder how this statement can stand in the light of the fact that the saints are justified from all eternity in the counsel of God. In reply, we state, in the first place, that whether we can explain this statement or not, we all know by experience that it is true. On account of our sins, we are guilty and feel that we are guilty. Otherwise, we would never pray, “Forgive us our debts.” In the second place, we hasten to add that the statement does not refer to our objective position before the bar of God’s justice: from this point of view, we are forever justified. But, in the third place, we must remember: 1) That all these sins are in themselves worthy of death. 2) That the saints feel the guilt of their sins before God. 3) That as long as the soul does not get rid of its burden of sin through confession and the seeking of forgiveness through the blood of Calvary, that soul must carry the burden of guilt. 4) That, therefore, in the case of gross sins for which the saints do not immediately come to repentance, sins in which they walk, sins which go unconfessed for a time, the result can only be that the saints feel themselves to be in a state of damnation. And when finally they come to the spiritual consciousness of these sins, the saints can give expression to this very hopeless feeling. In fact, we must remember that this is fundamentally true of any one of our sins. As long as it goes unconfessed, as long as we do not get rid of it in the prayer for forgiveness, we can only feel a deadly guilt.

(H.C. Hoeksema, “Exposition of the Canons, Fifth Head of Doctrine, Of the Perseverance of the Saints” [SB, volume 35, December 15, 1958], 137)

I wholeheartedly agree with your statement, “...repentance is the way to the enjoyment of our reconciliation with God.” By renewed faith we lay hold again on that which is eternally real and accomplished at the cross; in heartfelt repentance we again experience the joy of being united with Christ in full fellowship with our God.

With love and respect,
Your brother in Christ,
Doug Mingerink, Sr.
Wyoming, MI

Response:

Dear brother,

Here follows my reply to your letter.

1. It is worth pointing out that the “historic position of the PRC” does not begin with Herman Hoeksema. As Hoeksema himself frequently insisted, our tradition as churches goes back to John Calvin. Before we were Protestant Reformed, we were Reformed. And the Reformed tradition has its roots in Calvin. For that reason, the last several articles that I have written in the series, “Antinomians? Without a Doubt,” have been

saturated with Calvin—what he wrote in his *Institutes*, his commentaries, his class lectures, and his stirring prayers. All your quotes of my statements in these articles are really only summary responses to what Calvin taught. If you have a concern, it would seem that your concern is with Calvin more than with me. Nonetheless, Hoeksema is in complete agreement with Calvin in his doctrine of repentance, and the relation between repentance and forgiveness, as my contribution in the following pages demonstrates. I encourage you to read it as part of my response to your letter.

2. From a certain point of view, my answer could simply be the fifth petition of the Lord’s Prayer, “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” When we pray the fifth petition, are we thanking God for a forgiveness we already have in eternity? Or rather, are we petitioning God to supply some great need that we have in the present, at the time that we pray? The latter is undoubtedly the case.

3. There is no question that justification and the forgiveness of sins have their source in God’s eternal decree of election. About that there may not be any disagreement. Calvin taught this and this is the teaching of our Reformed creeds, resting as they do on the foundation of Calvin’s teaching. For this reason, Herman Hoeksema writes that God’s sovereign good pleasure “is the ultimate fountain of all spiritual blessings.” And for this reason, if you deny “the truth that the blessing of the forgiveness of sins is eternal in God,... you must also deny that there is remission of sins in time.”

4. The justification and forgiveness that I am concerned with at present in my articles is justification *in time*, what is referred to in Reformed theology as justification *in foro conscientiae*, that is, in the forum of the sinner’s conscience. This is the justification illustrated by our Lord in His parable of the Pharisee and the publican. About the publican who was repentant over his sins before God, Jesus says, “I tell you, this man went down to his house justified” (Luke 18:14). In the quotation in your letter from H.C. Hoeksema, he speaks of the sinner’s need for forgiveness during his lifetime: “That as long as the soul does not get rid of its burden of sin through confession and the seeking of forgiveness through the blood of Calvary, that soul must carry the burden of guilt” through life. In Lord’s Day 23 of the Heidelberg Catechism, which deals with justification, we are taught that although our conscience accuse us, God testifies in our consciousness that out of mere grace He “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.” That “granting and imputing” clearly take place in the lifetime of the believ-

er. Over and over again, the Scriptures teach that we are justified *by faith*. That underscores that forgiveness (justification) takes place in the lifetime of the believer. Prof. D. Engelsma says in his book, *Gospel Truth of Justification*, “Faith is the means by which God grants, and the sinner receives, the righteousness of Christ by imputation *in the sinner’s own consciousness*, so that the sinner is himself aware and assured of his forgiveness and righteousness” (127). A little later he says, “When the elect but guilty sinner believes, God pronounces the verdict, ‘Not guilty!’ into the sinner’s soul by means of the sinner’s faith, thus changing the sinner’s state, or legal standing before the heavenly judge, from guilt to innocence *in the sinner’s consciousness*” (128). And later, in a chapter in which he contrasts justification and sanctification, he says that “justification is a legal act *in the consciousness of the believing sinner*, declaring him righteous before God....” (448. In every instance the emphasis is mine.)

