

THE STANDARD BEARER

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MEDITATION

JEHOVAH'S GOODNESS

The Lord is good to all.....but all
the wicked will He destroy.

Ps. 145: 9a, 20b.

Emphatically, according to the Hebrew original, the poet, who is the inspired author of this psalm, puts it: "Good is Jehovah".

The Lord is goodness essentially.

Apart from any relation to His creatures, conceived all by Himself, in Himself, for Himself, as the absolutely Self-existent, Self-sufficient, Independent One, the Lord is good. His essence is goodness, His eternally adorable Divine Being is only good. Could we enter into the amazing profundity and explore the fathomless depths of His infinite Being, the deepest depths of the incomprehensible divine essence would reveal nothing but goodness.

He is the Light and there is no darkness in Him. He is Truth, Righteousness, Holiness, Purity, Love, Grace, Mercy and Eternal Life, and there is no Lie, Unrighteousness, Defilement, Corruption and Death in Him.

He is Summum Bonum, the Highest Good, not in a mere superlative sense, not in a sense that would compare Him with other goods or goodnesses, that might perhaps be conceived as existing next to Him though in a far inferior degree; but in the sense that He is the Sole Good, that there is no good apart from Him or without Him.

He is the ultimate and absolute criterion of all good. He is no good in the sense that He knows no certain standard of goodness that might be applied to Him, but Himself is the only Standard of all that is called good.

He is good because He is God.

Very perfection in all His adorable virtues.....

Good is Jehovah!

This cover is from the first Standard Bearer ever published, in October 1924.

A similar format was used from October 1924 to January 1927. The editorial staff consisted of three ministers, with layman G. Van Beek serving as managing editor (see the masthead above; can you spot the spelling error?). The Christian Reformed Church was at this time stirred by debates over common grace. The adoption of the doctrine by the CRC Synod of 1924 led to the 1925 formation of the Protestant Christian Reformed Churches, later to be renamed the Protestant Reformed Churches in America.

God He lives from everlasting to everlasting the perfect life of Infinite goodness in and thru Himself. Never there arises from the unfathomable depths of His perfect Essence the slightest thought that is not good, perfect, true. Never the faintest thrill of imperfection there is in the Will of Jehovah. Never the most imperceptible discord there is in His divine feeling. Never there is the tiniest ripple of evil on the stream of life flowing from His divine heart.

No shadow of darkness ever bedims the light of life, perfect and infinite, of the Divine Family. Father, Son and Holy Ghost, each eternally subsisting in the unchangeable Essence of limitless goodness, thinking in the Perfect Mind, willing with the Perfect Will are living in absolute Self-sufficiency an uninterrupted divine life of purest goodness, dwelling in a Light that is never in any wise bedimmed.

Yea, good is Jehovah!

Everlastingly, solely, unchangeably good!

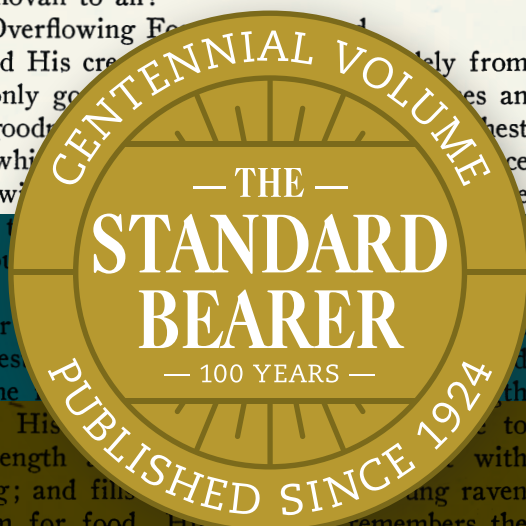
Because the Lord is good, the absolute good in Himself He is also good to all His creatures.

Good is Jehovah to all!

He is the Overflowing Fount of Goodness.

All the good His creatures receive flows from Him and is only good inasmuch as it reflects His attitude of goodness, His overflowing benevolence which He pours out upon all the world.

His goodness is like the silvery lustre of the sun, His goodness decks the gold, day after day, the field with pure gold, and clothes the earth with His majesty. His goodness renews its strength in the powerful wing; and fills the raven with food. His goodness remembers the roaring lion and the chirping sparrow on the housetop. His goodness clothes the meadows in velvety green and the fields with golden grain. His goodness made man lower than the angels, adds keenness to his mind and strength to his arm and fills his heart with goodness.



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REFORMED
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Meditation

Rev. Michael DeVries, minister emeritus in the Protestant Reformed Churches and member of Southwest PRC in Wyoming, Michigan

Soldiers exhorted to pray

Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints.

Ephesians 6:18

Are you equipped for battle? The Christian life involves a bitter warfare! That is the context here in Ephesians 6:10-17. This passage is a call to battle: "...be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might" (v. 10). There are many today who have the notion that the battle of the church and of the people of God is against social injustice, poverty, homelessness, human rights violations, and the like. Be not deceived! If these were the enemy, we would have nothing to fear. But the Word of God tells us that this battle is spiritual. We must stand against the wiles of the devil! We face all the powers of darkness, with the devil as their commander-in-chief.

We are ordered, as soldiers of the cross, to put on "the whole armour of God" (v. 11). All the pieces of this armor are intimately connected to the Word of God—the girdle of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shoes of the preparation of the gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. God's Word is our only sure protection and the only weapon with which we can fight the enemy. This implies that we know and love the truth.

But according to the verse before us there is more: "Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit...." The apostle says, as it were, "Take and carefully put on all of these various pieces of the armor and use them diligently in the battle; but in addition, at all times and in every circumstance, *keep on praying!*" An old hymn puts it this way, "Put on the gospel armor, each piece put on with prayer." From this perspective we fight the battle on our knees! Maybe that sounds strange. Perhaps that sounds like a very weak position. But that is the way we must fight. The saying is true, "Satan trembles when he sees the weakest saint upon his knees." Pray! Pray for all the saints, for our fellow soldiers of the cross.

As soldiers of Jesus Christ, we are exhorted to pray.

This is war! There is no let-up in the fighting. There is no hope for a cease-fire or a truce. The enemy is fierce and dangerous. The battle rages throughout our earthly life. By God's grace, we put on the whole armor of God. But that armor which is provided for us by God cannot be employed effectively except in communion with God. We may never suppose that the armor of God protects and equips us mechanically or magically. The danger is that we feel that as long as we have put on the armor, as long as we have and know the truth of Scripture, we can relax; we are safe and secure. Such a notion is folly! We would surely falter in the battle. The fiery darts of the wicked would surely find their mark in us!

"Praying always...." How vital is prayer unto this spiritual warfare! The point is that we cannot effectively use the armor apart from receiving strength, power, and grace from God through prayer. The truth of the Word of God must live within our hearts through prayer. The apostle Paul is really re-emphasizing what he has already set forth in verse 10: "Finally my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might." How is it that we become strong in the Lord? By praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit. For we are utterly dependent upon God and His grace. We need the fellowship of God's covenant that is manifest and experienced through prayer. As soldiers of the cross, the life of prayer is essential.

Look at the Lord Jesus Himself. As the Son of God in our flesh, He knew the Word of God; He perfectly understood the truth; and He often displayed that knowledge, frequently to the amazement of the scribes and Pharisees. But consider how frequently He turned aside to pray. He would spend a whole night in prayer! Christ was in constant communion with His heavenly Father in prayer. It is not surprising that Jesus taught His people that "men ought always to pray, and not to faint" (Luke 18:1). We must always pray lest we falter in the battle.

By God's grace, we know and love the truth, putting on the whole armor of God. But if that does not lead us to prayerful lives, there is a grievous lack. Something is

seriously wrong. Be not deceived by a tactic of the enemy. Satan would say, as it were, “You know the Word of God; you have the armor; you are good to go!” In foolish pride we agree, “Yes, I’ve got this; I can handle anything that comes my way.” Being puffed up, we are a prime target for a fiery dart of the evil one.

The apostle instructs us in this matter of prayer, “Praying always, with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit....” The general term here is “praying.” “Praying with all prayer” refers to all kind of prayers. We pray in private, the prayer of our closet. There are public prayers as we come together for various meetings and assemblies. There are regular offerings of prayer when we rise in the morning and when we prepare for bed at night, as well as at meal time. There are also those spontaneous prayers we utter throughout the day—just a sentence or sometimes even a word. Sometimes it is just a sigh, a groan, a cry from the heart. We must always be in that spirit of prayer, living in conscious communion with God. In the context here, prayer is especially the expression of dependence. We must realize the severity of the battle and the power of the enemy. We must realize our own weakness, frailty, and helplessness apart from God.

Notice too that Paul specifies a certain type of prayer—“supplication.” Prayer consists of adoration, praise, worship, thanksgiving, and confession, but also of supplication. In supplication we bring our needs before the throne of grace. We come with our petitions. It is especially in our supplicating pleas that we acknowledge our dependence upon God and His grace in the battle. We are exhorted in Philippians 4:6, “Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God.” Paul urges us to bring, and keep on bringing, these supplications, these specific requests, these particular petitions as we fight the battle of faith.

This leads us to see the character of true prayer—that it is “in the Spirit.” This is the essence of prayer, the very life of prayer! The apostle says in Ephesians 2:18, “For through him we both have access *by one Spirit* unto the Father.” We have the same idea in Romans 8:26: “Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities; for we know not what we should pray for as we ought; but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.” (See also Jude 20, which speaks of “praying in the Holy Ghost.”) The Spirit here is the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the exalted Christ. To pray in the Spirit means that we pray as controlled and influenced by Him. Then too our prayer is according to the Word

of God, as Christ taught us to pray. It is praying in the Spirit that we are able to stand in the midst of this fierce battle. Praying in the Spirit is the reaching out of our souls to the living God to receive His grace in whatever position in the battle He may place us.

This means that our prayers are not just a formality. They are not cold and heartless. They are not the vain repetitions of the heathen against which Jesus warns. Prayer must not be just a custom or habit because we feel it is the right thing to do. For we are to pray in the Spirit, “watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints.” We must diligently see to it that we are always praying in the Spirit. We may not doze off in this spiritual conflict. We must always be alert, on guard! We must know the enemy and his wiles—his purpose to devour and destroy. Always we must be mindful of our own weakness and our dependence upon our heavenly Father. We must *persevere* in prayer and supplication in the Spirit.

