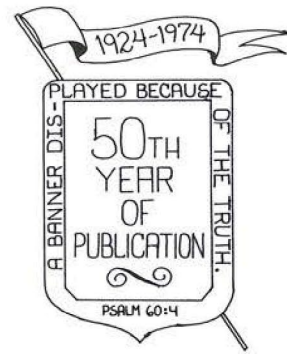


# The STANDARD BEARER



A REFORMED SEMI-MONTHLY MAGAZINE

No one at that meeting could have anticipated the future of that organization which exists to this day. No one could have seen that the Lord would give to these men and their successors in the fifty years ahead far more than ever they asked or thought. It was a small beginning, an uncertain and hesitant step in the direction of *The Standard Bearer*.

A Reformed semi-monthly magazine

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but a step taken in faith no  
And how mightily the Lo.  
that faith!

(see page 32)

This cover format was used from October 1973 to September 1987. The advent of October 1973 saw a staff of 14 "department editors," with Prof. Homer C. Hoeksema serving as editor-in-chief. Prof. Hoeksema began the SB editorial of October 1973 with the statement, "If you took note of the cover of this issue...you will already have noticed that there must be something special afoot with our magazine. And indeed there is! The occasion is the beginning of our fiftieth year of publication" (Editorial Oct 1, 1973). In 1975, the PRC too looked back on 50 years of history.



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## Contents

### Meditation

- 171 Christ's speedy coming (Revelation 22:6, 7)  
Rev. Steven Key

### Editorial

- 173 The misuse of power  
Prof. Barrett Gritters

### Letters

- 176 Thank you!  
Questions concerning treatment of disciplined members

### Search the Scriptures

- 178 Habakkuk: The just shall live by faith (16—concluded)  
Rejoicing in troubled times (Habakkuk 3:17-19)  
Rev. Ronald Hanko

### A word fitly spoken

- 181 Honor  
Rev. Joseph Holstege

### I believe

- 182 Gender dysphoria and transgenderism (5)  
“Religious” objections to the Bible’s teaching on gender  
Prof. Cory Griess

### When thou sittest in thine house

- 185 Hide and seek  
Mrs. Sherry Koole

### Translated treasures

- 188 From “A Brief Explanation of the Church Order”  
by Johannes Jansen  
The causes for discipline, and private sins  
Rev. Joshua Engelsma

### Bring the books...

- 190 *When the Stars Disappear:*  
*Help and Hope from Stories of Suffering in Scripture*  
Dr. Marco Barone



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## Meditation

Rev. Steven Key, emeritus minister of the Protestant Reformed Churches and member of Loveland PRC in Loveland, Colorado

# Christ's speedy coming

And he said unto me, These sayings are faithful and true: and the Lord God of the holy prophets sent his angel to show unto his servants the things which must shortly be done. Behold, I come quickly: blessed is he that keepeth the sayings of the prophecy of this book.

Revelation 22:6, 7

Immediately following our consideration of Christ's coming in His incarnation, we are brought face to face with the passing of another year and the entrance of a new year. It is a good reminder for us that the coming of our Savior in the incarnation was an event that set in motion His work which continues even now. It is a work that we observe with awe, as Christ's work continues in His church and in us as members of that church. But it is a work that also affects the whole creation and all history. For in that work Christ is preparing the way for His second coming.

As we come to the end of another calendar year, we must not get caught up in looking back at the many discouragements and trials we faced and that we continue to experience; but we must trust that all things are serving a purpose, namely, to usher in our Lord's return. We do not have to understand how; but we must believe the words of our Savior, "Behold, I come quickly."

The book of Revelation was written in order that the church might not be forgetful of that fact, and might not grow weary and despondent in the face of all the troubles she must endure. We must see and discern the Lord's coming in all the events of the world and in all the trials that we might face as Christ's bride, awaiting His return.

### The nearness of Christ's coming

"Behold, I come quickly." The coming of Christ is revealed and explained by God in what is called "the prophecy of this book." The same God who inspired the holy prophets from the beginning is the God who inspired John and gave him to see the "revelation" that he in turn recorded. That emphasizes that all prophecy is essentially one and the same. All prophecy proclaims the coming of the Lord. That was the great promise

spoken by the prophets throughout history: The Messiah, the Christ, is coming.

That promised Messiah came too. When Enoch and Noah preached that the Lord was coming, He came—in the Flood. He came to bring salvation to His church. But that was not the final coming. The Lord came again at the Red Sea, in the destruction of Pharaoh and all his hosts. He came in the Babylonian captivity and in the deliverance from that captivity. But those events were steps, as it were, in His coming. So His prophets continued to preach, as did the apostles. "Repent! For the kingdom of heaven is at hand." God has set a day when Christ shall be revealed from heaven. Christ is coming!

But notice, the word of Christ is, "Behold, I come *quickly*." It is this aspect of the promise of Christ's coming that causes many to question the promise. These words, after all, were written almost 2,000 years ago! And so there are those who deny this promise of Christ's coming, or put it entirely in the past. Preterism, a growing movement in Reformed and conservative Presbyterian circles, teaches that this promise of Christ was fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. All that remains, therefore, is for the church to be busy building the kingdom of heaven on this earth, Christianizing the nations and all aspects of society. But that view is a serious error, and in fact robs God's children of their hope. We must not be led astray by that teaching. John, after all, recorded this testimony of Jesus some 20 years after the destruction of Jerusalem. Others look at this promise of Christ's speedy coming and scoff at it (II Pet. 3:3-4). Because it does not fit with their understanding of what *quickly* means, they reject it.

What does Christ mean, therefore, when He promises us, "Behold, I come quickly"?

In the first place, *quickly* does not mean *immediately*. It does not mean that He can come *at any moment*. There are events that must take place before Christ returns, things which in fact set the stage for Christ's sudden coming. Among those things, as Paul spells out, are a great falling away, the church becoming worldly, and the appearance of the man of sin, the Antichrist, "whose coming is after the working of Satan with all



power and signs and lying wonders,” and who will deceive those who love not the truth.

That said, we note, secondly, that when we stand before this promise, we must realize that the speedy coming of Christ is near, and was near at the time this was written. That is even emphasized in the context, when we read that John is instructed in verse 10, “Seal not the sayings of the prophecy of this book: for the time is at hand.” This present age is the last hour (I John 2:18).

In the third place, that expression, “Behold, I come quickly,” means that our Lord is coming as fast as He can in harmony with God’s counsel. He is not simply waiting. He is actively coming, rushing toward us. Peter ties this to the Lord’s longsuffering toward His people (II Pet. 3:9). Christ’s return cannot be a moment too soon, lest some of His people perish. Every last elect must be brought to repentance and faith before Christ returns. But He is coming, speedily coming. He is coming in and through everything that takes place in this present age—actively and speedily coming. In the gathering of His church, He is coming. In the birth and raising of covenant children, Christ is at work, speedily coming for the salvation of His church. In the various catastrophes that happen throughout the whole world, we see that Christ is coming. In the horrific wickedness and violence that even plagues our own land, we must understand that Christ is coming. In the tragic departure from the truth by many, and the fierce opposition to the rule of Christ, we must realize that Christ is working His sovereign purpose and is busy in His return to redeem Zion. In all the political developments worldwide, Christ is turning the hearts of the kings as the rivers of waters (Prov. 21:1), guiding them for His speedy return. All these events are taking place with speed, as God’s time clock ticks steadily and persistently toward the final moment.

### Its divine certainty

“These sayings,” said the angel, “are faithful and true.” These sayings do not belong to a mythological dream. They come to us from the Lord Jesus and are exactly according to the counsel of God. God, who is faithful, shall certainly bring them to pass. But these sayings are faithful because they are *true*. These are the things that God has decreed, and that His exalted Son is even now bringing to pass.

But the divine certainty of these things is also confirmed by the instruction given, that these are “the things which must shortly be done.” That Jesus returns is the culmination of all God’s counsel. The *must* spoken of here is the *must* of God’s eternal and sovereign good pleasure, the *must* of His eternal will. That is a

fundamental truth concerning God—He always does what He says and what He purposes.

Christ’s speedy coming happens with divine certainty because He comes for His Bride, the church. That also explains the urgency with which this promise is proclaimed, “Behold, I come quickly.” Especially the previous chapters, Revelation 19-21, set the scene of this blessed relationship that is waiting for its full realization. The Bride is presently being prepared, adorned for her Husband. John is given to see the beauty of the Bride, the Lamb’s wife. The marriage feast of the Lamb is waiting! And not only does the Bride await it with eager expectation, but the Bridegroom is coming as speedily as possible. His Bride is most dear to Him. He laid down His life, in fact, in order to purchase her as His Bride. So great is His love for her! From heaven He has given her His Word, His love letters, if you will, in the Holy Bible. He has sent to her His messengers to encourage her, to urge her to remain faithful, and to live in watchfulness for His coming. He is coming for her. That coming cannot fail. After all, His Father ordained this marriage in His eternal counsel of election. It is, therefore, a divine certainty. “Behold, I come quickly,” is His promise.

### The response it demands

The nearness of Christ’s return and the divine certainty of His speedy coming demand a particular response from you and me to whom this Word is given—a response summarized in verse 7 by these words: “Blessed is he that keepeth the sayings of the prophecy of this book.”

The sayings of the prophecy may be defined within three categories.

1. There is the category of *exhortation*, including instruction and admonition.

2. There is also the category of the *judgments* that are proclaimed, especially the judgments of God’s wrath upon the disobedient and unbelieving.

3. But there is also the category defined by the beautiful *promises* to the Bride, Christ’s beloved people.

With that in mind, we may say that to keep the sayings of the prophecy of this book implies three things.

In the first place, it means that we take notice of the judgments pronounced by God, and that we take a stand. In all that takes place in the world today there is nothing that falls outside God’s sovereign purpose and the fulfillment of His will. There are some astounding happenings, to be sure. There are events that shock the senses and that cause even the ungodly to ask questions. But in the light of God’s Word and His pronouncements of judgment, there is nothing strange. For the fact is, the sayings of this Book are being realized before our very

eyes. Let us humble ourselves before the judgments of the Lord.

In the second place, to keep these sayings means that we heed the exhortations that God speaks to us in His Word. Sometimes, we like quickly to cast off the exhortations that are preached to us. Sometimes we live like those admonitions of Scripture are for anyone but ourselves. But hear the Word of the Lord: “If any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book” (v. 19). The hypocrisy of one who only puts on an appearance of being one with Christ’s Bride shall be exposed. To keep the sayings of the prophecy of this book is to recognize in all humility that the ex-

hortations God gives us are needful for us, and to walk in obedience to Him.

