

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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Meditation

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

As a roaring lion

Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: Whom resist stedfast in the faith, knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in world.

I Peter 5:8, 9

The apostle Peter would be used by God to equip us as pilgrims and strangers in the earth to fight the battle of faith. In the final admonition of his first epistle he sums up our pilgrim calling. He warns us concerning our great adversary, the Devil, who goes about as a roaring lion. We are called to resist him, steadfast in the faith! What an urgent warning for us as we make our way through another year of our pilgrim journey.

Peter certainly knew whereof he spoke. He had experienced the fierce attacks of Satan. How foolishly proud and naive he had been! Jesus Himself had given him clear warning, “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat” (Luke 22:31). Peter thought himself strong and courageous, “Lord, I am ready to go with thee, both into prison, and to death” (Luke 22:33). Him deny the Lord? Never! But in a short while he stands outside the gate of the high priest’s palace weeping bitterly because he had thrice denied his Lord.

Peter’s spiritual eyes had been opened by the Spirit to see the wiles of the Devil. Peter now knew that the Devil is always nearest to us and most ready to attack when we do not expect him at all. From one who is vigilant, expecting him, he often remains at a distance. But Satan may be upon us when we are least expecting his attack! What about you? Do you feel strong, self-confident as you embark upon another year of history? Need we bother our minds with concern regarding the Evil One? “Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall”! (I Cor. 10:12).

How often we underestimate the cunning and power of the Devil. For some the reason may be a lack of knowledge concerning him. We may hear his name mentioned, but it is often in jest. The world of unbelief speaks of him as a mythological character. He is a subject for jokes and cartoons. But, it may easily be

the case that, though we have a biblical knowledge of Satan, directed as we are by our senses—especially by what we see—we neglect to take him as seriously as we ought, since he is a spirit and we cannot see him. We are well aware of the world of wicked people in the midst of which we live as well as the many vile allurements present in this world, and even of our own sinful natures. But of all the forces of evil, the Devil is the chief, and to a great extent he controls and directs them. And it is he whom we are called to resist.

As the captain of all the fallen angels, Satan is our chief adversary. Here Peter refers to him as “your adversary the devil.” The designation of him as “devil” tells us that he slanders and brings false accusations. He does so as our “adversary” or opponent, yea, as our enemy, who would hurl unjust accusations against us as in a court of law. Already in the garden, making use of the serpent, he slandered the name of God and led our first parents into sin and rebellion against God!

In the old dispensation the Devil still had a certain access to heaven—think of his accusations against Job. In Revelation 12:7-10 we see that the “accuser of our brethren” is cast out of heaven with the ascension and exaltation of Christ. But that spells “woe to the inhabitants of the earth and of the sea! For the devil is come down unto you having great wrath, because he knoweth that he hath but a short time” (Rev. 12:12). And increasingly today we see his success in persuading the ungodly by his slander that we Christians are the radicals, the rebels, perhaps even “domestic terrorists.” Ultimately he is able to convince the world that we are only hindrances to its progress and not deserving a place on earth. And persecution of the church increases.

But especially grievous are his personal attacks. For as he and his army of demons are spirits, they even have access to our inner life to tempt us into the ways of sin and disobedience against God. Or, with cruel slander, our minds are filled with doubts and fears regarding the possibility of salvation for such awful sinners as we are. He would shake our very faith.

This dreadful foe is described by the apostle as being a roaring lion—“the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh

about, seeking whom he may devour.” With this powerful figure Peter would impress upon us the very great danger posed by our adversary the Devil. For the lion is known as the king of beasts, certainly one of the most dangerous predators of the jungle. If you have been at a zoo at feeding time for the lions, you would readily confirm that their roaring is truly frightening! For when a lion roars, he is hungry, enraged, ready to devour. What a fearsome and dangerous enemy the Devil is! He, with his host of demons, even with all the powers of darkness at his disposal, seeks to devour the church of Christ and the saints of God if it were possible.

How urgent it is that the Devil be resisted! The apostle Paul exhorts us, “Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil” (Eph. 6:11). Resisting the Devil implies that we are living in the consciousness of our adversary and his allies. We stand firmly against his enticing schemes to lure us into ways of sin and error. We must be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might (Eph. 6:10). The Devil’s awful roaring must be answered with the Word of God that will drive him away.

To resist the devil we are called to “be sober, be vigilant.” To be sober is the opposite of being drunken in a physical sense. One who is drunken cannot see clearly, cannot think straight, is not able to discern reality. His reactions are impaired and he stumbles about. Peter holds before us the picture of a drunken man staggering through a lion-infested jungle. He is oblivious to the danger and is unable to take any precautionary measures. He would quickly fall prey to a hungry lion. From a spiritual perspective, it is even more dangerous to be spiritually drunken. Then one is unaware of the reality of the Devil and the danger he poses. Being drunken with the pleasures and treasures of sin, one becomes easy prey for the roaring lion who is the Devil.

One who is sober is able to reckon with reality. He is of a sound mind spiritually and takes heed to the Word of God also as it warns of the dangers he faces. And being sober enables one to be vigilant, to be on the alert. A sober man proceeds cautiously through the jungle, always alert to potential dangers, ready to defend himself and repel any attack. Being sober and watchful, we are able to resist the Devil “steadfast in the faith.”

That faith is the gift of God that unites us with our Savior Jesus Christ. It is the means for receiving all the strength and courage we need to resist the lion and his hosts in the battle. In ourselves we are weak. We would surely be devoured. We stand not in our own strength, but in the strength of Christ, the Captain of our salvation. By faith we lay hold upon the perfect work of Christ. We take refuge in the promises of our God. Yes,

we know that we often falter in our calling to resist the Devil. But we cling to the cross of Christ, being assured of the forgiveness of our sins through His shed blood. We have true comfort knowing we are not our own but belong unto Him.

Our faith is in the Word of God, the Scriptures, which reveal Christ in all His power to save and deliver us from Satan’s snares and stratagems. Wielding the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God, we are able to meet the temptations and threats of the Devil. We are able to refute all the lies that he spews forth. Taking the shield of faith we are able to quench his fiery darts. By faith in the Word of God we look beyond the battles against the roaring lion to the reward of grace that shall presently be given to us. Through Christ, the Captain of our salvation, we shall do valiantly. In faith we stand victorious.

We are given a wonderful incentive to press on in resisting the Devil. This encouragement Peter describes when he says, “Knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world.” We are mindful of the fact that we are not alone in facing attacks of the Devil who walks about as a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour. Our Christian brothers and sisters throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings. God’s people around the world face the onslaughts of our adversary.

In His providence, our God has determined and directs the temptations, sufferings, and adversity through which we must pass. Even the Devil and his hosts of darkness are governed and controlled by our sovereign God so that we are never devoured by the roaring lion. We are supplied with grace sufficient for our needs. The Lord never sends more temptation, more suffering, than we are able to bear. And these, even the attacks of the Devil, He causes to work together for good for His children that we may be tried and perfected for our heavenly inheritance.

This implies too the blessings of the communion of saints. This means that we are not alone in the struggle against our adversary. The saints through the ages have fought the same battles and have been triumphant by God’s grace. Consider the host listed in Hebrews 11: “Who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions” (v. 33). Their faith is also ours. And we presently have each other. Together we contend with our adversary, striving to resist him. We come to each other’s aid. We bear each other’s burdens. We help and encourage each other in the battle till the crown of victory is ours.

For now the struggle to resist the Devil continues. Let us not be naive or careless with regard to the dan-

ger he poses. He is after us—as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour! His allies and weapons are many: worldly culture, social media, material prosperity, false prophets who change the grace of God into lasciviousness. Be sober, be vigilant, resist the Devil, and he will flee from you. Rest assured that this roaring lion will not ultimately devour even one of God’s children. We are safely kept. He cannot pluck us out of Father’s hand. But it is the Father’s will that we battle against the Devil,

resisting him. Let us be steadfast in the faith, confident of our victory in Christ. As Martin Luther so beautifully conveyed it,

The prince of darkness grim,
We tremble not for him;
His rage we can endure,
For lo! His doom is sure,
One little Word shall fell him.



Editorial

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

PRCA: 1924-2024

Guarding the Lord’s Day landmark

The Lord’s Day and its rest are part of our Protestant Reformed Churches’ rich heritage from the Lord that we share with other Reformed and Presbyterian denominations. But as valuable as that heritage is, if we fail to appreciate it, we can lose it quickly. Pray God that we do not.

The Lord’s Day is an ancient landmark (Deut. 19:14; Prov. 22:28, for example). The large stones called “landmarks” delineated each tribe’s or clan’s inheritance in the Promised Land. Once placed, they were fixed there by God’s law. This civil law forbidding removal of these stones taught Israel, of course, that one man’s property may not be stolen by another by removing or even slightly shifting the landmark. But the stones also showed that God “marked out with gracious care” Israel’s entire inheritance—their typical salvation.

The “substance” of this law that “remains” (Belgic Confession, Art. 25) for us in the New Testament is the mandate to guard our entire inheritance, all of God’s rich gifts, including the law of the ten commandments. These commandments can be unlawfully removed altogether, or their boundaries unlawfully shifted an inch at a time. Either way, the church loses her inheritance.

It is worth asking ourselves, as we celebrate almost 100 years of our denomination’s existence, whether the Lord’s Day landmark has remained where it was in 1924: that Sunday is the special day of the week designated for public worship; that recreation and work are forbidden, except the works of charity and necessity; that we are to give the entire day to God; and that all these are the requirements of the fourth commandment.

There is reason to examine ourselves in light of real-

ities in the twenty-first century—some new, some old: the possibility of worshiping on vacation in the wilderness by a video, or at home in an easy chair by livestream; traveling on Sunday to extend a vacation or to begin a work project out of state early Monday morning. Just as great and perhaps greater is the ever-present danger of formalism, legalism, ritualism. This may be a greater danger because going through the motions of Lord’s Day activities gives me a sense that I am actually keeping the day, when in fact God judges formalism in worship with probably harsher condemnation than open violation (see Is. 58, for example). Or the danger threatening the Lord’s Day for us in 2024 may be a change of mind regarding the law itself—that the fourth commandment does not really require designating a day for worship, does not forbid recreation or work on Sunday, but only that it calls God’s people to rest spiritually every day of the week. Sunday, then, is good to observe, but is not required by God’s law.

