



THE **STANDARD BEARER**

**A Reformed
Semi-Monthly
Magazine**

Those who in any sense of the word — I do not hesitate to say it — build on the foundation of man, on the foundation of Arminian grace or any other common grace, do not build on the foundation of the church. They do not. Only the church knows those who are the sign of authentic faith.

A Reformed semi-monthly magazine

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See "A Sure Foundation"

This cover style was used for the SB from October 1993 through October 1998, in various colors ranging from orange to green to the familiar blue. And although there were occasionally full-color covers used before this, this format introduced the use of colorful headings within the pages themselves. *Continued inside.*

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Editorial office

Prof. Barry Gritters
4949 Ivanrest Ave SW
Wyoming, MI 49418
gritters@prca.org

Business office

Mr. Dwight Quenga
1894 Georgetown Center Dr
Jenison, MI 49428-7137
616-457-5970
dwight@rfpa.org

United Kingdom office

c/o Mrs. Alison Graham
27 Woodside Road
Ballymena, BT42 4HX
Northern Ireland
alisongraham2006@hotmail.co.uk

Contents

Meditation

- 243 A building fitly framed (Ephesians 2:20-22)
Rev. Stephan Regnerus

Editorial

- 245 A conference on abuse with Moles and Denhollander
Prof. Brian Huizinga
- 247 2024 British Reformed Fellowship Family conference
Prof. Brian Huizinga

All around us

- 248 Denominational changes close to home
Rumblings on the Canadian-American fault line of the CRC
- 249 The new "Alliance of Reformed churches"
Rev. Daniel Holstege

Taking heed to the doctrine

- 250 Marks by which Christ's church is known
Rev. James Laning

Go ye into all the world

- 253 Protestant Reformed missions
Years of rebuilding:
Missions revived, 1954-1962 (3)
Rev. Wilbur Bruinsma

I believe

- 256 Gender dysphoria and transgenderism (7)
"Religious" objections to the Bible's teaching on gender
Prof. Cory Griess

Strength of youth

- 259 Strength in weakness
Rev. Jacob Maatman

Church and state

- 261 May Coach K pray?
Mr. Nathan Vis

As to the logo in the top left corner, managing editor Don Doezema noted that "the RFPA Board has been busy...with matters relating to the use of the logo in the SB...[T]he first *Standard Bearer*...contained a short article of introduction which affirmed that the RFPA 'is convinced that a battle has to be fought.' The armament in the logo suggests the same conviction on the part of today's board. Further, the very first article in the October 1924 issue was entitled 'Jehovah's Goodness,' and the third, 'God is God.' From the beginning, therefore, the emphasis was obvious. As is also the appropriateness of the two Greek letters incorporated into the logo today" (Vol 70, No. 1).



REFORMED
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Meditation

Rev. Stephan Regnerus, pastor of Hull PRC in Hull, Iowa

A building fitly framed

And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; in whom all the building fitly framed together growth unto an holy temple in the Lord: in whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.

Ephesians 2:20-22

Her foundation

Every carpenter understands the importance of a good foundation. A sturdy foundation is necessary to hold up the weight of the building that later will be constructed upon it. If the foundation should fail, it will present a host of problems for the home. Cracks appear in the drywall, door frames go out of square, and doors stubbornly refuse to shut. Children of the church learn about the foolish man who built his house upon the sand, and the storms beat against that home, and great was the fall of it. How vital is the home's foundation!

Given the importance of the foundation, what will serve as the church's foundation? What is strong enough to bear up under the weight of all God's people? What has sufficient stability to resist the forces of the world, which forces would beat against the church and seek her total collapse? What has the power to endure from one generation to the next, so that the church does not "go out of square," but remains firmly rooted?

The text tells us that the church's foundation is the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. This does not mean, as some maintain, that the apostles and prophets themselves serve as the church's foundation. The foundation of the church is not Peter, or Paul, or James. How weak a foundation that would be! How uncertain would our faith be amidst the storms of life if the foundation of our religion rested on the faithfulness of Peter and Paul. Then we would have no comfort in the midst of trials and no hope in the face of discouragement!

The foundation is not the apostles and prophets themselves, but the foundation is *of* the apostles and the prophets. That is, the foundation is *laid by* the apos-

tles and prophets. God appointed these men to be instruments in His hands by which the foundation was laid. The apostle Paul testified of this in I Corinthians 3:10: "I have laid the foundation, and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon."

The apostles and prophets laid the church's foundation by their teaching and preaching. They were called by God into special office; they were given special (and at times, direct) revelation of God; and they were given a special work: teach the people of God. It was not the business of apostles and prophets to be laying brick and mortar, or even to be serving tables (Acts 6). But it was their duty to bring the Word of God to His people. This is how Peter and Paul and all the other apostles laid the foundation of the church: by means of the teaching ministry. Teach and preach, catechize and comfort, exhort and admonish, and in all this, lay the foundation.

Central in their teaching was Christ! Christ is the chief Cornerstone of the church. Without Christ there would be no foundation to lay. To lay a Christ-less foundation would be to build a home on sinking sand. Historically, the cornerstone had an indispensable role in the construction process. The cornerstone would be the first stone laid, and all the other stones of the foundation would fit around it. The architect would carefully select an appealing stone to serve as the cornerstone, for oftentimes it would be displayed in a prominent position.

So it is that the apostles and prophets taught Christ. They taught the foundational truth of the humanity of Christ; He is a real man, tempted in all points like as we are. They laid the foundational truth of the divinity of Christ, who is the eternal Word by whom the heavens and earth were created. They taught of Christ's work at the cross, who was delivered for our offenses. They made clear that Christ is supreme, for He is the prominent Cornerstone. He is the Firstborn from the dead who had the preeminence in all things. He alone is the chief Cornerstone, and He needs no other cornerstone besides. "For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (I Cor. 3:11).

This foundation, laid by the apostles and prophets, stands! The foundation of the church has stood the test of time. How much pressure the church faces from every direction! There is pressure from beneath, which would heave up the church: distrust of fellow members, dissatisfaction, or pride. There is pressure from outside: the winds of false doctrine, the temptation to displace the teaching ministry with something more “contemporary.” There is pressure from above that settles heavily upon church: the weight of trials, the burden of disappointment, the grief of loss. All these pressures would try to fracture the church to her very foundation. Let us never forget: the foundation has been laid, and the unbreakable Cornerstone of the foundation is Jesus Christ.

Her construction

Upon this foundation God builds up His church. The construction is described in verse 21: “In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord.” *All the building* refers to the various parts of the building. Earthly homes are comprised of many different materials: two-by-fours and plywood, nails and windows, and many other parts besides. The carpenter takes all these pieces and fixes them together in an orderly, logical way, so that eventually all the parts constitute one home.

So does God for His church. There is one spiritual building, and that one building is made up of many different “parts.” The different parts of God’s church are not boards and nails, for His kingdom is not physical, but the parts of God’s church are the many different members, chosen by Him in eternity. The church includes Jews and Gentiles, bond and free, rich and poor. Among these members of the church there is great diversity. Viewed naturally, the members do not resemble a unified and sound building, but they are strangers and foreigners.

All of these differences among members would, if it were possible, rend the church apart. How easy it is to hold a grudge against another member! How quickly our minds recall the sinful word spoken about us, or even to us. The Devil would use the diversity of the church to split and divide so the church does not resemble a unified building.

Behold the power of God as He takes the diverse parts of the building and frames them together! He is always performing the work of uniting the various members together. Oftentimes, He works in ways that are different from the way we would work. What seems orderly and logical to God may seem confusing, disappointing, or painstakingly slow to us. He uses hardship

and loss to unify. He uses death to soften hard hearts. He uses trials to cleanse unrighteousness.

Always, God uses His Word to build up! The faithful Word is both the foundation on which the church is built up and the power by which God presently frames the church together. His Word seeks lost sinners; it is a light to lighten to Gentiles. His Word exposes sin and evil; it convicts, humbles, and points us to our only hope, which is found in Jesus Christ.

Her habitation

God constructs this building with a view to its occupation. This building is a home, not a barn or a shed. The final nail is pounded in, the glue hardens, the paint dries, and at last, the occupant excitedly moves in.

But who will inhabit this house? Who anticipates its completion and longs to move in? We might think that the ones to move in would be the elect of God: you, and me, and all of the catholic church. After all, we are the ones who long for the day when Christ will return and we will be brought into the mansion prepared for us.

But that is not the answer of this text. God constructs this holy building, not so that you and I can move in, but so that *God Himself* can inhabit this home. Verse 22 states: “In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.” What an amazing and humbling thought! God is at work, throughout the history of this earth, constructing His own home. Jesus is the Cornerstone, the members of the church are framed together as the building, and Jehovah comes and dwells in it—in you! God builds you up so that you might be an habitation of His Holy Spirit.

To be sure, it is not the case that God lacked a home, and now He looks to you to provide something He otherwise lacked. He is the eternal God; His throne is in the heavens. If He would hungry grow, He would not tell you, for the world is His and all that is therein. God does not need this building as His habitation; but rather, God desires the holy temple as His habitation. How remarkable is the consideration of that thought! Of all the places the transcendent God could choose to dwell, God chose you, the members of His church.

He chose you, knowing your sins and weaknesses. He chose you, knowing that you were strangers and foreigners. He chose you in love. He chose you in Jesus Christ, who is the elect of God. He chose you, so that He might sanctify you as an holy temple of the Lord. How great is our God!



Editorial

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

A conference on abuse with Moles and Denhollander

A conference on abuse

Last weekend (I write mid-January), in the midst of a furious winter storm, I joined hundreds of others in attending a two-day conference in Hudsonville, Michigan hosted by Haven of Mercy on the subject, “A Biblical and Compassionate Response to Abuse in the Church.” Due to the snowstorm, the majority of people stayed home and tuned in via livestream, and during the twenty-four hours in which the video-recordings were posted on the web following the conference, the recordings reportedly attracted thousands of hits. The conference featured three speeches on domestic abuse by Pastor Chris Moles, and three on sexual abuse by Rachael Denhollander. The three speeches for each speaker were divided along the same three lines: 1) theological foundations, 2) dynamics and impacts, 3) biblical and compassionate response.