But for us, as soldiers of the cross, who are to be the objects of our prayers and supplications? Obviously we pray for ourselves. That is implied in all that has been said about the battle, about the enemy, about our own weaknesses, about our dependence upon God. We make known before the throne of grace our own needs, our problems, the temptations we face. We must look unto our faithful Savior to supply all of our personal needs. He is the armory, the military supply depot, as it were. We must go to Him continually that we might be renewed for the battle day by day.

Yet the emphasis here is on what is called “intercessory prayer.” We are to pray, making supplication, for others. The apostle says, “...watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication *for all saints*.” The supplication is for all *saints*. It is not for all men, head for head, but for all saints, holy ones, our fellow soldiers of the cross. This means, struggling saint, that you are not in this battle alone! Thanks be to God that we are not alone! As saints, we are soldiers together in the army of our Lord. As such we are engaged in the same fight. We face a common foe and are subject to the same weaknesses and struggles. We are members one of another. In a battle line, if there is a faltering at any one point in that line, it affects the whole army! As the apostle tells the Corinthians, “And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it” (I Cor. 12:26a). How wonderful is the communion of saints!

The devil would like us to forget this blessed reality. He would like us to believe, as many do, that religion is just a personal thing, that commitment to the church

is unnecessary, that we are in this battle alone. With that attitude we become self-centered. We are inclined to view things in a very subjective manner—my needs, my struggles, my temptations, my battles! And we easily become anxious, discouraged, and afraid. Let us not be deceived by this tactic of the enemy! We are not only individuals. We are together members of the body of Christ! Let us make supplication for all saints. Pray for one another! Do you want to be uplifted yourself? Then pray for someone else! To a considerable extent, we know each other's needs, burdens, and struggles in the battle. Make supplication for all saints!

The answer to our prayers and supplications will

not be that the conflict will cease or that the battle will be finished. That will not be the case in this life. But the answer is that we will be able to stand! We will be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might! We will hold our position in the midst of the battle. For Christ is the Captain of our salvation! Even now we are more than conquerors through Him. As we sing from Psalter #407, stanza 4:

For this is His word: His saints shall not fail,
But over the earth their power shall prevail;
All kingdoms and nations shall yield to their sway.
To God give the glory and praise Him for aye.



Editorial

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

It depends on what you mean: The importance of definitions

Church divisions may not be *caused* by a failure to define terms, but church troubles certainly can be hastened and aggravated by it. In recent years I have noticed, with great pain at times, that if two divided parties had clarified what they meant when they used a certain word, or had admitted that they were using the same word in a different way, they would have found that they were closer than they actually thought. I have heard and read, also with great pain, the grossest misrepresentations of churches or preachers because of a failure to recognize that some words have different meanings—imposing on others a meaning they did not intend.

When Scripture teaches us to speak the truth in love, it requires not only to be properly motivated when speaking and to speak only what we are permitted to say, but also to be aware that what *we* mean by a word may not be what others mean, and vice versa. One word may mean two different things. Or three. Or four. It is important to define our terms.

And it is also important to ask what another may mean before labeling his writing as false teaching.

This is true in natural life, too. If you are a resident of the USA and travel to England, you should be aware that your use of the word 'boot' or 'bonnet' may not be

what those in the UK mean by it. When you are invited for 'tea,' you should not come to your hosts with a full stomach. If you ask for chips in a restaurant, do not be surprised when they bring you French fries. And if a group wants you to play football with them, do not expect them to bring a pigskin for throwing passes and making touchdowns.¹ Such miscommunications may be innocent and even funny at times. But there are other miscommunications that can cause fear or hurt, and some Americans who have preached in the UK or Singapore have learned this the hard way.

But clarity and carefulness when we speak is never so urgent as when we speak to other Christians about God, His works, His attributes, or His way of salvation. If you say, 'righteousness' or 'salvation' or 'law' or 'gospel' (for only a few examples) and mean one thing, while your neighbor thinks you mean something quite

¹ Legend has it that the Americans and Brits were engaged in formal discussions during WWII and could make no progress because they meant different things by the same parliamentary terms. When the Americans wanted to discuss a topic, they asked to 'put it on the floor,' which, to the British, meant to *delay* treatment of it. And when the British wanted to discuss a topic, they proposed putting it 'on the table' which, to the Americans, meant to put the item on hold.

different, the potential for division is great. It is important to define terms. If we are not careful, we will either judge others rashly or be judged wrongly.

We often use words and mean different things by them because the Bible does. When reading the Bible and listening to others, we are obliged to be clear about the context and the writer's intention.

Those with seminary education learned this in their first year of training. All Christians should be aware of it. In the course that teaches the principles of Bible interpretation—the formal name is “hermeneutics”—one of the basic rules of Bible interpretation goes like this: “The same word in the same context means the same thing, unless....” There are a couple obvious inferences one must take from this rule. First, to state that “the same word means the same thing in the same context” implies that it may well have a different meaning in a *different* context. Same word, different meaning. Second, even in the *same* context, the same word may have two *different* ideas. The rule states “unless....”

I remember well when Prof. Homer Hoeksema was teaching us theology and the *ordo salutis*, or the order of the steps of salvation. Repeatedly he said, “The order you propose depends on the meaning of each of the concepts you are referring to. If, by ‘regeneration’ you mean...then regeneration is first. But if, by ‘regeneration’ you mean...then regeneration follows....” Or, “If, by ‘faith’ you mean...then faith precedes.... And if, by ‘faith,’ you mean...then faith comes after....” This good teacher was not so much giving latitude to the students in stating their preferred order, but emphasizing the importance of: “It depends on what you mean.” He also was teaching us: “Be clear about what you mean.”

The Bible uses words and concepts in different ways.

A classic example of the same biblical word used multiple times in close proximity but with different meanings is the word ‘spirit’ in John 3:5-8, where ‘spirit’ has three different meanings. The Holy Spirit of God (“Spirit” with upper case “S”), man’s spirit (‘spirit’), and wind are all different meanings of the same Greek word *pneuma*. In John 3, therefore, even the same context does not mean that the same word means the same thing. Careful study of a passage’s context and the writer’s own usage of the word will help determine it. Thus, the same word in widely *different* contexts may certainly have different meanings. The word’s context and the writer’s intentions are determinative.

Let me give some other examples of the same word having different meanings in Scripture—and some significant theological terms—and then conclude by making a plea to the readers.

‘Righteousness’ in Scripture can mean the legal state in which a believer stands before God because Christ’s perfect righteousness is imputed to him. Think, for example, of Romans 1:17 or 3:21. But ‘righteousness’ can also refer to the upright conduct in which a believer walks. Genesis 30:33 and Psalm 15:2 are two examples of ‘righteousness’ meaning a man’s upright behavior. There are many others, especially in the Old Testament. But if I am speaking of a man’s righteous conduct and a reader supposes that I am referring to how I am justified, there could not be a more serious misunderstanding. To be *justified*, I need the righteousness of Christ. My living in righteousness is *sanctification*. To which definition of the word ‘righteousness’ am I referring? I, as a writer, must make clear my intent, and the reader must understand my context.

In Reformed circles, ‘faith’ can refer to the bond that God forms between the believer and Christ. Based on Scripture’s teaching in passages like Romans 11:20, the Heidelberg Catechism (Lord’s Day 7) speaks of faith as an ‘ingrafting.’ But the Catechism also speaks of faith as the believer’s true knowledge of God’s Word and his confidence that the salvation described in it is *his* salvation. When I am speaking about faith, therefore, it is imperative that I make clear to which aspect of faith I am referring, lest I am misunderstood to mean the ‘bond’ when I am in fact referring to the activity of knowledge and trust.

Writer, be clear. Reader, understand context and intent.

The concept ‘save’ and the word ‘salvation’ have perhaps the broadest range of meanings in Scripture. ‘Salvation’ may refer to its *origin* in regeneration; or it may refer to its *end* in glory, as Peter refers to it—a salvation that will be “revealed in the last time” (I Pet. 1:5). Perhaps ‘salvation’ means what Christ has done *for* His people—in the past; at other times it may refer to what Christ does *in* them—in the present. Depending on what sense I am thinking of, I may say, “I have *always been saved*” or “I am *being saved*,” or even, “I am *not yet saved*.” In the Psalms, *saved* children of God cry out, “Save me, O God!” as though they yet need salvation. In Acts 4:12, ‘salvation’ refers to what *God* does in Jesus. In I Timothy, Paul tells pastor Timothy that *he* saves himself and those who hear him when he preaches (I Tim. 4:16). In Luke 19:9, ‘salvation’ is the great *deliverance* God provides; in Luke 2:30, ‘salvation’ is the *Person* who brings it. Christians have the liberty to use the word in all these different ways, as long as they identify what they mean and what they do not mean.

Clarity. Intention. Context.

The word ‘forgiveness’ has given rise to more than a

little discussion and disagreement. One man says forgiveness comes after repentance; a second man claims that forgiveness has no relation to repentance. Unless they are willing to recognize that the first man is referring to God's declaration to a penitent sinner, and the second man is referring to the satisfaction Christ accomplished on the cross, they may come to blows. But both may be right; that is, if you permit each to use his biblical or confessional definition of 'forgiveness.'

There are also *expressions* that can mean more than one thing.

When a Reformed Christian of one denomination speaks with a Reformed Christian of a different denomination about the covenant, the two may imagine unity of faith when both assert that man can "break God's covenant" because, of course, Scripture teaches it (for example, Gen. 17:13, 14; Lev. 26:14-16; Deut. 31:16; Jer. 31:32). But one man believes 'break the covenant' means 'to destroy' or 'sever' the relationship that God established, and the other that it means 'to violate' a relationship that can never be truly destroyed. There is a world of difference between the two, and unless they define their terms their theological discussion will give a false sense of unity on a very important doctrine.

An example of a secular term that gives rise to misunderstanding these days is 'abuse.' The concept is a hot-button topic and special care needs to be given to explain what is meant when we use the term. Context is vital and, especially here, assumptions are dangerous. In spousal mistreatment, 'abuse' is usually defined as an *ongoing, repeated, intentional, conscious* effort to destroy the other. But with some sexual sins, 'abuse' takes place when it happens *once*. Deliberateness or persistence has no bearing at all. Again, definition and context are crucial.

There are important lessons that everyone can take from this.

For the sake of truth, right, unity, and peace, let me urge upon us, as the people of God:

First, let us, especially preachers, teachers, and writers, define carefully what we mean when we speak and write. Let there be no misunderstandings. When we write and speak about God's works and attributes, God's name is being 'pronounced.' His name is His reputation. Let us get His name right, to His glory. We confess in the Catechism that there is no sin more heinous

than taking His name in vain. The trumpet must sound no uncertain sound. Especially from those who teach. This is our duty. Be clear.