5. If I understand your letter correctly, you are raising the issue of *eternal justification* over against what Calvin taught regarding forgiveness in time. Everyone should be clear what the teaching of “eternal justification” is. It is not the teaching that our justification is eternally decreed. Among Reformed and Presbyterian brethren there may not be disagreement over this truth. But those who defend “eternal justification” teach that the sinner’s actual justification before God takes place

in eternity. Those who deny eternal justification appeal to Scripture’s oft repeated phrase that we are justified “by faith.” Justification by faith is temporal justification—justification in the lifetime of the believing sinner. Among Reformed theologians, there has always been brotherly disagreement over whether or not it is proper to maintain eternal justification. Francis Turretin, a successor of Calvin in Geneva, refers to some who teach that justification is actually executed eternally. While he agrees that justification was decreed eternally, Turretin insists that the actual execution of God’s decree occurs during the believer’s lifetime. The two nineteenth-century Dutch Reformed stalwarts, Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck, disagreed over eternal justification. Kuyper maintained the doctrine, whereas Bavinck rejected it. Herman Hoeksema maintained eternal justification, although his contemporary, Louis Berkhof, rejected it. Among Protestant Reformed clergy there is difference of opinion on what has always been viewed as a non-confessional issue. For further reading on eternal justification, I recommend Prof. Engelsma’s book, *Gospel Truth of Justification*, chapter thirteen, “Justified, When?”

I hope that I have answered your concerns. Thanks for your letter.

Cordially in Christ,
Prof. R. Cammenga



Taking heed to the doctrine

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

Antinomians? Without a doubt (8)

What Says Herman Hoeksema?

In this series, we are concerned to point out the antinomianism of the Reformed Protestant Churches (RPC), the schismatic group that separated from the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC).

In the last several articles, we have examined the teaching of John Calvin with respect to the relation between repentance and forgiveness. We have compared the teaching of Calvin to the teaching of the RPs that forgiveness is eternally prior to repentance.

Before the believer repents of his sins, God has eternally forgiven him. Forgiveness is not temporal, but eternal.

We have seen that in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, in his commentaries, in his classroom lectures, and in his recorded prayers, Calvin taught that God’s forgiveness follows upon God-worked repentance. Forgiveness is a blessing of salvation bestowed by the Holy Spirit throughout the lifetime of the Christian. In the way of repentance—never *because of* or *on the basis of*

repentance—God forgives our sins. “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

David knew this relation between forgiveness and repentance by his own bitter experience. So long as he continued impenitent in his sin, he testifies that God’s “hand was heavy upon me” (Ps. 32:4). When he “kept silence,” that is, kept silence before God, refusing to confess his sin, “my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long” (Ps. 32:3). But God worked repentance in David: “I acknowledged my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord; and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin” (Ps. 32:5).

In this article, I intend to demonstrate that this was also the teaching of Herman Hoeksema, one of the founding fathers of the PRC. Even though Hoeksema was a proponent of eternal justification—a subject for a different time—he was in complete agreement with Calvin as regards the relation between repentance and forgiveness. He never allowed the teaching of eternal justification to cloud the biblical truth of repentance and forgiveness. Rather, he was adamant in teaching that repentance is the way in which we enjoy the blessing of forgiveness.

Warning against antinomianism

It is worthwhile to begin our consideration of Hoeksema’s doctrine of repentance by taking note of his warning against antinomianism. He regarded the heresy as a real threat against which the church must be on guard. He did recognize that not everyone who was charged with being antinomian was in fact guilty of the heresy. More than once he and his beloved Protestant Reformed Churches were railed upon as being antinomian, especially because of their firm commitment to God’s sovereign predestination. Nevertheless, Hoeksema recognized that the threat of antinomianism was real and that there were those who were guilty of holding to this error.

Hoeksema writes as follows in *Love the Lord Thy God*, chapter 2, “The ‘Must’ of Perfect Freedom:”

I rather think that some sincere antinomians place a wrong emphasis on justification at the expense of sanctification. They place all the emphasis on the work of Christ for us, in our behalf and in our stead, at the expense of the work of Christ in us and through us by His Holy Spirit.¹

1 Herman Hoeksema, *Love the Lord Thy God*, The Triple Knowledge, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1955), 37-38.