I did not attend the conference with the intent to write about it. I attended to gain personal knowledge to help me become more faithful to God. Intentionally, I did not jot down a single note, nor sketch a basic outline for any of the speeches. Instead, I sat back so I could take in the moment, absorb both what was said and how it was said, examine my own heart and life, and as always, try the spirits to see whether they were of God (1 John 4:1). I found the presentations profitable and when reflecting upon them afterwards, I decided it would be worthwhile to write something for the readership of the *Standard Bearer*. Because I have no notes, and because the video-recordings were removed from the web, I have no material to reference or quote. But that is okay, because I do not intend to give a standard review that defines terms and provides a synopsis and analysis of the content of each speech.

Instead, I will do something out of the ordinary and quite subjective. I will note some lasting impressions that the speakers made upon me, as they not only presented truths but themselves. I am familiar with the books authored by each speaker,¹ and have seen a fair number of

Denhollander interviews and presentations online; however, hearing the two speak in person was a new experience. While neither is a celebrity to be flattered or a superstar to be venerated, each has extraordinary experiences and knowledge in their respective fields and has been gifted by God in a unique way for helping many individuals, families, and churches as they grapple with domestic and sexual abuse. I do not endorse absolutely every word spoken by each speaker. Neither do I share identical personal theological convictions with either of them in the whole body of biblical truth. However, that does not hinder me from thanking the Lord for the helpful instruction He provided through them as they applied the timeless and heavenly wisdom of Scripture to these two dark realities with which the church of Christ must contend.

Good material and careful reflection upon the topic of abuse is timely. Abuse, both domestic and sexual, is not the only threat to the church today. Abuse is not the only topic that matters and is worthy of a large conference. But it is a very important topic that historically has not received due attention. As a denomination of churches, the PRCA has expressed its commitment to strive to be faithful in dealing with abuse, and most recently this has included a synodical decision to contract a third party for investigation into sexual abuse. The work of the investigation is well underway, and periodic updates from the Ad Hoc committee of Synod 2023 indicate that Guidepost Solutions is presently compiling data from survey results and will report to the committee.

Now, and in the future, as the Lord brings the results of this investigation to our attention, we must *be faithful*. We must humble ourselves and stand for truth, justice, holiness, purity, compassion, protection, repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation, and peace. We want to grow in our biblical understanding of all the dynamics and impacts of domestic and sexual abuse, and then wisely apply our knowledge to concrete cases so that each one of us makes sound judgments. Whether we are individuals or consistories, we want the infinitely holy name of God to be honored by our dealings with the oppressed, the oppressors, and their families. Thus, a conference on abuse, and now a few reflections, are in order.

¹ The two main books are: *The Heart of Domestic Abuse* by Moles, and *What is a Girl Worth* by Denhollander.

Chris Moles

Pastor Chris Moles resides with his wife and children in West Virginia where he serves as a pastor and biblical counselor. He devotes much of his time to helping churches and families confront the evil of domestic violence and promote healthy, God-honoring relationships. He readily acknowledges that he has never suffered domestic abuse. He grew up in a home of godly parents and solid Christian influences. Moles admits that although he takes his subject very seriously, he does not take himself too seriously. During the conference he effectively drew in and engaged his audience with his casual approach, self-deprecating humor, questions, stories, and wide-ranging movements on stage. Outside of this conference, I would not be able to take a consistent dose of his relaxed style if he were the one expounding the lofty truths of God's Word to me, and I do not think he would be upset by me saying so, as long as I take to heart the heart of his message: in domestic abuse, get to the abuser's heart.

Two things about Moles struck me as he gave his presentations. First, God wisely equips each one of us for our position and task in His kingdom, and God gave Pastor Moles his personality, character traits, and the spiritual gifts of knowledge and utterance for his unique role. I was left with the impression that the casual demeanor of Moles suits him for devoting so much time to the grave reality of domestic abuse. How could a Christian, whether as friend, family member, pastor, or elder, help both victims and perpetrators of domestic abuse in hundreds and hundreds of different cases, and then regularly teach on the same, without burning out, denying the goodness of God, losing all objectivity, and becoming cynical about everything and everyone? The primary answer is that God gives strength, without which anyone would falter. But in addition to that, God uniquely shaped and equipped Moles for continually confronting the wickedness and anguish of the very serious matter of domestic abuse. God gave him a personality that does not take self too seriously, and though I could be mistaken, it seems to me that such a personality helps him enter the darkness again and again without fearing personal failure or criticisms. It also helps disarm his audience and counselees. Not everyone can labor in the same capacity as Moles, and we must know our limits and be faithful with what God has given to us.

Second, I was struck by the fact that he cares, and cares enough to help. That came out in various ways through the conference. He earned my respect for being a man of words *and deeds* (James 1:27; I John 3:18). He cares about the abused—women (and men) and children—controlled and oppressed by the cold-hearted.

He cares about churches and communities being safe. He cares about perpetrators of abuse and is willing to work with them in gospel hope for their salvation. Caring, he not only sits at his desk to write an article or deliver a podcast, and he not only walks on stage to speak to an audience, but he gets down in the mire of the trenches to help.

That ongoing commitment of a weak sinner to care for others left an impression. It made me look up with gratitude to our God who not only gave Pastor Moles a heart that cares, but who is Himself *The Faithful Father* who “careth for you” (I Pet. 5:7). And how amazing that the Eternal Son cares enough about us that He, as the Nicene Creed puts it, “for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven; and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried.” What condescension, compassion, and commitment!

Do I care? Do you? From my infancy until now I have only ever known a house of safety, and the same for Moles, but some are living in a marriage and home of domestic terror. Those in that home did not choose to be abused; it is inflicted upon them without their consent. When God brings that reality right into our pathway, do we care enough to help as we are able or go around?

Rachael Denhollander

Rachael Denhollander and her husband reside in Louisville, Kentucky where she homeschools their children. She is also an attorney, advocate, and public speaker. She speaks affectionately of her Christian parents as they lovingly reared her. Her name is recognized internationally because she was the first woman to speak publicly against the now infamous USA gymnastics doctor and sexual predator, Larry Nassar. Rachael knows the reality of sexual abuse from painful experience.

Her carefully articulated and serious-minded presentations made two impressions on me. First, she has the heart of a courageous lion. I thought of Joshua at the doorstep of Canaan, ready to enter and confront the walled cities, giants, and hordes of hostile Canaanites, all without Moses. God exhorted Joshua to “be strong and of a good courage” (Josh. 1:6). God has given similar courage to Rachael. Her life is a testimony to her determined conviction to hate and oppose evil as God hates it, and no matter what the cost. She is fiercely protective of little girls (understandably), but also of all children, young people, and adults. She is determined to pursue mercy and justice, and to make communities and church-

es as safe as possible from the wiles of predators. The Spirit has written Proverbs 31:9 on her heart, “Open thy mouth, judge righteously, and plead the cause of the poor and needy” so that she has spoken for those who have been made poor and needy by abusers. She has been resisted, opposed, and maligned by unbelievers and Christians, by secular and Christian institutions. But through it all, God has caused her to take heart by the power of the Lion of the tribe of Judah (Rev. 5:5).

Second, she has the demeanor of a harmless dove. Without this element, she would not continue to attract the audiences she does, nor would she be able to labor so profitably on behalf of the kingdom of righteousness. When I think of what she has experienced in sexual abuse, the opposition she has faced for calling attention to this heinous sin, the statement she delivered in a packed and pressure-filled courtroom, the interviews she has conducted for major news outlets, and all the speeches she has given at conferences, I marvel at the inoffensive demeanor God gave her. Where you might otherwise expect that certain topics would provoke her to disrespect authority and vent with a vitriolic tongue, there is civility and restraint. Only the Spirit could refine her so. Her conviction comes out with such poise, her fire with such sweetness, her passion with such purity, and her admonitions with the earnestness and tenderness of a mother. You cannot help but want to hear her out.

That balance of heart and demeanor brings me to a concluding point that ties together both speakers in the six presentations at the conference. I heard balance. I did not sense any radical extremes pushing too hard in one direction or another. Only by the grace of God can anyone be as deeply involved in abuse issues as these two speakers and not get tugged too strongly in one direction. On account of that balance, every listener could profit from this conference. If you listened to the in-

struction, encouragement, and exhortations, and if you were honest before God, you could go home with convictions regarding *your* life thinking, “I learned where and how *I* can be more faithful to God.” Let no one think the conference was only for others because he or she has nothing to learn or relearn.

With the wisdom of locusts

I believe a key to the church’s advancement to greater faithfulness to God in this issue of abuse is keeping rank. Scripture commends the men of Zebulun for keeping rank (I Chron. 12:33). Scripture also provides an analogy from creation and commends the wisdom of the seemingly contemptible little locusts for the same (Prov. 30:27): “The locusts have no king, yet go they forth all of them by bands.” The locusts are an ordered host, not a mob, with each locust knowing its role and ability. They maintain such good order among themselves, even without a king to train and lead them, that they can accomplish great things, such as consuming an entire field of crops as instruments of God’s judgment (Ex. 10:12; Ps. 105:34-35). They do not descend upon a field as a disorderly host with determined little groups flying in different directions or disinterested groups dropping out. There is neither division nor negligence in their ranks. Not one goes rogue. Not one is derelict in duty. Each knows and performs his role with such devotion that the locust army not only *exists* in bands, but *advances*, going forward as one.

We have a King—Jesus. He rules us by *His* Word (not the word of any man or woman—you, me, Chris, or Rachael) and He rules us by *His* Spirit (not the spirit of any man or woman—you, me, Chris, or Rachael). May God make us faithful in the role to which He has called us so that we advance together in unity.

Thanks to Haven of Mercy for the conference.

2024 British Reformed Fellowship Family Conference

After the release of booking forms only a few weeks ago, excitement is building for what looks to be a fabulous conference this summer in England. What follows is an announcement of some of the important details.

Place: Cloverley Hall, described as “a Christian Conference Centre set on 9 acres of its own grounds in the beautiful Shropshire countryside. Within the grounds there is a lawn suitable for volleyball, a football pitch, a hard tennis court (which will also be used for pickleball and football tennis), an indoor heated swimming pool, a games room, and a creche.” Shropshire is a county in the middle of En-

gland to the west along its border with Wales.