Second, let us, especially hearers and readers, judge writers, teachers, and preachers charitably. Judging rashly is violation of the ninth commandment. Let us listen carefully and, before we label another as in error, let us ask for explanations. And when explanations are given, genuinely listen to the explanations. Imposing your definition upon another's speech is not only unwise, but it may also be sinful and damaging.

Do not judge another according to only *one*—probably *your favorite or preferred*—meaning of a word or concept. Brotherly charity does not "think evil" and "hopes all things."

Third, let us all, as Reformed Christians, work very hard to use the language of Scripture and of the Reformed creeds, whether the Three Forms of Unity or the Westminster Standards. The creeds are the official interpretation of Scripture for the Reformed Christian. And the creeds not only give good guidance in defining biblical concepts, but also provide latitude to give some words a fairly wide range of meaning. Let us permit the confession's definitions, never criticizing a brother for using them, even if in our own minds we think the definition should be narrower or sharper. Let us start with the creeds, not our favorite theologian, in our definition of concepts.

Communication among Christians is so exceedingly important. Miscommunication can be so utterly divisive and damaging. Speaking clearly and understanding rightly is a wonderful gift among Christians.

So, before I travel to a different country, I want to learn about the social and verbal blunders I should avoid. I do not want to hurt my friends in Northern Ireland by eating a big meal before coming to their invitation to 'tea,' or be confounded when they tell me to put the groceries in my 'boot.'

How much more do we not want to hurt one another by miscommunicating about the truth of God. There is nothing more important, nor more precious. What a grace to be able to think carefully before we speak, study the proper manner of speaking about biblical things, and work hard at judging as charitably as we can and may.

"If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men" (Rom. 12:18).

Let us listen carefully and, before we label another as in error, let us ask for explanations. And when explanations are given, genuinely listen to the explanations.



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): The meeting

Previous article in this series: August 2023, p. 445.

The broad issue faced by the Seventh Ecumenical Council, we saw in our last article, was whether God could be worshiped through artistic representations of Jesus, such as paintings, mosaics, and statues. Some, including the emperors, said that such worship violated the second commandment. Others, including the pope and the patriarch, said that the second commandment did not apply here. It forbids worshiping God by means of creatures, but does not forbid using images that represent Jesus in worship, because Jesus Himself was the image of God.

Political leaders on one side, and church leaders on the other! As people took sides, the peace of the empire was jeopardized.

The council's decision about icons

The Seventh Ecumenical Council (also known as the Second Council of Nicea) met in eight sessions from late September to late October, 787. The council reaffirmed that “the unlawful art of painting living creatures blasphemed the fundamental doctrine of our salvation—namely the Incarnation of Christ.”¹ Such artwork was not to be worshiped, and was to be removed from the churches.

However, the council said “that just as the figures of the precious and life-giving Cross, so also the venerable and holy images, as well in painting and mosaic as of other fit materials, should be set forth in the holy churches of God...to wit, the figure of our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ, of our spotless Lady, the Mother of God, of the honorable Angels, of all Saints and of all pious people.”² The council explained further that in this way the church would remember the saints and strive more to be like them, and it emphasized that this reverence shown to these pictures was not the worship due to God alone.

In several ways, this council paved the way for the worship and theology of both the western churches (Rome) and the Eastern Orthodox churches. First, it established the distinction that these churches make between reverence and worship. Rome speaks of three degrees of honor shown to others: an honor shown to all saints, a higher honor shown to Mary, and then a divine worship given to God alone. Reformed believers do not object to remembering the martyrs, but we do evaluate Rome's practice of honoring the saints as being idolatrous.

Second, these decisions reflect the idea that in that image Jesus Christ Himself was really, spiritually present with His church; the images helped the church understand His spiritual presence. This became a justification still used today to worship God through images of Jesus.

The Reformer John Calvin recognized that councils have authority, for which reason the matter was settled in the minds of some. Yet he endeavored to show that the council misused many Scripture passages, and that the conclusions of the council are not the teachings of Scripture.³

Other Decisions

The council also dealt with church political matters, though nothing really new. Among other things, it asserted that those who did not know Scripture well should not be made bishops; bishops were to be elevated to office by the church, not by secular means; simony was wrong; and those who were not ordained should not do official work in the church. These decisions suggest that many were abusing sound and biblical principles regarding officebearers. The council also required relics to be housed in churches, and that those who had books opposing the use of icons should hand in those books.⁴

We conclude our examination of the first seven ecumenical councils.

1 Philip Schaff, ed, *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, second series, vol. 14, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils*, 543.

2 Schaff, 14:550.

3 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1559 edition, 1.11.14-15.

4 See Schaff, 14:555-570 for a list of the canons and additional commentary on them.

menical councils. Some of them were more noteworthy than others, but in general they established the foundational dogmas of the Trinity and the person and natures of Christ. They also addressed church political matters of the day. But by the seventh council, the churches were

degenerating in doctrine, worship, church polity, and other moral issues; the councils that followed in the Middle Ages underscore that point, and need not take up our time.



Search the Scriptures: Bible characters

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The planned departure of Onesimus

For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever.

Philemon 15

“A runaway slave only runs away once.”

This was the common, unsettling refrain in the Roman empire, for slaves were necessary to drive the economy. They made up 20-25% of the population and, according to Roman law, they had no rights and were mere property.

The New Testament canon reveals the story of a thieving, runaway slave named Onesimus; yet one who is described as a “faithful and beloved brother” (Col. 4.9). The name Onesimus literally means, ‘profitable,’ or ‘useful.’ Clearly, Onesimus was no ordinary slave; therefore, the Holy Spirit gives us a treasure in Paul’s letter to Philemon. We have in this short, private correspondence, a beautiful picture of God’s eternal love manifest through the conversion of an ordinary slave.¹

Philemon was a wealthy merchant from the city of Colossae, 100 miles from the coastal city of Ephesus. Through Philemon’s frequent travels and Paul’s extensive missionary labors in Ephesus on his third journey, Philemon and Paul would have become close acquaintances (Acts 19:10; Phile. 22).

Philemon owned Onesimus. When Onesimus ran away, he violated the slave-master relationship (Phile. 15; Eph. 6:5-7). Additionally, he stole something from Philemon, for Paul offers to repay what was lost (Phile. 19).

During this time, slaves held unskilled positions (in more rural contexts) as well as skilled positions (in more

urban contexts). A more skilled position might involve more domestic services, like being an accountant for the master’s business or even being a physician (Luke, for example). It seems that Onesimus had a skilled position in Philemon’s household due to the urban context of Colossae and Philemon’s wealthy status (Phile. 2).

This could be further supported through the liberty that may have tempted Onesimus to flee his master. His involvement in the household of Philemon may have given him special access to whatever he stole, being tempted to take advantage of Philemon’s trust, and to better his life by pursuing freedom.

Additionally, slaves wore a slave collar (made of metal or leather) for identification, and this collar gave the name of the master and the reward promised for return of the slave. The material used would have varied based on the status of the slave, so it may have been that Onesimus’ higher status as a slave meant he could easily remove and dispose of his collar. In this way he could make it all the way to Rome.

However, it could also be plausible that he held no additional advantage and was weary of his lot. Whatever the case may be, Philemon reveals that he fled to Rome, the largest city in the empire (Phile. 10). Certainly a safe place to hide: 1,300 miles from Colossae and a city harboring well over one million people.

Surprisingly, he was discovered. But not surprising, because God ‘discovered’ him. His departure, albeit a sinful departure, was planned. In God’s mind, from before the foundations of the world, He knew Onesimus. God used Onesimus’ sinful flight to reveal His eternal plan. As Paul eloquently writes in Philemon 15, “For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever.” God *led* Onesimus to Paul, who was enduring a two-year imprisonment, and

¹ The reader is encouraged to read Paul’s short letter to Philemon and see the beautiful parallel of the work of salvation for each of His elect “runaways.”

God *used* Paul, in the highest sense of the word, to find Onesimus as a lost sinner, through the gospel, to bring him unto Himself (Luke 15:4-7).

Through the planned departure of Onesimus and his new friendship with Paul, Onesimus discovered that Christ was his Savior. Through the gospel, God revealed His eternal relationship with Onesimus and gave him the knowledge that all his sins were forgiven in Christ. Departed to be received!

Through the power of the Spirit, Onesimus was converted, and it is evident from Paul's letter to Philemon that Onesimus had developed a secure place in the apostle's heart (Phile. 10, 16). Paul loved Onesimus and would have wanted nothing better than to have Onesimus stay with him and continue ministering to him and to others (13). But Paul knew Onesimus must be sent back to Philemon. His sin was serious, and his need to repent *directly* to Philemon and seek forgiveness of Philemon was necessary.

The request of Paul that Philemon restore Onesimus is beautifully transitive in nature and models all relationships within the body of Christ: "If you (Philemon) and I (Paul) are beloved brothers in Christ, and Onesimus and I (Paul) are beloved brothers in Christ, then you (Philemon) and Onesimus are beloved brothers in Christ" (see Phile. 16, 17). That very same logic *must* extend to the church of Christ: beautiful brotherhood, unity, and spiritual equality.

Therefore, Paul's dilemma to return Onesimus was really no dilemma. The same Spirit who changes the heart of man also renews to sorrow over sin. Paul knew what had to be done.

The basis for this possibility is Revelation 13:8: "And all that dwell upon the earth shall worship him, whose names are not written in the book of life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world." This declares the wonder of grace that Onesimus was eternally forgiven of all his sins, including his sinful flight from Philemon. God knew Onesimus *in Christ*, eternally, by His electing grace!

Because of his eternal forgiveness and new life in Christ, Onesimus had the power of the Spirit to sorrow over his sins and be reconciled with Philemon. Philemon's forgiveness of Onesimus would be used by God to assure and declare to Onesimus that he was a forgiven sinner. Herman Hoeksema beautifully expresses the truth of eternal forgiveness thus:

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. In God's eternal counsel Christ is "the firstborn of every creature," and that too, as the head of this church and as "the firstborn from the dead" (Col. 1:15, 18). And therefore there is, there eternally is, forgiveness with God. And there is no condemnation, there never was with God condemnation for them that are in Christ Jesus. In Christ "we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins" (v. 14).²

In this way, the gospel that Paul had so powerfully preached to Onesimus would be magnified in all its glory that God declare to him, in the very depth of his soul: "Onesimus, you are forgiven." This beautiful truth would have encouraged Onesimus on the foreboding trip back to Colossae.