Where are we in 2024?

The ‘other’ controversy of 1924

PRCA catechism students are taught the history of 1924: that the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) adopted the doctrine of common grace in three points, and when three ministers would not subscribe to them, deposed them. These three began the Protestant Reformed Churches.¹

Unknown to most members of the PRCA, maybe

¹ See Prof. R. Dykstra’s current series of *SB* articles.

even to our ministers, is that another controversy shook the CRC in 1924, although the tremors were more localized. In Jamestown, Michigan, to be precise.²

Jamestown CRC's new minister, Rev. H. Wierenga, was a 1920 graduate of Calvin Theological Seminary. As he made his way through preaching the Heidelberg Catechism in his congregation, he came to Lord's Day 38 and the explanation of the fourth commandment. No slothful minister, Rev. Wierenga had read other explanations of the fourth commandment and concluded that the Sabbath, instituted in creation and the fourth commandment, was not applicable to New Testament Christians. In other words, Sunday has no hallowed status today and is not a substitute for the Old Testament Sabbath because Christ fulfilled that law. Of course, Rev. Wierenga wanted to worship on Sunday, encouraged the people to rest, recommended that work and recreation are best reserved for the other days. But because these are not commanded by God, so he taught, no members who worked or played or absented themselves from worship would be subject to Christian discipline.

Jamestown's elders were alarmed at what they heard and asked their minister to preach another sermon to correct his error. But instead of correcting and apologizing, he dug in his heels and publicized his position in a widely distributed 95-page pamphlet. The case came to Classis Zeeland, which deposed him, synodical deputies agreeing. Wierenga protested and appealed, but Synod 1926 confirmed the deposition and reminded the churches that already in 1881 the CRC had adopted the Synod of Dordt's stance on the fourth commandment. Now they reaffirmed Dordt.

That Great Synod, after settling the Arminian controversy in the Canons, also faced the question of Sabbath doctrine and adopted six points that Reformed consistories ought to be very familiar with (brackets and italics are added):

1. In the Fourth Commandment...there is a *ceremonial* [temporary] and a *moral* [permanent] element.
2. The rest on the *seventh* day...and the *strict* observance of the day with which the Jewish people were charged particularly, were *ceremonial*.
3. That a *definite*...day has been set aside to the service

of God, and that for this purpose as much rest is required as is necessary for the service of God and for hallowed contemplation; this element is *moral*.

4. The Sabbath of the Jew having been set aside, Christians are *in duty bound* to hallow the Day of the Lord solemnly.

5. This day has always been kept in the early Church since the time of the apostles.

6. This day must be so consecrated unto the service of God that upon it men rest from all servile labors, *except* those required by *charity* and present *necessities*, and likewise from all such recreations as prevent the service of God.³

In 1924 the CRC was strong on the Sabbath commandment and continued so. Thus, even though a few influential ministers defended Rev. Wierenga, the CRC held and preached the position of Dordt in some striking ways. In the 1940s, Calvin College's dormitory regulations demanded the students to pay particular attention to "the matter of Sabbath observance." "Unless he is sick," the regulations said, "every student is expected to attend divine services on Sunday morning and evening." The college's board was instructed to provide dorm residents suitable reading material "especially for Sunday reading." In the 1960s, the *Banner* editor wrote an open letter to Fred Meijer, owner of large supermarkets in Michigan, to reconsider his decision to open his stores on Sunday. At that time, many churches in West Michigan called on their members to boycott stores open on Sunday. Synod 1972 urged the churches to "guard the celebration of the glad day of the Lord against the onslaughts of secularization."

The CRC resisted strong pressures to move the landmark.

The PRCA controversy over the sabbath

I consider the 1924 history of the CRC—just prior to the PRCA's existence—to be an important part of our own history, even precedent for us. *How* weighty those decisions actually are for us may be debatable, but there may be no debate over the importance of a Sabbath decision in a controversy of our own in 1975. Our controversy closely paralleled the Wierenga controversy in the CRC but had a happier outcome. The happier outcome is that, although a PRCA minister preached error about the Sabbath and his consistory defended him, after classis met and decided against his view, the matter was finished. The consistory repudiated the

2 This story is told more fully by H. J. Brinks in his article, "Henry Wierenga: Sunday Isn't Sabbath" in *Origins, Historical Magazine of the Archives—The Hekman Library*, Vol. XIII, 2 (1995). It can be found online at <https://origins.calvin.edu/issues/origins-vol-13-no-2-fall-1995/download>. To research the synodical decisions of 1926 where the Wierenga case concluded, go to <https://library.calvin.edu/hh/acts-of-synod>, where English translations of the Dutch minutes are available.

3 These decisions may perhaps most easily be found in VanDellen and Monsma's *The Church Order Commentary* (Jenison, MI: RFP, reprint, 2021), 431, 432.

unbiblical position, and removed the offence from the congregation.

The minister and his consistory had taught error almost identical to Rev. Wierenga's: that God's fourth commandment does not set apart the first day of the week for worship, that He does not require the New Testament saint to observe this day solely to worship, and that working on Sunday is not forbidden by the fourth commandment. Classis corrected the error and declared that "God in the fourth commandment commands the New Testament Christian...to set apart one day out of seven, which is...the first day of the week...to cease from work in order that he may totally consecrate the day to God in worship and service." Classis grounded this declaration in Scripture and the confessions, but also in that historic position of Dordt. The classis quoted Dordt's six points as they were found in VanDellen and Monsma. That is, the PRCA in one of its classes has taken the same official position that the CRC did in 1881 and confirmed in 1924 and 1926.⁴

So the PRCA have also been strong defenders of the ancient landmark of the Sabbath.

2024: Whither the PRCA?

Because almost 50 years have passed since the PRC's controversy about the Sabbath, it is worth reminding ourselves of our heritage.

First, we may be very thankful that our seminary teaches future preachers our historic position, and no active preacher shows interest in removing or shifting the landmark, even a little. But as we notice others losing the battle for the Sabbath, we want to be on guard ourselves.

Our mother church, once a strong defender of the Sabbath, has now given up much ground. A few years ago, their Church Order requirement that churches worship "ordinarily twice" on the Lord's Day was removed. Congregations are still required to worship, but not "ordinarily twice." One sad outcome of the decision was the further demise of Heidelberg Catechism preaching, which was usually done in the second service. Most CRC congregations do not worship twice each Lord's Day.

In Reformed churches more broadly, whereas 50 years ago most businesses in West Michigan were closed on Sunday, partly due to the large influence of Reformed Christians who did not buy and sell on the Lord's Day (witness the *Banner's* letter to Mr. Meijer), now the bus-

iest time for McDonalds and other like restaurants, I am told, is the "church rush" at Sunday noon. In my first pastorate in Byron Center, MI, in the early 1980s, no stores in the community were open on the Lord's Day—not even the gas station, which was owned by a Reformed Christian. So, when a national franchised business proposed to the local authorities that they were coming to town and would be open on the Lord's Day, most of the area churches signed a petition to disallow it. The petition failed and now there are very few businesses that are not open on the Lord's Day.

So, what dangers do the PRCA face in 2024—our centennial year—regarding the Sabbath? If there are dangers we may guard against, they include:

First, the danger that we preachers do not make explicit, both on the pulpit and in the catechism room, what are God's requirements for us in the fourth commandment, and that these are the historic Reformed positions. Let us never forget.

Second, that we members observe the Lord's Day ritualistically and formally, so that although we avoid working on the Sabbath we are not spiritually resting in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Maybe we scowl when a fellow Christian rides his bike on Sunday, but never think of visiting the sick or going to the nursing home to comfort the aged saint. Or we complain of those who take brisk Sunday afternoon walks, but we think nothing of sleeping the afternoon away. We call out other churches for compromising the true rest-giving gospel but are so busy being critical that we do not find glad rest in the true gospel. Let us take heed to ourselves.

Third, that we members adopt the mentality that 'worshiping' online is an acceptable alternative for being physically present in the house of worship. Of course, livestreamed services are a great blessing to shut-ins or sick members who simply cannot be present. My wife's family will never forget the wonderful Sunday afternoon, right before Christmas, when the Lord took her father to glory. Only minutes after he passed away at home, we sat together to watch the worship of their congregation, and heard the minister preach "Now let thy servant depart in peace." But it must not become easy for us to remain home for little reasons that, a generation ago, would never have been excuses to miss. Let us not neglect assembling together, as the manner of some is (Heb. 10:25).

Fourth, that we elders look the other way when the members of the church become lax about Lord's Day observance, coming to church once instead of twice, or missing because of the convenience of livestreamed services. The result is that the little leaven leavens most of the lump, and soon the minister does not dare preach

⁴ The reader who needs to research this history may find the decisions in Classis West minutes of September 1975, Articles 81, 89, 90.

the fourth commandment and it is futile for the elders to warn those who do not obey it. It is not uncommon that churches change some official position simply because their members no longer live according to it. When recently the CRC changed the Church Order to eliminate the requirement to worship twice, one of the striking grounds was that 2/3 of the congregations no longer did anyway. Rules were changed to comply with a practice which, by the way, did not change overnight. The devil is very patient and usually does not move landmarks

quickly, but an inch at a time. Let us maintain the third mark of the church by disciplining our brothers who do their own pleasure on God's holy day (Is. 58:13). Let us be diligent.

At stake is the gospel itself, because God designed the day of rest for the salvation of our souls—sweet fellowship and rest with Him, blessed Father and Friend. God be thanked for the Sabbath!

(Next time: The treasure of the Sabbath)



Search the Scriptures

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

Nahum

The burden of Nineveh. The book of the vision of Nahum the Elkoshite.

Nahum 1:1

Introduction

The prophecy of Nahum is little known, though it ought to be better known. It is similar to that of Obadiah in being a book of judgment pronounced on a single foreign nation and people. Nahum's prophecy, however, is later than that of Obadiah and belongs to the period just prior to Judah's exile in Babylon. The nations against which they prophesy are different also.

The only verses in Nahum with a positive message are in chapter 1:2, 3, 7 and 15. The rest concerns the coming fall of Nineveh and God's just vengeance on her, the capital of the nation of Assyria. That the prophecy is largely of judgment may be the reason it is so little known.