Date: Saturday, August 3 - Saturday, August 10, 2024

Topic: The theme, “Then Comes the End: The Reformed Doctrine of Eschatology,” will be unfolded with these six speeches delivered throughout the week:

1. The End That Is Coming—Prof. B. Huizinga
2. The Day of the Lord in the Old Testament—Rev. R. Hanko
3. The Antichrist in Daniel 8—Huizinga
4. The Battle of Armageddon—Hanko
5. The Final Resurrection—Hanko

6. The New Heavens and New Earth—Huizinga Special Historical Lecture by Rev. Angus Stewart

On Sunday, Aug. 4, two worship services will be held on site. Each of the two conference speakers plans to preach a sermon from a passage of Scripture touching on eschatology.

Other Activities: (descriptions are taken from the booking forms)

Day trip 1, via charter bus: “Blists Hill Victorian Town and Iron Bridge: Step back in time and visit a recreated Victorian village, tasting authentic food and sweets, and joining craftspeople demonstrating their trades. We will also stop at the historic and impressive Iron Bridge and Toll House at the heart of the area where the Industrial Revolution began.”

Day trip 2, via charter bus: “Chester. An authentically-dressed soldier will give us a medieval walking tour of Chester, including England’s most complete city walls, the famous 700-year-old ‘Rows’ shops, the largest Roman amphitheatre in Britain, St. John’s Cathedral and more. Chester contains the church in which Bible commentator Matthew Henry (1662-1714) preached and was buried, as well as an obelisk to his memory. You can also check out the Roman shrine to Minerva, the castle, Tudor houses, the military museum, etc. Open top bus tours and boat cruises on the River Dee are available.”

In addition: Shropshire Falconry is planning to make an onsite visit for those interested in an up-close experience with birds of prey!

Purpose: The conference aims at doctrine and fellowship. One thinks of the early church as described in Acts 2:42, “And they continued steadfast in the apostle’s doctrine and fellowship...” The British Reformed Fellowship was formed in 1990 and consists of believers from the British Isles. The BRF aims to promote knowledge of the Reformed faith in many ways. The chief way is the organization of a biennial national family conference (this year is #17!) which enables Reformed Christians scattered throughout the British Isles to come together to hear sound doctrine expounded from the Scripture and discuss the same, and to support and communicate with one another in the bonds of Christian love. The conference typically draws people from many other countries outside the British Isles, and a goodly number of saints from the PRCA. Readers of the *SB* anywhere are welcome to attend.

Interested?: check out <http://brfconference.weebly.com>

For those unfamiliar with the British English in “Place” above:

football pitch: a soccer field.

football tennis: think tennis with a soccer ball, and instead of a racket, players use any part of their body except their hands.

Creche: (Multiple choice, see answer on page 258.)

a. a volleyball suspended from a stationary metal pole by a rope

b. a nursery area for small children

c. an outdoor oven for making thin pancakes served with fruit filling and cream

d. a room to relax and enjoy a cleansing dry heat

All this, the Lord willing.



All around us

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

Denominational changes close to home

Rumblings on the Canadian-American fault line of the CRC

To one who is not too familiar with the history of the Christian Reformed Church in Canada, like myself,

the lead article in a recent issue of the Canadian-based periodical *Christian Courier* came as a bit of a surprise: “Dreaming of a Canadian Synod: New group calls for

the end of Christian Reformed Church binationalism.”¹ What is “binationalism”? The basic idea is that the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) is a denomination that spans two nations, the United States and Canada. Many denominations have fraternal relationships with churches in other nations. But few denominations actually stretch across national borders. According to their website, the Christian Reformed Church has a little over a thousand churches, 75% of which are in the United States and 25% of which are in Canada. But a group of leaders on the Canadian side recently banded together in the hope of possibly seceding from the Americans and starting a new denomination. If that would happen, it would reduce the size of the Christian Reformed Church significantly.

Angela Reitsma Bick, a writer for *Christian Courier*, interviewed John Vanderstoep, a Christian Reformed pastor in Fergus, Ontario and leader in the new group, in the November 22 (2023) issue of the magazine. When asked about the origin of the group, Vanderstoep answered, “Our tentative name is Towards a CRC Canada. We are a grassroots organization trying to answer the question, ‘Should the CRC in Canada be our own denomination and what kind?’” Vanderstoep answered a question about the driving factors of this “initiative” by referring to Canada’s unique culture, theology, and ministries. As one example, he said that in the U.S. the native Americans were a mission field, but in Canada, “we’re doing a lot of learning.” What is that supposed to mean, one wonders? Does the pastor not believe that the heathen people who were the original inhabitants of North America were and are the objects of missions? What is it about Canadian culture and theology that makes the heathen no longer need the gospel? Most of the Canadians I know do not share Pastor Vanderstoep’s way of thinking.

Then the big question: “Is everyone in the group LGBTQ affirming?” Ah, now we come to the real issue, do we not? Vanderstoep’s answer: “No. That’s a great question, because one objection to our group is ‘this is just another way around the HSR’ (Human Sexuality Report).... So yes, there are affirming people in the group; there are non-affirming people in the group. There’s both. We want both. As Canadians that’s a creative tension out of which something can be built.” Really, pastor? Having people in your group who affirm that it is okay to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgen-

der and people who do not affirm it is a “creative tension out of which something can be built?” I tend to think of creative tension as the kind of thing a thoughtful artist might experience when debating whether to use warm or cool colors to paint a mountain on canvas. When two sides are battling over whether it is a sin for a man to have sex with another man or a woman with another woman, or whether it is okay for a man to become a woman or vice versa, you do not call that creative tension but the battle of light versus darkness. Canadian CRC pastors and members who are not LGBT affirming, you ought not to join forces with those who are, for what concord has Christ with Belial, and what communion has light with darkness?

Rather, you ought to take a stand against the rising tide of vile sexual perversion in the world. You ought to hold fast to the truth that homosexuals are sinning and do not need us to affirm their sinful desires and actions, but they need us to call them lovingly and humbly to the cleansing blood of Christ in the way of repentance. I have come to know a few conservative CRC pastors here in southern Ontario who do not share the views of “Towards a CRC Canada.” I asked a couple of them for their thoughts as we had breakfast together. They are convinced that this new movement is primarily made up of liberals who are angry over the CRC synod’s refusal to budge on calling homosexual activity a sin. They are moving in the direction of exiting the CRC so that they can be an openly LGBT-affirming denomination. It seems that the rumblings on the Canadian-American fault line of the CRC might soon lead to another denomination splitting over the issue of human sexuality.

The new “Alliance of Reformed churches”

Moving to the Reformed Church in America (RCA), a new alliance of churches has already separated from that denomination in recent years and calls itself the “Alliance of Reformed Churches” (ARC). According to an article on their website, “The Alliance started with a movement of congregations asking the RCA to provide definitive boundaries to its view of biblical exegesis and understanding of authority. By doing so, the RCA would also set boundaries to its understanding of universalism, interfaith practice, and human sexuality. While human sexuality was most often the focal point of these requests because of cultural trends and national government practices in Canada and the U.S., the core foundation was defining the understanding and boundaries of biblical authority and exegesis in the RCA.”²

¹ <https://www.christiancourier.ca/dreaming-of-a-canadian-synod/>. The *Banner* also reported on this online on November 17 of last year: <https://www.thebanner.org/news/2023/11/groups-suggesting-pathways-for-separation-unity-in-the-crcna>.

² <https://arc21.org/blog/origins-a-movement-begins-t9zeg>.

The author continues, “On January 1, 2022, the Alliance moved from its research phase to its launch phase and was born when 43 congregations were released [from the RCA] to become partner congregations. Throughout the spring, summer, and fall of 2022, those 43 congregations would be joined by almost 90 more congregations so that the Alliance expects to have 125+ congregations by the end of 2022.” As of this writing early in 2024, their website shows that they have 158 churches across the United States. The largest clusters are in the areas of northwest Iowa and west Michigan.

In Canada, a related alliance of churches formed on October 18, 2022 called the Reformation Canada Network (RCN).³ They call themselves a new denomination, though they are still waiting for charitable status in Canada. It appears that almost *all* of the RCA churches in Canada left the denomination to form the Reformation Canada Network.⁴ The RCN maintains close ties with the Alliance of Reformed Churches and appears to have left the RCA for the same reasons. Interestingly, the Canadian RCA’s are more conservative than the Canadian CRC’s on human sexuality, whereas in the United States it appears that the opposite is true, the American RCA’s are by and large more liberal than the American CRC’s.

All of these massive denominational changes happening around us remind us that we live in tumultuous times of apostasy and lawlessness. We can thank God

when we see churches holding fast to the truth about human sexuality and resisting the cultural tsunami of the LGBT-affirming movement that looms so large over us today like a black cloud of evil. But we also mourn the widespread apostasy that such separations and the birth of such alliances implies, even as we also recognize with hope that such apostasy is a sign of the approaching Christ and end of the world for which we pray daily.

Finally, as we observe the falling away of many and the flight of congregations from their apostatizing denominations, we have much cause for thanksgiving to God if we are members of a denomination whose pastors preach against *all* kinds of sexual sin without waver; preach the gospel of forgiveness for sinners of *all* kinds who flee to the cross of Christ and trust in His cleansing blood alone; and practice what they preach by living chastely and temperately in *all* respects as husbands who are in love with their one wife; a denomination too whose elders admonish and discipline those who walk in sexual sin of any kind and also practice what they preach by living faithfully and humbly in the bond of holy wedlock with their one wife.

Since there is no perfect denomination on the face of the earth, let us take heed to ourselves as we observe the apostasy all around us, lest we also get swept off our feet by the tsunami of the sexual revolution. Let us hold fast to the precious things God has given us and be ready always to reform in the areas where we have become weak or gone astray (*semper reformanda*). Let us do so in complete and conscious dependence on the grace of God.

3 <https://reformationcanada.ca/faqs>.

4 See the church statistical data page of the website of the RCA: <https://crf.rca.org/public/stats/3908?new-starts=0>.



Taking heed to the doctrine

Rev. James Laning, home missionary in the Protestant Reformed Churches and member of Zion PRC in Jenison, Michigan

Marks by which Christ's church is known

If a random group of those who attend some church were asked why they attend the specific church that they do, one would suspect that a relatively small percentage of them would make a reference to the marks of the true church. Some would perhaps mention their upbringing. Others might talk about the friendliness of the people, the activities that take place during the week, or the mission-mindedness of the people. Yet there would likely be relatively few who would mention the marks,

with fewer yet being able rightly to say what those marks are. Yet it is important that we be a member of a specific church for the right reason. It ought to be because we are convinced that it is a church that teaches and truly holds to what Jesus taught.