In addition, what is remarkable to consider is that the comfort that Onesimus needed, the assurance of his forgiveness in Christ, both eternally and at the cross, was in the satchel of Tychicus, the letter-carrier, for he was preparing to deliver three of Paul's prison letters to Asia: Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon (Eph. 6:22; Col. 4:7). Ephesians declared the truth of Onesimus's election (Eph. 1:3-12), Colossians of Onesimus' forgiveness (Col. 1:14, 15; 2:13-14), and Philemon of Onesimus' need to repent of his sin to Philemon and to press on faithfully in the knowledge of his forgiveness (Phile. 11).

Tychicus may have assured Onesimus, through Colossians 2:13-14, that his trespasses were forgiven and that Christ "took it out of the way, nailing it to the cross" (2:14). The sinful flight of Onesimus was *nailed* to the cross! What a great comfort for Onesimus, and for each child of God!

Yet, this return of Onesimus would still be difficult. Even though Tychicus would have given spiritual support and encouragement to Onesimus, and even though he had the testimony of the Holy Spirit through the inspired letters Tychicus carried, the trip would have engendered anxiety as Onesimus rehearsed in his mind the reunion with his master Philemon.

Remember, slaves only ran away once. A branding and beating would certainly be waiting for any runaway slave.

But just as Onesimus was no ordinary slave, Philemon was no ordinary master. He was a Christian. He understood the teachings of Paul regarding the duty of masters to be fair and just, knowing that Christ is their Master (Eph. 6:9; Col. 3:22). He would be ready and willing to forgive. He, too, knew forgiveness in Christ (Phile. 19).

2 Herman Hoeksema, *I Believe: Sermons on the Apostles' Creed* (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2023), 272.

Therefore, we can be confident that, upon arrival in Colossae, Philemon opened his arms for Onesimus. Much like the father in the parable of the prodigal son, so Philemon rejoiced to see his “son” Onesimus once again (Luke 15).

Due to Paul’s request of Philemon that lodging be prepared for him (Phile. 22), and the freedom to travel he enjoyed between his first and second Roman imprisonments, it may very well be that Paul entered Philemon’s home several years later and saw a restored slave. Once unprofitable, now profitable (Phile. 11), for ultimately, Onesimus knew that his Master was King Jesus.

Some scholars have posited the possibility that Philemon freed Onesimus, for “there are traditions that he became bishop of Berea in Macedonia, and that he returned to Rome, and suffered martyrdom under Nero.”³ Regardless of a possible freedom, the Spirit’s mes-

sage through Paul’s letter to Philemon is to assure *each* of His dear children that though each one runs away, daily, he or she is *always* received back through sovereign grace and mercy.

Metaphorically, child of God, be a slave for Christ! Confess that you must surrender your power to be whole to Him. Confess that you are not your own, but belong to your Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Confess that though life will be difficult, His yoke is easy, and His burden is light.

Confess your sinful flight each day, but rest assured in the promises of His Word, that you are a forgiven sinner. Go back, repent to your Master each day, be comforted by His warm embrace, and know His eternal love to you. Hear, again and again, His declaration of forgiveness! You, like Onesimus, are departed...to be received!

3 William Smith. *The New Testament History*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1890), 591.



When thou sittest in thine house

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Peace with God's plan

It is in our very nature, to one degree or another, to plan. In fact, it is our duty and calling as faithful stewards of what God gives us. For some, that plan is very broad, lacking in much detail and short term. For others, that plan is exact, very detailed and long term. Everyone, though, has and devises a plan. Although there are many aspects of our life that we tend to plan out, the area that likely receives the most focus is our personal plan, and this planning typically begins at a young age. We make plans either to go to college or not, which degree we will pursue, what trade we will take up, whom we will marry, the names of the children that God will give if that is His will, where we will live, and more. As has already been stated, it is good and proper that we plan. What we must always remember, however, is that our plan is always subject to the will of God, as is seen in Proverbs 16:9: “A man’s heart deviseth his way: but the LORD directeth his steps.”

Our plans, though, are made up of the things that we

want and that we believe will be good for us. Never do our plans include, for example, a broken home, a child or spouse or sibling taken away in death, living with a chronic illness, a special needs child, families torn by schism and abuse. The reality is that if all were to go according to our plan, life would be smooth and easy, and everything would work out for our good here, in this present life. And if we are going to be honest, our planning then tends to be self-centered and focused on our own good and what can benefit us. The problem, you see, is that very rarely does our plan for this life take into consideration the life to come. In the end, although our plans for this life may seem long term to us, they are very short term when considered in relation to eternity. This then is one of the main reasons why our plan so rarely aligns with the plan that God has for us.

The difference is that His plan for us encompasses both this life, which is so very fleeting, and the life that is to come. His plan for you and for me is eternal,

while our plan is temporal. His plan has in mind our eternal good, not simply our good in this life. His plan is aimed at the glory of His name while our plan is often aimed at our own glory. Although it is good to be reminded that God has a plan that He has laid out for each of us, this is not something of which we are unaware or something we have not been taught from our youth up. The question that you and I must face and answer is, How do we respond to God's plan for us, especially, as is most often the case, when His plan is not our plan? Is it possible for us to find peace and even joy in His plan?

Sadly, most often, our response is not one of faith, but of unbelief and self-pity. I recall a particular night, earlier in our marriage, that I went into the room of our two young boys to make sure they were tucked in before going to bed ourselves. Their cribs were arranged in such a way that they were head-to-head, and so I could look at both at one time. It hit me, as I gazed down at them as they lay there sleeping, that had I not known better, I would never have known that our oldest son had special needs. The reality of that thought hit me even harder when I realized that the only time he was "normal" was when he was sleeping; the only time that I was unable to interact with him at all. I remember sitting on the floor next to their cribs and weeping. I cried because I was sad and because I was confused, but most of all, I cried because I was angry. This was not my plan! In fact, this was completely contrary to my plan! How could this possibly be for my good, for our son's good, and for our family's good?

This was the similar response of the prophet Elijah to God's plan for him after he had heard of the threat to his life from Jezebel as it is recorded in I Kings 19, where he flees into the wilderness and lays down under a juniper tree to wait for God to end his life. The great demonstration of the mighty power of God in the previous chapter in the fire from heaven on the top of Mount Carmel and the bringing again of rain was lost to his mind as he wallowed in his own self-pity and woe.

But what then should our response to God's plan be? Consider Job. Here was a man who lost everything that he had. In the span of but a few moments, Job is informed that he has lost his cattle, his sheep, his camels, and his servants. And if that were not enough, lastly, he is told that all his children have also been killed. We find his incredible response to God's plan for him in Job 1:20-21: "Then Job arose, and rent his mantle, and shaved his head, and fell down upon the ground, and worshipped. And said, naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of

the LORD." He worshiped! What faith this man had by the grace of God!

We must ask ourselves whether this is how we would have responded? The reality, as we have seen, is that it is likely not. This is in part because of our fallen human nature and our desire to be God ourselves and for all to go according to our plan. It is also in part because we simply do not understand God's purpose.

So, what then is that purpose? Why does God bring so many things into our lives that are not in our plan? Clearly, there are many reasons that can be given, but three stand out.

First, they are for our good and for His glory. This we see clearly from Romans 8:28; "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose." All that God sends in our lives prepares us for the place that will be ours in glory. All things, both those that we see as good and those we see as difficult and hard. Through the shaping of those things, the great glory of God can be seen, as He uses those experiences to shape us and to form us into the men, women, and children that He has called us to be. Only our great God can do that.

Second, He brings these things into our lives to direct us back to Him. So easily we take our eyes off Him and His glory and it is as if He reaches down as our heavenly Father, and after placing His hand under our chin, raises our eyes back to Him. Think of Peter, in all his impetuosity, climbing out of the boat, after being summoned by Jesus to walk on the water. In mere moments the roar of the wind and the waves and the tumult around him caused him to take his eyes off his Lord and to see the storm around him, and then to sink. We must keep our eyes on God, always. "Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us. Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb. 12:1-2).

Third, God brings these things into our lives to give us the experience that now equips us to be able to come alongside others and minister to them. The Christian life is and must be a life of service, and as members of the church it is our great privilege to be the hands and feet of Christ to others. It is indeed an amazing thing when a fellow saint is able, by the grace of God, to minister to one who is hurting or experiencing a certain trial and express to them that they know exactly what

they are going through. God is pleased to use us: “Who comforteth us in all our tribulations, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God” (II Cor. 1:4).

What about the peace of God that we read of in Philippians 4:7? Is it possible for us to have this peace when God’s plan does not align with ours? The answer for you and me, by the amazing grace of God, is a resounding and emphatic, **YES!** As redeemed children of God, there are two things in relation to this peace that we must never forget.

First, you and I belong to Christ. The blood that dripped from His hands and ran down the rugged beam of the cross and pooled on the ground at the foot of that cross, was shed for you and for me. We were bought for an astoundingly great price. Because of this, our identity is not in our circumstances, in our trials, in our sins, in our shortcomings and failings. Our identity is in Christ! Our identity is in Him while in the midst of our troubles and trials, in those times when we feel alone, when we face temptation, and when all appears to be lost. And because our identity is in Christ, we are God’s beloved. Always! You and I are precious to Him because He sees us in Christ! He will never forget us or leave us. He cannot, because you and I are graven on the palms of His hands (Is. 49:16)! You and I belong to Christ.

Secondly, as we find ourselves in the midst of the

storms of this life, we must never forget who sends the storm. No, it is not Satan, although he would love to have that power and with what glee he would wield it. No, the storms are sent by God. Beloved saints, think about this and take this to heart. If God sends the storm, then He is bigger than the storm and He is sovereign over it. God never promises that He will always keep us *from* the storms, but that He will always keep us *through* the storms. “And the LORD, he it is that doth go before thee; he will be with thee, he will not fail thee, neither forsake thee: fear not, neither be dismayed” (Deut. 31:8). Jehovah goes before us, and Jehovah will be with us. God sends the storms and keeps us through them.

Knowing this, we can and do, by the grace of God, have peace in His plan. But in the abundance of His grace, He does not give us just any peace, but *His* peace, the peace of God. This peace is so astounding, amazing, and awesome that it passes all understanding (Phil. 4:7). This is the peace that we experience now in part, but that we will experience in all its fullness when finally, after this long journey’s night, we arrive in glory.