But then, finally, to keep these sayings is also to embrace by faith the promises proclaimed to us who are in Christ Jesus. Blessed are you who embrace the promises. We cannot have the promises without also receiving the judgments and the exhortations. But blessed are you who, walking in the way of God’s Word, also embrace His promises. For then you live in hope and receive with faith His judgments and exhortations. And then you have peace.

Outside these promises, there is nothing but despair. But lay hold of them by faith, and you, together with the Bride, will say, “Come, Lord Jesus.” He who alone is our Savior says, even now, “Surely I come quickly.”



## Editorial

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

# The misuse of power

Solomon spoke of more than a few evils that he had seen under the sun (Eccl. 5:13, 6:1). If we may use his template, “There is a sore evil that we see more and more under the sun, namely, God’s people using their strength to the hurt of their neighbor.”

We can use power for great good or we can abuse it for greatest harm, and it seems that these days the harm becomes greater. Even in the church.

Governments use power for good. They stop criminals and control citizens with it. Government’s power stops aggressive enemies. But government’s power can also kill babies and imprison those who speak truth.

Businesses have power. Labor unions have power. Teachers have power. Athletes have power. Entertainers have power. Billionaires have power. Everyone has power—parents, spouses, children. Even little people have power. All of them can use their strength for good or evil.

That is the concern of this editorial, because God’s people have power that they can use wrongly to hurt. They try to control, move, stop, change, influence, bend others. In their sin, they do it for evil. This is abuse of power. Parents hurt children; husbands and wives hurt one another; elders and ministers can hurt members.

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We learn from God, who has power above all powers

and always uses it for good—to bless His people or stop the wicked. I marvel at His power that created the world (Gen. 1) and now upholds and governs the universe (Heb. 1:3) for our blessing and His glory. Watch His strength to make the hinds to calve and the rain gently fall on the fields (Ps. 29). But His might also breaks cedars and shakes the wilderness, hurls down lightning bolts and great hailstones, and strips forests bare. Using His power to stop the wicked, He sat, as Psalm 29 puts it, enthroned as King over the Flood. He carried mountains into the sea. Then, be more amazed that His strong hand turns a king’s *heart* (Prov. 21:1), bends a man’s *will*, changes a woman’s *mind*. By His power He conforms men to His image, makes them think His thoughts and do His will. God is strong and God is always good in the exercise of His power.

Civil government’s power to stop criminals and control citizens and protect us from oppressive neighbors is God-given power (Rom. 13). The instrument God gave the magistrate is the sword power, or physical restraint. Police and prison stop criminals. Guns and bombs stop an enemy nation from overtaking our nation.

We Christians likewise have God-given power. We are called to exercise it to bless and protect and sometimes to restrain.

The question is how to exercise power? What tool

should we use to influence others? Governments have the sword. What do Christians use?

I mean, especially (although not only) Christians in *authority*: a parent, spouse, elder, minister, teacher. A parent wants to change his children, a man his wife, a woman her husband. A man is not conducting himself as his wife desires. What shall she do? A woman does not behave as her husband wants. How can he change her? Parents want their children to think differently, do differently, be different—for God’s sake, for their own good, and maybe the protection of their other children. How can they accomplish that? Ministers and elders see members hurting themselves or hurting others. How can they promote or cause change?

Answering this question wrongly can bring horrible damage to God’s people. Instead of using *God’s* power, they use *human* power and, in the process, harm instead of bless. Probably they view their power as their own, and for their benefit, rather than as God’s gift for the good of others. I have often wondered how many have been driven from the church and from God by those who do not understand, or do not want to understand, power.

### The violence of the bully

Men and women today who try to control others by human power are bullies and brutes who strongarm their neighbors. Brutes and bullies are common today in ungodly society, but you will find them more and more among Christians. They are in Christian homes, but maybe also in consistory rooms and schoolrooms where supervision may be lacking, or oversight may be weak. Husbands, wives, elders, ministers, schoolteachers, and parents can all be brutes. The Bible calls them “violent” and God hates violence and those who love it (Ps. 11:5).

A violent man coerces his wife to do what he wants because he is stronger than she is. He forces her into submission. Fear of his power (even violence) stops her from doing one thing and drives her to do something else—what he wants. But instead of blessing her, this power hurts her. Instead of promoting their relationship, he damages and even destroys it. His actions were not love but hate. He does not know what God’s power is or how to use it.

A parent, with violence or the threat of it, can force his will upon a child. Battered and bruised, the child will comply, but only out of fear. He does not learn obedience but only how to escape another beating. Rather than strengthen the bond between dad and son, the violence damages it. The beatings were not love but cruelty. Sooner or later (and probably as soon as he can) the

child leaves home and probably the church that dad represented. Maybe he even leaves God Himself, because dad’s picture God and who would be attracted to such a god? Dad did not know what God’s power is or how to use it.

A woman can be violent with her husband or child, too. Now maybe not with her hard fists but with her sharp tongue. God also hates her violence, which is the violence of cruel, demeaning, humiliating, threatening, terrorizing words—words that bruise and wound and disfigure as painfully and as permanently as fists and knuckles, and maybe more. The words do not bless but curse, and instead of building up the bonds of marriage and motherhood, they gradually but relentlessly destroy the relations. Her husband runs to the housetop (Prov. 21:19) and her children run away. She does not know what God’s power is or how to use it.

Ministers can be bullies. You may have had one as your pastor. They move others, including their elders, with hard words and threats, with forceful language and a voice of intimidation. If their words are not loud, their stance is inflexible, their wills are like steel. Not fulfilling this minister’s will is a sign of weakness, probably of not being Reformed. He gets his way. He always gets his way. He probably convinces enough with his words that he is strong for God’s cause and truth and those who oppose him are not God’s friends. This man does not help the congregation but damages it. Ironically, the one man in the church who ought to know best what God’s power is and how to use it, does not. The results in churches are devastating.

Organizations can be bullies by shaming or “canceling” people who do not buy into their thinking. Angry people on Facebook can be bullies.

But everyone can be a bully because the bully is in all of us, naturally, and we are very inventive in how to be so. To borrow from John Newton, “I have read of many wicked bullies; but the worst one I have ever met is Bully Self.” Boyfriends can threaten their girlfriends to stick with them, maybe by threatening suicide. Girls have powerful emotional weapons to manipulate boyfriends. Young people in school can bully through social media. Women can use fists and men can use smooth words. Elders can strive as well as ministers. We are all brutes by nature.

### Converting the bully

If we are to help the bully, what he needs is the gospel because a brute does not know the gospel. If he knows anything at all about it, he is not living it. Since he has not experienced the gospel’s power in his *own* life and how it changed *him*, he does not know the real power

that can change others around him. The violent person has not heard or experienced the sweet and irresistible power of God's *grace*.

Anger toward the bully, therefore, is appropriate, but so is pity. In other words, although it is necessary to stop a violent person, put him or her out of the church if they are impenitent, or restrain them from doing more damage to others, a bully is miserable and, if he *can* be changed, those who recognize his misery must bring the gospel to him. The bully needs to know by personal experience how God changes His people by His sweet and powerful Word.

If I am amazed at God's ability to throw a mountain into the sea or hold the stars in their place, how much more marvelous that God changes us? He turns us, bends our will, breaks hard hearts, changes wicked minds, conforms us to His image by the sweet and irresistible power of the gospel! We know that it was not violence or the threat of harm that turned us, but His love and kindness that mercifully appeared, changing my malicious heart into a kind one (Tit. 3:3-5). Every day, gradually and efficaciously, it is not physical force but love and tenderness that conforms me to God's image. The *goodness* of God leads me to repentance (Rom. 2:5). His *truth* sanctifies me (John 17:17). *Grace* is the power that makes me *willing* (Ps. 110:3) to serve Him. We cannot resist God's grace, not because it forces us against our will, as human power does, but because it *changes* our will. "[E]vidently most powerful," that grace is "at the same time most delightful, astonishing, mysterious, and ineffable..." (Canons III/IV:12). God's power works within. Delightfully!

Jesus' own life was a testimony of how God's power works in His people.

Watch Him perform a wonder work to transform His ambitious, self-serving disciples into servants willing to die for others. He did not quarrel or strive, lifting up His loud voice in the streets (Is. 42:2; Matt. 12:19). Apostle John wrote that Christ, knowing that He came from God and would return to God because He *was* God (John 13:3)—this One who wraps the heavens in the clouds—wrapped Himself in a servant's towel. Rising from the supper with His disciples, He did the unthinkable: He washed their feet. And the end of this precious story, when Peter was probably still confused, is that Jesus left the upper room because He had an appointment at Calvary to die for these disciples—as their servant. "Put away your sword, Peter; you do not understand how My strength works. My help for you is that I will die for you." Here is God's power: that sacrificial service, that simple but profound act of dying for His own. It is the explanation of the entirety of our salva-

tion as well as the key to understanding how we may exert power.

When I know that love by personal experience, I will do anything for Him. That is the power of grace. That is how God controls me, bends my will, breaks my heart, makes me willing and eager to serve Him. It is how God teaches us to change others.

When a person understands grace, then, two things will happen: First, he will gladly employ the Word of grace as the tool to influence others for good. Nothing less and nothing more. He knows that "no human power delights" God. Second, his own new life of being conformed to God's image will be so delightful to him that he will not seek to conform his wife or children into *his* image, but into God's.

In the end, then, there may be *many* reasons that a person would use wrong means to change others—sinful anger, a sense of self-importance, a proud desire to project his strength and impose his will on other people. At bottom the explanation is that he or she does not understand God's grace in his own life.

### Learn grace

The sweet power of God's Word. Always the Word of the gospel.

"The servant of the Lord must not strive...but be gentle...instructing..." with God's Word (read all of II Tim. 2:24-26). This applies not only to elders—the first reference in Paul's warning to Timothy—but to all God's people. Do not fight with people who need changing. Parents, aside from the select and careful use of the rod when the children are young, God is not pleased to use physical power to change your children, but spiritual—His Word. Husbands and wives, the power to influence your spouse for good, even to stop them from harming others, is not your strong arm or acidic tongue, but the patient and meek application of God's Word. For fighting not only will not accomplish what you want but will in fact do the opposite—make them as much the brute as (and more than) you.