Our Lord gave us specific instructions concerning what to preach, who is called to preach, what the sacraments signify and seal, who should receive them, how they are to be administered, who should be put

under discipline, and how that discipline should be carried out. The church where we are a member ought to be one that faithfully follows these instructions. With this in mind, let us turn now to consider what Jesus has taught us concerning the marks by which His church is known.

The marks: The means and the keys

According to Article 29 of the Belgic Confession, the marks of the true church are as follows: “if the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached therein; if she maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ; if church discipline is exercised in punishing of sin.” These are said to be the specific marks “by which the true church is known.”

One way to remember what the marks are is to think of the means of grace combined with the keys of the kingdom. The marks are the means by which the Spirit works and confirms faith. They are also the keys of the kingdom by which Christ opens the kingdom to believers and shuts it against unbelievers. The means and the keys taken together constitute the marks of the true church.

This makes perfect sense. The Spirit works faith by the preaching of the gospel and confirms it by the use of the sacraments. So undoubtedly both the pure preaching of the gospel and the proper administration of the sacraments must be marks of the true church. If the Spirit uses these to work and confirm faith, then certainly both of these will serve as marks by which the true church of Christ is known.

Furthermore, it is by the preaching of the gospel and church discipline that Christ opens the kingdom to believers and shuts it against unbelievers. An instituted church is a manifestation of the kingdom of Christ. Christ, the King of the church, uses these two keys to open and shut the kingdom. So, certainly, both of these must be marks of a true church, marks we should look for when considering where we ought to be a member.

The two means of grace and the two keys of the kingdom taken together come to three marks of the true church. The reason why there are three instead of four is that the preaching of the gospel is both the chief means of grace and one of the keys of the kingdom. Let us take a look at each of these marks in a bit more detail.

The pure preaching of the gospel

We start with the central mark of the true church: the pure preaching of the gospel of Christ. The church was called to go forth and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the triune God. Since that is what the

church is called to do, the true church will be the one that is actually doing that.

Note also that Christ called the church to teach “whatsoever I have commanded you.” The true church, then, will be the church that is genuinely teaching what Christ has commanded her to preach. Though the truth may be unpopular today, as it has been in the past, the true church is the one that will continue today to teach the same doctrines that Christ has taught His church in the past.

Further proof for that is found in John 8. There we read that Jesus spoke to His disciples about the importance of continuing to hold to what He has taught them: “Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on him, If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:31, 32). Jesus said that those who continue in His word are His disciples indeed. It is easy to see the connection between being a true church and being Christ’s disciples indeed. What Jesus says here again places an emphasis on the importance of holding to what Christ has taught. It is those who continue in His Word, faithfully holding to and submitting to what He has taught them, who are His disciples indeed.

Christ’s sheep will be where they can hear the voice of Christ, their Shepherd. Jesus said that His sheep hear His voice: “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me” (John 10:27). Jesus says that His sheep hear His voice and know His voice: “And when he putteth forth his own sheep, he goeth before them, and the sheep follow him: for they know his voice” (John 10:4). Christ today is continuing to teach the same doctrines He has always taught. He does not teach one thing in one time period and something different in another. As the times change, the instruction Christ gives remains the same. Where you hear that instruction, that is where you are hearing Christ’s voice. And wherever Christ is, there you will find His bride, the church.

The proper administration of the sacraments

Let us now consider the proper administration of the sacraments as a mark of the true church. Before Christ ascended, He commissioned the church to go forth to the nations, preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments: “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen” (Matt. 28:19, 20). When Christ here briefly summarizes the calling of the church, He mentions two subjects:

teaching and baptizing. That serves to stress the central importance of preaching the gospel, first of all, and then also properly administering the sacraments.

The two clearly go together. The sacraments are visible signs of Christ's saving work. So proper preaching about the saving work of Christ will go with a proper explanation and administration of the sacraments.

The flipside is also the case. The preaching of false doctrines goes with giving erroneous instruction concerning what the sacraments signify and who should receive them. More on that, Lord willing, later.

We proceed now to the third mark of the true church.

The proper exercising of church discipline

Church discipline is the third mark of the true church. A true church is one that not only preaches what is true, but also will not tolerate the preaching of what is false. This applies to both doctrine and life. The true church not only preaches rightly concerning what the living God calls us to do, but also disciplines those who do the opposite.

One place where we find instruction on church discipline is Matthew 18. In this chapter Jesus speaks to us about our calling to discipline the impenitent brother. We read that we are to go to our brother who has sinned and tell him his fault. If he neglects to hear us, then we are to bring with us one or two more. If he will not hear them either, then we are to tell the church: "And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican" (v. 17). If he refuses to listen to the church, he is to be unto us as a heathen man and a publican. The implication is that the church is called to remove such an impenitent person from her midst, using the key power of church discipline. It is interesting to note the statement Christ made in the very next verse of this chapter. He had just spoken of the church's calling to discipline the impenitent, and then He adds: "Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (v. 18).

This is the same language Christ had used earlier when speaking about the keys of the kingdom of heaven: "And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matt. 16:19). The similarity of language here points to the fact that church discipline is indeed one of the keys of the kingdom.

Since Christ has given these keys to the church, we

should be a member of a church that is rightly using these keys. In other words, church discipline, which is one of the keys of the kingdom, must also be one of the marks of the true church.

This third mark is clearly related to the other two. A church will not continue to preach the truth as she ought if she is not disciplining those who reject that truth. Secondly, the sacraments are not rightly being administered if they are administered to those who are walking in sin. So, if a church does not have the mark of church discipline, that will have a bearing on the other marks as well.

The church with these marks

What has been said thus far can be summarized this way: A church has the marks when she shows herself to be striving to follow the principles that the Head of the church has taught us in Scripture. That is how the marks are summarized in the Belgic Confession, which says the true church is known by this: "in short, if all things are managed according to the pure Word of God, all things contrary thereto rejected, and Jesus Christ acknowledged as the only Head of the church" (Art. 29).

If a church confesses that Jesus Christ is the only Head of the church, and shows that she makes that confession genuinely by striving to manage all things according to what the Head of the church has said, that church is a true church of Christ.

A true church is one that preaches what she does because she is confident that this is what her Head has called her to preach. She is a church that follows the instructions Jesus has given regarding the administration of the sacraments. It is one that makes sound decisions regarding discipline, not respecting persons in judgment, but executing the righteous judgment of Christ, following the instructions He has given us in Holy Scripture.

When determining where our church membership will be, these are the marks we are to consider.

These marks also serve to remind us of what our calling is as a church of Jesus Christ. May we in these last days faithfully follow the instruction our Head has given us. May we diligently proclaim what He has taught us, not only in our own country, but also to the nations. May we go forth as He has called us to do, joyfully doing the work He has given us to do, looking forward to that great day when He will return from heaven.



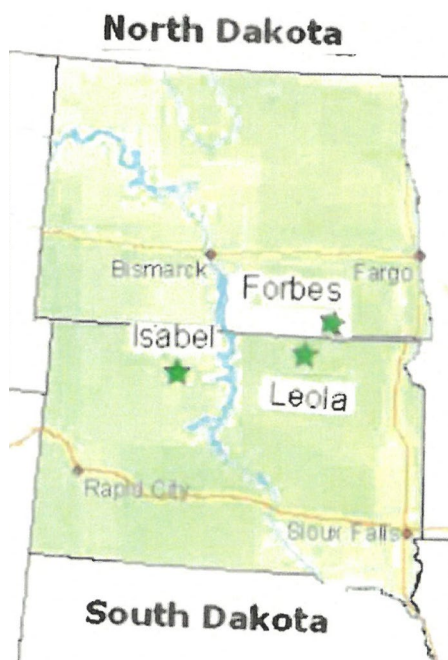
Go ye into all the world

Rev. Wilbur Bruinsma, pastor-emeritus of Pittsburgh PRC in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Protestant Reformed missions Years of rebuilding: Missions revived, 1954-1962 (3)

About 100 miles northeast of the Badlands of South Dakota, tucked away between two Indian reservations, the Standing Rock Indian Reservation on the north and the Cheyenne River Indian Reservation on the south, lies a small grain-farming community with the name Isabel. This small town in western South Dakota was established in 1910 and named after a railroad employee's daughter. Through the years this town has dwindled in size so that today it numbers 145 people and about 38 families. In the 1950's, however, it numbered a little over 500 people.

Traveling 150 miles east out of Isabel, one finds another small South Dakota town named Leola. This town established in 1884 was also named after a daughter of one of its founders. Today about 435 people inhabit this



town, but according to the 1950 census it then numbered 772 people. Among the people of both these small towns, German immigrants from Russia had settled with their families. These families were organized into two congregations in the Reformed Churches of the United States, Eureka Classis. Several families in the Reformed church in Leola hailed

from Forbes, North Dakota 25 miles to the north of Leola, only 3 miles over the border. The small ranching community of Forbes numbered 200 people during the 1950s. Today there are only 36 families that yet cling to their earthly inheritance there.

To these three small midwestern towns the Mission

Committee of the PRC and their missionary, Rev. George Lubbers, turned their attention in the late 1950s. Rev. Lubbers had not yet completed his labors in Loveland, CO, but since the church in Loveland was firmly established as a PRC mission work, Rev. Lubber's attention was diverted from Loveland to Isabel and Leola, SD. It was so through Rev. Herman Mensch, to whom we were introduced in our last article. Rev. Mensch asked for the assistance of Rev. Lubbers in these two congregations where Mensch was at that time called as an ordained pastor in the RCUS (Reformed Church in the United States).¹ Bear in mind, the Eureka Classis of this denomination had just reconstituted itself in 1945 as the continuing RCUS and was still struggling in the 1950s to consolidate many little churches into a well-formed denomination. There were many vacancies and few ministers to fill the pulpits. These churches, therefore, were very vulnerable at this time in their history. Through the request of Rev. Mensch, Rev. Lubbers began to preach and teach in several RCUS congregations. Little of this is recorded in the minutes of the Mission Committee. In a report of Rev. Lubbers to his calling church and the Mission Committee (December 26, 1956), he mentions in passing that the Mission Committee "decided to give me somewhat free hand; they left it to my discretion. This aid to Rev. Mensch has entailed considerable time, effort, and energy." This aid to assist Rev. Mensch in his work and troubles in the RCUS would, in turn, eventually lead to our concentrated mission labors through Rev. Lubbers in Isabel and Leola (Forbes).