His prophecy is described in chapter 1:1 as "the burden of Nineveh." The prophets often describe the Word of God to them as a burden, especially His word of wrath and judgment. Isaiah 30:27 tell us why, "Behold, the name of the LORD cometh from far, burning with his anger, and the burden thereof is heavy: his lips are full of indignation, and his tongue as a devouring fire." In Isaiah, in Nahum, and in other of the prophets, God's word of judgment is described as burden, not only because it is heavy with judgment, but also because it is burdensome to those who must bring that word of judgment, as any preacher knows.

That word of judgment is the "burden of Nineveh" because that wicked city would find how heavy God's word of judgment against it was: it would crush and destroy not only the city of Nineveh but the empire of which Nineveh was the capital. Thus it is always with the pronouncement of God's judgments. His word is effectual and always accomplishes His purpose.

Chapter 1:1 of Nahum's prophecy serves as an introduction, mentioning Nahum by name and telling us the little we know of him. The verse tells that Nahum received his prophecy as a vision, as was often the case (Is. 1:1; Ezek. 8:4; Dan. 8:1, 2; Obad. 1:1; Hab. 2:2). Visions were different than dreams, especially in that the person who saw the vision knew that it was from God. The reference to a vision, then, is Scripture's way of telling us that Nahum's prophecy is the Word of God.

Nahum's prophecy is further described in chapter 1:1 as a book, a description unique among the minor prophets, though the other minor prophets also had their prophecies written down for posterity. Some speculate that the description of Nahum's prophecy as a "book" means that it was written in order to be sent to Assyria, but there is no evidence of that in Scripture. All we know is that it, along with all the other books of the Bible, was written for our edification and growth in grace, and the description of the prophecy as a book is a reminder of the importance of the written Word of God.

Of Nahum we know nothing except that he is called the Elkoshite. This is almost certainly a description of his place of origin, but even that description tells us

very little. If it is indeed a reference to a place, the place is impossible to identify. Some say it was in Galilee, perhaps even the city of Capernaum, the name of which city means the “Village of Nahum.” Others locate Elkosh in Judea and some identify it with a person, but we do not know. What matters is that the prophecy of Nahum is from heaven, the work of the Spirit of God.

Nahum’s name means “Comforter,” and there is comfort for God’s people in the book; but we do not know if his name has any connection with his message. Even if it does, the comfort that is to be found in the book comes from God, “the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort” (II Cor. 1:3), and the words of comfort are found only in chapter 1.

There has never been any question about the canonicity of Nahum, that is, its place in Scripture. If there were any doubts, the quotation of Nahum 1:15 in Romans 10:15 should prove beyond doubt that it belongs to the inspired Word of God.

Nahum’s prophecy is more or less from the same time period as the prophecies of Habakkuk and Zephaniah, and for that reason the three are sometimes called the pre-exilic prophets, just as Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi are known as the post-exilic prophets. Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah prophesied just before the Babylonian captivity and within thirty years of each. Nahum would have been the first of the three, with Zephaniah following and Habakkuk the last.¹

If the accepted dating of Nahum is correct, as we believe it is, then the order of the prophets who prophesied in Judah, both major and minor, is: Joel, Obadiah, Isaiah, and Micah (who also prophesied in the Northern Kingdom of Israel), Nahum, Zephaniah, Habakkuk, and Jeremiah, with Daniel and Ezekiel the prophets of the exile, and Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi the prophets after the exile. Joel and Obadiah would have prophesied before Israel’s dispersion by the Assyrians, and Isaiah and Micah during that time. The remaining three, Hosea, Amos, and Jonah, prophesied in the northern kingdom before its dispersion.

The end of the Northern Kingdom would have preceded Nahum’s prophecy, therefore, and Judah would have reached the point where its captivity in Babylon was certain. She had reached that point about the time of Israel’s dispersion and during the career of Isaiah and the reign of Hezekiah.

Nahum prophesied during the reign of Manasseh, king of Judah, and possibly into the reign of Josiah, the last God-fearing king of Judah. His career as a prophet may have overlapped with that of Zephaniah, who prophesied during the time of Josiah.

Manasseh was the longest-reigning king of Judah, fifty-five years (697-642 BC, II Chron. 33:1), and the indications are that Nahum’s prophecy would have come near the end of his reign or at the beginning of Josiah’s reign, between 664 and 612 BC. The fact that Nahum makes no mention of Judah’s sin, seems to show that his prophecy was given during the reforms begun by Manasseh after his repentance and continued by his grandson Josiah (II Chron. 33:14-34:33).

The date of Nahum’s prophecy is bounded by two events, both of which he mentions: the fall of the Egyptian city of Thebes (called No in Nahum 3:8) to the Assyrians in 644 BC and the fall of Nineveh in 612 BC, which had not yet happened when Nahum prophesied. Most likely Nahum’s prophecy comes near the beginning of that time span, since he describes Nineveh at the height of its power in chapter 1:12.

Nahum’s prophecy dates to the reign of Ashurbanipal, King of Assyria. He is the Asnappar of Ezra 4:10, the king whom God used to bring His judgments on the Northern Kingdom. He was one of the great kings of the Assyrian empire, but the last great king, for under his descendants the kingdom quickly declined, ending with the conquest of Nineveh by the Babylonians in fulfillment of Nahum’s prophecy.

The historical background is important. When King Hezekiah died, his son Manasseh was only twelve years old and, on assuming the throne at that young age, proved to be one the wickedest kings of Judah. He introduced human sacrifice, temple prostitution, witchcraft, and the worst of idol worship to Jerusalem (II Kings 23:3-7; II Chron. 33:2-7). He desecrated the temple and persecuted and murdered many of God’s people (II Kings 21:16), including, according to tradition, the prophet Isaiah, whom he ordered to be sawed in half. His excesses are summed up in II Chronicles 33:9, “So Manasseh made Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to err, and to do worse than the heathen, whom the LORD had destroyed before the children of Israel.”

For his sins he was carried away captive to Babylon by the king of Assyria, probably by Ashurbanipal (II Chron. 33:10, 11). There he repented and was restored to the throne, his supposed prayer of repentance recorded in one of the apocryphal books, the “Prayer of Manasses” (mentioned in the Belgic Confession, Art. 6). Having repented, he began a series of reforms in Judah,

¹ I am indebted in much of this introductory material to O. Palmer Robertson’s *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1990), part of the *New International Commentary on the Old Testament*, R. K. Harrison, ed.

only partly successful (II Chron. 33:12-20), reforms that were carried on by his grandson Josiah after Manasseh's son Amon, also very wicked, was assassinated only two years into his reign. Many scholars believe that it was during this time of reform under Manasseh that Nahum prophesied, since he does not mention Judah's sins in his prophecy, except indirectly.

The theme of Nahum's prophecy, fittingly, is found in chapter 1:7, "The LORD is good, a strong hold in the day of trouble; and he knoweth them that trust in him." In the troubled days before the Babylonian captivity this was God's word through Nahum to the faithful in Judah. It is also God's word to us in troubled times, especially now at the end of time, when the church and the faithful face troubles such as never have been seen before.

In developing this theme, Nahum's prophecy speaks of the destruction of Assyria and Nineveh under the judgment of God, thus predicting the ruin of all who oppose the kingdom of God. His message, therefore, is not only a message of comfort for God's people, but also a message that the wicked nations of today's world, increasingly hostile to the church, would do well to hear and take to heart. Nevertheless, it is God's people who must hear what Nahum has to say by way of a warning against the sins to which they are prone, when they follow the ways and practices of the world, as Judah did in the days of Manasseh. Judah did not hear until it was too late. Would God that the church today proves more sensible to the Word of God and its warnings.

Nahum's prophecy of Nineveh's destruction is divided into three parts: the announcement from God of Nineveh's fall (1:2-14); a vivid description of Nineveh's fall (1:15-2:13); and God's word concerning the certainty of Nineveh's fall (3:1-19). That last section is especially important in view of the fact that Judah had reached the point of no return. God had indicated this already in the prophecies of Isaiah and would tell Judah this during the good reign of Josiah through the prophetess, Huldah (II Chron. 34:22-28).

With its words of judgment and comfort, Nahum's prophecy fits beautifully into the period of time when some reform was taking place but when exile in Bab-

ylon was unavoidable. In a time when things were improved, though temporarily, Judah needed to know that God does not acquit the wicked, as the destruction of Nineveh would demonstrate. Since in God's just judgment Judah was facing exile for her sins, the faithful needed to hear this word of warning but also God's word concerning the destruction of her enemies and her place of refuge in troubled times.

What does the prophecy of Nahum, then, have to say to us?

It is, above all, a warning against wickedness, especially when the wickedness of the world creeps into the church as it did in the days of Manasseh. God "will not at all acquit the wicked" (Nah. 1:3), whether Ninevites or Israelites or Christians.

Nahum's prophecy is also a reassurance that God will deliver His people from their enemies and take vengeance on those who trouble them. And though, in the book of Nahum, the enemies upon whom He takes vengeance are the heathen, the background of the book reminds us that Nineveh was used by God to chastise Israel and Judah for their sins. God spares none when He comes in wrath: "He rebuketh the sea, and maketh it dry, and drieth up all the rivers: Bashan languisheth, and Carmel, and the flower of Lebanon languisheth" (Nah. 1:4). Many in Judah would experience God's vengeance firsthand.

The book is, therefore, a call to repentance, to conversion, to holiness, and to reformation: "O Judah, keep thy solemn feasts, perform thy vows: for the wicked shall no more pass through thee; he is utterly cut off" (1:15).

It is also a book of comfort for God's people, for those who walk in His ways, who hear His Word and obey it. To them the Lord proves Himself a deliverer, a strong hold in time of trouble. He knows those who trust in Him and will never forsake them in the troubles He sends them.

The theme of Nahum's prophecy, fittingly, is found in chapter 1:7, "The LORD is good, a strong hold in the day of trouble; and he knoweth them that trust in him." In the troubled days before the Babylonian captivity this was God's word through Nahum to the faithful in Judah. It is also God's word to us in troubled times, especially now at the end of time, when the church and the faithful face troubles such as never have been seen before.



Taking heed to the doctrine

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The *ordo salutis* (4b): Conversion: The new man

Previous article in this series: November 15, 2023, p. 85.

And I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within you; and I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and will give them an heart of flesh: That they may walk in my statutes, and keep mine ordinances, and do them: and they shall be my people, and I will be their God.