Beloved child of God, hear the comforting and peace-giving words of your heavenly Father to you as they are found in Jeremiah 29:11, as He lovingly holds your hand in His and gently lifts your chin to look into your eyes; “For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you an expected end.” May God make it so.



Church and state

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Religious accommodation victory for employees

While saints in the United States and Canada currently enjoy great freedom to gather for worship, pressure to bend beliefs and curb convictions exists. Some reading this may very well have already experienced that strain. Where do believers typically feel this tension? A common setting is the workplace. Here, fellow employees may belittle a believer’s faithful walk or employers may threaten loss of employment or promotions when an employee requests accommodations to practice their religious beliefs.

As we move through this new millennium, it often seems that lawmakers are making it increasingly difficult for religious expression and action to take place in the public square. However, in a recent United States

Supreme Court case, *Groff v. United States Postal Service*, 143 S. Ct. 2279, 2023, the Court affirmed (for the present) that in the United States, employers must make religious accommodations for their workers, unless the accommodation has a substantial negative affect on their business.

The facts

In 2019, Gerald Groff tendered his resignation to his employer, the United States Postal Service (USPS), after experiencing seven years of pressure to work on the Sabbath. As the workload increased for his particular postal office, Groff faced increasing pressure and even discipline for not falling in line with his employer’s

request to work on Sundays. Groff, an evangelical Christian, held devout beliefs that the Sabbath was for worship and family.

Groff began his work with the USPS in 2012. As Amazon's collaboration with USPS increased, so, too, did the pressure for Groff to work on Sundays. Anticipating that the tension would not lessen, he changed locations to a much smaller rural postal district, a proactive move he hoped would avoid future issues. However, this same Sunday strain soon found him in his new rural route, and over the course of the next three years, pressure again mounted for Gerald Groff to work Sundays. He requested accommodation for his sincerely held religious beliefs. His employer expressed that the effect of accommodating Groff's belief (to honor the Sabbath day) caused more than a "*de minimis* negative impact on the work environment and co-workers" and thus they were not obligated to grant him a Sabbath rest.

The filing

In 2019, Gerald Groff resigned. Shortly thereafter, he filed suit in the local District Court, claiming that under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the USPS could have accommodated his sincerely held religious beliefs "without undue hardship on the conduct of the Postal Service business." But business, the Postal Service argued, was placed under an undue hardship, as this request for accommodation required Groff's fellow employees and management to work Sundays to keep up with the flow of parcels and goods.

The case never went to trial at the local level. The District Court (lowest court) granted summary judgment to the USPS (if facts are not in dispute in a case, but rather how the facts are to be interpreted pursuant to the law, the court can rule early in a case). At odds? How to interpret what was the level of "undue hardship."

Groff appealed the decision. Upon appeal, the Third Circuit affirmed the District Court's decision, which held that requiring an employer to bear more than a *de minimis* cost to provide a religious accommodation to an employee was an undue hardship on the employer, and therefore not required. The Third Circuit found that exempting Groff from Sunday work had "imposed on his co-workers, disrupted the workplace and workflow, and diminished employee moral" (Groff. 14).

The final step

Groff filed a request in August 2022 for the Supreme Court to hear his case. In the months following, voluminous religious groups filed *Amicus Curiae*

(friends of the court) briefs to the Court, urging it to take the case. And they did, in January 2023.

Backdrop: Title VII & Interpretive Case History

At the heart of the case was the Supreme Court's first opportunity in nearly forty years to interpret a small—but vital—portion of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Congress enacted Title VII, making it unlawful for employers to "fail or refuse to hire or to discharge any individual, or otherwise to discriminate against any individual with respect to his compensation, terms, conditions, or privileges of employment, because of such individual's...religion" (42 USC 2000e2(a)(1)). As initial legislation did not define what was meant by "discrimination because of religion," subsequent administrative regulations issued by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) further enunciated that this portion of law obligated employers "to make *reasonable accommodations* to the religious needs of employees whenever doing so would not create *undue hardship* on the conduct of the employer's business" (29 CFR 1605.1).

This regulatory interpretation faced great criticism from the Sixth Circuit, who maintained that the above regulatory interpretation was actually leading to the establishment of religion! (in the case *Dewey v. Reynolds Metals Co.*, 429 F2d 329). In response, the 1972 Congress placed into law the EEOC's "undue hardship principle"—seemingly bringing an end to the matter. But defining "undue hardship" would soon be watered down.

In 1977, the Supreme Court's majority opinion in *Hardison v. Trans World Airlines, Inc.* included a seemingly small sentence, which inadvertently (or perhaps intentionally?) created a low standard by which employers could terminate an employee seeking religious accommodations, if the accommodation sought had a slight impact on the employer.

In *Hardison*, an employee experienced a religious conversion and sought relief from his Sabbath (for him Saturday) hours. This conflicted with fellow laborers with more senior union authority at the airline company, and Hardison was terminated. The case focused on "seniority rights" against a "junior employee's religious practices." While the thrust of the case dealt with "seniority systems" a byline in the majority opinion read "to require TWA to bear more than a *de minimis* cost in order to give Hardison Saturdays off is an undue hardship."

And thus the "*de minimis* standard" was born. And for over four decades, Congress sat idly by, failing to redefine or clarify an emerging court doctrine that al-

lowed employers to deny even minor religious accommodations sought by employees.

Into the fray

So Groff and his legal team moved forward. But they were not alone.

It is interesting to note that prior to and even after a case reaches the Supreme Court, procedural rules allow interested third parties to file supporting succinct briefs called *Amicus Curiae* to advise the Court. Curious as to which organizations may have been particularly interested in Groff's case? The Sikh Coalition, The Council on American-Islamic Relations, Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations, Seventh Day Adventist Church of Canada, Christian Legal Society, Church of Latter Day Saints, American Hindu Coalition, Baptist Groups, Evangelicals and others all submitted Amicus Curiae briefs in support of Groff.

Justice Samuel Alito, who wrote the majority opinion of the Court, noted several of the above Amicus Curiae briefs, writing "a bevy of diverse religious organizations has told this Court that the *de minimis* test has blessed the denial of even minor accommodations in many cases, making it harder for members of minority faiths to enter the job market" (Groff. 26).

After reviewing the Title VII history outlined above and subsequent misinterpretation from the *Harri-son* case, Justice Alito addressed the interesting fact that by the time the case reached the Court, both the USPS and Groff's legal team submitted briefs to SCOTUS that took issue with the forty-year-old *de minimis* test. The USPS (and Amicus Curiae briefs supporting its position) suggested to the Court that it create a standard of "substantial expenditures" or "substantial additional costs." Groff suggested "significant difficulty or expense" to be the standard.

A new way forward

Justice Alito concluded the following: "We think it is enough to say that an employer must show that the burden of granting an accommodation would result in substantial increased costs in relation to the conduct of its particular business" (Groff. 28). That is, "undue hardship" for an employer. "What matters," Justice Alito continued, "is that courts must apply the test in a manner that takes into account all relevant factors in the case at hand, including the particular accommodations at issue and their practical impact in light of the nature, size, and operating cost of an employer."

The test was further clarified with two points by Justice Alito. First, the test requires an assessment of

possible accommodation's effects on the "conduct of the employer's business" (Groff. 29). Meaning, fellow employees' (or employers') dislike or negative reaction to a closely held religious belief is not an undue hardship. Nor, the Justice continued, can the action of accommodation of a religious practice or expression be considered "undue" (Groff. 29).

Second, the test means that an employer must reasonably accommodate an employee's practice of religion and not merely assess the reasonableness of a particular possible accommodation. In short, an employer must consider a wide swath of options, and in Groff's case Justice Alito concluded, "it would not be enough for an employer to conclude that forcing other employees to work overtime would constitute an undue hardship. Consideration of other options, such as voluntary shift swapping, would also be necessary" (Groff. 29).

The fallout

Public clamor leading up to the written decision's release on June 29, 2023 feared a decision that would give far too much power to the religious right. When SCOTUS released the decision, as you may have guessed, many religious groups cheered, recognizing that employers now had a much higher burden of proof resting on their shoulders if they wished to avoid religious accommodation for their workers.

But while a new standard had been clarified, what constitutes an actual hardship will need to be sorted out on a case-by-case basis. How far must employers go to accommodate employee religious practices? What degree of costs and disruption will be enough to show undue hardship? These are just a few of the questions that are awaiting answers to be developed.

As a byproduct of the increased standard for employers, a new bulls-eye target is likely to emerge. What constitutes a "sincerely held religious belief?" In the past four decades, courts have not needed to scrutinize an employee's claim of a religious belief or expression, due to the previous low burden placed on employers. But now? An unintended consequence of this decision may very well be that more heightened scrutiny is directed at employees' beliefs or practices, questioning whether they are actually "sincerely held" or even "religious beliefs" at all.

The calling to be faithful

While *Groff vs. The United States Postal Services* is widely heralded (rightly so) as a legal victory for religious employees, the history of four decades of employees' legal battles who sought employer accommodations

in order to continue in their line of work while still remaining faithful to their closely held religious beliefs is a sobering reminder of the world's efforts to create an environment and perception that faith does not provide the framework for all aspects of our lives.

We should be encouraged by the results of those efforts to preserve our right to worship and give expression of our faith in all aspects of our lives, including vocations and public callings.

Paul, in a letter to his dear friend Titus, understands that we will live our lives in the scrutiny of this world. Unlike a Supreme Court test, still vague and open to

interpretation, the instruction to us from Scripture is simple and clear.

“In all things shewing thyself a pattern of good works: in doctrine shewing uncorruptness, gravity, sincerity, sound speech, that cannot be condemned; that he that is of the contrary part may be ashamed, having no evil thing to say of you.... For the grace of God that bringeth salvation, hath appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world” (Tit. 2: 7-8, 11-12).



Special feature—PRC seminary convocation

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

The Protestant Reformed minister today*

**This convocation address was given at Hope PRC in Walker, Michigan on September 6, 2023.*

Scripture Reading: II Timothy 2

Introduction

For three reasons I take as my subject, “The Protestant Reformed Minister Today.” The first reason concerns *target*—the target at which we aim. It is the express purpose of the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary (hereafter: PRTS) to train men to become Protestant Reformed (hereafter: PR) ministers. It has been a great privilege for us in the seminary to participate in the training of men who never intended to enter the gospel ministry in the Protestant Reformed Churches in America (hereafter: PRCA), or even in one of our sister churches. Nevertheless, the seminary does not exist to train ministers for other denominations or simply to produce ministers in general, and no one has ever imagined or expected otherwise. Everyone knows that this is a *denominational* seminary that exists to train ministers for the PRCA. This is stated already in the opening line of the first article of the Constitution of the Theological School, “The Theological School of the Protestant Reformed Churches has for its purpose

the training of future ministers of the Word for the aforesaid churches.” Therefore, just as the woman who leads a cake-baking and decorating class holds before her pupils on day one a finished cake so that everyone knows the target at which they aim, we now do the same in conscious dependence upon God at the beginning of this new school year. Hence, my subject.