A violent man or woman will affect nothing in others except to tempt them to violence. That is what the children learn from a violent dad or a harsh mom, a sarcastic wife or an angry husband. How devastating to see children copy their parents' sin. So, there is reason for even more pity for the bully, when his children become brutes to their spouses and bullies to his grandchildren.

Luther's hymn is right. A "little word" is what we need as we face the foe of violence, in ourselves or in others. Speak that word. "Peradventure" (II Tim 2:25) God will use it to convert them.

We have a powerful God!



## Thank you!

I have enjoyed in my reading and even studying, the *Standard Bearer*. I don't have the words to express my appreciation. I saved my copy of November 15, 2022—Vol. 99, No.4—titled “The Reformation’s Recovery of Justification by Faith Alone.” It’s a little bit worn. A great read in loaning out to others.

Justification in the blood of Jesus,

J. R. G.  
[prisoner in Texas]

## Questions concerning treatment of disciplined members

*Editor’s note: In response to a recent editorial, a reader began correspondence with the author. The editors decided that this correspondence could be useful for many readers. With permission of the correspondent and with some slight editing, it is printed here. Our thanks to him for agreeing to its publication. We pray it is of benefit to all.*

Prof. Gritters,

Thank you for your timely article in the recent *Standard Bearer* on wayward children: “Our Forgotten (?) Wayward Children,” (November 15, 2023). My wife and I have been discussing this subject frequently over the last couple of months.... [The paragraph continues by explaining that a person close to them was excommunicated.]

I am concerned and confused about the activities taken after excommunication that you refer to in the article: pray, admonish, and be good examples.

I have not been able to reach a conclusion on where this is best to take place. I struggle with the holiday family get-together as the place. I feel this should be done in a more intimate setting than a crowded house of many family members. I don't feel that an admonition at the door and a mention during the meal prayer is sufficient to justify spending the day with someone who doesn't need my Savior in their life. However, should I use the rest of the day to show good examples to the wayward?

The Form [of excommunication] also confuses me. The form tells us to have no company with him that he may be ashamed, not counting him as an enemy, but admonishing him. Then the prayer talks about the cutting off from the community of the church, in order that we not be partakers of their sin, and that the person may become ashamed of their sin. It goes on to say we need with a pious zeal to labor with good Christian admoni-

tions and examples to bring them back. What does this look like!?

Is the proper way to meet privately with the wayward, invite him to my home or coffee to talk periodically? Or should I invite him to family gatherings and try to properly admonish him there and allow him to partake of the family atmosphere as if he is acceptable in his walk before God?

Is admonishment direct, and alone, with him enough to then eat and fellowship with him?

I understand that God may have a way and a plan for him and my admonishment and/or example may play a part; we're just confused on how the example should look without making light of his wayward walk and showing the proper example to my children....

Thank you for your work and your writings. Any suggestions or approaches you can help us with would be greatly appreciated.

Name withheld

---

Dear brother,

My heart aches for you and your extended family, even as it did and does for other families (and my own as well) who struggle with how to relate to the wayward. I have often said to people that in my ministry of forty years now, if I put all the hard questions into two piles: 1) how to relate to impenitent relatives, and 2) all the other questions, pile #1 would probably be larger than pile #2. So your questions are not surprising.

Let me write a few things to start a discussion. Please write back and reflect on these if you wish.

1. It is always challenging to establish a wise balance between having fellowship that is too close (a danger on the one side) and shunning (a danger on the other side). So many factors come into play. Your decision about how it will look in your circumstance must keep both those dangers in view. The biblical principles I want to abide by include these:

*First, I Corinthians 5:9 and the biblical warning not to mingle my life with his.* The Greek for “have no company” means to mix and mingle your life with his life. This does not forbid contact here and there, which is why Calvin speaks of communication that is “*too familiar*” (the early Dutch synods spoke of “*overly familiar*” fellowship). Nevertheless, there must be a concerted effort on my part that something significant changes in my relationship with the former member.

*Second, II Thessalonians 3:14 and the biblical call-*



ing to “admonish him as a brother” so that he may be ashamed. We must not fail to speak to the former member. Failure to speak to him is sin as much as having “too familiar” fellowship with him is sin. Thus, as Calvin also wisely says, “there is a difference between excommunication and anathema.”

2. The severity of the sin of which the person is guilty is a factor. Going all the way through to excommunication is as serious as can be. This is different than the relative who left your church because he does not heed the elder’s call to attend worship twice each Sunday but is going to another Reformed church once each Sunday. (By this I do not minimize Sabbath observance but give an illustration).

3. Where this excommunicated person comes into my presence also makes a difference to me. For example, I would not invite to an event that I hosted a relative who is living with someone who is not his lawful spouse. I will try to talk to him to admonish him once in a while; I will have breakfast with him in private. But I will not invite him to a social gathering with others. However, when he is present at someone else’s social gathering where I also have been invited is harder. A large wedding where we will be in the same room is one thing. A small family gathering where we plan to watch football after eating Thanksgiving dinner would be much harder for me. If I attended the latter (and I don’t know if I would), I would want with a meek spirit to make clear to all that I have admonished him to turn from his sin. And I likely would not sit and laugh with him about the game, lest the impression is left that my relationship with him is the same as it always was.

4. In this circumstance (such a relative is invited to a family gathering to which I am also invited) I probably also have responsibility to speak to those who invited both him and me. They probably could use kind and loving help as much as the wayward.

5. Another factor in making my decisions is how others in this social gathering view the impenitent. Do they approve of his sin? Have they admonished him? What they have done and said to the impenitent is important. If other family members have not admonished him or even approve his behavior, I would be more hesitant to attend, because it may appear that I approve his actions as they do.

6. Returning to II Thessalonians 3, I am reminded of what my goal is: the sinner’s *shame* may bring him to *repentance*. “Have no company with him, that he may be ashamed.” (By the way, the ESV says “have nothing to do with him,” and the NIV: “do not associate with him.”) Our withholding familiar fellowship aims at making him “ashamed.” Likewise, Paul says (I Cor.

5:5) that excommunication aims at the complete ruin of their earthly life (first step) so that they may come to their senses, repent, and be saved (ultimate goal!). Too many want to do just the opposite: they want to make the sinner’s life *normal* and make him feel *comfortable*. I may be labeled as mean and unkind when I want to make the person uncomfortable (“ashamed”). You have felt this. But it is not ‘mean’ to do what God calls us to do to make someone feel shame, any more than it is ‘mean’ for elders to excommunicate him. Both are acts of love, aimed at his repentance and salvation.

7. I also want to make decisions that can be *consistently* applied. Some will fellowship with those who embrace some false doctrines (an Arminian Baptist relative) or whose Sabbath observance is gross violation of the fourth commandment but refuse fellowship with one divorced and remarried; or vice versa. Consistency is an important principle for Christian conduct.

8. Finally, I find that good people make different judgments in light of differing circumstances. I want to be very careful not to draw lines that are too sharp and may be simplistic, and not too quickly to judge others who make different decisions.

God give you wisdom and much grace.

In Christ,  
Prof. B. Gritters

Dear Prof. Gritters,

You asked me to reflect on your last letter.

First, fellowship or contact with this individual is difficult. About the only time I see him would be at a family get-together, holiday, or wedding. As you mention, I don’t feel this is the place to pull him aside and admonish him, because very little substance can be brought to the conversation in such a setting. I did not invite him to our [family function] recently. My relatives were a bit upset about this.... I have another relative that had him over for dinner specifically to talk to him and admonish him. This was a great idea. But some think that this opens us up to allow him at all our family functions. We do not believe so. I need to have him over as well and admonish him, but I don’t believe that this will allow future get-togethers. I always come back to this: he willfully left the church by excommunication, basically shaking his fist at God as an unnecessary part of his life. I cannot associate with such a one.

Second, Article 28 of the Belgic Confession clearly states we are to be bound to the true church and out of it there is no salvation. He has dismissed God’s church. I cannot think of a sin any more gross: it is a denial that there is a God. I’m not sure anything is worse.

I appreciate your approach to letting others know my

view if an occasion occurs where the individual will be present. This stand also may not be easy when all do not agree with my stance on this.

I would like to start strong rather than waffle and try to change to a harder stance in the future. As you say, consistency is a “must” and could be necessary for other possible relationships in the future. This is where the “ashamed” part comes in as well—very important. I never want him to feel as if I condone his lifestyle and lack of spiritual walk and talk.

Thank you again for your time and work; this has been a good exercise for me to work through this issue with someone, rather than just keep reading/praying and trying to go it alone.

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Dear brother,

Your last letter reminds me of a couple things I should add:

First, God’s people ought to be united in their stance toward the impenitent. Discipline is the act of the entire congregation, not merely of the elders, so for the congregation to be divided does damage to the act and thus to the sinner. My 2023 summer classes on discipline (see our seminary website, <https://www.prcts.org/post/2023-summer-class-on-church-discipline>) began by showing *why*, and the seven ways *how*, all church members perform discipline. No member may undermine this work by improper fellowship with a former member. Of course, division is not surprising, as it is the devil’s specialty. Paul’s comment in II Corinthians 2:6,7 that discipline was carried out “by the majority” hints that there were some holdouts in the congregation’s exercise of discipline. That was not healthy. If there is a

difference of opinion in a family, it would be wise to seek the counsel of the elders.

Second, to gain this unity, we should all carefully read the Forms of Excommunication and Readmittance, and the Scripture passages that apply to this aspect of discipline (Matt 18:15-17; I Rom. 16:17; Cor. 5:9-11; II Thess. 3:6, 14, 15; II John 10, 11). We will all agree that our actions will be governed by these.

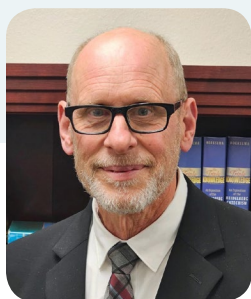
Third, the pain of keeping no company with a family member is especially acute. Thus a) sympathize with and pray for the closer family—it is their son, daughter, brother, spouse, father, mother, who is no longer a part of their fellowship; b) remind yourselves of Jesus’ encouraging promise in Mark 10:28-30 to those who, for *His* sake, must leave their family members.

Fourth, those who leave *before* final excommunication must be treated in the same way as those who “stuck it out” to the end. All members who were placed under discipline, even the first step of “silent censure,” were charged with impenitence in sin. Such a charge is Jesus Christ saying to them through the church, “If you do not repent, you will perish.”