Ezekiel 11:19-20

The terminology

In the last article in this series I explained the concept “old man”; in this article I will explain the concept “new man.” The term “new man” appears only in the New Testament and never in the Old Testament. Both references to the “new man” appear in the letters of the apostle Paul. “And have put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness” (Eph. 4:24). “And have put on the new man which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him” (Col. 3:10). There are synonyms for the “new man”; different words, but the same idea. Three times Paul uses the terms “the inward man” or “the inner man.” “For I delight in the law of God *after the inward man*” (Rom. 7:22); “though our outward man perish, yet the *inward man* is renewed day by day” (II Cor. 4:16); and “that he would grant you according to the riches of his grace to be strengthened with might by his Spirit *in the inner man*” (Eph. 3:16). Peter uses the term “hidden man”: “But let it be *the hidden man of the heart* in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit which is in the sight of God of great price” (I Pet. 3:4).

The Belgic Confession even says that *we are a new man*: “We believe that this true faith, being wrought in man by the hearing of the Word of God and the operation of the Holy Ghost, doth regenerate and *make him a new man*, causing him to live a new life, freeing him from the bondage of sin” (Art. 24).

We must also understand what the new man is *not*.

First, the new man is not Christ. Romans 13:14 says, “But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not pro-

vision for the flesh, to fulfill the lusts thereof.” Galatians 3:27 says, “As many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” Those verses do not mean that we put on the person of Jesus Christ; they mean that we receive Christ in His gifts and graces. We receive His Holy Spirit, we receive His power, we receive His holiness. Besides that, the passages on the new man in Ephesians 4:24 and Colossians 3:10 speak of the new man who is “*created* in righteousness and true holiness” or “renewed in knowledge after the image of him that *created* him.” Christ is not created.

Second, the new man is not the Holy Spirit. Galatians 5:16-17 says, “This I say then, Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfill the lusts of the flesh: for the flesh lusteth against the Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other, so that ye cannot do the things that ye would.” The apostle refers to the old man (the flesh) striving against the new man (the Spirit), but that simply means that the Spirit who works in us *causes us* to strive against the flesh. That is why the apostle writes, “So that *ye* cannot do the things that *ye* would [that ye want to do]” (v. 17). He does not write, “So that the Spirit cannot do the things that He would.” That is important. We must not imagine that the Spirit fights against the flesh within us, while we are passive bystanders. We actively fight against the flesh by the power of the Spirit.

Third, the new man is not simply a different word for the soul: all men, believers and unbelievers, have a soul, but not all men have a new man. Only believers, only the regenerate, have the new man. The unbeliever is only the old man; the believer has a new man; or, better, he is the new man.

The idea of “new man” or the new heart

What, then, is the new man? Quite simply, the new man is the regenerated Christian. As believers, we have two aspects to our existence: we have an old man—a sinful flesh, the power of sin/evil within us—and we are the new man. That is really the best way to express it—Do not say, “I am the old man”; say rather, “I *have*

an old man; I have sinful flesh.” Say and confess with thanksgiving, “By God’s grace I *am* a new man. Not only do I have a new man, but I *am* the new man; I am a new creature in Christ Jesus.” That is actually the emphasis of Scripture, especially the New Testament: believers are saints, holy ones, children of light; never in the New Testament does the apostle call believers totally depraved; the closest Paul comes to that is in Romans 7:18, “I know that in me [and notice how he immediately qualifies it—“that is, in my flesh”] dwelleth no good thing.” Do not say, “I am totally depraved,” except, according to the flesh. Say, “I am holy.”

The new man is the opposite of the old man. The old man is as ancient as Adam; the new man is as new as regeneration. The old man is corrupt, depraved, evil, and vile; the new man is holy. “Created in righteousness and true holiness” (Eph. 4:24); “renewed in knowledge” (Col. 3:10); “renewed day by day” (II Cor. 4:16); “not corruptible” (I Peter 3:4); “he cannot sin because he is born of God” (I John 3:9). The old man affects every aspect of our being: our heart, our soul, our mind, our will, and our body; the new man is a transformation of every aspect of our being. Paul writes in II Corinthians 5:17, “If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.” In Ephesians 2:10 Paul writes, “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.”

This transformation is due to the marvelous work of the grace of God. We did not make ourselves new creatures or new men. That new man was *created*, says the apostle: “created in righteousness and true holiness” (Eph. 4:24); that new man was *renewed*, says the apostle: “renewed after the image of him that created him” (Col. 3:10).

What the New Testament calls the new man, the inner man, the inward man, or the hidden man, the Old Testament calls a new heart. The prophet who teaches the most about the new heart is Ezekiel, both in chapters 11 and 36. In chapter 11 Ezekiel describes two kinds of hearts. God promises to remove one kind of heart (“I will take,” v. 19) and to give another (“I will give/put,” v. 19).

The first kind of heart is a heart of stone (“I will take the stony heart out,” v. 19). A stony heart is a very hard heart: it is the heart of one who stubbornly opposes God; the heart of one who refuses to listen to God; the heart of one who is unresponsive to God. The Canons of Dordt describe such a heart in Canons III/IV, 11: hardened, uncircumcised, dead, evil, disobedient, and refractory. That last word, *refractory*, means resisting

control or authority, resistant to cure, unresponsive to stimulus—a stony heart. Canons I, 6 also speaks of a heart that is obstinate, which means stubborn; such a heart God is able to soften and transform.

The second kind of heart is a heart of flesh (“I will give them a heart of flesh”). A heart of flesh is a soft heart, a responsive heart, the heart of one who listens to and obeys God, the heart of one who loves God. That heart, too, is described in Canons III/IV, 11: good, obedient, pliable. That word *pliable* is significant: a hard, stony heart is the opposite of pliable; you can beat it with a hammer but it will not change its shape; but clay is pliable; it can be bent, twisted, molded, according to the desires of the potter. The prophet uses the word *flesh*: a heart of flesh. That might surprise us because often the word “flesh” is used negatively, but here the word “flesh” is used in a good sense to contrast it with the hardness of a stone.

God promises a fundamental change in the spiritual, ethical center of a man, which is his heart. The heart is the spiritual center of a person, the source of all his thinking, feeling, and willing. The heart is equivalent to the *mind*, for it is the source of a man’s *thinking*: “Why reason ye these things in your hearts” (Mark 2:8). The heart is equivalent to the *emotions* or *affections*, for it is the source of a man’s *feeling*. We love with our heart; we hate with our heart; fear or anger can fill our hearts. “Let not your heart be troubled” (John 14:1). The heart is equivalent to the *will*, for it is the source of a man’s *desires*. “My heart’s desire...for Israel...is that they might be saved” (Rom. 10:1).

Therefore, if that is what the heart is—the spiritual center of a person, the source of all his thinking, feeling, and willing—we know what the Lord is promising to do in Ezekiel 11. “I will cause you to have different thoughts: you thought that the way of evil was good and the way of good was evil. Your thoughts will change because I will give you a new heart, a new way of thinking. I will cause you to have different affections: you delighted in sin and abhorred righteousness. Your affections will change because I will give you a new heart. I will cause you to have different desires: you desired sin and evil and you rejected holiness. Your desires will change because I will give you a new heart.” Quite simply, with a new heart, your thinking, affections, and desires are changed; you become a new man: “[God doth] regenerate [the sinner] and *make him a new man, causing him to live a new life*” (Belgic Confession, Art. 24). It is important to notice, however, that *we* have thoughts, affections, and desires from our new heart. Ezekiel does not say, “I will compel you to have new thoughts, affections, and desires,” but “I will give you

a new heart.” The Canons explain this truth: man is always a rational, moral creature. When man has a stony heart, he sins willingly as a rational, moral creature—a totally depraved creature; when man has a fleshy heart, he loves God and keeps His commandments willingly as a rational, moral creature—a renewed and holy creature. God, says the Canons, does not treat men as senseless stocks and blocks (stocks and blocks have no heart), nor takes away their will and its properties (stocks and blocks have no will), neither does violence thereto, but “[He] spiritually quickens, heals, corrects, and at the same time sweetly and powerfully bends it; that where carnal rebellion and resistance formerly prevailed, a ready and sincere spiritual obedience begins to reign, in which the true and spiritual restoration and freedoms of our will consist” (Canons III/IV, 16). In other words, sincere obedience is not forced out of us, but is the fruit of a new heart. Or as Lord’s Day 1 of the Heidelberg Catechism puts it, “He makes me sincerely willing and ready, henceforth, to live unto Him” (A. 1).

The relation between the new man and the old man

We must also understand the relation between the new man and the old man. The old man is not changed by the presence of the new man. That means, first, that the corrupt flesh does not improve. We improve, but the corrupt flesh or the old man never improves. Paul writes, “Ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts” (Eph. 4:22). Notice that the old man is, and remains, corrupt; notice that the lusts of the old man are, and remain, deceitful. Paul also writes in Romans 7:18, “For I know that in me, that is, in my flesh, dwelleth no good thing.” Notice he does not say, “In my flesh dwells some good thing; or that in my flesh goodness is growing, and evil is decreasing”: no good thing! That is why there is always a struggle in our hearts: the new man desires holiness (we desire holiness); the old man has deceitful lusts. Two principles work in us at the same time and sometimes, when we indulge the flesh, we strengthen the power of evil within us, with disastrous consequences. Sometimes, warns Canons V, 2, “[we] sinfully deviate from the guidance of divine grace, so as to be seduced by and comply with the lusts of the flesh.”

But at the same time that means, second, that the corrupt flesh no longer rules. In the unbeliever the flesh rules; of course, the unbeliever is only flesh. In the believer the new man rules—the believer is the new man; in the believer the new heart dominates; in the believer Christ rules by His Spirit. Therefore, the exhortation comes: “Let not sin therefore reign” (Rom 6:12).

In addition, there is progress. The quickening of the new man is our conversion; it is also our sanctification. Over time we *become more holy, that is, we are progressively sanctified*. This does not mean that our struggle with sin becomes easier. If anything, the holier we become, the fiercer becomes the struggle against sin. But it means this: over time the new man becomes stronger (and, in times of lamentable backsliding, becomes weaker); and, as we grow, we become more consecrated to God; we love Him more; we love sin less; it means that the new man’s rule in our new heart is greater; it means that the new man is more victorious.