The second reason concerns *history*—continuing the history. In the remarkable faithfulness of God, we are very close to the line that is the seminary’s centennial. June of 2025 will mark 100 years. This is school year 2023-2024; therefore, we are only one or two strides away. Way back at the beginning, the seminary had professors with names like Hoeksema and Ophoff, and students with names like Vos and Hanko. Back at the beginning, we were still in the thick of the 1924 controversy over common grace and the now hugely popular well-meant offer of the gospel. Those men in the seminary had strong convictions and passion for the *particularity* of God’s grace—that God’s grace is only ever for those who are elect in Christ, and for the *sovereignty* of God’s grace—that all those whom God eternally chose, He will certainly and effectually save in Christ. Our fathers, therefore, did not regard something like the well-meant offer as a minor and peripheral matter at

which one could wink, but as an error that is inherently Arminian, taking aim at the very heart of Reformed orthodoxy. That was way back then, nearly 100 years ago. Do the men in the seminary who train and are trained have the same biblical and confessional convictions? Does the history continue and even develop? Hence, my subject.

The third reason concerns our *times*—preparing men for the times. We live in challenging times. If we think broadly, the church of Christ *has* lived through much more challenging times (read church history), and the church in other places *is* living through much more challenging times (read reports coming out of Myanmar), and the church *will* live through much more challenging times (read Matt. 24 or Rev. 13). Nonetheless, today is a day of extraordinary times. We have seen major issues: doctrinal controversy, a Covid pandemic, schism, and the exposure of cases of sexual abuse. Then, accompanying any one of these issues can be a variety of wrong responses, coming from many different directions.

Additionally, Satan attempts to exploit these major issues to create the factions of Corinth. Though all the ministers may be orthodox and members in good standing, there can be the temptation to divide them up, so that depending on how the minister relates to the aforementioned issues, some might say, “We are of Paul,” or “We are of Apollos,” or “We are of Cephas.” That is, “My family and I are of Rev. so-and-so. We stand with him. We think there are only a few, maybe as many as four or five good ministers in the churches—men who really get it. As for the rest, we probably would not even come to church if one of them were preaching in our pulpit.” Then the temptation for the minister is either *pride* in seeking hero-status, or *fear* in refusing to repudiate such an attitude should it surface.

Then on top of it all, what great hurt has been done to the denomination by PR ministers who have left, heap upon the denomination condemnation, and cast a barrage of wild, unfounded, and slanderous charges, usually drawing or hoping to draw some followers with them. *Today* is a day of extraordinary times for the PRCA and her ministers. Hence, my subject.

The PR minister today: Generally His task

We want a man to be prepared to take up his *task*. The times may be extraordinary, but the task never changes. The task for all Reformed ministers has four elements according to the “Form for the Ordination of Ministers.” I will briefly summarize.

Task one: He explains the Word of the Lord faithfully to the flock. The Form adds that he *applies* that word

for the edification of the hearers, instructing, admonishing, comforting, and reproving according to everyone’s need. He preaches repentance toward God and reconciliation with Him through faith in Christ, and he refutes all schisms and heresies. In short, his task is to open up the Scriptures and explain them everywhere, from the catechism room, to the counseling room, to the consistory room, to the hospital room, and especially in the pulpit on Sunday. II Timothy 2:15 presents the task this way: “Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” The entire seminary curriculum is designed to fit men for this task. Explain the Word! Faithfully! To the flock! In that way, God’s people come to know their Savior.

Task two: He prays publicly on behalf of the congregation. The minister prays privately, but especially in the worship service, he prays *publicly* on behalf of the congregation (see also: Church Order, Art. 16). The minister needs to think about this—do I give to public prayer what it deserves? The seminary needs to think about this—does our training fit him to pray? To use the language of verse 22 of II Timothy 2, the minister must be first among all those who “call on the Lord out of a pure heart.”

Task three: He administers the sacraments as instituted by the Lord. It is a privilege to *partake* of the sacraments (imagine being churchless and without the sacraments!). But what a great privilege to *administer* them! When the minister is ‘in the Spirit,’ and his heart is captivated by the Word, and he is administering those elements through which God communicates His wondrous love to His people, he experiences the nearness of God in one of the richest ways possible on earth. In those extraordinary moments also, the minister must be, according to verse 6, “first partaker of the fruits.”

Task Four: He keeps the church of God in good discipline and order. Through faithful preaching, by assisting in family visitation, and by serving as a member of the consistory, the minister labors to ensure that there is good order in the church, and that faithful discipline is applied to impenitent sinners whom the apostle describes as being ensnared by the devil (v. 26).

This fourfold task lines up with the substance of the three marks of a true church (Word, sacraments, and discipline), with prayer tying them all together. This fourfold task gives definition to the target at which we aim as we seek to train men to become PR ministers.

His character

Today, in these extraordinary times, the Theological

School Committee, the seminary faculty, and the local consistory take and ought to take as seriously as ever, the whole matter of a man's *character*. Gifts of intellect, knowledge, oratory, and communication are important. To be sure, we want men who can understand the doctrines, articulate and apply them with conviction and clarity, and perhaps even captivate an audience. We want men who can relate well to the flock as a pastor. However, God has given to some of the most profane unbelievers of world history astonishing mental, verbal and interpersonal skills. What about the man's *character*?

Is the prospective minister a man of God in his own heart and life? Is he a reflection of Christ? Is he a living illustration of godliness? Is he honest, sincere, and humble? Is he actually the man he shows himself to be, or is he a fraud, so that years later, even his former elders say in perplexity, "We thought we knew him." Is he devoted—not to himself in pride as he yearns to get a name above all other names in the churches? Is he devoted—not to this world and the entanglements of it (v. 4)? But, is he devoted to his Master and Captain as a good soldier? When he strives for the cause of sound doctrine or holy living in the church, does he do it in the right *manner*? That matters to God. After all, "...if a man also strive for masteries, yet is he not crowned, except he strive lawfully." The pastoral epistles to Timothy and Titus do not emphasize abilities and skill, but *character*. In the language of verse 2, the minister must be "faithful" (see also vv. 22-26).

The PR minister we seek to train today, the minister Paul sought to train, and the minister Reformed churches have always sought to train, is a man faithful in his *task*, and upright in his *character*.

The PR minister today: Specifically Love

Now we become more specific as we hold up and hone in on the target. The PR minister today ought to love the churches in which he is a minister. How can he perform his *task*, and how can his *character* be approved, if he does not love the church of Christ in which he labors?

A PR congregation is a manifestation of the body of *Jesus*. *Jesus* dwells in the midst of that congregation by His Word and Spirit; and through ruling officebearers, *Jesus* exercises the keys of His kingdom. That congregation in her particular geographic locale is God's light in a world of darkness. Her history is real church history, directed by the Spirit of God. She is a bastion of God's truth in a godless, corrupt, and violent world. She is made up of, that is to say, she *is* the beloved people of God. She is birthed by and has her life in the gospel of

God; she gathers to worship God; and she strives in all her organic life for the glory of God. She is an imperfect congregation, as even children come to know; but with all her spots, wrinkles, and blemishes, she is sanctified in Christ. The one church of our Lord is manifested in many places through the world, including in the PRCA, with all of the churches being true churches of Christ.

It ought to go without saying that as a PR minister loves Christ, he loves the specific churches of Christ in which he labors. How could a man be a member of the PRCA, attend the seminary of the PRCA, make a solemn vow before God at his ordination into the ministry in the PRCA, and then discharge the duties of his office in the PRCA, if he does not love both the congregation and denomination to which he belongs? To the question, "Do you love your congregation? And, do you love your denomination?" ought to be a swift and hearty, "Of course, I do!" That does not mean the minister disdains or dismisses anything or anyone outside of the PRCA—what a wicked notion! But it does mean we love and are thankful for what God has given *us*.

Today, love and loyalty are hard to find, especially among the new generation. Where are the employees devoted to their company or citizens devoted to their nation? It ought not be that way in the church. When our Lord saves us and makes us members of His body as manifested and instituted on earth, we ought to love the church, so that we sing with sincerity, "And for the house of God the Lord, my loving care shall never cease" (from Psalter #350, stanza 5).

The apostle Paul *loved* the churches for whom he labored, and he regularly wrote of his hearty affection for them. Except Corinth, right? In Corinth were schismatics who divided the congregation into factions. In Corinth they tolerated a man living openly in fornication, they ran to the civil courts suing each other over petty matters, and they denied the bodily resurrection. Corinth is the church you condemn, disassociate with, and leave, or at least remove from the denomination, right? No, no, no! One could argue that Paul loved Corinth more than any other church, for he wrote them not one or two, but at least three epistles. In I Corinthians 5:9 he said, "I wrote unto you not to keep company with fornicators," meaning that what we know as *first* Corinthians is actually his *second* epistle, and *second* Corinthians is actually his *third* epistle. The very first epistle was uninspired and not included in the canon of Scripture. Paul *loved* the church, and like Paul we do not stop loving the church when we believe there is a problem, or even many problems. That is when love begins to show its power, genuineness, and service.

The love of Paul for the churches was only a dim

reflection of the love of Jesus, who laid down His life for the church—a people who are by nature God-hating rebels! And though Christ has bought us and reconciled us to God, we are doomed if the continuation of His love rests upon whether or not He sees sins or problems in us. The power of His love is not that He loves a perfect bride right now, but an imperfect bride whom He sanctifies until He presents her without spot and wrinkle. The seminary aims to produce a minister who will be filled with the love of Christ and *love* our churches.