Fifth, I want always to examine my own heart and conduct more than the misconduct of others who treat impenitent family members wrongly. *My heart*: am I acting in love and a spirit of meekness? *My conduct*: am I truly taking action to help the sinner, both in frequent prayers and regular visits to bring him the gospel and show him my care?

May our study of this matter serve the goals we have in discipline—the salvation of the sinner, the purity of the church, and the glory of God.

In Christ,  
Prof. Gritters



## Search the Scriptures

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

### Habakkuk: The just shall live by faith (16—concluded)

## Rejoicing in troubled times

Previous article in this series: December 15, 2023, p. 154.

Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the

God of my salvation. The LORD God is my strength, and he will make my feet like hinds’ feet, and he will make me to walk upon mine high places. To the chief singer on my stringed instruments.

Habakkuk 3:17-19

If chapter 3 is the crown of Habakkuk's prophecy, then verses 17-19 are the jewels in that crown. Doubts have turned to faith in God, complaints to song, and questioning to confidence. No wonder then that these verses are often quoted and remembered.

Habakkuk describes a time when "the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls." Habakkuk is not using these verses as we use them, to give thanks to God for an abundance of food and crops, recognizing the possibility that it might be otherwise and that we must be thankful always. Such use of the verse is not inappropriate, but is not what Habakkuk is talking about.

Nor is he describing a coming time of drought or famine; but he is remembering what God had said about the coming of Babylon and the devastation of the land by that enemy (cf. Is. 6:11). There would be nothing left of fields and vineyards, flocks and herds when Babylon marched through the breadth of the land, to possess the dwelling places that were not theirs (1:6) and when they gathered the captivity like sand (1:9).

What would happen to the fields and flocks was only part and picture of what would happen to the nation, as Isaiah prophesied: "And now go to; I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard: I will take away the hedge thereof, and it shall be eaten up; and break down the wall thereof, and it shall be trodden down: And I will lay it waste: it shall not be pruned, nor digged; but there shall come up briers and thorns: I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah his pleasant plant: and he looked for judgment, but behold oppression; for righteousness, but behold a cry" (Is. 5:5-7).

Even Habakkuk could not foresee the horrors of the Babylonian conquest and captivity as described by Jeremiah in Lamentations 2:20-22 and other parts of that book: "Behold, O LORD, and consider to whom thou hast done this. Shall the women eat their fruit, and children of a span long? shall the priest and the prophet be slain in the sanctuary of the Lord? The young and the old lie on the ground in the streets: my virgins and my young men are fallen by the sword; thou hast slain them in the day of thine anger; thou hast killed, and not pitied. Thou hast called as in a solemn day my terrors round about, so that in the day of the LORD's anger none escaped nor remained: those that I have swaddled and brought up hath mine enemy consumed."

Habakkuk describes the loss both of luxuries, figs and the fruit of the vine, and of the things necessary for

survival, the olive and the flocks and herds with their meat and milk. All would be destroyed by the ravages of Babylon's coming. The people would be left with nothing; their homes, their cities and their place of worship would be destroyed and they would be taken to Babylon as captives. Their children would be taken from them as were Daniel and his friends, many of them would be slaughtered and unspeakable things would be done to them by the Babylonians.

Yet Habakkuk's prayer and song amount to this: "No matter what horrors lie ahead, and no matter how bad our situation becomes, God will still be Jehovah, the LORD, who established His unbreakable covenant with us. Things will likely be worse than anything I can imagine, but God will still be the God of our salvation. When all things seem to be against us and we are no longer in the land God promised; when there is no earthly reason left to rejoice and be thankful, then I will still rejoice in the Lord."

What a prayer for troubled times and for the end times! Nothing left but God, but having Him we still have everything: "Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee. My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever (Ps. 73:5, 6).

Lloyd-Jones puts it well:

Herein we as Christians are to differ from the world. When hell is let loose, and the worst comes to the worst, we are to do more than "put up with it" or "be steady." We are to know a holy joy and manifest a spirit of rejoicing. We are to be "more than conquerors," instead of merely exercising self-control with the aid of an iron will. We are to rejoice in the Lord and to joy in the God of our salvation. Such a time is a test for our Christian profession. If we are not then more than conquerors, we are failing as Christians.<sup>1</sup>

Yet our response is often not this but rather, "How can God do this to poor me? What did I do to deserve this? I cannot go on under these circumstances. Does not God love me?" Or, "Will the Lord cast off for ever? and will he be favourable no more? Is his mercy clean gone for ever? doth his promise fail for evermore? Hath God forgotten to be gracious? hath he in anger shut up his tender mercies?" (Ps. 77:7-9). Trials sometimes bring not joyful song but discouragement, depression, and unhappiness, while we wish to die and hope the Lord will take us away.

Habakkuk dedicates his song, not just these verses, but the whole chapter, to the chief singer, so that it could be sung in the temple in the years that remained

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1 D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *From Fear to Faith: Studies in the Book of Habakkuk* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1982), 71.

before the Babylonian conquest and by the Jews when the temple was destroyed and the singers scattered. In dedicating it to the chief singer, he dedicates it also to us to be prayed and sung when things are at their worst. When church troubles are overwhelming; when families are scattered by the evils of these last days, when there seems no reason at all to rejoice, then this must be our song. With its pleas for mercy, its remembrance of the Lord's work in the past, and its reference to the Lord's Anointed, there is nothing else to sing and pray when troubles come:

Though troubles great o'ershadow me,  
Thou art my refuge strong;  
My mouth shall praise Thee all the day,  
Thy honor be my song.

(Psalter #191, stanza 1, Psalm 71).

Habakkuk uses the name LORD, Jehovah, the great covenant name, because in what precedes he has been reviewing the history of God's covenant faithfulness. He uses the name God to emphasize God's sovereignty in all His dealings with His people. Captivity? Babylon? If that is what God is pleased to do, then it must happen, but God will forever be the sovereign God of the covenant who uses all for good. And so Habakkuk uses both names together in verse 19 in celebration of both truths.

The two words Habakkuk uses to tell of his joy in verse 18 show us that his joy was not the muted or grudging joy of one forced to acknowledge God's sovereign goodness, but real, heart-felt joy. The first word, translated "rejoicing," is to jump for joy, and the second word means to spin around or dance for joy. How many would be able to do that, even say what Habakkuk says, in the face of earthly troubles? Only grace makes that possible.

His joy, as ours, is ever only in God as the God of our salvation, that is to say, in God as He reveals Himself in Jesus. That name, the God of my salvation, though Habakkuk could not have known it, is very close to the personal name of our Savior, Jesus. Yet there can be no doubt, that though the name Jesus had not yet been given as the personal name of our Savior, Habakkuk, like Abraham, saw His day and was glad (John 8:56).

Never may our joy be dependent on circumstances or on others. There are those who think it impossible to rejoice when they are seriously ill or dying. Husbands and wives, friends, church members, often think that unless circumstances and people change, they cannot be happy. Rejoicing is always in God as the God of our salvation or there is no possibility of rejoicing.

Habakkuk adds to his joyful resolution his confidence that God would be with him and bless him

through the troubled times ahead: "The LORD God is my strength, and he will make my feet like hinds' feet, and he will make me to walk upon mine high places" (v. 19). These words are a near quote of Psalm 18:32, 33, words first sung by David when God delivered him from his enemies. Thus Habakkuk ends his prayer and song as he began by harking back to God's dealing with His people in ancient times, dealings that forever prove His faithfulness and mercy.

That God would be Habakkuk's strength does not just mean that God would give him perseverance and help in the face of Babylon's coming, but that God, living in Habakkuk's heart, would be everything Habakkuk needed. That truth, too, is fulfilled in Christ. In Him by faith we share everything that is His—His Father, His family, His Spirit, His life. Even our strength is no longer our own but His, for we have no strength of our own.

When Habakkuk says, "he will make my feet like hinds' feet," he is expressing his confidence in God's power to help him rejoice in the troubled times ahead, to jump and spin around for joy, to rejoice in the God of His salvation. Some commentators have, however, made these words a reference to Judah's return from captivity, and that may be so in light of a passage like Isaiah 40:31, "But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint." Certainly it looks forward also to the blessedness of heaven, when the high places of which Habakkuk speaks will be the inheritance of God's people forever. Nevertheless, they are an expression, too, of his joy in the Lord.

The reference to his stringed instruments is not only a reference to the words of chapters 3 as a prayer and song and not only a reference to the purpose of this chapter, but also a reference to the permanence of this song, for it is a song that will be sung forever by God's people. Habakkuk's words are similar to those of Hezekiah in Isaiah 38:20, "The LORD was ready to save me: therefore we will sing my songs to the stringed instruments all the days of our life in the house of the LORD." Hezekiah, healed of his illness and assured that the line of Christ would continue, resolved to be forever thankful. So did Habakkuk. So do we now and forever.

We have seen that Habakkuk dedicates his song and prayer to the chief singer. In the temple that was a man like Asaph or Heman. In the church it is Christ. He is the One who sings in every psalm and whose gracious voice is heard in the singing of every saint. He is the One whose voice is heard in this song and in the singing of the church in such times as would come on Judah. He



says, “I will declare thy name unto my brethren, in the midst of the church will I sing praise unto thee” (Heb. 2:12). He is the One, present in our hearts, who brings up on our lips this song when there is, humanly speaking, no reason to sing. He is the reason, often the only reason to sing in troubled times.

This song is His also because on that worst of all days, when the fig tree did not blossom, when there was no fruit in the vines and when the blood of the everlasting covenant flowed instead of wine; when the labor of the olive failed, and the fields yielded no meat; when the Lamb of God was cut off from the fold, and when there was no herd in the stalls for all had fled, turning everyone to his own way, then the LORD revealed Himself to us as never before as the God of our salvation, deliver-

ing our feet from lowest hell and setting them on high. He is the chief singer always.

In Him the Lord has fulfilled His word “to appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he might be glorified” (Is. 61:3). In Him we received a blessedness with which all the sufferings of the former times cannot be compared until that day comes when every tear has been wiped away and there is no more sorrow or death or crying or pain. Blessed be His name forever, and until He comes may every song be sung in His honor and company.



## A word fitly spoken

Rev. Joseph Holstege, pastor of First PRC in Grand Rapids, Michigan

# Honor

You cannot see honor. You cannot point to it, measure it, weigh it. It will not fill your stomach when you are hungry. It will not refresh you when you are hot. It will not warm you when you are cold. It is nothing. And yet, it is everything.