We can look at progress in two ways. When we look at the goal, we might say, “We have made little progress.” Heidelberg Catechism, A. 114 says, “Even the holiest men, while in this life, have only a small beginning of this obedience.” But when we look at where we started from, we can say, “I have made progress.” Our starting point was total depravity—we have made progress; we are holy. The goal is perfection—we have a small beginning; nowhere near perfection.

The quickening of the new man

We make progress, we grow, and we are sanctified and converted *as the new man is quickened*. Quickenings is God’s work. Strictly speaking, God quickens us, but in that work God makes us active. That is the language of the Catechism. “What is quickening?” It is a “sincere joy of heart in God” (We rejoice; God does not rejoice; God is the object of our joy; we rejoice in Him). “It is a sincere joy of heart in God *through Christ*” (Christ is the reason for our rejoicing; we rejoice because our sins are forgiven, because we have everlasting life, because of fellowship with God through Christ). Quickenings is also with love and delight (*we* love God and delight in Him) to live according to the will of God in all good works (we do good works). God is first and we follow. He works joy in us and we rejoice; He works life in us and we live; He works obedience in us and we obey.

And God uses means in the quickening of the new man. We are called to feed the new man so that we grow—the new man is strengthened by the means of grace: the preaching of the gospel, the use of the sacraments, the reading of the Bible, and prayer. The more these are neglected, the weaker we become spiritually; thus, Peter writes, “As newborn babes desire the sincere milk of the word that ye may grow thereby; if so be that we have tasted that the Lord is gracious” (I Pet. 2:2-3).

The fruit of the quickening of the new man is good works: “It is with love and delight to live according to the will of God *in all good works*” (A. 90). That is also the fruit of the new heart promised in Ezekiel 11. The

Jews were disobedient, they were idolaters who transgressed God's commandments; for that reason they were cast out of Jerusalem into captivity. God says, "Here is why you are disobedient: you have hearts of stone. That is not an excuse, but a reason. Stony hearts produce only disobedience. And your stony hearts are your own fault. It is because of your stony hearts that you must be punished."

So God makes a beautiful promise to His people, to us: "I will take away your heart of stone; *then* you will obey me. I will give you a heart of flesh; *then* you will obey me." Verse 20, "That they may walk in my statutes, and keep mine ordinances, *and do them.*" That will be the result, the fruit, of your conversion. Do good works, then, as the fruit of your conversion, to God's glory.



Pillar and ground of truth

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What the layman should know about textual criticism: History

Previous article in this series: December 1, 2023, p. 130.

We saw last time that New Testament textual criticism is the scholarly work of comparing the readings of currently available Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, observing the differences in their readings, and trying to explain those differences, in order to determine as best as possible which Greek words the Holy Spirit originally inspired.

We also noted that the work of textual criticism is not inherently wrong. It is good when it uses sound methods to attain a good goal, that of learning which words are authoritative. However, some textual critics have used unsound methods and have had unsound goals. Today some textual critics use their methods to undermine the Bible's unity and integrity as the revelation of God.

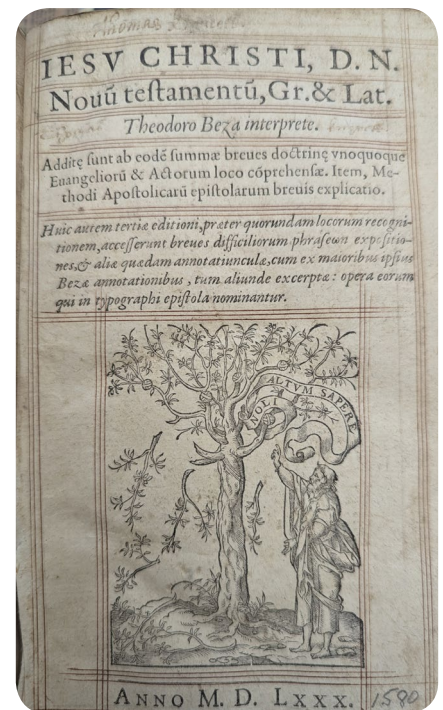
A study of the history of textual criticism will underscore the need to beware of certain presuppositions and assumptions that some textual critics make, and to ensure that our methods and goals are sound.

Reformation era

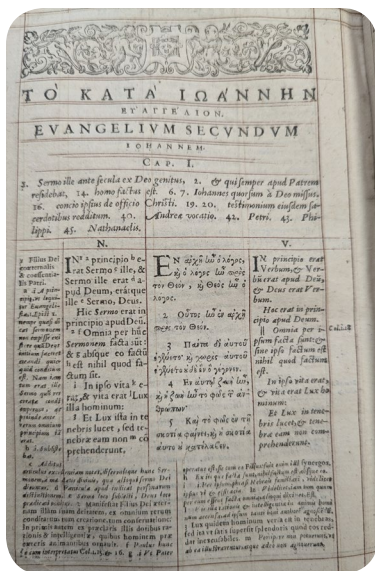
The work of textual criticism began in the late medieval era. During the Dark Ages in Europe, Constantinople had been a center of scholarship. When the Muslim Turks invaded Constantinople in the 1400s, scholars fled west into Europe, taking with them ancient Greek and Hebrew documents that had been unknown in Europe before. Also, in 1454 the printing press was invented; now textual critical editions of the New Testament could be printed more easily.

Desiderus Erasmus (1466-1536) was an early notable textual critic; he began his work by comparing two Greek

manuscripts, one dating to the twelfth century, and the other to the tenth. Two manuscripts are not many; but textual criticism involves the comparison of the readings of two or more manuscripts. In the mid-1500s, Robert Estienne, a printer in Paris, printed several editions of a Greek New Testament text, relying on Erasmus' work. His 1550 edition was based on a comparison of at least fifteen manuscripts, and became known as the *Textus Receptus* (Received Text) in Great Britain.¹ The Bibles subsequently published in Great Britain, including the King James Version (1611), rely on this Greek edition for their New Testament translation. The Bible had been divided into chapters since the 1240s, but Estienne's 1551 edition was the first to include verse divisions. We note that the chapter and verse divisions of the



¹ The Received Test was the text that all church scholars in that day acknowledged to be the standard.



Bible are not inspired. Neither, for that matter, is any punctuation; all was added later by printers.

The Reformer Theodore Beza (1519-1605) continued Estienne's work. Beza published nine critical editions over his lifetime. Why so many? Because the work of textual criticism is ongoing. Beza found more Greek manuscripts to compare, and over time was able to compare them more thoroughly.² After he died, the Elzevirs, a family of publishers in Leiden, continued the work; their 1633 edition became the *Textus Receptus* (Received Text) on continental Europe, and the basis for Bibles published thereafter, including the 1637 Dutch *Statenvertaling*.

Many manuscripts used in textual criticism to this point dated from the 800s. These were the manuscripts that were available at that time. As older manuscripts were found, the work of textual criticism continued.

The 1700s-1900s

The 1700s saw an assault on orthodoxy, as liberal ideas were taught. The Enlightenment promoted rationalism, the idea that human rational thinking is the way to find truth (man, not God). Scripture's authority in faith and life was rejected in favor of scientific findings and philosophical theories (man's ideas, not God's revealed Word). Cardinal doctrines of the faith (the Trinity, and atonement) were denied. The theory of evolution was advanced. Views of Scripture changed also; some denied that it is God's inspired revelation. This affects one's goals in textual criticism, and a change of goals will involve a change of methods.

The method of textual criticism in the Reformation era involved two things: noting the number of manuscripts that agreed on a certain reading, and considering what we knew about those individual manuscripts. To restate, let's say a scholar compared the reading of 100 manuscripts on a certain verse. He found that 95 included or omitted a certain word or phrase, and 5 did the

opposite. He would try to give a plausible explanation why 5 did the opposite of 95, and he would conclude that the reading of the 95 was correct. Leaving out technical aspects of the method for now, this is how textual criticism had been done, and ought to be done.

But in the 1800s at least two developments took place. Brooke Westcott (1825-1901) and Fenton Hort (1828-1892) did not begin these developments, but they popularized them and used them to justify the need for a new Bible translation. They argued that the KJV was based on inferior manuscripts, and that the Revised Version (1881/1885) should replace the KJV as the most popular version.

The first development was the "eclectic" method of textual criticism. Instead of noting that 95 manuscripts agreed, and 5 did not, the textual critic now began asking which reading made the most sense. Made the most sense *to whom*? Why, the textual critic, of course. Made the most sense *using which criteria*? Not how many manuscripts had a certain reading and how many did not, and what kind of manuscripts they were, but what word Paul was more likely to have used, or what word seemed to fit the context better.

The eclectic method requires the textual critic to make subjective judgments. To try to avoid subjectivity, teams of scholars are formed to agree on the result. They produce "critical editions," Greek New Testaments that alert the reader to the different readings in a verse, and suggest which reading is probably the best. (Our ministers all have these in their library). But note two ways in which this method is a change from the previous. First, the ultimate standard for our opinions will be, "in my judgment...." *Rationalism affected textual criticism*. Second, majority of manuscripts is out the window, in favor of majority of men's opinions.

The second development was to propose some objective criteria for making subjective judgments: divide every known manuscript into four basic families, and prefer one family over another. Unfortunately, this "objective" criteria was a man-made, flawed theory. According to this theory, the Neutral family contains the oldest and best manuscripts, but they are few in number. Specifically, the two "oldest and best" manuscripts are in this family. The Alexandrian family has more manuscripts, but is related to the Neutral family; both families include prominent manuscripts from Egypt. The Western family contains manuscripts found in western Europe in the third century. And the Syrian family includes manuscripts found in the eastern part of the Roman Empire, from Greece and Turkey (Asia Minor) eastward.

The Syrian family contains *by far the largest* number of manuscripts; it also includes those *manuscripts that*

² The images here are from the 1580 ed. (Geneva) of Beza's Latin-Greek NT held in the rare books at the PRC Seminary. The first is the title page, while the second is the beginning of the fourth gospel, John.

were found in areas in which most of the New Testament epistles were written. But according to this theory, someone in the region of Syrian Antioch did a poor job of textual criticism and editing in the 200s or 300s. As a result, we should not trust the large majority of manuscripts in the Syrian family. I presented the four families—Neutral, Alexandrian, Western, and Syrian—in order of most reliable to least reliable, according to this theory.