Love manifested

I believe there are at least three important manifestations of that love today. First, if a man loves the churches he will *view*, *treat*, and *speak of* the churches as the body of Christ. He will not view, treat, and speak of God's precious saints as a collection of unbelievers and heretics. He will not slander the doctrine, life, and people of the churches. He will not maintain a hyper-critical spirit that *studies* to find faults. He will not take a bad personal experience and conclude that all those involved in that experience are bad people—even enemies of God; nor will he broad-stroke the entire denomination as corrupt because of his experience. Not only will he *avoid* all wicked slander, accusations, and misrepresentations, but he will defend the churches in the midst of such attacks. That is not pride, denominational pride, institutional pride. Of course, it is pride to defend the name of the church, and cry "Peace, peace!" when the church opposes God and willfully stands for what He hates. But defense of the bride of Christ is not pride. In the midst of attacks there is a time to fall down on our faces in utter humility, in self-examination, and in repentance before the God who chastens us. But there is also a time to stand up and courageously defend Christ's church in faithfulness to our Head and in love for truth and purity.

Second, if a man loves the churches, he will oppose the evil that threatens the churches. Go to any church of Christ on earth, and if you are there long enough, you will encounter sin and evil of some kind. It is inescapable until glorification. "Endure," says Paul (v. 3). Endure "hardness." Opposing evil is hard, especially when our natural response is often to flee. Do not flee. Endure.

If anyone, including the minister, has a problem with some individual, a fellow minister, a consistory, or a school, believing violence has been done to the way of truth and righteousness, then he must go to the source. The way of love is not to go on a furious rampage and start bashing people and the churches. One must wisely, carefully, humbly, prayerfully, courageously, and graciously address the problem. And, should there be doctrinal or practical matters that need to be addressed

publicly from the pulpit or in writing, then in harmony with the good counsel of elders, the minister must refute with the Holy Scriptures all schisms and heresies. *That* is love for the churches.

Third, if a man loves the churches he will love, defend, and promote the truth historically maintained by the churches. To be PR is not to be proud, to be radical, to major in minors, or to maintain contrived, man-made distinctives. To be PR is to be truly and consistently Reformed according to the Three Forms of Unity, especially in confessing the particularity and sovereignty of God's grace in His covenant. In short, as our fathers said, we let God be God. We do not tell God or people how it is; God tells us how it is, and He does that in the Word. Honoring the Word is love for the churches.

We do not tell people that God gives grace to the reprobate, and that in the preaching He has a sincere desire to save everyone who hears it, including the reprobate. We let God be God, and God tells us in His Word that He is gracious to His elect in Christ, and that His grace never fails.

We do not tell people that God's covenant *depends* upon our activity of faith, or repentance, or prayers, or good works. We let God be God, and God tells us in Scripture that His covenant is everlasting and depends upon the Word of His gracious promise.

We do not tell people that if God forgives the penitent, or if God gives blessings to His children who pray for blessings, then that is conditional, man-first theology. We let God be God, and God tells us in His Word that He forgives the penitent and that He gives to those who ask.

We do not tell a married woman who is grievously sinned against and betrayed by her adulterous spouse, that she may not only divorce but also *remarry* because God wants her happy. We let God be God, and God tells us in His Word that marriage is for life, and that if any woman remarries while her husband yet lives, she shall be called an adulteress (Rom. 7:3).

If a minister loves the churches, then he loves, defends, and promotes the *heritage of the truth* God has given us. That truth is good for us and our children.

The PR minister today: Principally (or chiefly) Grace needed

Above all else, the PR minister today is a man of grace, who needs grace, and by grace, relies upon grace: "Thou therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus" (v. 1). The minister is a very needy man who must find his strength not in himself, but in the grace that is in the Savior.

He needs so much grace! That fourfold task spelled out on paper is straight forward, but in reality it is daunting and demanding. The minister could spend

all week doing nothing other than preparing two sermons so that on Sunday he can explain the Word of God faithfully to the flock. But he does not get all week just for that task. Often the minister teaches as many as six catechism classes, leads a couple Bible studies, cares for the sick, the needy, the widows and widowers, leads pre-marriage classes, marriage counseling, and other forms of counseling, is involved in consistory work and the work of the broader assemblies, gives chapel speeches, graduation speeches, special lectures, and funeral messages, writes for magazines, participates in evangelism efforts, and often serves on denomination committees, or as a stated clerk or church visitor. Also, he usually has a wife and children for whom he cares.

Now set that task in the context of doctrinal controversy, a Covid pandemic, schism in which families and friends are torn apart, or a case of sexual abuse, and there is one biblical word to describe it all: *hardness*. And the minister looks at all his elders who are just as busy and needy as he is: *hardness*!

Grace given

The apostle says in verse 3, “endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ.” What makes a good soldier? One who is strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus

(v. 1). God has boundless grace in His crucified and resurrected Son—forgiving grace, sanctifying grace, empowering grace, and reassuring grace. He has grace *today* for PR ministers and seminary students. And God *gives* that grace so that the PR minister can endure hardness, can be faithful in his task, and can be upright in his character, all the while loving his congregation and denomination.

In fact, so powerful is God’s grace, that even as Jesus *delighted* to do His Father’s will, no matter how agonizing it became, the minister *delights* in his work. After outlining the minister’s duties, the Form for Ordination states, “From these things may be learned what a glorious work the ministerial office is, since so great things are effected by it....” The minister experiences that. It is a glorious, blessed, and very joyful work to be a minister anywhere in Christ’s church, *and* in the PRCA *today*.

PR ministers, we at seminary pray for you often, and we pray for our students that they may join your ranks in due time. Members of the PRCA continue to pray. We know you do. Love your ministers, care for them, give thanks for them, and keep praying that God will make them strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.



Pertaining to the churches in common— Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary

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

Seminary news

By the time this report reaches the readers of the *Standard Bearer*, we will be well into the first semester of classes in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary. The 2023-2024 school year began on Tuesday, August 29, with a full slate of classes. We also held our first chapel service of the year. Customarily the rector leads the first couple mid-week chapel services. Thereafter, in the weeks in which we have no practice preaching exercises, the area ministers lead our chapels. Not only are the chapel services a source of encouragement to our students and faculty, but they are also a way in which the ministers can stay connected to the seminary.

Students in PRTS

This year the Lord has blessed us with five students.

Our fourth-year student is Mr. Arend Haveman. Arend is a son of our Trinity PRC and a native of the Grand Rapids area. Since the beginning of July, he has been on his internship, under the supervision of the Pittsburgh PRC consistory and the mentoring of Rev. W. Bruinsma. During the internship, Mr. Haveman is taking part in all the aspects of the work of a pastor, including making and preaching new sermons, attending consistory meetings, teaching catechism, leading a Bible study, taking part in counseling, visiting the sick and

home-bound, family visitation, attending the meetings of Classis East, and more. One of the most significant requirements of the internship is that the student intern must make and preach approximately twelve sermons, which are then critiqued by the mentoring pastor. We are very grateful for pastors and consistories who are willing to take on student interns. This has proven to be a very valuable tool in our training of men for the gospel ministry. After the conclusion of the internship on January 1, 2024, Arend will return to the seminary to complete his last semester of classes and prepare for his examination by Synod 2024.



Our third-year student is Mr. Aaron Van Dyke. He and his wife Sarah are members of our Faith PRC in Jenison, MI. The third year of study at the seminary is one of the most demanding. The courses are meaty and the assignments are time-consuming. Many of you have met Aaron when he occupied your pulpit and led one of your Sunday worship services. At the end of the previous semester, Mr. Van Dyke was licensed “to speak a word of edification” in our churches. Because of the number of vacant congregations, combined with summer vacations, he was kept very busy during the summer and preached in a large number of churches, not just in the Grand Rapids area, but also in the churches of Classis West. Besides continuing to lead Sunday services and a Bible study, he is also teaching two catechism classes. He and his wife have a young daughter and are expecting their second child, the Lord willing, in March of 2024.

Mr. Bruce Feenstra is our second-year student. Bruce hails from our congregation in Redlands, California in which the Feenstra surname is quite common. During the school year, he attends our Hope PRC in Walker, Michigan. This will be the first year in which Mr. Feenstra will deliver specimen sermons in our Practice Preaching sessions. Beginning in their second year, students are required to preach two sermons each semester, in the presence of the faculty and the rest of the students. For these sermons, students are assigned a “chief critic” from the faculty, who determines the text of the sermon and offers critique of the sermon after it is preached, the other members of the faculty offering any additional points of criticism or reinforcing the points raised by the chief critic. Practice preaching sessions are

crucial in the development of men who are able effectively to bring the Word of God after they are ordained into the ministry. These sessions are ‘make or break’ for seminary students.

Our new first-year student this year is Mr. Isaac VanBaren. Mr. VanBaren grew up in our Crete, Illinois congregation, although he comes to us from our Hope PRC in Redlands, California. He had a career in engineering when he came increasingly under the conviction of the Lord’s call of him to the ministry. In the last year he has taken pre-seminary Greek through Zoom. He and his wife Elizabeth (Libby) are members of our Hope church in Walker, Michigan. The Lord has blessed their marriage with two sons: Benjamin and Titus.

We have another first-year student who is enrolled under the new Special Student Entrance Program (SSEP), which was adopted by Synod 2023. This is a new program that aims to prepare qualified men who have not met all the pre-seminary requirements, have been in the work force for a number of years, and also likely have families. The first student to be enrolled in this special program is Mr. Joseph (Joe) Ophoff. Mr. Ophoff was born and raised in the Grand Rapids area, but for several years he and his family have been members of our Loveland, Colorado congregation. There he served as a new home inspector. He is married to Audra and together they have five children: Isaac, Judah, Alexandra, Ramona, and Cecilia. They are members in our Byron Center PRC and the children attend Adams Christian School.