There is a lust for honor that burns insatiably in the human heart. To have the royal apparel around your shoulders, to ride in the king’s chariot pulled by the king’s horse, to wear the crown, to be proclaimed before all as the man whom the king delights to honor—men will kill, they will cheat, they will do all kinds of dishonorable things just to be in such a state (Esther 6:6-9)! And when they have it, they will flaunt it. They will pronounce over their little kingdoms what Nebuchadnezzar pronounced over his. “Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for the house of the kingdom by the might of my power, and for the honor of my majesty?” (Dan. 4:30).

What is ironic is that such men actually degrade themselves in their relentless pursuit of honor. The true honor in a human being cannot be won or achieved, but only recognized. When God created man, He made him “a little lower than the angels” and “crowned him with glory and honor” (Ps. 8:5; cf. Heb. 2:9). That makes everything he does significant enough for God to weigh it in the balance as the Judge. And that applies to every one of them, male and female, rich and poor, big

and small, young and old. Nonetheless, “man that is in honor...understandeth [it] not,” and so turns to counterfeit honors. And eventually he becomes, in the case of Nebuchadnezzar quite literally, “like the beasts that perish” (Ps. 49:20; cf. Dan. 4:33). God strips their honor away, for “as snow in summer, and as rain in harvest, so honor is not seemly for a fool” (Prov. 26:1).

God’s idea of honor is exactly the opposite. Where foolish men seek honor through strife, clawing and prying their way to the top, God says “it is an honor for a man to cease from strife” (Prov. 20:3). Where foolish men say honor comes to those who seize it for themselves, God says “riches, and honor, and life” come “by humility and the fear of the Lord” (Prov. 22:4). Where foolish women aim to be honorable by sitting in the gates with the men, God says “strength and honor” are the clothing of the woman who fears him by serving her household (Prov. 31:25). Where foolish husbands despise the delicate nature of their wives, God says she ought to be given “honor...as unto the weaker vessel” (I Pet. 3:7). Where we think some members of the body of Christ are “less honorable” because they “seem to be more feeble,” God says these members not only are “necessary,” but on them we ought to “bestow more abundant honor” (I Cor. 12:23) as we walk in the more excellent way of love.

Honor is really an attitude of the heart. The Old

Testament word often rendered into English as “honor” means, at its root, “heavy or weighty.” If you compare the heart to an old-fashioned scale, how heavily certain persons and objects weigh on that scale reveals what the person finds valuable and important. And this “heaviness” will be evident in the way the honorable person or place or thing is treated. To use a familiar example, to blaspheme the name of God is to treat His name lightly, that is, to take His name “in vain” (Ex. 20:7; Deut. 5:11). To honor the name of God is to let it weigh heavily on your mind and tongue so that you treat it with the utmost gravity and respect.

Now, God calls us to bestow such honor on certain persons whom He has lifted into certain positions. Where we may be inclined to view the decrees and laws of the powers that be with lightness and disdain, God calls us to render “honor to whom honor” is due (Rom. 13:7). Where we may be tempted to exploit the weaknesses of parents as a reason to treat their rules as nothing, God calls children to “honor thy father and thy mother” (Ex. 20:12; Deut. 5:16). Where human nature may incline us to discount the message of a prophet who comes from our own country (Matt. 13:57), God calls us to count those who labor in the word and doctrine as worthy of “double honor” (I Tim. 5:17).

This has nothing to do with the inherent weightiness or significance of these men themselves. These men may

be petulant and small-minded. These parents may be riddled with weaknesses and infirmities. Even the greatest and most magnanimous among them are counted by God “as the small dust of the balance” and as “less than nothing” (Is. 40:15, 17). But God has put His own name and honor on them. God has ordained the powers that be. God has placed parents over their children. God has sent the prophets that speak in His name. And to honor these is to honor God, which is why the calling to “fear God” is placed side by side with the command to “honor the king” (I Pet. 2:17).

In short, what we must remember is that all honor belongs to God. Honor is before Him always as the royal carpet for His feet (Ps. 96:6). Honor is around His shoulders as the robe of the heavenly King (Ps. 104:1). Honor lives in His house (Psalm 26:8). It comes from Him, and it always returns to Him. Those who refuse to honor God, will honor Him nonetheless. “I will get me honor upon Pharaoh,” God says, “and upon all his host, upon his chariots, and upon his horsemen” (Ex. 14:17). Those who honor Him willingly will be rewarded beyond any reckoning. They will be carried up to the host of heaven, where they will lift up their voice to say, “Amen: Blessing, and glory, and wisdom, and thanksgiving, and honor...be unto our God forever and ever. Amen” (Rev. 7:12).



## I believe

Prof. Cory Griess, professor of Practical Theology in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary and member of First PRC, Grand Rapids, MI

# Gender dysphoria and transgenderism (5) “Religious” objections to the Bible’s teaching on gender

Previous articles in this series: Volume 99, pages 13, 45, 69, 114.

## Introduction

In a previous article on the subject of gender dysphoria and transgenderism I have defined gender dysphoria, transgender, and transgenderism. So-called “gender dysphoria” is a distressing feeling of being different from one’s biological sex. On the other hand, being “transgender” is *accepting* the errant feeling of gender dysphoria and therefore identifying oneself as another gender. Transgenderism is a philosophy that promotes the notion that a person’s gender is not given in a person’s biological sex.

We have also seen in previous articles that both the Bible and God’s good created order together teach that God has created two sexes, male and female, and that one’s gender is determined by one’s sex.<sup>1</sup> This remains true despite the Fall, which affects everything, including sex and gender. The Bible clearly identifies gender roles for males and females. Scripture also teaches that there are gener-

<sup>1</sup> “Sex” is the biological organization of a being for reproductive function (male or female). “Gender” is the social expression of who one is. The proper (biblical) relationship between sex and gender is that gender is the *proper social expression* of one’s sex.

al characteristics peculiar to the two different sexes that allow the members of these sexes to carry out their gender roles. Furthermore, the Bible declares that presenting oneself as a gender different from that of one's sex is sin against God. By observing all of this, we have gained a fairly comprehensive view of the Bible's teaching on sex and gender.

There is a movement, however, that attempts to use the Bible itself to dismiss all of this teaching. There are three main "religious" objections to the Scripture's teaching that there are only two genders and that those genders are determined by an individual's biological sex. I will present these arguments and respond to them in this and the following two articles.

## The argument

The first objection makes an appeal to Galatians 3:28 which reads, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus." Some argue that the apostle Paul is teaching here that, while in the beginning God created humanity male and female, for those who are in Christ all natural distinctions among people fall away, including that distinction of male/female. According to this teaching, if a person is in the kingdom of Christ, he is no longer distinguishable by national and ethnic characteristics (Jew nor Greek), his position in labor (bond nor free), or sex or gender differences (male nor female). Therefore, part of the effect of Christ's work on the cross is to cut the tie between sex and gender for those who are in the kingdom of God. Consequently, part of the message of Christianity is that coming into the kingdom of God "frees" a person to choose any gender they wish.

In 2013 Heather Ann Clements, former theology professor at Azusa Pacific University, an evangelical college near Los Angeles, declared herself in a speech at the university to be Heath Adam Clements. In her speech she appealed to Galatians 3:28 as the reason why she believed her decision to present herself as a man was blessed by God. Her argument was that the creation of humanity into two genders was not a part of the good creation of God, but a part of the "brokenness" of creation. According to Miss Clements, God originally created mankind without gender. Then later, God divided human beings into two genders. This was not a good thing God did but was part of the brokenness of this world. However, in Christ Jesus, that brokenness is restored to wholeness by the removal of gender differentiation. Miss Clements believes this return to the original genderless humanity is what Paul is referring to when he says in Christ "we are neither male nor female." In

other words, Paul teaches that in the kingdom of God Christians transcend gender.<sup>2</sup>

As the argument in her speech progresses, Miss Clements then moves to Galatians 5:1, arguing that Paul is referring to liberation from gender when he goes on to say that we are to "stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage." Miss Clements argues, "Paul continues after he says we are not male and female, [to say] 'we are one.' That's the important thing. And then he says, 'It's for freedom that you were set free. Don't live as slaves to anything, gender conventions, or anything else.... We are free in Christ to live as free people,' Paul tells us, not bound by gender or any other limitation."<sup>3</sup> For Miss Clements, the message of the gospel of Christ, and thus the goal of His suffering on the cross, is the removal of gender distinctions.

The result of this work of Christ, according to Miss Clements, is that all Christians may choose to be whatever gender they desire to be. Since in Christ, all gender requirements fall away, and therefore any remaining gender expectations are "cultural restraints we impose on each other," "we are free, even empowered, to be fully ourselves in Christ,"<sup>4</sup> no matter what gender we choose.

Miss Clements does not make this argument as an outlier. Rather her basic argument concerning Galatians 3:28 represents the argument of an entire theological movement in liberal Christianity.<sup>5</sup>

## Furthering of a previous error

Strikingly, a similar twisting of the biblical phrase, "there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus," has long been used as the basis for allowing women to hold special offices in the church.

2 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Y\\_Hns6IYT4&t=956s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Y_Hns6IYT4&t=956s) Accessed December 4, 2023. She makes this argument at minute mark 12:30-14:20.

3 Clements makes this argument at minute mark 13:40-16:15. Interestingly, she at one point accused the school of "outing her" when in fact she was the one who told a supervisor of her decision to change her name. Later she had to backtrack and relate that she was not really outed. Rather, she said, "I felt that way." "But what happened actually, I can't say too much about that, but I shared my impending name change with the supervisor and we tried to figure out ways to manage what that implied...and it didn't go well. Within 24 hours I was asked to leave." Feelings do in the end give way to objective reality. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ybffUHxSKI4&list=RDLV7Y\\_Hns6IYT4&index=3](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ybffUHxSKI4&list=RDLV7Y_Hns6IYT4&index=3)

4 Clements makes this argument at minute mark 15:20-15:55.

5 See, for example, <https://reformationproject.org/case/gender-complementarity>.

The argument then was that if we are no longer male nor female in Christ, then whatever the Scriptures say about gender roles in church no longer applies. Paul in Galatians 3:28 set the trajectory for the church to remove distinctions between male and female roles in the kingdom of God. Perhaps, so the argument goes, Paul was bound by some cultural conventions so that his practice (I Tim. 2:12) could not always match his own doctrine.<sup>6</sup> Yet, when the church *coming after Paul* takes gender distinctions away and allows women to hold church offices, so the argument continues, the church is putting Paul's statement in Galatians 3:28 into better practice than even Paul himself was able to do.