That we were indeed laboring in RCUS churches is evidenced from a report Rev. Lubbers sent to the Mission Committee in late 1955:

We also made contacts with other churches during this time [while laboring in Loveland, CO—WB]. We have preached the Word in the Emery Hope Reformed Church, SD, in the Leola Reformed Church, speaking

¹ A correction needs to be made to our second installment of the "Years of Rebuilding: Mission Revived." I made mention that Rev. H. Mensch was called first to the congregation of the RCUS in Leola, when he in fact had served the congregation in Isabel for almost two years before also receiving the call to labor in Leola.

for the Ursinus Society and also for the Isabel Reformed Church, where Rev. Mensch has been minister for better than 2 years.

After preaching in Emery, the elders requested me to come and preach for them again when I should “be coming through.” ...That I received a request to preach there was due to contacts with these elders at the Eureka Classis meeting at Sutton, Neb. There Rev. H. Mensch gave them the suggestion to request me to serve them with the Word.

In Isabel, So. Dakota I have come to feel rather at home. Here I assist Rev. Mensch in teaching catechism, and visited with the entire congregation. During this visit which was on Sunday evening, after I preached two sermons for them, I suggested that they visit the next Classis meeting of Classis West. I felt free to do this because a couple of months ago they already asked me “how can we join your churches”....

In Leola too I met people who said, “be sure to come through there again.” Incidentally, the Rev. Mensch will become minister in Leola. And there will be a drawing of the lines for and against him....²

The Mission Committee together with its missionary and others who assisted him in his work could not have been naive to the bitterness this caused in the RCUS. Perhaps our men felt justified in their actions because the consistories of these congregations were attracted to the preaching of our churches. But our labors were at best questionable and at worst wrong.

Already in 1947 church relations between the PRC and the RCUS had broken down.³ Although this was true, the RCUS hoped they could continue to send men to the PRC Seminary for training to become ministers in their denomination. Rev. Robert Grossmann, a minister in the RCUS, writes in his account of the history of the RCUS,

Contacts [with the PRC—WB] were continued during these years however as the RCUS thought of looking to the Protestant Reformed Seminary as a training ground for ministerial students. This too came to a

bitter end when the Rev. Herman Mensch, who had studied at the Protestant Reformed seminary, turned out to be a proselytizer for them, and was found guilty of schismatic activity and deposed from the ministry. It was not without influence in this bitterness that Rev. Mensch had been actively supported in his efforts by PRC minister Rev. Lubbers.⁴

Earlier in his account of these events, Grossmann writes,

Rev. Herman Mensch was parsonage trained and then attended the Protestant Reformed Seminary. He came out to split one church and take another into the Protestant Reformed Church. He was deposed, and later asked for forgiveness, which was granted. Eventually he requested to be examined for re-instatement but was unable to sustain the exam.⁵

In his “Missionary Notes” written for the *Standard Bearer*, Rev. Lubbers took exception to the deposition of Rev. Mensch by the RCUS. He wrote:

The brethren and sisters [of Forbes—WB] experienced the dealings of this Executive Committee in putting Rev. H. Mensch out of office on November 28, 1956 at Leola, South Dakota. Without a hearing, simply by stating the facts slantedly, the Executive Committee gave its version of the facts in the case, and sent a circular letter to the “members of Classis” (also ministers out of office and not in Classis) and if no dissenting vote came, this committee simply issued a decretal that Rev. Mensch was no longer in office!⁶

In the same newsletter Rev. Lubbers pointed out that the Executive Committee of the RCUS had acted against their own Constitution, Article 95. The Consistory of Isabel protested this action to the Classis of the RCUS, but when the Classis met to decide the matter it approved of the deposition of Rev. Mensch.

It is true, that the procedure followed by the RCUS in deposing Rev. Mensch may have been questionable, and perhaps even improper. But even our own records reveal that Rev. Mensch certainly was guilty of creating schism in the RCUS. In 1954, though a minister in the RCUS, he recommended to an elder in Loveland that rather than joining up with the Eureka Classis he should contact the PRC Mission Committee. The report of Rev. Lubbers’ labors in 1955 that we quoted above repeatedly mentions that it was by Rev. Mensch’s prompting that Rev. Lubbers preached and taught in RCUS congregations. Rev. Lubbers mentions in that

2 An undated report of Rev. Lubbers to the Mission Committee sent in late 1955.

3 In our first installment of the “Years of Rebuilding: Missions Revived” I suggested that the reason for the breakdown of church relations between the PRC and the Eureka Classis (RCUS) might have been that our doctrinal differences were too great or the RCUS may have been shying away from us on account of our own controversy over the conditional covenant. Having obtained additional literature on this subject, I learned that the main reason for the sudden collapse of church relations was due to the failure in 1947 of the PRC delegation to show up for a scheduled conference in Waukon, Iowa. For this reason, the RCUS did not send delegates to our next synod, although by letter to synod they asked for more conferences. Our churches never responded to this request. This means only one conference was held after which the PRC failed to follow up.

4 *You Shall Be My People: Reformed Church in the U.S. 250th Synod*, Rev. Robert Grossmann, p. 109. Pine Hill Press, Inc, Freeman, SD 57029; 1996.

5 Grossmann, *You Shall Be My People*, 106.

6 *Standard Bearer*, Vol. 35, Issue 2 (Oct. 15, 1958).

same report, “Incidentally, the Rev. Mensch will become minister in Leola. And there will be a drawing of the lines for and against him.” Rev. Mensch in his labors split the congregation of Leola and out of this emerged the congregation of Forbes. The RCUS was not wrong when they deposed Rev. Mensch from office, even if we deemed improper the manner in which they did so.

It is easy, of course, for a new generation to place its own template on events that took place in the church in the past and then condemn them. It seems that is the order of the day. There probably were many different circumstances surrounding the work of our missions during this time that are not clear to the one studying them. It would take hours to sift through and put in order all the correspondence and reporting (not supplemented in the Mission Committee minutes) that took place at the time. For that reason, this period of our mission work becomes muddled and even confusing. Then too, some might judge these labors from a different perspective and be able to shed some new light on the reasoning that took place then. It may also be true, that men led by their convictions acted in certain ways that in hindsight we would say were not the wisest. All that being said, looking back at the history of missions in our churches, this was not, in my estimation, the most illustrious period of time. Nevertheless, God in His providence did lead us to the work of PR missions in both Isabel and Forbes.

In 1957 a number of events took place that led to our “official” work in the churches of Isabel and Forbes. First, Rev. Lubbers drafted a letter for the consistory of Isabel addressed to the Eureka Classis (RCUS) informing the Classis of Isabel’s decision to withdraw from their fellowship. Second, Rev. Lubbers formulated a motion for Isabel’s Consistory as an answer to Rev. Mensch’s request to be released from office in Isabel. This request of Rev. Mensch to be released was made in part because our Mission Committee in its September 8 meeting decided that it would be unethical for us to send a missionary to labor in a church that already had its own minister. It was also decided at that meeting that “we answer Isabel and Forbes that as soon as they are without a minister we will give their request our serious consideration.”⁷ Rev. Mensch resigned and moved to Michigan, in part (there were other considerations), as a result of this decision.

Third, Isabel Consistory then sent a request to the Mission Committee that our churches begin a labor in that church. The same type of request was sent to

our Mission Committee by the remnant of the Leola church that had now split away from the RCUS in 1957 and met in a schoolhouse in Forbes, North Dakota. In response to their requests the Mission Committee took up labors in these churches. But, since Rev. Lubbers was still laboring in Loveland, CO, which was some distance from these churches, he requested of the Mission Committee the assistance of Candidate Alvin Mulder.

Candidate Mulder spent the weeks of his candidacy laboring on the mission field. He took up his labors in December of 1957. He reported to the Mission Committee in January of the next year that the congregation in Isabel that had been organized for many years was made up of 7 families. “Forbes,” he writes, “which is a group of 3 families...was organized evidently recently. Their organization is a mystery to me although I know they are reorganized.”⁸

Mulder faced the hard but necessary questions concerning a viable mission work in these churches. Concerning Isabel he remarked in his January report, “Isabel area can expect little growth externally. Internally however they may grow because there are quite a few children and they all seem well-behaved and interested too.” Concerning Forbes: “Forbes on the other hand is a potential jumping off spot. But then, by all means, the meeting place must be changed from Forbes to Leola. Forbes is out in a region where little growth could be anticipated because of its great distance from towns and villages. While Leola is approximately 20 miles from Aberdeen, Eureka, and Hosmier, and in these villages there are old German Reformed churches out of which, I am convinced, a few parties could be drawn.”

These observations went unanswered in the future labors of the Mission Committee. Was Isabel going to be able to hold its own, especially in a town that from year to year was dwindling in its residency? Was Forbes going to thrive in a little town that already then had only about 800 residents? Should not these few families who lived in Forbes continue to travel to Leola as they had in the past? Despite these circumstances, the mission work in these towns continued until the time of their organization as PR churches.

We will conclude this era of our mission work in one more article in which we make a few of our own observations.

7 PRC Mission Committee minutes, September 8, 1957.

8 Report to the Mission Committee, January 14, 1958.



I believe

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

Gender dysphoria and transgenderism (7) “Religious” objections to the Bible’s teaching on gender

Previous article in this series: February 1, 2024, 230.

Introduction

We are currently examining the three main arguments transgender activists make in an attempt to deny the clear scriptural teaching regarding gender and sex. So far, we have examined transgender activism’s deceitful appeal to Galatians 3:28 and its wrong interpretation of the creation narrative. In this article we will examine transgender activism’s appeal to Matthew 19:12, where the Lord Jesus says, “For there are some eunuchs, which were so born from their mother’s womb: and there are some eunuchs, which were made eunuchs of men: and there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven’s sake. He that is able to receive it, let him receive it.”

The argument

The argument is that since in the first part of Matthew 19:12 Jesus accepts eunuchs from their birth (which includes a condition now known as intersex) as part of His kingdom, we ought to conclude that He would accept people who are unrepentantly transgender into His kingdom in our day.