Hoeksema goes on to point out one significant aspect of the antinomian error. Antinomians, he says,

make such a separation between the old and the new man of the Christian that the believer is no longer responsible for the sins committed in the flesh and does not have to be sincerely sorry for them—if all this is supposed to be implied in antinomianism, it must be condemned as a very serious error.²

Still with regard to the error of the antinomians, Hoeksema writes,

[T]hey do not understand that by failing to give due emphasis to the work of Christ in the believer and through him, and therefore, by failing to understand that it is inevitable that those who are justified in Christ and therefore are by faith ingrafted into Him walk in a new and holy life, they detract from the glory of Christ as a complete Savior.³

The antinomians fail to give due emphasis to the work of Christ in us. Christ’s work is not only His work *for* us, insists Hoeksema, but also His work *in* us. And thus, Christ is a complete Savior. That is the seriousness of the antinomian error. Just as Rome denies that Christ is a complete Savior by denying the sufficiency of His work *for* us—Lord’s Day 11 of the Heidelberg Catechism—so do the antinomians deny that Christ is a complete Savior by denying the reality of His work *in* us. No one ought to minimize the seriousness of the antinomian error.

The forgiveness of sins

In the volume of The Triple Knowledge series entitled *Abundant Mercy*, Hoeksema treats the article in the Apostles’ Creed that concerns the forgiveness of sins. He calls attention to the fact that “of all the spiritual blessings that are, *in this life*, bestowed upon believers, by the Spirit of Christ, only the forgiveness of sins is mentioned in the Apostolic Confession.”⁴ Take note of the fact that Hoeksema views the forgiveness of sins as a blessing of God bestowed on believers “in this life.”

Clearly, this blessing of salvation in time is rooted in eternity. “Without eternal, sovereign election, there is neither atonement nor forgiveness. Except for this eternal forgiveness in God, there is no remission of sins in time.”⁵ Take note that in this quotation, Hoeksema distinguishes between the atonement and forgiveness. Atonement is the

2 *Love the Lord Thy God*, 37. Emphasis added.

3 *Love the Lord Thy God*, 38.

4 Herman Hoeksema, *Abundant Mercy*, The Triple Knowledge, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1949), 83. Emphasis added.

5 *Abundant Mercy*, 87.

work of Christ on the cross that is the basis for forgiveness. Forgiveness is the work of the Holy Spirit in the believer to apply that which Christ merited on His cross. Both atonement and forgiveness have their origin in God's sovereign decree of election. By the work of the Holy Spirit this "eternal forgiveness in God" becomes the temporal forgiveness of sins in the believer. The forgiveness decreed by God assures the "remission of sins in time."

In his treatment of the article concerning the forgiveness of sins, Hoeksema is at pains to emphasize its close connection to the preceding articles in the Apostles' Creed, which concern the communion of the saints and the holy, catholic church. He takes for granted that forgiveness is a present blessing in the life of the believer. From the perspective of the Apostles' Creed, the believer's sins are not forgiven in eternity, but are forgiven in time, as the child of God lives in the fellowship of the church and exercises himself in the communion of the saints. "Outside of the holy catholic church, [and] the communion of saints," he insists, "there are no spiritual benefits, [and] the forgiveness of sins cannot be appropriated. If, for some reason, the believer severs himself...from that communion, the first effect of this error is always that he lacks the joy of forgiveness."⁶

Forfeiting forgiveness?

Is it possible for the child of God to forfeit forgiveness? If forgiveness is a present blessing, is it possible for the Christian to forfeit forgiveness for a time? Is it possible that by his sinfulness, by his disobedience to God's law in his lifetime, or by some sin against a fellow church member, the Christian forfeits the forgiveness of his sins?

According to Hoeksema, this is indeed possible. This is a very real possibility and a frightening prospect that ought to serve as a warning to every child of God. By his sin and impenitence in sin, in the course of his earthly life, he may indeed forfeit the forgiveness of his sins. God, then, during the believer's lifetime, keeps from him the forgiveness of his sins. Rather than enjoy God's smiling countenance, he beholds God's frowning disapproval.