With the transgender movement, the argument is advanced in a way that even those who used the same argument to advocate for women in church office could not have foreseen (logical though it is). If the distinction between male and female is literally removed in Christ, then not only are we all free to hold whatever church office we want, but we are also free to *be whatever gender* we desire, and we are free to *have sex* with those of whatever gender we desire.

### Countering the argument

However, the apostle is not arguing that the distinctions of male and female, Jew and Greek, bond and free, no longer *exist* for those in Jesus Christ. He is arguing that, while these distinctions are a reality, they have no effect on one's justification, adoption, or any aspect of salvation in Christ. The Judaizers against whom Paul was writing were arguing that these distinctions *did* mean that some could not be justified and adopted into the kingdom of God. Therefore, if the Gentile converts did not very really *become* Jewish by circumcision and obedience to dietary laws, they could not be justified. The argument of the Judaizers was that natural, God-created distinctions can prevent justification. Arguing for justification by faith alone, the apostle, then, is making the point that when it comes to justification before God, the distinctions between human beings are irrelevant.

In fact, to make Paul say more than that proves too much. If the apostle is really arguing that the cross and resurrection of Christ abolish human distinctions, then

Christianity ends all structured relationships and causes the breakdown of society! By this logic, there is no more distinction between boss and employee in the sphere of society if both boss and employee (bond and free) are in the kingdom of Christ. The employee does not have to obey the boss; the boss does not have to pay the employee, for these distinctions no longer exist. And with regard to gender distinctions, if the apostle intends to say that there is no more male and female *altogether* since we are in Christ, then we do not in fact get to choose to be the *opposite* gender. If we are male, the opposite gender is female. But the argument is that in Christ there are no longer genders known as male and female. In fact, then, if the argument were true, we must conclude we are all sexless and genderless after we come into the kingdom. A consistent position would require all Christians to deface their genitalia and present themselves as androgynous, genderless beings.

### Even further development of the error

Despite its absurdity, the erroneous line of reasoning persists and even broadens out. In a recent book, Cheryl B. Anderson argues that the apostle's point is that the natural distinctions between people that the apostle speaks of in Galatians 3:28, fall away *utterly* for *everyone* after Jesus died on the cross. No longer is the argument that these distinctions fall away when one becomes a Christian, but rather, the death of Christ objectively accomplishes the destruction of all natural differences between *every* human being *everywhere* regardless of whether or not they are Christians. Recognizing the oddity of arguing that the distinction between male and female is part of the "brokenness" of creation that must be removed by Christ, Anderson says the coming of Christ undoes

even the good distinction God established in His original creating work in the beginning. With reference to Galatians 3:28, Anderson opines, "Moreover, a discernible theological principle in Paul's writings is that the death and resurrection of Jesus shattered *creation's* boundaries and also shattered traditional human boundaries such as those of gender."<sup>7</sup>

**However, the apostle is not arguing that the distinctions of male and female, Jew and Greek, bond and free, no longer exist for those in Jesus Christ. He is arguing that, while these distinctions are a reality, they have no effect on one's justification, adoption, or any aspect of salvation in Christ.**

<sup>6</sup> Thus, these have pitted Paul's writing in I Timothy 2 against his writing in Galatians 3:28.

<sup>7</sup> Cheryl Anderson, *Ancient Laws and Contemporary Controversies: The Need for Inclusive Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 97.



This is astounding. Christ's coming has "shattered creation's boundaries"! Because of the coming of Jesus there is no more marriage, therefore, and no more male and female anywhere and everywhere. In other words, according to Anderson, the message of Christianity is that Jesus came to undo any notion that human identity is determined by the will of God found in the Bible or creation. The gospel is that all are free to be and do anything that they desire.

### Lessons to learn

There are a few lessons here for us. First, principles work through. What began as a twisting of God's Word with respect to the calling of men and women in the church has found its end in the argument that Scripture teaches there are no gender distinctions in the coming of Christ. If this is not the clearest example of the bitter fruit of manipulating the plain teaching of God's Word, where will a clearer one be found?

Second, there is an innate, rebellious desire among men, not only to undo the law of God, but to undo the law of God...in the name of *God Himself*. As part of the rebellious desires planted in us at the Fall, we still believe we can overcome God and become as God, de-

termining good and evil. What greater expression of this, than that man writes his own definitions of good and evil with respect to the most basic aspects of God's will and places those definitions in God's own mouth! The world will continue to develop in this rebellion until this root sin in humanity finds its fullness in the anti-christian kingdom. Watch for it!

And yet, within your nature and mine also this wickedness lives, child of God. Watch for it there too!

Third, the wonder of the gospel that Paul *is in fact* declaring in Galatians 3:28 is that any distinction among men, whether God-created or man-forced, does not prevent the imputation of the righteousness of Christ or citizenship in His kingdom to one for whom Christ died and who thus comes genuinely to Him. Even if a person has gone so far as to deface their genitalia in an effort to join the rebellion against God's good order that lives within and without himself, God can redeem him or her, giving the gift of repentance, faith, and a new life of submissive obedience to Christ's good way. *Any* and *every* redeemed sinner, no matter what had gone before in their life, will stand before God just as if he or she had not sinned. What a gospel to proclaim to the ends of the earth, and to every person!



## When thou sittest in thine house

Mrs. Sherry Koole, wife, mother, and grandmother in Hope PRC in Grand Rapids, Michigan

## Hide and seek

**And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.**

**Deuteronomy 6:6, 7**

The title of this rubric and the passage of Scripture from whence it is taken sets before us the immense, all-consuming, and endless responsibility of godly parents. We are to instruct our children in the commandments, the statutes, and judgments of our God (Deut 6:1). Just as the Israelites of old were instructed by Moses at Mount Sinai to teach these commandments, statutes,

and judgments to their children, we are given that same command to instruct our children today.

This instruction involves far more than just verbally sharing with them the knowledge we have of God, His laws, His grace, and His redeeming love—a knowledge that for many of us has been passed down through the line of continued generations. Verse seven tells us that we must be instructing our children while sitting in the house and walking by the way, and that we are to be busy doing so both night and day. It is not just a one time, or even once-a-day, activity. Rather, it is a continual activity of instruction both inside and outside the home. It involves all of our everyday life as we pilgrimage here below. This instruction has no regard as

to where we might be, what we might be doing, or what time of day or night it may be. Rather, this calling to instruct our children is a tremendous, all-consuming, lifelong responsibility placed upon us by God.

What a calling! What a responsibility! Frightening at times. So much so that we can identify with Moses of old when called upon and commanded by God to lead His people Israel out of the land of Egypt (Ex. 3). Though we are humbled, and even honored, by the task God has given, we at times, like Moses, can cry, “Why us? Why us, Lord? Who are we that we should bring forth and raise the children of the Most High God?” Surely He does not need us. And yet, He chooses to employ us, weak means that we are, to fulfill His will. Daily we must pray and petition our God for the grace and strength needed to execute our calling in a way that is God-glorifying and pleasing to Him.

Our children learn in many different ways—verbal instruction, written directions, hands-on-activities, and by example. They learn in all these ways at home, in the church, and in the school. And as parents, we implement many of these same methods while teaching our children to play. Take, for example, the many board games our children may enjoy playing. Though they come with written instructions, our children often learn just as well with verbal instruction and a *trial attempt* at playing the game. The physical games our children play are also learned best with verbal instruction accompanied with some *learn-as-you-play* direction—games such as basketball, volleyball, soccer, football, softball, baseball, hockey and so on. After some simple explanation of the rules, children gain some of their best knowledge by having hands-on guidance while playing each game.

I would like to take this opportunity to look at the simple game of *Hide and Seek*. Though simple in itself, children still need to learn how to play. So we explain to the littles ones, “You count to (a specified number) while *Uncle Jo-Jo hides*. When you finish counting, you try to find him. It is as easy as that.” They happily begin to count. Then happily begin to *seek*—but they *search* aimlessly here and there. Finally, with some guidance from *grandma*, they find him *hiding* behind the living room recliner. They try again—and, with *grandma’s* help, he is found underneath a blanket. And one last attempt at *seeking* finds him *hiding* in a nearby closet.

They squeal with delight and excitement at every discovery of his *hiding* place.

Now it is their turn to *hide*. Uncle Jo-Jo begins to count—and then *search*. He looks here and there before knowingly *seeking* and finding one child *hiding* behind the recliner, one underneath the blanket, and another one or two in the closet. But after just a few more times of their *seeking* (with no assistance), the children begin making their own attempts and choices at finding *hiding* places for themselves. They have learned well by observing, and with some guidance from others. They have discovered that the more they play and *seek*, the better they learn to *hide*.

Over the years, I have heard a fair number of references made from the pulpit to various sporting events or types of child’s play, which the speaker then used to bring application or clarity to some point of the sermon for his listeners. So I wonder, is it possible to take this simple game of *Hide and Seek* and make spiritual applications to little children and young people? The *grandma’s heart* in me would like to believe so.

We know that even though we are children of God, we are far from perfect, for that is something not even possible in this life. But, having the Word of God deeply embedded within our hearts, *hidden* really, we strive to live obediently to His laws and commands, making daily supplications to Him that He might keep us from sin

and evil. In Psalm 119:10, 11 we read, “With my whole heart have I *sought* thee: O let me not wander from thy commandments. Thy word have I *hid* in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee.” The psalmist speaks first of *seeking* with his heart and then *hiding* in his heart. Our children need to learn that as they too *seek* the

**The psalmist speaks first of *seeking* with his heart and then *hiding* in his heart. Our children need to learn that as they too *seek* the Lord, and the more they seek the Lord, the more deeply His Word will be *hidden* within their hearts, assisting and sustaining them in living as they are called to live, in humble adoration of and obedience to the God whom they love and serve.**

Lord, and the more they *seek* the Lord, the more deeply His Word will be *hidden* within their hearts, assisting and sustaining them in living as they are called to live, in humble adoration of and obedience to the God whom they love and serve.