To begin to understand this argument, we must understand something about intersex conditions. People who are born intersex experience a disorder of sexual organ development. This means the external sexual organs (most common), or internal sexual organs, or both, do not develop the way sexual organs typically do. In most cases the reason for this traces back to problems with a person’s chromosomes. Remember that males typically have an XY chromosome and females an XX chromosome. And remember that the presence of the SRY gene (normally on the Y chromosome) indicates one is male. This gene is responsible for the development of male sexual characteristics. For intersex people, something has gone wrong in the development of their sexual characteristics. And often what has gone wrong has originated with a problem in the chromosomes and/or the SRY gene.

For many intersex people, the disorder in their sexual development is not drastic.¹ Some males have an extra X chromosome (or two) so that they are XXY or XXXY instead of XY.² Some women are missing one of the X chromosomes or a portion of it.³ These can lead to some atypical developments in sexual characteristics. For some males their genitalia can be unusually small, or a woman’s, unusually large. These disorders of sexual development are distressing and can come with various challenges that God in His providence places upon a person’s life. None of them, however, leads a person to question whether or not he or she is male or female.⁴

Yet, a very small fraction of the population (.02%, that is, 2/10’s of one percent) have intersex conditions that cause disfigurement so drastic that people can wonder what sex they really are. For example, there are intersex conditions that lead to the development of more female characteristics even though the person is genetically male, or more male characteristics even though the person is genetically female, or that produce genitalia that are a combination of *male and female* parts, all the while the person is either genetically male or female.⁵ Let me explain all three of these briefly.

The first condition mentioned above occurs when a

1 “Not drastic” does not mean there is no difficulty for those who experience this. In addition to the atypical development of sexual characteristics, there are often additional difficulties that can be very distressing and life altering.

2 Klinefelter Syndrome. Symptoms are smaller testicles, less body hair, possible enlargement of breasts and possible infertility.

3 Turner Syndrome. These women are typically infertile, are at higher risk for heart disease, and may have developmental difficulties that affect their appearance.

4 Including these “lesser” kinds of disorders of sexual development in the definition of intersex balloons the percentage of intersex persons to 1.7 percent of the population. As I explain in the next paragraph, the percentage of those who are intersex to the degree of serious disfigurement of the sex characteristics is much smaller, .02 percent.

5 Ryan T. Anderson, *When Harry Became Sally: Responding to the Transgender Moment*, (Encounter Books, 2018), 88.

person has XY chromosomes (normally male), but the SRY gene is missing or disordered. Normally (that is, over 99.8 percent of the time), the presence of the Y chromosome and SRY gene leads to developing male sex characteristics. But on rare occasions the Y chromosome is lacking the SRY gene, or that gene is corrupted, with the result that person will develop female characteristics.⁶ This is why I have argued that it is the presence or absence of the SRY gene that genetically makes one male or female.

The second type of intersex condition mentioned above occurs when the SRY gene is present on the Y chromosome as it should be (thus, the person is male). However, the body is not able to absorb the testosterone that the SRY gene tells the testes to produce. The result is that the person develops some form of female external sex characteristics though he is genetically male.⁷

The third drastic intersex condition is the most rare and occurs when a person has XX chromosomes (normally female), but the SRY gene has attached itself to one of the X chromosomes. Thus, the person lacks a Y chromosome, yet they develop some male sexual characteristics because the SRY gene is present.⁸

There are other rare occasions (all of these and others are what make up the .02 percent) where a person has *both male and female* sets of chromosomes in their cells, either XX and XY, or just an X and also an XY. The result is that these develop parts of both male and female sex characteristics though they are genetically only male or only female. This used to be called hermaphroditism. That term is not generally used anymore. Rather, this kind of intersex condition is termed “ovo-testicular disorder of sexual development.” (All of these disorders are placed under the umbrella term “intersex conditions.”)

Who does not sympathize with a person experiencing the difficulties of an intersex condition—difficulties intensified by the fact that most people with these conditions are also infertile. If we personally know a brother or sister in Christ suffering from this disorder, we ought to assure him/her of his/her place and value in the kingdom of God redeemed in Jesus Christ. There is, of course, before them the hope of all things made new. But there is a hope in the present as well. We ought to remind him/her that intersex difficulties have been

around since the Fall effected everything, including at times sexual development. And we ought to remind these brothers and sisters, that the Lord Himself knew of these conditions and spoke of them, and saw believers with these conditions as valuable citizens of the kingdom of God.⁹

Only one part of transgender activism’s understanding of Matthew 19:12 is correct: Christ’s reference to those who are “born eunuchs from their mother’s womb” includes those with serious intersex conditions. How gracious of the Spirit to include this reference in Scripture for the sake of those who experience these conditions. And how gracious that God, as He does with others in the kingdom who have disorders that affect them in various ways, gives grace to those in His kingdom with intersex conditions so that they are made “able to receive it” and thus are an astounding witness of God’s goodness in their difficulty.

The argument transgender activists make is that Jesus’ acceptance of those with intersex conditions in His kingdom indicates that we ought to accept transgender people into the kingdom without repentance. Jesus’ acceptance of intersex people indicates that He accepts that there are not only two sexes. Therefore, the church should accept there are more than two sexes and more than two genders.

Countering the argument

Despite the Lord’s statement that intersex believers are accepted in His kingdom in their intersex state, Matthew 19:12 is not a basis for the conclusion that those choosing to live transgender need not repent to be part of the kingdom of God. Nor is it a basis for the notion that there are more than two sexes and more than two genders.

Eunuchs from birth are still genetically either male or female. Neither the eunuchs Jesus was speaking of in the text, nor intersex people today, represent some third possible sex. The presence or absence of the SRY gene determines one’s sex. And 99.998 percent of the time that SRY gene is found on a Y chromosome. If in the most serious intersex cases it can be discovered what sex a person is, as usually it can be discovered, then one ought to live in accord with what is discovered, recognizing that sex and gender are one. There may be very rare cases where one cannot discover what

⁶ This is called Swyer Syndrome.

⁷ This is called Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome, which is classified as either “partial” or “complete.”

⁸ This is variously called “XX male syndrome,” or “de la Chapelle syndrome,” or “46, XX testicular difference of sex development syndrome.”

⁹ For further comfort for those in the kingdom with an intersex condition, see Isaiah 56:3-5.

sex a person truly is. A decision must be made for one or the other, and the possibility exists that one chooses wrong. Yet, even in these rarest of all cases there is yet one sex or the other; there is not a third sex. Something has gone wrong in the development of that person's sex, but the person is still either male or female. What is astounding is that in spite of the Fall's profound effects on all aspects of life, including biological sex, God has so upheld His creation that 99.98 percent of the time the sex of each person is crystal clear and obvious.

The rare exceptions do not overthrow the rule, but rather prove the rule. Robert Gagnon is correct when he argues, "the appeal to 'intersex individuals' [as a basis for rejecting two sexes] is akin to an appeal to conjoined twins as a basis for rejecting a standard of monogamy. It makes as a basis for imploding the entire standard, an extraordinarily rare exception, where something goes developmentally wrong in nature's processes...."¹⁰ Scripture calls marriage an institution of one man and one woman joined together for life. Conjoined twins cannot classify as "one," and thus cannot enter marriage. To argue that this reality should overthrow the concept of marriage between one man and one woman is unfounded. So too, the fact that there are some intersex people, a tiny fraction of the tiny fraction of whom might not definitely know what their sex is in their lifetime,¹¹ does not overthrow the reality of two sexes. It did not lead the Lord to that conclusion. Remember that just before He spoke of intersex people, He stated, "he that made them in the beginning made them male and female." There He called the church to uphold marriage between one man and one woman, as divinely created, on the basis of two sexes and two genders.

Intersex people are not the same as transgender people. Intersex people are not trying to overthrow their sex based on feelings. They are trying to *discern* their sex with a view to living in accord with it. The eunuchs from birth Jesus refers to are not people who are born with clear sex characteristics and willingly try to deface them on the basis of how they feel. Rather, they are people who have had some physical disorder in their biological sexual development and are trying to reckon with it. Therefore, Jesus' acceptance of intersex people (without calling them to re-

pent of being intersex) may not be used to claim that Jesus would accept unrepentant transgender people into His kingdom.

In fact, the closest comparison between the biblical eunuch and a modern transgender person¹² is not found when Jesus speaks of eunuchs "so born from their mother's womb," but rather when He speaks of eunuchs who are "made eunuchs of men." This is a reference to males who were castrated by powerful men abusing their positions of power for their own gain.¹³ Many today are now coming to the painful conclusion that though they consented to a sex-change operation, the doctors who performed the operation were all too much like those who castrated the youth of Jesus' day. By withholding information, pressuring young impressionable people and their naive (or worse) parents, these doctors have used their power to advance their own agenda by castrating young men and women. I pray that, as some who were "made eunuchs of men" were brought into the kingdom in the days of the Scriptures (Acts 8:27), so some (many) who have suffered this oppression today will be brought into the kingdom of God by the same Spirit.

Lesson to learn

The Scriptures always teach us to hold the standard and yet reach out to those who, due to sin and its effects, do not reach that standard. This is one of the amazing things about the Bible. It avoids the ditch on the one hand of only caring about the standard. And it avoids the ditch on the other hand of relinquishing the standard for the sake of those ravaged by sin. Instead, the Scriptures constantly reveal the will of God and call the church to maintain the standard of the will of God. God help us to do so without compromise! And yet, they also call the church to reach out in love with the truth of the gospel to those who do not meet the standard (as none of us do), calling people to acknowledge their sin and rebellion and to repent and live by faith. May God ever give us grace to do this too.

12 I refer, at least, to a modern transgender person who has had a sex-change operation.

13 For example, eunuchs could be used by kings to tend to the royal harem.

10 Robert Gagnon, "Memo to the Washington Post: The Bible does Reject 'Transgender' Behavior," *The Stream* (September 16, 2016). <https://stream.org/memo-to-the-washington-post-the-bible-does-reject-transgender-behavior/>

11 My judgment is that there are very, very rare cases where someone might enter into the next life and discover they are a sex and gender different from what they knew.