Perhaps, for a time, he lives in hatred over against some of the brethren; or he evinces an unforgiving spirit;

or he seeks the friendship of the world; or he lives in whatever other sin may sever his fellowship with the saints, and disturb the exercise of the communion of saints: in that state of separation from the body of believers, he forfeits the forgiveness of sins.⁷

A bit later, Hoeksema speaks of the same thing: "If, therefore, through some sin, the believer separates himself from the body, and does not live in the communion of saints, *he immediately forfeits the forgiveness of sins.*"⁸ If the forgiveness of sins is only an eternal reality, we cannot "forfeit the forgiveness of sins" because of our conduct in time. Clearly, Hoeksema is speaking of forgiveness as a blessing of God that is enjoyed in the lifetime of the believer.

As might be expected, champion of God's sovereign grace that he was, Hoeksema underscores the sovereignty of God that works repentance in the elect sinner and bestows the blessing of the forgiveness of sins:

It is never in our own power to lay hold on the forgiveness of sins. That we are sorry for sin, repent, seek forgiveness, and obtain it, is the work of Christ Himself. By His Spirit and grace, He works the true sorrow after God in our hearts. By that Spirit, He brings us to repentance, leads us to the cross, and assures us of redemption, even the forgiveness of sins in His blood.⁹

Notice Hoeksema's order: repentance and seeking forgiveness are first, followed by obtaining the forgiveness of sins. If forgiveness follows Spirit-wrought repentance, forgiveness is a present blessing enjoyed in the lifetime of the child of God.

Herman Hoeksema was a proponent of eternal justification, that is, that the actual justification of the sinner takes place in eternity. But the doctrine of eternal justification in

Hoeksema's theology did not cloud over the biblical truth concerning the relation between repentance and forgiveness. Although he held to eternal justification, Hoeksema also taught very clearly the truth that our sins are forgiven during our lifetime in the way of repentance. Only they who repent enjoy the forgiveness of their sins.

Next time, more of what Hoeksema taught concerning the relation between repentance and forgiveness.

Is it possible for the child of God to forfeit forgiveness? If forgiveness is a present blessing, is it possible for the Christian to forfeit forgiveness for a time?...According to Hoeksema, this is indeed possible. This is a very real possibility and a frightening prospect that ought to serve as a warning to every child of God.

⁶ *Abundant Mercy*, 87-88.

⁷ *Abundant Mercy*, 88. Emphasis added.

⁸ *Abundant Mercy*, 90. Emphasis added.

⁹ *Abundant Mercy*, 89.



Search the Scriptures

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Habakkuk: The just shall live by faith (12) God's judgment and salvation (2)

Previous article in this series: August 2023, p. 442.

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.

Habakkuk 3:1-2

We saw in the last article that Habakkuk 3 is a fitting conclusion to the prophecy, for in it Habakkuk bows submissively to the will of God, acknowledges His unchangeable faithfulness, and resolves to rejoice in God as the God of His salvation. He teaches the faithful in Judah to do the same.

Chapter 3:1 identifies what follows as a prayer. It is both Habakkuk's personal prayer and a public prayer intended for the temple and for public use in the years of the captivity. Judah would need Habakkuk's prayer in Babylon as a reminder of the need for submission to God's will. She would need to sing often of His unchangeable faithfulness and His sovereign power. Only He could use the captivity and its horrors for Judah's salvation.

As a personal prayer intended also for public use, it is a wonderful testimony to the need for individual prayer and for communal prayer. When we are troubled and confused, as Habakkuk was, then we must pray. When we have confronted the revealed will of God and found it difficult, we must pray. When we do not understand God's ways, then we have nothing left but prayer. And when not only we but the church is afraid and wondering, then we must come together in prayer: "The attitude which should characterize Christian people in a time of trial and perplexity is seen here."¹

The word translated "prayer" is a word that means intercession or supplication. That is certainly the main element in the prayer, especially the petition, "in wrath remember mercy." It is prayer that includes not only petition but also all the elements of true prayer—worship, thanksgiving, remembrance of God's ways, confession

of sin, and pouring out of one's heart to God. Especially the element of recollection or remembrance stands out in the prayer, as it does in Psalms 78, 81, 105, 106, and 107. Remembrance is an element of true prayer that is often forgotten, perhaps because too many Christians are ignorant of God's ways in ancient times.

Prayer should include recollection and remembrance. Thinking, in prayer, of God's past works and ways provides a foundation for confident prayer even in the worst times and the greatest need. Habakkuk, remembering, is able to pray as everyone ought to pray in troubled times and perplexing circumstances. Remembering God's ways teaches us His faithfulness, His sovereignty, His saving purpose in all things.

The word *Shigionoth* (Shiggaion in the heading of Psalm 7) is difficult to translate accurately. Calvin and others think it is a form of the Hebrew word for ignorance, a word that reflects back on the prophet's own ignorance and questioning. The idea of verse 1 would then be, "a prayer to be prayed when guilty of sins of ignorance." Calvin's interpretation is appealing and, if true, means that Habakkuk's prayer is meant for times of doubt, fear, and questioning. Others, however, take the word as a musical directive or reference to tunes or instruments.