*Hiding* God’s Word in one’s heart means to treasure that Word. It is valued above all else! Therefore, it is *hidden* securely within one’s heart—not as to conceal it but, rather, to protect it and keep it safe. The reader would do well to read the whole of Proverbs 2, which in my Bible is given the heading of “The Value of Wisdom.” The chapter speaks volumes about

the power of God's Word in the hearts of His people, a power that preserves His own and spurs them on to a life of holiness. Verses 4 and 5 give these encouraging words of instruction, "If thou *seekest* her as silver, and *searchest* for her as for *hid treasures*: then shalt thou understand the fear of the LORD, and find the knowledge of God." *Hide* His Word! Cherish it for the *treasure* that it is! For in verses 10 and 11 we read, "When wisdom entereth into thine *heart*, and knowledge is pleasant unto thy soul; discretion shall preserve thee, understanding shall keep thee." What a comfort! What a *treasure*!

Psalter #215, a versification of Psalm 78 entitled "Religious Training," puts forth our calling as parents very well. In stanzas 4-6 we sing,

A testimony and a law  
The Lord our God decreed,  
And bade our fathers teach their sons,  
That they His ways might heed.

He willed that each succeeding race  
His deeds might learn and know,  
That children's children to their sons  
Might all these wonders show.

Let children learn God's righteous ways  
And on Him stay their heart,  
That they may not forget His works  
Nor from His ways depart.

"And on Him stay their heart." This is really the goal of godly instruction. As parents, it is our desire that our children love the Lord our God with all their heart, mind, soul, and strength. And in order for us rightly to teach our children the ways of the Lord, they must first see evidence that His ways are embedded in our hearts (Deut. 6:6). The words of a song committed to memory by little ones and sung at a Kindergarten program years ago say it well: "I belong to Jesus, He is Lord and King, *Reigning in my inmost heart over everything*." Yes, the thoughts, words, and deeds of a person speak volumes about the state of his or her heart. What message are we sending our children? Do they see the love of Jesus shining in and through us? Do they view us as children of the King? Do they see our love for God and for His precepts as the sole authority and foundational basis for all of our life here below? Is it evident to them that the Word of God is *hidden* deep within our hearts? Pray, dear reader, that it is so.

How then does one *hide* God's Word in his heart? By *seeking and searching* the Scriptures. And our children need to learn that this *seeking and searching* involves far more than just reading the Word, or even committing much of that Word to memory. *Seeking* the God of the Scriptures means reading His Word,

studying His Word, listening to His Word (lively preaching), and meditating upon, talking about, and sharing it with others. Simply put, it is *believing and living* that Word! The lives that we live, which include the words of our mouths, our every deed, and the very thoughts of our hearts, should be God-glorifying and pleasing to Him.

Thus, we need to be *seeking and searching* the Scriptures, not only in our personal devotions but in our family devotions as well. The knowledge we have of God and His Word should spill forth from the *hidden* resources of our hearts to be shared with our children and grandchildren. When helping our little ones prepare for a Bible lesson at school, or a Sunday school or catechism lesson at church, we need to do more than just help them with the memorization of the needed materials. We need to discuss with them the details of the lesson, sharing with them the knowledge we have of the things they are now learning. We and our young people should be found preparing for and participating in the society life of the congregations of which we are members. And living as children of the light in a world of darkness, we must always be ready to give an answer when asked for a reason of the hope that is within us.

As we diligently apply ourselves to the calling we have to instruct our children in the ways of the Lord, we do so in the hope that God will bless us in our labors. And He does. As we live obediently to God's Word and His commands, we as God's people find harmony within our family life, our congregational life, and even society life in general. How can we not? When and if we deal with one another in a caring and loving manner both inside and outside the home, *seeking* the advantage and benefit of others before self, harmony will follow.

To that end, dear reader, let us *seek and hide*! *Seek* the Lord (Is. 55:6). *Search* the Scriptures (Eccl. 7:25). Continue in the things we have *learned* (II Tim. 3:14-15). *Teach* them diligently to our children (Deut. 6:6-7), that they and we together may *hide* these truths securely within our hearts (Ps. 119:11). Share them with others (I Pet. 3:15). And in so doing, may we be happy and blessed in knowing that thus saith Lord, "Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then shall ye be peculiar *treasure* unto me above all people; for all the earth is mine" (Ex. 19:5). *Treasured* by God! Blessed indeed!



## Translated treasures

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

# The causes for discipline, and private sins

From “A Brief Explanation of the Church Order” by Johannes Jansen

**Article 72: “In case anyone errs in doctrine or offends in conduct, as long as the sin is of a private character, not giving public offense, the rule clearly prescribed by Christ in Matthew 18 shall be followed.”**

In this article two things are discussed, namely, the causes (reasons or motives) for discipline, and the rule which according to Matthew 18 must be followed with private deviations.

1. *The causes for discipline.* These lie in sins “against the purity of doctrine or godly conduct,” that is, in deviation with respect to *doctrine* or *life*. From the beginning there was agreement on this. The Convent of Wesel (1568) already mentioned “doctrine or religion and life.”<sup>1</sup> The Synod of Emden (1571) stipulated in Article 26: “Therefore if anyone has gone astray in purity of doctrine or has sinned in regards to uprightness of life.”<sup>2</sup> The Synod of Dordrecht (1578) in Article 93 already edited this to: “If anyone has erred regarding purity of doctrine or has sinned in his conduct, etc.,”<sup>3</sup> and this description has remained so until now.

This description rests on Scripture. Particularly on those texts in which it warns against deviation in doctrine and life and exhorts to discipline those who cause offense. There is an array of texts that require discipline concerning doctrine (for example, Matt. 7:15; 24:11; Acts 20:28-31; I Cor. 12:3; 16:22; Gal. 1:8-9; I John 2:18; 4:1-6; II John 10). Likewise there is also an array of texts for discipline concerning life (for example, I Cor. 5:6-8; Rev. 2:3-6, 14-16, 20, and more).

What is the character of a *disciplinable error*? Not every sin or error in doctrine or life is the object of discipline. We all stumble in many of God’s command-

ments. We err and sin in word and walk, in doctrine and life. These are the cause for why the churches must repeatedly encourage self-examination (self-discipline) in preaching, catechism, and home visiting. But they do not become disciplinary sins in doctrine or life until they have a certain character, and, as Voetius rightly discerns, display three characteristics. They must, first, be *sins*; they must, second, *give offense*; and, third, they must be accompanied by *rejection* of admonition and *stubborn persistence*.

2. *The rule of Matthew 18:* “...as long as the sin is of a private character, not giving public offense, the rule clearly prescribed by Christ in Matthew 18 shall be followed.” This provision has been included in the Church Order from the beginning. The Convent of Wesel (1568) initially applied it only to the errors in *life* and not to those in *doctrine*. It evidently judged that the words of Matthew 18:15 (“if thy brother shall trespass against thee”) refer only to a sin in *life*. Such a person must first be admonished privately. But if he “secretly or publicly has disseminated strange teachings and heresies,” his name was to be made known to the consistory immediately.<sup>4</sup> But already three years after that the churches at Emden (1571) in Article 26 decided that both the error in *doctrine* and the sin in *life*, as long as they were still secret, were not to be brought to the consistory.<sup>5</sup> Already there the article was edited, just as it still reads now.

The churches then thought that the words “if thy brother shall trespass against thee” referred not only to personal insult, but to all kinds of secret or hidden sins of doctrine and life. They followed the view of Calvin, who understood “trespass against thee” in the sense of: “with your knowledge, so that no one else has knowledge of it.” We doubt, however,

1 The quotation is from Chapter VIII:3 of this meeting. Cf. Richard De Ridder, ed., *The Church Orders of the Sixteenth Century Reformed Churches of the Netherlands Together with Their Social, Political, and Ecclesiastical Context* (Grand Rapids: Calvin Theological Seminary, 1987), 93.

2 De Ridder, 118.

3 De Ridder, 222.

4 The quotation is from Chapter VIII:7 of this meeting. Cf. De Ridder, *Church Orders*, 93.

5 Article 26 of that meeting stated: “Therefore, if anyone has gone astray in purity of doctrine or has sinned in regards to uprightness of life, insofar as it has happened secretly without open offense, the rule shall be maintained which Christ expressly prescribes in Matthew 18.” Cf. De Ridder, *Church Orders*, 118.



whether Calvin's view is correct. It seems to us that "to sin against you" here means a personal insult, an injustice done to the brother personally. Thus, for example, Meyer and Zahn.<sup>6</sup> But even then one can just as well maintain the distinction between hidden and public sins. For Christ here expressly says that a personal insult must also be treated personally: "Go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone"; do not bring in a third party in the first instance; do not make it public; and, even if this first admonition is rejected, it has yet to be repeated in a second instance among witnesses and is not yet to be made public. And, furthermore, brotherly love in general demands that a matter which is not public, but known only to a few, must not be made public.

"[Charity] beareth all things" (I Cor. 13:7; James 5:19-20). Even though Christ referred in Matthew 18:15 only to personal offense, on the two grounds mentioned above the rule applies to all cases: as long as a sin is hidden in doctrine or life and has not given public offense, it may not be made public. The words "as long as the sin is of a private character, not giving public offense" thus mean: in case the sin in doctrine or life is still "private," that is, only known to one or a few persons, and yet "not giving public offense," that is, has given offense to only one or a few persons but not yet public offense.

In such cases the rule of Matthew 18:15-17 must be followed. This rule breaks down into three admonitions:

The first must take place privately: "Go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone," that is, do not wait until he comes; do not say that he is guilty and must first come to me; but you who are innocent go, go and rebuke him between you and him alone. Settle it between the two of you; do not involve a third party; convince him that he has offended you; bring him to see that he has wronged you. Indeed, the guilty one also is obliged on his part to come to the innocent to confess his sin and ask for forgiveness, but if he stubbornly refuses it you must go to him and show that you are doing it for the salvation of the brother. Neither do we come to God first, but God comes to us first. "If he shall hear

thee, thou hast gained thy brother" for the kingdom of heaven; you must then forgive him and, since the matter is over, keep silent about it. But if he does not hear you, a second admonition follows.

This second admonition must be among witnesses: "But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established" (v. 16). You can choose

those witnesses yourself, but of course they must be honorable and trusted members of the church. One or two is left an open question. They are necessary "that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established," that is, that every statement which the sinner makes to your common correction may be proved, so that he cannot later deny

it. If he hears you and confesses his guilt on this second reprimand, it is also true here that you have won your brother for the kingdom of heaven. You must forgive him wholeheartedly, and you as well as the witnesses must remain silent about the matter. But if he does not hear you, a third admonition follows.