This theory, like the evolutionary theory of origins, is both unproven and faulty. That someone edited manuscripts in the 200s or 300s has never been historically verified. That many hundreds of manuscripts that were written in the area in which the apostles labored (Greece and Asia Minor) are less reliable than fewer, though older, manuscripts found in another area has not been compellingly demonstrated. Interestingly, and perhaps related, is the fact that these older manuscripts are found in an area where the Coptic Christians of Egypt were developing a wrong view of Christ and where an allegorical interpretation of the Bible was being promoted.

Although not proven, the theory has been widely accepted. Now the textual critic takes 100 manuscripts and decides that 90 of them are inferior because they are in the Syrian family. He then puts 4 into a pile called “Western family” and says they are relatively harmless, just not really to the point. And he puts 6 into a pile called Alexandrian, and decides that 2 or 3 of those 6 are Neutral. When he finds different readings among the 100, he decides that the reading of the 2 or 3 older Neutral manuscripts must be better than the readings of the 90 manuscripts in the Syrian family!

This method of textual criticism lies behind most modern critical editions. These critical editions are the textual basis for every English Bible translation from the Revised Version (1885) and American Standard Version (1901) to the present, *except* the New King James Version. This method also explains why the NIV or ESV speaks at times of the “earliest and best manuscripts” having a certain reading: the several, especially two, manuscripts that are part of the Neutral family have that reading.

Not everyone has swallowed the hook. Already when the theory was being developed, men like Frederick Scrivener (1813-1891), John Burgon (1813-1888), and Edward Miller (1825-1901) pointed out its flaws. More recently, Wilbur Pickering, Edward Hills, and Theodore Letis have written against it. These men knew the field; they gave scholarly rebuttals to the flawed theory. Also the Trinitarian Bible Society opposed these developments in textual criticism, and publishes a Greek edition of the New Testament that does not reflect them.

So a wrong method of textual criticism has affected us, without our knowing it. The ESV, the NIV, and

every English version except the KJV and NKJV are based on a Greek text that is itself based on faulty assumptions. Let me be clear: I am not now addressing the translation method or accuracy of these versions. Nor am I suggesting that everything in them is suspect. However, when the KJV and ESV differ, not just on how to translate a certain word, but whether or not to include a word, textual criticism explains why. For example, II Peter 3:10 ends in the KJV: “the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up.” The ESV says, “and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.” The difference in translation of “burned up” and “exposed” is not due to the question what the Greek word *meant*; it is due to the question *which Greek word* was used.

The 2000s

For over one hundred years, scholars have ardently defended the ideas promoted by Westcott and Hort. But now a *brand new method* of textual criticism is being developed! Suddenly the unproven theories of Westcott and Hort are out of vogue! Theories are always susceptible of being replaced by new theories when convenience permits.

Not coincidentally, this new idea was developed after a century or more of higher critical scholarship that insists that the Bible is not really God’s revelation to us; it is a collection of ancient documents that give insight into what people thought at that time. And Paul did not write a letter to the Romans, but “Romans” is the work of an editor piecing together different documents that show how the Christians of that day thought of the work of salvation. And to understand the Bible, we need not pay much attention to the words but have to understand only the context and culture in which they were written, and try to read between the lines—sort of like studying English poetry.

The new method is called the Coherence-Based Genealogical Method (CBGM).³ Its goal is no longer to determine what Paul’s original letter to the Romans actually said. Rather, it is to find the initial text, that is, the text that an early editor produced. No need for a theory of four text families, if in the end some editor was piecing together different documents! And we have no way of knowing what those documents were, so to try to figure out what they read is pointless. We are only interested in

3 Although I have read about this method elsewhere, how I present it in this article is based especially on Jeffrey T. Riddle’s article “The Coherence-Based Genealogical Method: The Newest ‘New’ Method,” in the Trinitarian Bible Society’s *Quarterly Record* 635 (April-June 2021), 12-18.

the first edition of this editor. And all the New Testament manuscripts that we have today are copies, not of Paul's letter to the Romans, but of some editor's work.

To this end, the CBGM uses computers and mathematical/statistical analysis to determine how many manuscripts agree on a certain reading, and how those manuscripts are related to each other. In other words, why a certain reading keeps popping up. This raises questions that I cannot answer at the moment: who is programming the software that will do this work? Do those programmers also make assumptions? And while a computer can certainly analyze and produce statistics, how does it make judgments on matters that entire teams of scholars used to make?

Two things are certain, as of today. First, this new method is being integrated into the most recent critical editions of the Greek texts. I own such an edition that uses this method in analyzing the epistles of Peter, James, John, and Jude. Future critical editions will incorporate it even further. The next is a prediction: eventually new Bible translations will be based on texts that used this method, unless their translators consciously reject this method and use the method of Westcott and Hort, or use the *Textus Receptus* on which the KJV and NKJV are based.

Second, the limited use of this new method has al-

ready demonstrated that it is capable of making significant changes to the text that would not otherwise have been made. Remember that the KJV and ESV translated II Peter 3:10 differently as a result of a textual critical difference? The Greek edition that uses CBGM adds a word: the earth and the works will “not” be burned up/exposed. Not a single Greek manuscript contains the word “not,” according to the data that this edition provides. A sixth-century Syriac translation has it, one Egyptian translation has it, and a second Egyptian translation *appears* to have it. Even the “oldest and best” manuscripts in what Westcott and Hort called the “Neutral text” do not have it. But it is in the critical edition now; the computers think it belongs in.

And is your hope shattered, believer? If Christ will not destroy this earth with fire, what hope have we for heaven? And what incentive for godliness? The next verse in II Peter shows that the apostle is pointing us to the destruction of the earth, judgment, and final redemption in order to underscore the need for godliness.

Well, I tried to keep this simple; you will have to decide if I managed or not. But I have laid groundwork for what is coming next. Next time, we will see how our ministers are taught to discern what the Holy Spirit actually said when some manuscripts disagree.



Strength of youth

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

Chastisement versus punishment

“And ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children, My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him.”

Hebrews 12:5

Young people have forgotten, and adults along with them, the difference between chastisement and punishment. When a parent angrily smites and the child shrieks in rebellion during discipline, they have forgotten the difference. When a teacher berates his stubborn students, and teenagers murmur about the consequences, they have forgotten the difference. When we become impatient and bitter as individuals or as churches under the afflictions God has brought upon us, we have forgotten the difference. Yes, chastisement is painful, often feeling much like

punishment, but we must not forget the difference. With eyes of faith let us discern and remember the important difference between chastisement and punishment. I remind you of two main differences.

First, the *motive* of chastisement is *love* for His elect. When God sends any adversity upon His people, He does so as our Father with tender love toward His children dear. His rod is hard, but His heart is full of grace. He is unchangeable in His holy hatred of sin and error but just as immutable in His abundant mercy toward His church. Even when He frowns upon us while we sin, His face constantly shines with unmerited favor toward sinners in Christ. “For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth” (Heb. 12:6a). Our heavenly Father will not spare the rod and spoil us. “For what son is he whom the father chasteneth not?” (Heb. 12:7b). With the same

loving heart, He brings pain with one hand, while with the other He upholds and comforts.

In contrast to chastisement, the *motive* of punishment is *wrath* against the reprobate. Against them God is angry always. In His just and holy ire against sinners without Christ, God brings both adversity and the slippery places of prosperity to slide down unto destruction (Ps. 73:18). How truly awful, yet just, it is that the sovereign God governs all things in hatred of many and without universal love (a.k.a. common grace)! God's motive in chastisement is love for His people in Christ, but His motive in punishment is wrath against sinners without Christ.

By faith, the elect child of God focuses on Christ and discerns: "God will chastise me, but He will never punish me. Although I deserve God's wrath as punishment for my sin along with the reprobate, I know that God has eternally loved me and Jesus has fully endured that wrath for me. Therefore, every hardship I bear cannot be God's wrathful punishment but only His loving chastisement." This is the perspective of a believer who lives by faith, in light of the cross and God's eternal election.

Second, the *purpose* of chastisement is *growth*. Our loving Father chastens for our spiritual benefit, "that we might be partakers of his holiness" (Heb. 12:10b). In other words, God chastens us for the strengthening of our faith. Through this fortified faith, we receive the grace to live holy lives more and more. Under the bright but sometimes sweltering heat of the sun, a plant presses its roots deeper into the moist soil of the earth. So also, God's people, under His chastening grace, are made to press deeper into Christ, and "afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness" (Heb. 12:11b).

Sometimes we need chastening for a specific presumptuous sin. We willfully take pleasure in it, imagining its bondage to be harmless fun, but God loves us too much to let us destroy our souls. So He chastens, and we immediately know exactly of what sin we must repent. Sometimes we also need chastening for "not-so-obvious" sins. After we have hustled through life for a while, seeking our glory, kingdom, and will, without thinking too deeply about spiritual things, He suddenly stops us in our tracks. Through pain and trouble, He humbles our pride. He makes us examine our hearts. He peels back the layers of our self-righteousness, self-reliance, and self-service that we thought was everyone else's and their church's problem rather than our own. With chastening, He exposes our "secret faults" (Ps. 19:12) that we were too blinded by conceit to see. His chastening abases us to despair in ourselves, which though unpleasant, is spiritually good, for in our weakness we are made strong to lean more wholly on Jesus. We find all saving help, lasting strength, and contentment in Him alone.

Unlike chastisement, the *purpose* of punishment is *payment* for sin. Jehovah, sitting in heaven as the Judge of all mankind, searches the hearts of all. Not in meanness but in His justice He enforces His law. Sinners without Christ must pay for their sins. "The wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). Before death, God ensures that many reprobate also suffer in this life before eternal death in hell. There is payback for sin, not for us to execute but for Him who has said, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay" (Rom. 12:19).

Living by faith, the believer in Christ recognizes: "God will chastise me, but He will never punish me. Punishment is payment for sin, but Jesus paid it all! The precious blood of my Redeemer is payment that is more than sufficient for me and all His people. To claim that He punishes me (or other suffering believers) would be to deny the perfect work of Christ. Therefore, all the consequences I must face for my sin cannot be punishment but chastisement: not for payment, but for growth. Affliction has been and will be for my profit, my correction, my nurture, my conforming to the image of Jesus Christ." This is the perspective of one who by faith hears that victorious cry of Him who paid it all, "It is finished."