In the first part of verse 2, Habakkuk confesses that he is still afraid. When he heard of the coming of the Babylonians, he was afraid and that did not change, though he had turned to prayer and praise and found reassurance in God's answers to him. That he was still afraid is evident from the verb tense in verse 2, which could be translated, "I am afraid." Verse 16 echoes those fears: "When I heard, my belly trembled; my lips quivered at the voice: rottenness entered into my bones." Habakkuk now understands that the coming of the Babylonians is the will of God, that they are in God's sovereign hand, and that out of it all God will work good for His people. Nevertheless, thinking of what lay ahead for Judah, he was terrified.

How much like us he was. Resting and trusting in God by faith, even rejoicing in Him, does not always and immediately banish our fears. We may think of

¹ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *From Fear to Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1970), 58.

the end times, as terrible as the coming of Babylon for Judah, and tremble for our children and grandchildren and for the church, while still trusting that all things work together for good to those who love God. We find ourselves so often in the condition described in II Corinthians 4:8, 9, “We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed.”

No doubt Habakkuk’s fear is also part of his repentance. He had dared to question God’s ways, and though he may not have been personally responsible for the sins of Judah against which he prayed in 1:1-4, he, like us, was a sinner who knew himself to be worthy of God’s judgments against sin. Like us he was communally responsible for the sins of God’s people. Always there is in the church a mutual responsibility for the sins of God’s people, as the story of Achan shows so clearly (Jos. 7:1ff.), and Habakkuk’s fear expresses that sense of responsibility.

With all his fears, he shows that he received God’s word to him when he twice addresses God as LORD, Jehovah, the God of the covenant and of His covenant people. He is fearful but sure that God is not only unchangeable in His purpose with Babylon and Judah, but also unchangeable in His love and care for His own. Babylon must come for the chastisement of God’s people, but God will never cast off His own, will never forsake them. Of that Habakkuk is now sure.

So he prays, “Revive thy work in the midst of the years.” Habakkuk, instead of questioning God’s ways, is now praying that God will do as He said in sending Babylon, in using Babylon to chastise His people, and in working out in that inscrutable way the salvation of His Old Testament people. Habakkuk in praying that God’s will be done describes Babylon’s coming as a revival of the work He did in delivering Israel from Egypt, in bringing them through the wilderness, in punishing them for their murmuring and rebellion, in bringing them to the promised land and giving them the land, in using the nations to chastise them when they sinned in the land every man doing what was right in his own eyes.

Habakkuk’s petition was fulfilled when God did send the Babylonians and used them to purify and restore His people. It was fulfilled again when God visited the sins of His people at the cross and out of the darkness of His judgments brought salvation and peace to His own. It is fulfilled now when persecutors and heretics are used for the good of His church. And it will be fulfilled one last time when God sends Babylon once more and out of those judgments works eternal salvation. Always God revives His work and always His work follows the same pattern: spiritual decline and sin on the part of His

people until things become humanly impossible and it seems deliverance will not come to His people who are suffering under His severe chastisement. It is then God works His miracles of deliverance, saving and rescuing them and sending judgment on the enemies He used to chastise them.

When Habakkuk prays that God will “in the midst of the years make known,” he is asking that God will make Himself known as the God of judgment and as the God of salvation, as a righteous but also merciful God. His focus has changed. From focusing on the terrors of Babylon’s coming, he now focuses on God Himself and His glory; and what a lesson that is for us. We are troubled, afraid, doubting, and worrying when we focus on circumstances or even on ourselves and our feelings; but when we look to the Lord, then our whole perspective changes and we are on our way to peace and joy.

At the cross, too, God made Himself known in answer to Habakkuk’s prayer, made Himself known as both a just and merciful God and as the only Savior. He made Himself known when He put Himself in the person of His Son into the hands of sinners, uncloaking their wickedness and forgiving those who crucified His Son. At the point of hopelessness, when it seemed that wickedness had triumphed, God finished the work of redemption. So, too, He will make Himself known when history comes to an end and the great day of judgment arrives.

We use the word “theophany” to express that truth. All of history is a revelation of God. We see that in the judgment of the last day. The question arises, Why must there be a judgment, when most of the human race are already in heaven and hell? Why must there be a judgment when God knows all the secrets of men’s hearts and lives? This can be answered only by the truth that the judgment day is God’s revelation of Himself as One who is righteous, just, merciful and gracious in all His works.