This third admonition, however, is an ecclesiastical admonition, for it follows: "And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican" (v. 17). Christ here does not refer to the Jewish, but to the Christian congregation, which gathered around him in the small circle of his disciples and formed the principle of the New Testament congregation. Discipline, according to Christ's intention, is a matter for the church as a local institution. She must continue to exercise discipline, of course, under the direction of the offices to be established in her midst. And only when the rebuke of the church is of no avail may the offended man regard him as a heathen man and a tax collector, that is, as one outside the church. He has then tried everything in him that is possible, and is free from his blood (Gal. 6:1; James 5:19, 20).

**For Christ here expressly says that a personal insult must also be treated personally: "Go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone"; do not bring in a third party in the first instance; do not make it public; and, even if this first admonition is rejected, it has yet to be repeated in a second instance among witnesses and is not yet to be made public.**

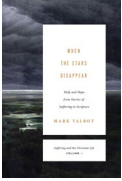
<sup>6</sup> Jansen is likely referring here to the commentaries on this passage by F. B. Meyer and Theodor Zahn.



## Bring the books...

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

The following book is reviewed by Dr. Marco Barone, book coordinator at the Reformed Free Publishing Association and member of Southwest PRC, Grandville, Michigan.



*When the Stars Disappear: Help and Hope from Stories of Suffering in Scripture* (Suffering and the Christian Life: Volume 1), Mark Talbot. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020. 144 pages. \$16.99. Paperback.

### Introduction

Mark Talbot's job (philosophy professor at Wheaton College, IL) might lead some to think that his treatment of "Suffering and the Christian Life" is an academic exercise detached from everyday trials. That would be mistaken. At the age of seventeen, Talbot fell fifty feet while on a rope swing, became partially paralyzed from the waist down, and has had pains and spasms since then. Moreover, a student close to him committed suicide after years of battles with depression. That led Talbot to ask himself painful questions regarding whether he could have done more to prevent that tragedy. Talbot knows pain.

The series plans to discuss "profound suffering," that is, calamities that involve "experiencing something so deep and disruptive that it dominates our consciousness and threatens to overwhelm us, often tempting us to lose hope that our lives can ever be good again" (14).

### Chapter 1, "When the Stars Disappear"

What does *When the Stars Disappear* mean? Humans live, think, and act according to two stories. The first is the *particular story*, the story "about what our personal lives mean" (20). The second is the *general story*, which "answers questions about what human life means" (21). Now, "these two kinds of stories are the stars that guide us, helping us navigate life's otherwise uncharted seas" (21). However, suffering challenges these stories, shakes our confidence, and it "may threaten to blot out completely the light of the stars that are guiding us by making us doubt the general story we have accepted about what human life means" (21). We might go through dreadful darkness where we cannot see the end of our trial, but the Lord has recorded in the Scriptures stories of saints who by faith endured atrocious suffering "to help us keep our faith, hope, and love alive" (21).

### Chapter 2, "Suffering Saints: God's People May Suffer Terribly"

This book's stories are those of Naomi, Job, and Jeremiah. A good selection, because the combined stories of these

three saints of old include in principle all the trials that any child of God can go through: poverty, depression, loss, persecution, abuse, the bitter consequences of a saint's own sins, and more. Particularly insightful and touching are the considerations about the life and ministry of Jeremiah, who, differently from Naomi and Job, never saw stability restored in his life.

### Chapter 3, "Breathing Lessons: How to Survive Great Suffering"

"Breathe! Don't panic! Slow yourself down! Don't take everything to be as it seems. Don't rashly conclude that things can never get better. And, above all, don't conclude that God has forsaken or betrayed you" (42). Deep breathing can certainly help us manage our physical and physiological responses, but with "breathing" the author ultimately means something else: "They [Job, Naomi, Jeremiah, and the psalmists] filled their spiritual lungs by breathing in the words that God had breathed out for them and then cried to him for grace and mercy by breathing out their sorrows, perplexities, and complaints" (43).

This spiritual breathing includes the forgotten art of lament. The Bible contains many laments, especially in the Psalms. On the one hand, true lament has nothing to do with bitterly complaining and grumbling to God about our problems with a demanding tone. On the other hand, however, our private, family, and public prayers often run the risk of seeking to be merely "theologically correct," a miniature theological lecture in prayer form with some petitions added, sometimes merely repeating what we have always heard praying from others. We often pray as if God does not already perfectly know our internal and external torments, as if they were something to hide. Differently, Naomi, Job, Jeremiah, and the psalmists were transparent, honest, and open about their anguish, and in some cases, they knew that their prayers would have been heard or read by others. Many of the Psalms are "emotional" because their authors "sought words describing their distress" (52). In turn, "their words help us feel their anguish, countering our tendency to think our suffering is unique," and "even if we don't find our exact grief in the psalms, we find anguish at least as deep" (52).

This honesty and transparency with God in prayer is not a privilege of the inspired writers alone.

They dared such transparency because they realized that God knew what was festering in their hearts.... They knew they would damage their relationship with him by trying to hide the truth...so they spoke what they felt—and thus they coach us to keep calling on God, to keep addressing him, even if that means complaining or protesting. (53)

But lamenting is not the final stop. Though the Lord allows and even welcomes our cries, He also calls us to look up to Him and to remember His grace and His past deliverances.

When suffering overwhelms us, it is easy to despair... the psalmists were never so overwhelmed by their suffering as to lose all hope...after they breathed out their troubles to God, they breathed in again. They reminded themselves of God's character, his promises, his previous wondrous acts for Israel, and his record of individualized care. By focusing on facts that made them confident their God would ultimately put things right, they countered their feelings with history and theological truth. Faithful lamenting begins and ends with remembering. (55)

#### Chapter 4, "The Rest of Their Stories: God's Steadfast Love for Naomi, Job, and Jeremiah"

God restored Naomi and Job, both spiritually and materially. Differently, Jeremiah saw his beloved Jerusalem conquered and destroyed by the Babylonians (as a judgment for Judah's apostasy), and he was also deported to Egypt. Nevertheless, and in spite of the death and darkness surrounding Jeremiah, "from [Jeremiah] chapter 21 onward we see that Jeremiah regained his hope and faithfully fulfilled his prophetic office" (79). The Lord "restored Jeremiah's hope, even though he never gave him earthly peace, security, or happiness" (80).

Christians know that "the God who in the New Testament reveals himself as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" cannot deny Himself, and, therefore, He will remain faithful "even when our suffering prompts us to lose so much perspective that our faith and hope flicker and seem to die" (82). However, this is *not* an excuse for passivity, but a motivation for the exercise of faith. Profound suffering can become doubly painful. When we experience intense suffering, that is the time when we most need to exert all our physical and spiritual faculties to look at and cling to the Lord; but that is also the same time when we feel the most weak and powerless. There is something that most people can do, even those bedridden because of debilitating physical or mental illness: *to remember*.

"Remember that *chesed*—[a Hebrew word for] steadfast, kind, loyal and merciful loving concern for others—is basic to God's character and emblematic of all he is;

"Appeal to God's *chesed* whenever we need reassurance of his radical and unceasing care for us;

"Believe that God is able to do all that his *chesed* intends for us;

"Read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest biblical stories like Naomi's, Job's, and Jeremiah's that trace God's steadfast and unstoppable love for his saints through the starless darkness of their profound suffering" (83).

#### Epilogue

"God has been gradually and progressively revealing the general story about what our lives actually mean" (89), and Talbot invites the readers actively to see their stories in God's general story. Scripture reveals that story, and the Lord has inspired His writers to include the stories of some of His great saints of old so that we can find instruction and encouragement to place our own story in God's redemptive story. Obviously, the best story for that is the story of our Lord Jesus Christ and of "his unparalleled suffering for our sake" (98). Being constantly immersed in God's Word; remembering God's faithfulness both in our individual stories and in the stories of His saints of the past; above all, remembering Jesus' lifelong suffering, unparalleled cross, shameful death, and glorious resurrection: this is what "floods our hearts and anchors our emotional lives" (98) and assures us that the Lord will "see his people safely through even the worst storms" (98).

Besides a few disagreements I have with the author, I find this book worth reading. This book is realistic: Talbot does not offer easy fixes to suffering, because there are none. The author's philosophical mind, being enlightened by Scripture, acknowledges that although we can *logically* reconcile the existence of evil and suffering with the existence of a good God, *experientially* and *emotionally* the struggles remain. As such, the book is also biblically grounded because the author acknowledges the horrific sufferings that often befall God's people in this fallen world, and rightly so, since this is what Scripture itself does (the psalmists themselves, though trusting in God, did not hide their pain but put it into songs for us to read and sing). Our sufferings and experiences can be overwhelming to the point of making us forget God's greatest, redemptive, loving plan for His saints. This book is a good aid to contemplate and remember that wonderful story.

## Announcements

### Resolution of sympathy

The Council and congregation of Southwest PRC express our Christian sympathy to Mike and Tammy Hanko and family in the death of Tammy's father, **Mr. Doug Tolsma**. Psalm 23:4, 6, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever."

Rev. D. Noorman, President  
Dirk Westra, Clerk

### Resolution of sympathy

The Council and congregation of Southwest PRC express our Christian sympathy to Lori Kuiper and to Joe and Kathleen Kuiper and family in the death of their husband, father, and grandfather, **Elder Dave Kuiper**. II Timothy 4:7, 8, "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing."

Rev. D. Noorman, President  
Dirk Westra, Clerk

### Reformed Witness Hour

[reformedwitnesshour.org](http://reformedwitnesshour.org)

#### Rev. Wilbur Bruinsma

January 7—You Cannot Serve Jehovah  
Joshua 24:19-22

January 14—Ehud: Deliverer of the Covenant  
Judges 3:12-30

January 21—Learning Contentment  
Philippians 4:11

#### Prof. Douglas Kuiper

January 28—Overview of the Law  
Matthew 5:17-20

### Classis East

Classis East will meet in regular session on Wednesday, January 10, 2024, at 8:00 A.M., in the Hope Protestant Reformed Church, Walker, MI.

Rev. C. Spronk, Stated Clerk

### Call to aspirants to the ministry

All young men desiring to begin studies in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary in the 2024-2025 academic year should make application at the March 21, 2024 meeting of the Theological School Committee.

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

All applicants must appear before the Theological School Committee for interview before admission is granted. In the event that a student cannot appear at the March 21 meeting, notification of this fact, along with a suggested interview date, must be given to the secretary of the Theological School Committee before this meeting.

All correspondence should be directed to the  
Theological School Committee,  
4949 Ivanrest Avenue SW  
Wyoming, MI 49418  
Joel Minderhoud, Secretary

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