Remembering the difference between chastisement and punishment, the believer will respond rightly to discipline and difficulty in his life. As faithful parents apply the rod, remove privileges, and bring sharp reproof, the believing young person will recognize that God is using his mother and father to chastise and not to punish. When students face consequences for their misbehavior and laziness at school, they will recognize this as a reflection of God's love, meant to cause them to grow rather than to harm them. More and more the young person learns about and recognizes other forms of chastisement that God gives, whether it come in controversy, by church discipline, or by some other affliction.

However, when we confuse chastisement with punishment, we will respond wrongly. God's Word warns, "My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord" (Heb. 12:5b).

One wrong response to chastisement is anger. Our anger during chastisement is directed not only against a human authority that administers the consequences but necessarily God-ward as well. This despising of chastening grows into a hidden but ugly "root of bitterness" that troubles many today (see Heb. 12:15). Sadly, bitterness is a hidden root that grows quickly and produces all kinds of bad fruit. Let us repent of this bitter despising of God's chastisement, trusting in His fatherly mercy to forgive and to cut it out of our hearts.

Another way to despise the chastening of the Lord

is to ignore the lessons that God is teaching us through chastisement. Sometimes, a young person is so stubborn that no matter how many consequences he faces, he does not seem to learn his lesson. In his mind, he does not take his sin seriously, he blames others, he makes excuses, and he forgets the lessons reiterated to him when corrected. This too is a despising of God's chastisement. Let God's people both young and old remember the lessons of both doctrine and life that God has been teaching us through chastisement.

A third wrong response to chastisement would be fear or doubt. Chastisement can be extremely painful and difficult to bear. As young people and adults in the church feel the pain of God's chastening rod, fears from sinful natures arise: "Is God punishing me? Is He no longer being gracious? Is he paying me back for my sin? Is he cruel?" More, Satan is the great accuser of the brethren, who will use the pointed fingers of those both near and far, not only to point out our sin but also to insist that God is punishing His church in His wrath. In this way, God's people are tempted to fear and doubt; but we must believe and remember the difference between chastisement and punishment. Trusting in the tender love of our sovereign Father, we should recognize that God uses even our foes to chastise us:

O righteous God, Thy chastisement,
Though sent through foes, in love is sent;
Though grievous, it will profit me,
A healing ointment it shall be.

Psalter 386 (Psalm 141), stanza 5

As we keep in mind our God who chastens us and does not punish us, we willingly submit to His discipline. We repent of the sin He exposes. We remember the lessons God is teaching. We endure the consequences, knowing that chastisement can last a long while. We rest assured that whom the Lord *loves*, He chastens. We are even thankful to God during chastisement, for though chastening itself is grievous, His purposes are always good. And in His time, He turns grief to gladness and sorrow to joy; He chastens and restores.

Finally, remember that the difference between chastisement and punishment must also affect how we administer discipline. Parents, teachers, and church leaders, we must take this to heart. If God has dealt with you as a Father who chastens rather than punishes, then you may *never* punish God's children. As God's motive is love, so ours must be love. As His purpose is growth, so also should ours be. This truth must temper the sharpness of our rebuke and the hardness of the consequence. Wrath may never characterize our discipline of God's dear children, and they may never imagine that they are paying for their sin. Let us always reflect God's fatherly love in discipline. Then, when our Father chastens us, let us be a godly example to our children of how to receive chastisement. Let us make clear to our children and to all around us how the gospel makes a difference between chastisement and punishment.



All Thy works shall praise Thee

Mr. Dan Kuiper, science teacher in Covenant Christian High School and member and elder of Hope PRC in Walker, Michigan

Mirages: Distortions of light

Imagine, for a moment, a man lost and wandering through the desert. He is not prepared for the extreme heat and has no water. As he stumbles through the sand, the sun beats down on him. His feet drag. His tongue sticks to the roof of his mouth and his head pounds as he becomes more and more dehydrated. His primary objective is to find real, refreshing, life-giving water. Without it, he has no hope of survival. In the distance, he sees a sparkling pool of water. He trudges on, his steps a little faster now as he anticipates quenching his thirst.

But when he reaches his destination, he freezes. There is only more sand. The water had only been a *mirage*.

While stories of desperate travelers chasing mirages might be exaggerated, the lessons we learn from such an illustration are important. The ability to distinguish between what is real and what is a mirage is of vital importance. If the wandering traveler sees and pursues real water, he has true hope. But if the water he perceives is actually a mirage, he has no hope at all. Likewise, the child of God must be able to distinguish

between the truth of Scripture and false doctrine. Scripture, when properly taught and believed, sets our eyes on the true Christ who is the object of our faith. When distorted, Scripture leads one to place his trust in a false Christ, a mirage in which there is no hope.

The science of mirages

A mirage is an image of an object produced by the bending of light. In scientific terms, this bending of light is called refraction, and occurs because the speed of light depends on the material through which it travels. For example, light travels more slowly in water than it does in the air. Place a pencil in a glass and fill the glass about halfway with water. When you look at the pencil, the light rays from the part of the pencil that is underwater bend as they transition from water to air before reaching your eyes. This bending of light causes the image of the pencil to appear shifted or distorted at the water's surface. Essentially, the light rays that reach your eyes create an image that seems disconnected or broken at the point where the water's surface interacts with the pencil. This phenomenon creates the illusion of the pencil being broken or disjointed when, in reality, it remains intact.

Similarly, mirages can form in the atmosphere because the speed of light depends on the temperature of air. At room temperature, light travels at an astonishing speed of around 186,000 miles per second. For the sake of reference, the circumference of earth at the equator is about 25,000 miles and the distance from earth to the moon is about 239,000 miles. In one second, light can travel 7.5 times around the equator and it takes approximately 1.3 seconds for light that reflects from the moon's surface to reach earth. As the temperature of air increases above room temperature, the speed of light increases. When air's temperature decreases, the opposite effect occurs.

The temperature of air at the earth's surface depends on the ground's temperature. When materials on the ground absorb heat from the sun, their temperature increases. However, the amount of temperature change depends on a property called heat capacity. Heat capacity refers to how much heat energy a substance can absorb before its temperature changes. It is like a measure of how "stubborn" a material is when it comes to heating up or cooling down. Different materials have different heat capacities. Some, like water, have a high heat capacity, meaning they can absorb a lot of heat energy without changing temperature much. This is why water takes a while to heat up or cool down compared to other substances. On the other

hand, substances with low heat capacity, like metals, asphalt and sand, heat up and cool down more quickly because they do not need as much energy to change temperature.

Areas on earth where the ground heats rapidly are the locations where mirages most commonly form. For example, a phenomenon known as the "pool in the road" often takes place over asphalt roads during the summer. This familiar phenomenon occurs because the hot asphalt road generates a large temperature disparity between ground level air and the layer of air above it. Therefore, light traveling towards the ground speeds up when it reaches this layer and bends upwards towards the eye. In the case of the water-like reflections on a road's surface, what appears to be water is actually blue light from the sky bending back upwards from near the surface of the ground to the eye. The same concept applies in the desert. What appears to be life-giving water is actually blue light from the sky taking an altered path to the eye.

The object of faith

This world is a spiritual desert. It is filled with sin and sinners. As a result, there are many pains and sorrows. Death and decay are seen all around. In the midst of such misery, people look for an object (something or someone) in which to place their trust (faith). Many place their trust in the things of this world that have no ability to save. Only those whose trust in the Lord have true hope.

It is worth noting that true faith is an objective faith based on objective truth. That is, true faith is a historical faith based on real historical events and on a real historical person as revealed in Scripture. True faith confesses that Scripture is the inspired infallible, inerrant Word of God. By faith, the child of God holds for truth all things promised in the gospel. He confesses that, "the remission of sin, everlasting righteousness, and salvation are, freely given by God, merely of grace, only for the sake of Christ's merits" (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 21). Scripture, at its heart, is the revelation of Jesus Christ who is the source of living water.

There are many things that could be said about the revelation of Christ in Scripture, but it is especially important to recognize that Scripture reveals Christ as the *only* Savior and the *complete* Savior. That He is the only Savior means that no one else is able to do what Christ does as Savior of the world. Christ alone is the way of salvation as He declares in John 14:6, "I am the way, the truth, and the life: No man cometh to the Father but by me." That Jesus is the complete Savior means that He

is responsible for all of our salvation. Justification, sanctification, repentance, forgiveness, faith and every aspect of our salvation from beginning to end is the work of the Lord. He is the Savior for us in His suffering and death on the cross. He is the Savior in us by the power of His Spirit who gives us eyes to see and perceive the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven. And He is the Savior through us. That is, He works in us both to will and to do His good pleasure (Phil. 2:13).

Distortions of Scripture

Jesus Christ, the only and complete Savior, is the Christ of Scripture. He is the one we are to look to and cling to for all we need. But, we are warned that false teachers will arise who will distort the truth of Scripture and lead many astray. We can expect these false teachers to arise from within the church. II Corinthians 11:13-15 teaches, “For such are false prophets, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ. And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also be transformed into ministers of righteousness.” The Devil hates the truth of Scripture because he hates the Christ of Scripture. He is crafty and subtle. His game plan most often is to distort gospel truth rather than deny it outright. To accomplish his purpose, he raises up false teachers who mix the truth with the lie and, in doing so, deny Christ. “But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them” (II Pet. 2:1).

Gospel distorters often focus on “difficult” or “problem” passages in Scripture. They remove these passages from their context and from clearer passages of Scripture and use them to preach another gospel (Gal. 1:6) and declare another Jesus (II Cor. 11:4). A text like James 2:24 (“Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only”) might be used to teach that man’s works contribute to his justification, which is a denial that Christ is the *only* Savior. However, when considered in context of the entire book of James (and all of Scripture), it is clear that James teaches justification by faith in Christ alone. What he emphasizes in this particular verse is that one who has

been given the gift of faith will be transformed by the power of the Spirit and will perform good works in thankfulness to God.