The expression “in the midst of the years,” used twice in verse 2, has the idea of “in the nearest part of the years.” It refers to the eminent coming of Babylon and what would happen to Judah when Babylon came. It refers to the very near future for Judah. Habakkuk is praying, “When these things come to pass, revive Thy work and in wrath remember mercy.”

“In wrath remember mercy” is a plea that God in sending Babylon and visiting His wrath on Judah will be merciful to His people. That mercy, though Habakkuk may not have realized it, would not mitigate the horrors of the Babylonian conquest, nor would it mean that God’s people would not go into captivity with the rest. It did mean that God in His mercy would use even the

coming of the Babylonians and the captivity in Babylon for the salvation of His people. He used those dreadful days to chastise, correct, purify, strengthen, and give hope to His people.

“Remember,” however, does not merely mean, “Do not forget to be merciful.” It means, “Be merciful as in the past—remember the mercy shown to Israel in Egypt, in the wilderness, in the conquest of Canaan and in the days of the judges: Be merciful as always; be merciful as when we were in the wilderness when our murmuring and complaining and rebellion needed to be punished. Do what Thou hast purposed, but do it, as in the past, out of mercy and for the salvation of Thy people. I do not understand why it must be this way, and am so afraid that my bones have turned to jelly, but I am confident that God is the God of our salvation and that He who has always been the God of His covenant people will be so always and in all that happens.”

That prayer, “in wrath remember mercy,” can only be prayed with an eye on Christ. Only in Him is there any possibility of mercy when the wrathful judgment of God is revealed. Only in Christ can One who is too pure of eyes to look on evil be merciful. Only through the fulfillment of the promises of Christ, would that prayer of Habakkuk be answered.

And so Habakkuk, though not as clearly as we, sees Christ. He is the revelation of Jehovah Savior, as His name reminds us. He is the One in whom God revives His work in the midst of the years and the One in whom a wrathful God remembers mercy. He is the One in whom justice and mercy meet, in whom righteousness and peace kiss each other. He is the safety of all whom the Father has given Him, even when they must be chastised for their sins. He is the One in whom the prophecy

of Psalm 89:30-34 is fulfilled: “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.”

Perhaps Habakkuk was thinking of Psalm 89 when he prayed the prayer and sang the song of chapter 3. He certainly was thinking of us and of our need for this prayer in the desperate days in which we live. As Calvin says, “Whenever, then, the judgment of the flesh would lead us to despair, let us ever set up against it this truth—that God is in such a way angry that he never forgets his mercy—that is, in his dealings with his elect.”²

There are, then, three petitions in Habakkuk 3:2: “Send the Babylonians to chastise us if that is necessary, as it so often was in the past; do so that the glory of Thy mercy and grace may be revealed, because Thy glory is more important than anything else; and remember that Thou art a merciful God and hast shown Thyself merciful in all Thy past dealings with us.” And the same applies to us: “Do to us as Protestant Reformed Churches whatever is necessary for our salvation and so reveal the glory of Thy mercy, for that is the only thing that matters; but, O Lord, show us that mercy, who are so undeserving of it, show it in the same way it was shown to our fathers in the wilderness and in the days of the Babylonian captivity.”

² John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1950), 139, 140.



Strength of youth

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

Coram Deo

Every Reformed young person needs to know some Latin. Not only is it the language from which many modern languages have their origin, and not only is it the language most Reformation leaders used to compose their writings, but it is a language frequently used to

make important truths memorable, one of them being *coram Deo*.

This Latin phrase expresses the most fundamental description of the Christian life. A young person ignorant of its meaning is seriously deficient in his under-

standing of how to live as a Christian. The Reformers, beginning with Martin Luther himself, explained that the most basic description of a true Christian's life is living *coram Deo*. It means literally: "Before the face of God." Is this how you live?

This simple yet profound phrase, succinctly expressed in Latin, is a biblical concept that transforms every part of life—how you worship, do devotions, obey, work, and play. It is the basic point of that repetitive children's song:

Oh be careful little eyes what you see,
Oh be careful little eyes what you see,
For the Father up above
Is looking down in love,
So be careful little eyes what you see.

Oh be careful little hands what you do...
... little mouth what you say...
... little feet where you go...
For the Father up above
Is looking down in love....

Whether we are little or grown up, we need to live every moment of each day conscious of being before the face of God. Of this most fundamental but oft-forgotten concept of Christian living we need frequent reminders.