Answer to Creche (multiple choice):

b. a nursery area for small children



Strength of youth

Rev. Jacob Maatman, pastor of Southeast PRC in Wyoming, Michigan

Strength in weakness

The rubric under which this article appears is “Strength of Youth,” and therefore it seemed fitting to write an article that commends weakness. It is a strange way to go about the subject, but we have the approach on good authority: the apostle Paul boasted in his weaknesses (quite something to boast in!) and concluded thus: “For when I am weak, then am I strong” (II Cor. 12:10). Strong, when weak! All this, because of what the Lord Jesus Christ said to him: “My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness” (v. 9).

The power of His grace operative in my inability; my weakness the venue in which it pleases the Lord to exercise His strength. It is the way He is pleased to work, a way that turns upside-down the wisdom of this world, defies our too-human expectations of what strength is and wherein it lies. It is the Lord’s “MO,” who called unlearned fisherman (and a publican to boot) to be the apostles of His kingdom, silenced His adversaries out of the mouths of children, was Himself crucified in weakness, operates in power through the word of the cross, and uses clay jars to preach it. The theology of the cross, as Luther called it, in action.

Some background: For one, the Corinthians had a boasting problem (I Cor. 4:7, 5:6). For another, there were some “super-apostles” (II Cor. 12:11) in town who were vaunting themselves, trying to demean Paul, and thus seeking to win over the Corinthians. So Paul decides to play the fool and boast a little himself: not because he likes to talk about himself (he is loath to do so; the Corinthians are the ones making him do it), but for the sake of the gospel and the good of the church. In chapter 12 he describes in the third person (not “I,” “I,” “I”) the visions and revelations of the Lord he received. It was tremendous. It was enough to put to shame his detractors and teach the Corinthians. But it was also enough for Paul to get a big head over, if the Lord did not do anything to check it. So, says he, “there was given to me a thorn in the flesh...lest I should be exalted above measure” (v. 7).

We need not figure out what exactly the thorn was. The point is, it was debilitating, so much so that Paul begged Jesus three times to pluck it out. It handicapped him. He felt so weak! Maybe he gave the Lord a reason why it should be removed: “I could get so much more

work done and do it so much better if it were not for this thorn!” The Lord did not grant his request, because He loved Paul, and it would not have been good for him. His answer was far better: “My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness.”

Whatever it was, by that thorn the Lord reduced the apostle to weakness. He “made” Paul weak, in the sense that He exhibited to him just how infirm he really was in himself. In verse 10, the things he takes pleasure in (weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, calamities) likewise served to keep him weak. But consider the word of the Lord. It is not just that Paul’s weakness did not “get in the way of” the power of the Lord’s grace; Jesus did not say, “My strength is made perfect *in spite of* weakness,” as in, “Your weakness cannot stop me,” although true. Rather, said the Lord, “My strength is made perfect *in* weakness.” Precisely *in it*, in those circumstances, in presence of weakness—right in the thick of it!—does it please the Lord to operate in power and achieve His purpose. A cup is best filled when it is empty. Our weakness is the venue in which He likes to go to work. The Lord, with His sleeves rolled up, had Paul right where He wanted him to be. As Paul says, “When I am weak, then am I strong.”

By nature we want to be strong in ourselves and sufficient of ourselves, and that is a problem. We think ourselves to be something, when we are nothing, and we deceive ourselves (Gal. 6:3). We locate strength in the wrong places and boast in the wrong things, and near, if not at the top of the list, is self. The boasting of a jock in his athletic prowess. The boasting of a student in her intellect. The boasting of the winner of the popularity contest at school who has this many likes on Instagram or that many friends on Facebook. How strong we are! But if when we are weak, then we are strong, what does it mean when we are strong? The bully at school prides himself in his strength and picks on students who are (he thinks) weaker than him and have trouble defending themselves. Is that strength? It is a cover for weakness and insecurity. Let him own himself to be weak, for the Lord’s strength is made perfect in weakness.

We could go on with examples that illustrate the self-strong bent of our flesh. Self-righteousness, pride, trust-

ing in oneself for righteousness and despising others: “God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are...I...I...I” (Luke 18:11, 12). So strong! But who went down to his house justified? “No doubt we think we can avoid the Pharisee’s error..., but what is our attitude toward the Pharisee? Alas, we despise him in a truly Pharisaical manner...‘God I thank thee that I am not as other men are, proud of my own righteousness, uncharitable toward publicans, or even as this—Pharisee’” (J. Gresham Machen, *What is Faith?*). Another one: Practically considering sanctification to be the Christian’s self-improvement project, a self-help program, something he has to achieve by his own fortitude, resolution, and effort. Or the mentality that we are strong enough in ourselves to overcome sin and temptation, like Peter: “Though I should die with thee, yet will I not deny thee” (Matt. 26:35). So strong! But alas, when he was strong, then he was weak, and so are we, when we are strong.

In truth, we are so weak in ourselves that we cannot stand a moment (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 127). In truth, without Jesus, we can do nothing (John 15:5). In truth, we are nothing in ourselves (II Cor. 12:11), and have nothing of ourselves but sin (Form of Consolation). But by nature we do not want to acknowledge ourselves to be such as we really are. We do not want to be weak. The apostle says, “When I am weak,” but we are not even strong enough in ourselves to become weak. It is by the Lord’s doing, the effect of His power. He who exhibited to Paul his weakness by the thorn, and before that, by the law (Rom. 7), is the One who breaks down our strength and exhibits to us our weakness. He has a way of bringing one who says “I shall never be moved” (Ps. 30:6), when he is strong, to say “Hear, O LORD, and have mercy upon me: LORD, be thou my helper,” as the weak we really are (Ps. 30:10). It is a sort of disintegration.

He exhibits to us our weakness when it comes to the Christian life: He causes us to recognize the futility of the self-help. He takes the rose-colored glasses off our eyes so that we come to know in our own experience what Guido de Bres was talking about: “A sense of this corruption should make believers often to sigh, desiring to be delivered from this body of death” (Belgic Confession, Art. 15). He exhibits to us our weakness, in those circumstances of life that make us feel like outmatched Judah felt when the enemy was invading: “We have no might against this great company that cometh against us; neither know we what to do: but our eyes are upon thee” (II Chron. 20:12). Or Asaph: “I am so troubled that I cannot speak” (Ps. 77:4). Or David: “My spirit [is] overwhelmed within me; my heart within me is desolate” (Ps. 143:4). Or Paul: “I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me” (II Cor. 13:8). One wonders if he

used the words “I can’t” when he prayed. By that thorn, the Lord sapped Paul of his strength and discovered to His beloved servant his own weakness and insufficiency and just how dependent was Paul upon the Lord, who is pleased to make His strength perfect in weakness.

What a word to the weak apostle! What a word to weak you and weak me! “My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness.” The grace and strength of Jesus Christ, true God of true God, who for us and for our salvation came down from heaven and became weak when He became incarnate. The omnipotent one, by whom the worlds were made, who was born of a woman, held as a helpless baby in the arms of His mother. He knows about weakness, He who was made like unto His weak brothers and sisters in all things, yet without sin (Heb. 2:17). He knows about weakness, He who was nailed to a cross, where He hanged and bled and died; who was crucified through weakness while His enemies mocked, “He cannot [is not able to!] save himself.” God’s strength was made perfect in weakness in the Crucified One, who died for them that are without strength (Rom. 5:6) and shed His blood for the remission of our sins. Through the weakness of the cross God “made bare His holy arm” (Is. 52:10) and accomplished our salvation. Jesus finished the work, and God raised Him from the dead: “For though he was crucified through weakness, yet he liveth by the power of God” (II Cor. 13:4). Jesus is Lord.

This is the One who makes His strength perfect in our weakness; who manifests His power in the cross-shaped lives of His disciples; who is at work in strength when to the human eye (or feeling) it seems naught but weakness. This is the power that wrought in the life and ministry of the apostle Paul. This is the strength that is operative in the life of the Christian, ordinary, humble, lowly, or humdrum though it may appear; that is at work in the struggle of the Christian and the throes of mortification; that is present in our felt weakness, so much so that it is as Charles Spurgeon said, “When you can neither repent, nor believe, nor love as you wish to do, you are repenting, believing, and loving with a strength which is more true than apparent” (sermon no. 2050, “A Paradox”). Strong, when weak! This is the power of Christ that is behind the unspoken prayer of the child of God when she feels “pressed out of measure, above strength” (II Cor. 1:8) by reason of trouble, feels like giving up, and pours out her complaint before the Lord; that is behind the obedience of the young adult when he “looks round upon a universe from which every trace of [God] seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys” (C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*); that is behind the Peter-like

response of the college student who feels battered with doubt: “Lord, to whom shall we go?”

Be of good courage, brother, and take heart, sister, because His grace is sufficient for you: for His strength is made perfect in weakness. Your weakness is right up His alley. Glory, you weak ones, in your infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon you; power that will have weakness for a dwellingplace.

Thus the Lord led Paul to glorying in his infirmities. Now Paul realizes the Lord wants things to be this way,

that his weakness might be the occasion for the exhibition of the Lord’s power. Now Paul is willing to be weak, having heard from the Lord that it pleases Him to manifest His strength precisely in Paul’s weakness. And so, while others will go around boasting in how big and strong they are, Paul will glory in his infirmities, which amounts to a glorying in the Lord, who has so designed things that no flesh should glory in his own strength, but, according as it is written, “He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord” (I Cor. 1:31).



Church and state

Mr. Nathan Vis, member of Cornerstone PRC, Dyer, Indiana and a practicing attorney

May Coach K pray?

The scene is Bremerton (WA) High School, and the year is 2015. Following a game, football coach Joseph Kennedy knelt on the 50-yard line in silent prayer. He understood that this action would likely result in a termination by the public school district for which he worked. After months of repeated requests from the school district that Coach Kennedy cease his public prayers, he did, indeed, lose his job. The coach, in turn, sued the school district.¹

After his case worked its way through layers of the judicial system, the United States Supreme Court ruled on June 27, 2022, that Coach Kennedy’s brief, quiet, and personal post-game prayer was protected by the free exercise and free speech clauses of the First Amendment of the United States Constitution and was not the “establishment” of religion of a government employee.

For his fellow religious public school employees and other government/municipal employees, the decision of Coach Kennedy’s case has sent reverberations throughout the nation. In 1969, in *Tinker v. De Moines Independent Community School District*, 393 US 503, 509 (1969), the Court held “public school coaches, teachers, and other school employees, like students, do not shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate.” However, since that time, the Supreme Court and lower courts have routinely grappled with how the First Amendment free expression and establishment clauses coexist. The *Kennedy v. Bremerton School District* opinion directly challenged

the long-standing notion that the establishment and free exercise clauses of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution do not stand in tension with each other. The converse the Court held is actually true: the Court expressed that these two clauses work together to provide robust protection for religious speech.