Another passage that is often distorted is Philippians 2:12, which instructs the believer to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.” Many use this passage to make sanctification the work of man. In other cases, this passage is used to teach that man is able to earn the experience (assurance) of his salvation by his works. Such teachings are a denial that Christ is the *complete* Savior. However, the context of Philippians 2:12 makes clear that the work of salvation is God’s work from beginning to end. The surrounding verses teach that Christ alone has atoned for all the sins of His people *and* works in them both the willing and doing of His good pleasure. Throughout, Scripture teaches that it is by faith that we have peace with God.

Peter warns that false teachers who distort Scripture do so to their own destruction (II Pet. 3:16). The

The Devil hates the truth of Scripture because he hates the Christ of Scripture. He is crafty and subtle. His game plan most often is to distort gospel truth rather than deny it outright. To accomplish his purpose, he raises up false teachers who mix the truth with the lie and, in doing so, deny Christ.

same can be said for those who believe such distortions of Scripture. We see these types of misrepresentations of God’s Word in many churches today. The teaching that man has something to contribute to his salvation is appealing to human pride. Therefore, we should be on guard at all times. We

must be reminded what the Heidelberg Catechism teaches in Q&A 30, “...one of these two things must be true, that either Jesus is not a complete Savior or that they, who by a true faith receive this Savior, must find all things in Him necessary to their salvation.” A Christ who is only a partial Savior is no savior at all, but only a mirage. There is no hope in such a Christ. By God’s grace and through the leading of His Spirit we are led to a knowledge and love for the true Christ of Scripture. He is the living water in whom we have life and hope. “My soul, wait thou only upon God; for my expectation is from him. He only is my rock and my salvation: he is my defense; I shall not be moved” (Ps. 62:5-6).



Translated treasures

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Secret sins

From *A Brief Explanation of the Church Order* by
Johannes Jansen

Article 73: “Secret sins of which the sinner repents, after being admonished by one person in private or in the presence of two or three witnesses, shall not be laid before the consistory.”

This article already dates from the Synod of Emden (1571) in Article 27.¹ But it was then somewhat broader, and distinguished between two kinds of secret sins: namely, secret sins of which the sinner, after being admonished personally in private or in the presence of two or three witnesses, showed “sorrow,” that is, repented, and were not to be brought before the consistory; and hidden sins which were dangerous to the state and church, such as treason or seducing of souls, and were to be reported to the minister, not to expose the sinner and to discipline him openly, but to be able to admonish him and to avert the danger. The Synod of Dordrecht (1578) in Article 94 took only the first part, namely, that secret sins of which the sinner repents being admonished as the case may be by one, two, or three witnesses, will not be brought to the consistory.² This wording has been maintained until now. By way of explanation, we point out the following three main matters:

1. *That discipline must originate in the congregation.* It is much easier for the members to leave the oversight of the congregation to the consistory. But the Scriptures

require that the congregation itself exercise discipline. This belongs to the office of believers. Church discipline begins with *brotherly admonition* in a broader sense. This is necessary already on account of general sinfulness. Believers are “able also to admonish one another” (Rom. 15:14), must “edify one another” (I Thess. 5:11), and “exhort one another daily” (Heb. 3:13). This brotherly admonition assumes the character of a brotherly *reprimand* in a concrete case, in the event of a personal insult or a hidden sin that is known only to a few. Then the rule of Christ in Matthew 18:15-17 applies: “Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee...”; and the exhortation of Paul in Galatians 6:1: “Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself...”; (see also James 5:19-20). Even the elders must see to it that the congregation fulfills its calling. If a member of the congregation complains about another member to the pastor or to an elder, they must first ask whether the complainant has acted according to Matthew 18 and, if not, encourage them to do so. While sin is still hidden, the rule of Christ must be maintained. If a person decides to refuse, he must be sternly punished and, if he continues to refuse, he may even be placed under censure in the extreme case.

2. *That there is a distinction between secret and public sins.* In the application of this article the question soon arose regarding what is the distinction between a secret and public sin. Already at Emden (1571) there was a question from Ghent whether obtaining a secret pardon from the government (for example, by persons who took part in the iconoclasm in 1566 and in 1567, but when Alva came, repented of it and now went to get a pardon³); and whether secretly seeking a confir-

1 Article 27 from the Synod of Emden (1571) reads: “Secret sins, for which the sinner (having been admonished in private or with two or three witnesses) shows sorrow, shall not be brought to the attention of the consistory; but hidden sins, those which might bring harm and ruin to the general welfare or to the churches, such as treason, or seducing of souls, shall be reported to the minister so that after his advice it may be determined what must be done.” 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), 118.

2 Article 94 from the Synod of Dordrecht (1578) reads: “Secret sins of which the sinner repents, having been admonished in private by two or three witnesses, shall not be brought to the consistory.” Cf. De Ridder, *Church Orders*, 222.

3 Jansen is referring here to the fact that in 1566 and 1567 many Dutchman participated in the “iconoclasm” (Dutch: *beeldenstorm*) in which many Catholic churches in the Lowlands were ransacked and Catholic images destroyed. In response, King Philip II of Spain sent the notorious Duke of Alva, Don Fernando Alvarez de Toledo, to the Lowlands to crush the rebellion. This precipitated the Eighty Years’ War between Spain and the Netherlands in which the Netherlands won her independence.

mation of marriage or baptism in Rome, etc., belongs to the secret or the public sins, [and] thus whether they must be dealt with according to Matthew 18 or brought to the consistory. The Synod could not give a detailed answer. It was discussed, but opinions differed.⁴ The Synod of Dordrecht (1578) was again faced with the question: “Which sins are public?” At least she gave an outline of an answer: a sin is public if it a) is committed in public before everyone; b) is practiced in a place which is public by nature, and is revealed through the obstinacy of the sinner; and c) is worthy of public punishment through its grossness. The sin of David against Uriah and of Ananias and Sapphira were concealed at first, but soon became manifest and were punished as public sins.⁵ In any case, this answer did not solve the problem, but it did give some guidelines. Yet it did not

4 The referenced minute from the Synod of Emden (1571) reads: “The brethren from Ghent asked if these sins should be considered public or secret, namely, to get a pardon or indulgence secretly, to be married by the Papists, to have the children baptized there, to deny Jesus Christ while holding the office of mayor or some other office in the government, to swear an oath by the saints or anything else. This question, because it is variously argued and spoken about, is postponed to another meeting.” Cf. De Ridder, *Church Orders*, 126.

5 The referenced minute from the Synod of Dordrecht (1578) reads: “In answer to the question which sins are public: A public sin is one which is committed publicly before everyone, or which is committed in a place that by its nature is public (as the lawyers say) even though there are few people, or which through the stubbornness of the sinner from being private becomes public, or lastly because of its grossness is deemed worthy of public punishment. Thus the sins of David against Uriah and of Ananias and Sapphira against the Holy Spirit were made public and punished as public sins.” Cf. De Ridder, *Church Orders*, 232.

satisfy all. At the Synod of The Hague (1586), it was urged “to make a distinct description of the secret and public sins,” that is to say, to make a list with two headings, namely secret and public sins, which only needed to be checked. Of course, the synod refused to comply. The church order is not a civil code that lists the punishable sins article by article. Moreover, it would be impossible, because in each new case it would have to be determined again to which the sin belonged. Nor can it be put under a rule in advance. There is only something to be said about it in general, namely, first, the word “secret” does not mean that it was done in private, for many “public sins” were hidden at first, but means that they remain hidden and so are not yet known to many. And second, there is no limit to be identified which applies to all cases; for example, that a sin that one or two persons know would not be public, but that three or four persons know would be public; it depends as much on places as on circumstances; if a sin is known to five persons in a small congregation it may be public, while in a large congregation it may still be hidden; each specific case must be judged on its own.

3. *That private sins, of which the sinner repents, shall not be brought to the consistory.* It is expressly stated that private sins of which the sinner repents, whether after admonition in private or after admonition under two or three witnesses, shall not be brought before the consistory. The preceding article implied that private sins are handled according to the rule of Matthew 18 and thus will be secretly reconciled. This article adds that private sins that have been secretly reconciled will not be brought to the consistory. Not only beforehand, but also after the reconciliation has taken place, one must be silent about it.

Announcements

Resolution of sympathy

The Council and congregation of Georgetown PRC express their sincere sympathies to Gerald Dykstra and his children in the death of their wife, mother and grandmother, **Theresa Dykstra**. It is our prayer that they and their extended family may receive comfort from the Holy Spirit in Revelation 14:13: “And I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, Write, Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours; and their works do follow them.”

Jordan Engelsma, President
David S. Miedema, Clerk

Wedding anniversary

The Lord willing, on February 8, 2024 **Gysbert and Joanne VanBaren** will celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary. We are thankful for them, and thankful that God is faithful to His promises in Psalm 128:5, 6: “The LORD shall bless thee out of Zion: and thou shalt see the good of Jerusalem all the days of thy life. Yea, thou shalt see thy children’s children, and peace upon Israel.”

With love from
your children, grandchildren,
and great grandchildren

Thanks

The Council of the Pittsburgh Protestant Reformed Church wishes to recognize **Rev. Wilbur Bruinsma** for his 45 years of faithful service to the PRCA. As our pastor enters retirement in 2024, we thank God for him and his wife Mary, and for the many years they have served here in Pittsburgh (from 2006 as a home missionary and then since 2016 when we organized as a church). We pray that God may continue to use him for the good of His church as he leaves the active ministry but continues to serve as an emeritus minister.

Ed Tolsma, Vice President
August Hollema, Clerk

Financial Stewardship Seminar

Faith PRC Evangelism Committee invites you to join us for our Financial Stewardship Seminar on Saturday, January 27, 2024, from 9-11:30. Doors open at 8:30. There will be keynote addresses by Rev. C. Spronk (pastor at Faith PRC), Mr. Bernie Kamps (former CEO of Kamps Pallets), and Mr. Jim VanderKolk (CEO of Royal Technologies) followed by breakout sessions on debt, budgeting, and pre-retirement planning. Men and women, teens to retirees are welcome to attend! A nursery will be provided. PLEASE REGISTER at faithprc.org.

Classis West

Classis West of the Protestant Reformed Churches will meet in Randolph PRC on Wednesday, March 6, 2024, at 8:30 A.M. the Lord willing. All material for the agenda is to be in the hands of the stated clerk by February 5 (30 days before classis convenes). All delegates in need of lodging or transportation from the airport should notify the clerk of Randolph's consistory.

Rev. J. Engelsma, 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).

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.