How quickly we fall into a practical atheism! We know intellectually that God exists. Yet we live as though He does not. We know that God in His very nature is omnipresent. With His whole being, this infinite God cannot be contained or limited. He is present everywhere, not only in heaven above, but fully present also here with us on earth. Though invisible, He is no less real and attentive to every event. "Can any hide himself in secret places that I shall not see him? saith the LORD. Do not I fill heaven and earth? saith the LORD" (Jer. 23:24). Yet we live too often imagining that He is absent and unseeing, saying in our heart like the fool of Psalm 14, "There is no God."

What exposes the utter folly of this is our fear of man. We live *coram homo*, far more conscious of the faces of humans around. Like chameleons, we change our outward colors depending on the people who watch us. Thus in the presence of a parent, officebearer, teacher, or boss, we learn how to conform our outward behavior to make ourselves seem faithful. But in the presence of friends with lower expectations, even ungodly co-workers, we blend in. When the employer is not looking, we slack. When no parent is peering over our shoulder, we stimulate our eyes with evil. We watch, drink, speak, and cross boundaries that would make us burn hot with embarrassment when the wrong set of eyes catch us by surprise. All the while we forget—even intentionally—that our God as a consuming fire watches with His holy

eyes every action as well as every selfish motivation of the heart.

What striking recklessness that we flippantly dismiss God's presence, while angels before the same face of God cover their faces with reverence, exclaiming, "Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory" (Is. 6:3). Realize, dear young person, that when we push God out of our minds, or distract ourselves with the faces of men, He still remains present. Woe to us who dare continue in such folly! "He that planted the ear, shall he not hear? he that formed the eye, shall he not see?" (Ps. 94:9). May we daily repent before His face.

This truth of the ever-present face of the Holy God is terrifying for the impenitent but comforting for the believer. The warning is clear, but the comfort needs to be clearer. The child of God lives not in terror before God's face, driven to do what is holy because he wants to escape the punishment of an angry God. Instead, the believer lives consciously before the face of God who is our "Father up above" and "looking down in love," His face shining upon us through Jesus Christ.

The gospel for every repenting believer in Jesus Christ is that while our Father's face frowns with great displeasure at our sin, His face never darkens with wrath against us. Why is that so? Because Christ Jesus has finished enduring that holy wrath of God in our place on the accursed cross. More, God's face always shines in favor toward us, as though we have obeyed all God's commandments. For Jesus has lived a perfect life of obedience in our place! Upon our sin the Holy God looks with vehement hatred; yet upon us, He looks with tender love. The elect child of God learns to live before the ever-shining face of this holy and equally gracious God.

Again and again, God's Word reminds us, "Fear not, for I am with thee. I will never leave Thee nor forsake Thee." You face no temptation without His loving embrace. You endure no thorn in the flesh without His compassionate care. You are never alone, though all faces of men are turned against you. Your sin against His grace cannot cause Him to give up on you. May God open your eyes of faith so that you live in the constant awareness of His face shining with perfect holiness and abundant kindness.

Living in the consciousness of the face of this God, the heart truly worships. In church, the child of God learns that the elements of worship are not a mere outward formality and that the purpose of a sermon is not mainly to receive more facts for the brain and store up ammunition against those who hold to error. But before the face of God, the believer comes consciously en-

gaging in holy conversation, both listening to His Father and responding from a heart of thanks.

Then, even after the believer leaves the Sunday assembly, this holy dialogue continues before the face of God in devotions. Prayer becomes less about saying the right words and doing the duty and more about being filled with awe again that this puny sinner is granted entrance before the face of the Almighty God who listens as our Father. Reading His Word becomes less about the good work or reading a self-help book for holy living and more about coming before the face of God to hear secrets of Himself that He personally reveals to us.

And having been in that secret place of the Most High God, all of life becomes less and less an outward conformity for the faces of men. More and more, all of life becomes worship and communion before the face of this holy and gracious God. When we fall into sin before the face of God, we repent, openly confessing to Him and those we hurt that which He already sees and forgives in Christ. We flee sin and pursue good works in thanks before the face of this God, knowing that such a life glorifies and delights Him. We learn to live by faith

before the face of this omnipresent God, singing with reverence and joy:

Where can I go apart from Thee,
or whither from Thy presence flee?
In heav'n? it is Thy dwelling fair;
in death's abode? Lo, thou art there.
If I the wings of morning take,
and far away my dwelling make,
The hand that leadeth me is Thine,
and my support Thy pow'r divine.

(Psalter #382, stanzas 3-4)

As we live consciously before the face of God, His face affects our face. Our faces become like mirrors, reflecting His holiness and graciousness for His glory. This is not only the essence of our Christian life now, but it is the Christian's hope. Soon we will live *coram Deo* in perfection. The glory of heaven is to live forever face to face with God. In that perfection, never again will we forget Him who is ever-present. "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known" (I Cor. 13:12).