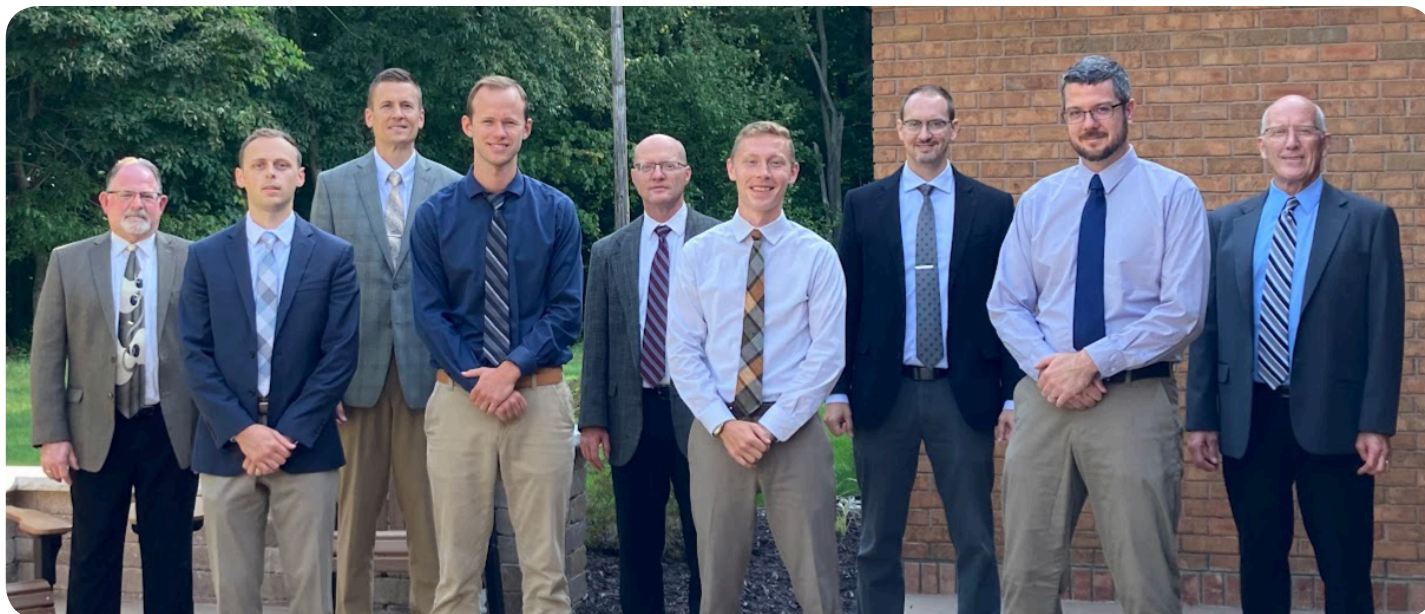
Faculty and staff

This school year is definitely a time of transition.

We have a new secretary, whose smiling face will greet you when you walk through the front doors. She is Miss Valerie Kleyn. Although she was mentored for several weeks by our former secretary, her older sister, Mrs. Sharon Korer, and although she was on the job all summer, this is the first time that she is on her own with classes in full swing. We have already grown to appreciate her skills and her willingness to take on any new task. We are thankful that the Lord has provided another seminary secretary to fulfill a very important function in our denominational seminary.



There is no transition in the office of Registrar and



*Faculty: Profs. R. Cammenga, B. Huizinga, D. Kuiper, C. Griess, B. Gritters
Students: I. VanBaren, B. Feenstra, A. VanDyke, J. Ophoff*

Librarian. Mr. Charles Terpstra continues to carry out the responsibilities of both offices admirably. From the time that he opens the doors in the morning to the time when he locks the doors in the evening, he is preoccupied with the multitude of demands that are placed upon him. And he is always ready to assist any of the students in research projects, finding and obtaining books, and fetching materials from our archives. Mr. Kevin Rau, a member of Southwest PRC, serves as Mr. Terpstra's part-time assistant in the library, usually biking from his home near Standale to the seminary building south of Grandville on the days when he works.

As far as our professors are concerned, we are definitely in a time of transition.

The undersigned is teaching for the last school year in the seminary. For nearly two decades he has given himself to the work, specializing in the areas of Reformed Dogmatics and Old Testament studies. At the end of the 2023-2024 school year, he will retire and he and his wife will begin a new phase of their lives.

Prof. Brian Huizinga is taking over nearly all of the classes in what was Prof. Cammenga's area. For the first time this semester, he is beginning to work his way through the six loci of dogmatics, beginning this semester with theology and next semester with anthropology.

Prof. Douglas Kuiper continues to teach in the areas of New Testament studies and Church History. He has been teaching a full load for the last couple of years, as the replacement for Prof. Dykstra after he accepted the call to Byron Center PRC.

Prof. Barry Gritters is beginning the process of

handing over his courses to his replacement, Prof. Cory Griess. These are courses in the area of Practical Theology and New Testament studies. Prof. Griess is teaching Greek grammar for the first time. Interestingly, one of his students is a young man in Mexico, Mr. Eduardo de la Rosa. This is another fruit of the increasing contacts that the PRC have in Mexico. Perhaps in the near future, our seminary will have the privilege of training men for the ministry of the Word in the land directly south of the United States.

TSC: The men behind the scenes

As part of this issue of "News from the Seminary," I would like to call attention to the synodical committee that oversees the day-to-day operations of the seminary, the Theological School Committee, commonly referred to as the TSC. These men are always working behind the scenes and often are under appreciated, as are the host of others who serve on denominational committees. The TSC is a synodically appointed committee of ten members—five ministers and five elders. Rev. G. Eriks is presently serving as the president of the committee. The committee meets monthly, and many of its subcommittees also meet during the course of the month. Gone are the days of the "Curatorium," which met once or twice a year. This is a very busy committee; its members devote hours to their work on the TSC. The seminary rector is also present for part of the meeting and presents a monthly report from the faculty.

Members of the TSC make monthly visits to the

classrooms, reporting on these visits to the committee of the whole. From time to time committees from the TSC visit with the professors in order to give their evaluation of the instruction that is given and offer some suggestions to faculty members for greater effectiveness in the classes that they teach. These visits are a tremendous encouragement to the faculty and students. We look forward to the visits and to the input of the members of the TSC.

In the last several years the membership of the TSC has undergone a changeover as younger ministers and elders have been elected to serve on the committee. For many years Rev. K. Koole served as the president of the TSC and before him, Rev. Dale Kuiper served a rather lengthy stint as chairman of the committee. At present, there are three educators serving on the TSC. Mr. Doug DeBoer has taught for many years at Heritage Christian School. Mr. Joel Minderhoud, the secretary of the TSC, has served in the science department for many years at Covenant Christian High School. And Mr. Brendan Looyenga taught in the science department at Calvin University. These men bring their experience as educators to the TSC for the benefit of our seminary.

With the changeover in the makeup of the TSC have come some fresh ideas and renewed enthusiasm. But one constant remains—the same cherished commitment to ensure that our PR Seminary maintains its distinctive witness to the Reformed faith and its purpose in train-

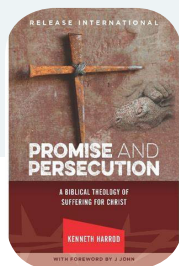


*TSC members: Rev. W. Langerak, B. Looyenga, Rev. N. Decker, Rev. J. Mahtani, D. Pastoor, J. VanBaren, Rev. G. Eriks, J. Minderhoud, D. DeBoer
Absent: Rev. D. Noorman*

ing men to serve faithfully in our churches and sister churches as preachers of the gospel of Christ.

We covet the prayers of our people and the readers of the *Standard Bearer*. Please include us in your regular supplications to God. In this new school year, we cast ourselves upon the Lord, for “Except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it” (Ps. 127:1).

For the faculty,
Prof. R. Cammenga, Rector



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 Dr. Julian Kennedy, member of Covenant PRC in Ballymena, Northern Ireland.

Promise and Persecution, Kenneth Harrod. Orpington, England: Release International, 2018. Pp. 142. Paperback. £8, \$10.00 US. ISBN 978-0-995969-3-3-1

As a basic theology of persecution, this is an excellent starter. Harrod traces the root of persecution back to the mother promise of Genesis 3:15 and outlines much of the biblical history of persecution from Abel to the apostles. His aim is for the reader to respond in a Christ-like way, “A solid, biblical understanding should lead to a godly, biblical response on our part.” He rightly states that this promise not only explains the reason for persecution, namely the God-ordained malice of Satan, his demons and the reprobate wicked, but also declares

the promise that Christ and His beloved church have the ultimate victory—hence the title. He has much truth to share on the spiritual reason for this inevitable aspect of Christian experience and also much profitable, overarching biblical theology.

We already appreciate this part of our Protestant Reformed heritage and treasure this vital knowledge, namely, the covenant, Old Testament typology, redemption through judgment, the individual and corporate dimension of persecution. Yet the author admits—wrongly—to being ignorant as to when the ultimate working out of the curse pronounced to Adam will unfold, as well as stating that “we cannot fully understand why God allows his people to suffer.”

This is the most glaring omission in the book because Scripture *does* tell us much about God's purposes in these things! Reading the Bible reveals that God uses persecution to purify His people, wean them from the world, unite them, encourage prayer and the sharing

of needs, increase our hope and dependence upon Him, and witness to the world and our persecutors. In other words, we fill up the cup of suffering while the wicked fill up the cup of iniquity and, when both are full, Christ ushers in eternal bliss for His persecuted children.

Announcements

Resolution of sympathy

The Council and congregation of the Kalamazoo PRC express our Christian sympathy to Steven and Terri DeVries, Erika and Bryan Kiel and children, and Matt and Kalista DeVries and children in the death of **Rena DeVries**, a mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother. John 11:25, 26: "Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believeth thou this?"

Rev. D. Lee, President
Tom VerBeek, Clerk

Resolution of sympathy

The Council of Hudsonville PRC expresses our sympathy to fellow elder Russ Zwak in the loss of his mother, **Mrs. Freda (Miedema-Zwak) Elzinga**, who went to be with her Lord and Savior on Sunday, September 17, at the age of 96. May they find comfort in the words of Psalter #28 stanzas 1, 2 (based on Psalm 16):

When in the night I meditate on mercies multiplied,
My grateful heart inspires my tongue
To bless the Lord, my Guide.
Forever in my thought the Lord
Before my face shall stand;
Secure, unmoved, I shall remain,
With Him at my right hand.

Ed Hoekstra, Vice President
Ralph VanderVeen, clerk

Resolutions of sympathy

The Council and congregation of Southwest PRC express our Christian sympathy to Nathan and Molly VanderWoude in the death of Molly's father, **Mr. Gerald VanBaren**. Psalm 55:22, "Cast thy burden upon the LORD, and he shall sustain thee: he shall never suffer the righteous to be moved."

The Council and congregation of Southwest PRC express our Christian sympathy to Dick and Bev Kuiper and family in the death of Bev's mother, **Mrs. Freda Elzinga**. Revelation 21:4, "And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away."

The Council and congregation of Southwest PRC express our Christian sympathy to Scott and Joyce Boverhof and family in the death of Joyce's father, **Mr. John Kuiper, Jr.** II Corinthians 5:1, "For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens."

Rev. D. Noorman, President
Dirk Westra, Clerk

Bound volumes

The September 15 issue of the *Standard Bearer* completed volume 99. If you would like your own issues bound, please deliver them to the RFPA office before the end of October. For additional orders, call Dwight at (616) 457-5970.