The question raised in the *Kennedy* case was as follows: When Coach Kennedy knelt in prayer at the 50-yard line following a football game—in plain sight of all spectators and players—was he engaging in the free exercise of religion or was he instead establishing religion prohibited by a government employee in the scope/course of his work?

The facts

In 2008 Joseph Kennedy became coach of the Bremerton High School football team, and since the start of his tenure as coach he would routinely take a knee at the 50-yard line and publicly pray quietly for around 30 seconds after games were completed. Over time, players began asking Kennedy if they could join him, including student athletes from both Kennedy’s team and opposing teams. For seven years, Kennedy engaged in this post-game prayer activity, which sometimes also included brief motivational speeches with religious references.

In 2015, the school district sent Kennedy a letter, instructing him to avoid motivational speeches or talks that included religious expressions of prayer and to refrain from any student prayer activities. Furthermore, Coach Kennedy’s personal religious activities must be non-demonstrative, meaning the activities should not “be outwardly discernible as religious activity.” Upon receipt of the letter, Kennedy stopped his post-game prayer for a

¹ See *Kennedy v. Bremerton Sch. Dist.*, 142 S. CT. 2407, 2418-19 (2022).

brief period of time, but after a time, he felt compelled to pray. He announced his intentions via local news outlets and took to the midfield after a game to pray.

Subsequently, the school district made it clear to Kennedy that his only option was to pray in a private location where neither students nor spectators could observe him. Kennedy continued to kneel at midfield and was put on administrative leave.

The objection

At both the District Court and Court of Appeals levels, the courts agreed that Kennedy's speech was "government speech" rather than private speech, and that Kennedy was not protected by the freedom of speech clause. In addition, the Court of Appeals rejected Kennedy's free exercise claim, concluding that the school district had a compelling state interest to avoid the establishment of religion, as the coach's public prayer gave the impression to those observing that the school was endorsing religion.

Since 1971, courts had analyzed similar cases, in the vein of a Supreme Court case known as *Lemon v. Kertzman*, which outlined that the government would violate constitutional rights unless they could show that their actions in denying the religious practice "number one, had a secular or non-religious purpose; two, did not advance or inhibit religion; and three, did not promote an extreme entanglement with religion on the government's part."

In writing for a 6-3 majority, Justice Neil Gorsuch explained that the clauses of the First Amendment are not at odds or in tension with each other, but rather "work in tandem. Where the free exercise clause protects religious exercises, whether communicative or not, the free speech clause provides overlapping protection for expressive religious activities."² Historically, Gorsuch would continue to write, that is what the framers of the Constitution intended, because of their "distrust of government's attempts to regulate religion and suppress dissent, it is that the First Amendment doubly protects religious speech."³ Continuing further, the Court rebuked the historical tendency of courts and commentators to set the establishment and free exercise clauses against one another, citing that the courts were creating a false tension between the two and for all practical purposes were seeking to remove religiosity from the public square and schools altogether.

Kennedy's free exercise holding

The *Kennedy* decision held that the free exercise clause

provides robust protection, not only for "the right to harbor religious beliefs inwardly and secretly," but also for "the ability of those who hold religious beliefs of all kinds to live out their faith and daily life through the performance of or abstention from physical acts."⁴

As Kennedy was able to show that the school entity burdened his sincere religious practice, pursuant to a policy that was not neutral or generally applicable, the burden then shifted to the school corporation to satisfy strict scrutiny for their actions. Since the school corporation sought to prohibit any overt actions that appeared to endorse voluntary prayer, the Court held their policies were "not neutral towards religion."⁵ Further, the Court aggregated other recent prior decisions on free exercise cases to express concern that government action may violate the Free Exercise clause if it: 1) expresses hostility toward religion; 2) targets or discriminates against religion; 3) prohibits religious conduct while permitting secular conduct that undermines the government's asserted interest in a similar way; or 4) provides a mechanism for individualized exemptions (meaning, government selects/chooses/allows some religious activities while prohibiting others).

In short, the Court expressed strong disagreement with the lower court's decision "that treats everything school employees say in the workplace as government speech, subject to government control."⁶ The Court then reasoned that such an interpretation would allow "a school to fire a Muslim teacher for wearing a headscarf in the classroom or prohibit a Christian aide for praying quietly over her lunch in the cafeteria."⁷ The Court went on to emphasize that state neutrality toward religion does not require the complete absence of religion from public spaces, including the expulsion of faith from the school environment, as if introducing or allowing students to encounter religious actions is harmful to students. This, the Court held, sends a message of hostility, not neutrality, to religious employees and students.

Developing their legal theory that a student will be exposed to different religious beliefs over the course of their lives in a pluralistic society, the Court continued that because "pluralism begins in the school context and extends into the workplace, a public school should not prevent students from any contact with religious beliefs besides their own, as it does them a disservice in preparation for relationship in adult society."⁸

4 *Kennedy* at 2421.

5 *Kennedy* at 2422-23.

6 *Kennedy* at 2425.

7 *Kennedy* at 2425.

8 Most importantly for the school context, the court made it clear

2 *Kennedy* at 2421.

3 *Kennedy* at 2421.

Kennedy's impact on the establishment clause

As mentioned earlier, for almost forty years the courts had used the *Lemon* test, which asked the courts to assess the facts based on whether or not a “reasonable observer” would deem the activities or speech in question to be the establishment or endorsement of religion.

In decisive fashion, the court rejected the *Lemon* test and its “reasonable observer” standard in the *Kennedy* case for two main reasons. First, the Court cited that the “reasonable observer” standard created a “modified heckler’s veto” in which religious activity can be prescribed or limited based upon perceptions or discomfort, otherwise known as a “coercion test.”⁹ Second, the Court acknowledged the *Lemon* test invited chaos in lower courts and created a minefield for legislators because of its subjective, unpredictable, and contradictory outcomes.¹⁰

Instead, the six justices who made up the majority in the *Kennedy* case wrote that the establishment clause must be interpreted by “reference to historical practices and understandings.”¹¹ Courts determined the justices should focus on the original meaning and history of the establishment clause dating back to its inception. The justices believed that focusing on historical practices and an understanding of what was meant by the establishment clause would ensure that the establishment clause and free exercise clause would be interpreted together, rather than in opposition in a way that allows a hostile government to choose “its preferred way out of its self-imposed trap.”¹²

The Court in *Kennedy* did not define the exact contours of the history and tradition analysis that would replace the *Lemon* test. The question still remains whether or not the “coercion test” for the establishment clause continues, only to be understood/assessed in its historical context.

Several cases have emerged in the eighteen months since the *Kennedy* case where circuit courts have applied the historical test to establishment clause challenges, including cases where courts have allowed a mayor’s prayer vigil, a prayer to begin a session in court, the approval of the motto “In God We Trust,” and others.

that public schools and other government actors can no longer hide behind hypothetical establishment clause concerns to justify real free exercise violations. “And in no world may government entities’ concerns about phantom constitutional violations justify violations of an individual’s first amendment rights.” *Kennedy* at 2432.

9 *Kennedy* at 2427.

10 *Kennedy* at 2427.

11 *Kennedy* at 2428

12 *Kennedy* at 2427.

A win for religious expression?

The experiment that is the American Constitution continues. The *Kennedy* ruling signals a shift in understanding (or perhaps a return to the original intention) of the dichotomy that is the First Amendment free exercise clause and the establishment clause.¹³ There is no doubt that the case marks a win for government employees’ ability to practice their faith more freely in public without reprisal, and for this there is much thanks to be given to God! It is also encouraging to see the continued emphasis that the current Court has on acknowledging (and not challenging) what it means to practice sincere religious beliefs. Finally, it is also positive to see the Court emphasize repeatedly that government arenas—including public schools—should not be void of any religious conversation.

However, it would be naive to ignore the tension that does exist around this subject. At the end of the day, values (whether derived from a religion or lack of religion) do drive legislation and law. If a government cannot establish or endorse a religion and must instead freely allow anyone to practice their sincerely held religious beliefs, does that not create conflict? What values can then drive legislative action?

The majority opinion’s view that early exposure to a plethora of religious views allows members of a society to grow and co-exist as they age and enter the workforce is troublesome. It treats religion as a factual buffet to be negotiated and argued.

The majority’s view that history serves as the guide to determine what establishment of religion is by a government employee may also be troublesome. What history is selected? Dating back to when?

But yet, worry should not be ours. Our calling is sure. We need not fear persecution nor what man may say, as we find in Matthew 5: 12-17:

Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you. Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? It is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men. Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.

13 Interestingly, Coach Kennedy returned as coach in September 2023, only to resign after one game back on the field.

Announcements

Resolution of sympathy

The Council and congregation of Loveland PRC of Loveland, CO expresses Christian sympathy to Ray and Joy Schwarz in the death of Joy's father, **Ed Ophoff, Sr.**, who was taken to his heavenly home on December 1, 2023. We also express our Christian sympathy to the grand children of Mr. Ophoff: Jake and Jessica Schwarz and Kate, Ruth Schwarz, and Calvin and Mary DeJong. May we all find comfort from Romans 8:38, 39: "For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Robert Brands, Vice-president
Joel Moore, Clerk

PRC archives—Materials wanted!

The 100th anniversary of the PRC is rapidly approaching (2025). With that in view, the PRC archives is looking for donations of anything and everything related to her history—personal (family), congregational, and denominational. We are interested in documents (official records, programs, bulletins, letters, etc.), photos of all kinds, and recordings in all forms. Large or small collections of materials are welcome! Please bring your items to the seminary, or call or email the seminary for pick up of your items (prcseminary1925@gmail.com). We look forward to seeing what you have!

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. Older men from the PRC who wish to apply under the new Special Seminary Entrance Program (SSEP) should approach the secretary of the TSC or the registrar (C. Terpstra) to review status and pre-seminary requirements (cf. *PRC Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 348ff.).

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. Those older men who apply under the new SSEP may be exempt from some of these requirements, which will be determined on a case-by-case basis. The requirements for the regular course of entering seminary and for the SSEP 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.