Bring the books...

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

The following book is reviewed by Prof. Douglas Kuiper, professor of Church History and New Testament in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary and member of Trinity PRC in Hudsonville, Michigan.

Forgotten Reformer: Myles Coverdale and the First Forty Years of the English Reformation, by G. F. Main. Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2023. Pp xii + 201. Hardcover. \$35.00.

The Middle Ages are known, among other things, for ignorance of the Bible. Few lay-people knew the Bible; most *priests* did not even read or know it! The official Bible version was the Latin Vulgate, which laypeople could not read. John Wyclif's translation of the Vulgate into English in 1382 meant that, for the first time in centuries, the people of England could read the Bible in their own language. The next two men to take up the work were William Tyndale and Myles Coverdale. This biography treats the life and work of Coverdale (1488-1569).

G. F. Main's title is apt: Coverdale is a "forgotten reformer." Few book-length biographies of Coverdale exist. Yet how God used him for the progress of the

reformation in England is a good story. Main writes the story in an interesting way that high-schoolers, even advanced junior-high readers, can understand.

I will not summarize the book; I will just give several reasons why I highly recommend the book.

It explains how Coverdale's work of Bible translation built on the work of William Tyndale, how Coverdale contributed both to the Great Bible and the Genevan Bible, and how all this paved the way for the King James Version.

It relates how Coverdale suffered for his work. Since 1408, the English church considered translating the Holy Scripture into English to be a *heresy*. Heretics, when caught, were imprisoned and often burned at the stake. So Coverdale had to leave England three different times. Once he was imprisoned with eleven other ministers. Some were killed, others recanted. Coverdale was the *only* one to leave prison without recanting! (Read the book!)

It shows that Coverdale contributed to the Reformation in England in other ways too. In his concluding chapter, Main summarizes eight ways that Coverdale contributed, including as a preacher; a translator of metrical psalms and hymns; and a translator of writings of other Reformers, including Luther and Calvin.

It puts Coverdale in his historical context. Here the book excels, for its attention to Coverdale's context. The book is as much a short survey of the Reformation in England, as it is a biography of Coverdale. Remember, these are the days of Henry VIII (increasingly bad times for those interested in doctrinal reformation), Edward VI (very good times), Bloody Mary (the absolute worst of times), and Elizabeth I. The days of Elizabeth I were the days when nonconformists made themselves known. Elizabeth wanted all to follow the same form of worship, including using the same prayer

book. Some courageous men would not use that book, in part because they understood that the monarch was dictating how the church should worship, and in part because they wanted a purer and more thorough reformation. Coverdale was one of the latter. Consequences followed. (Read the book!)

Did I mention that Coverdale was chaplain to Catherine Parr, Henry VIII's sixth wife and only widow? Or that he personally knew Christian III, King of Denmark? The book is full of intrigue! No surprise there; history is always full of intrigue. God sovereignly directs it, suddenly turns it in a new direction by the death of a monarch, again redirects it by the decisions of Parliaments and church bodies, and in the end preserves His church and saints through many perils! This book bears witness to all of that.

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Announcements

Wedding anniversary

We give thanks to God with **Jim and Carol Schimmel** in the celebration of 50 years of marriage on August 23. We thank our Heavenly Father for His mercy and goodness shown to our parents and His faithfulness through the years. Romans 8:38,39: "For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Erin and Sarah Windemuller

Noah, Jenni, Brody, Hannah, Malachi,
Chloe, Simon

Dan and Noni Guajardo

Harley (in heaven)

Jim and Stacey Schimmel

Kayli, Aubrey, Abrielle, James, Easton

Rebekah Bolton

Mikayla

Joe and Jennifer Schimmel

Mason, Sydnie, Lucy, Jolee

Grand Rapids, Michigan

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 delegates in need of lodging or transportation from the airport should notify the clerk of Crete PRC's consistory.

Rev. J. Engelsma, Stated Clerk

Call to association meeting

The Reformed Free Publishing Association hereby notifies all current Association members (and those desiring to join the Association) that the 2023 Annual Meeting will be held Thursday, September 28, at 7:00 P.M., at Grandville PRC. Speaker Rev. Daniel Kleyn will give a talk on the RFPA's work in "Spreading the Reformed Gospel to the Four Corners of the Earth." Refreshments will be provided. All current Association members are requested to attend the meeting in person or by proxy in order to approve new members and changes to the Constitution. Those who have not attended a meeting in the last 3 years will be contacted directly by the RFPA office, and your Association membership may be discontinued pending Association approval.