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A REFORMED SEMI-MONTHLY MAGAZINE

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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

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Meditation

Rev. Dennis Lee, pastor of Kalamazoo PRC in Kalamazoo, Michigan

The Lord's thoughts toward us

For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the LORD, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end.

Jeremiah 29:11

Appreciation! Great appreciation! Is this not how we feel when we are told by some dear friends that we are in their thoughts and prayers? How much more is this so when it is the LORD Himself, our covenant God, telling us that He thinks thoughts toward us!

That was the message from God brought by the prophet Jeremiah to His captive saints. In the letter, Jeremiah tells them to build houses, to marry and have families, to plant crops and abide peaceably in Babylon until the time the LORD would return them to their homeland. The peace of Babylon, would be, in the meantime, their peace too.

But the people did not always abide peaceably under the yoke of captivity. For, on the one hand, they were plagued by false prophets who gave false hope to them by telling them that they would be home soon. And, on the other hand, they were prone to despair. Because their Babylonian captors were so strong and cruel to them, it seemed that there was no hope that they would ever return to their beloved homeland.

That being the case, the prophet comforts them. In a word, he tells them not to think any of those thoughts—of false hope or of hopelessness that they would be in captivity forever. Rather, they should know that they *will* return to their homeland—not in their time, but in God's perfectly appointed time. Therefore, they had hope and were to wait for that day in hope! Their hope, like ours, is in God and His perfect plan and control of all things. So in the midst of experiencing much pain and trouble, they and we need to know that God has not forgotten us. He thinks thoughts toward us—thoughts of peace and not evil—to give us an expected end.

What they are

Scripture tells us that there are three things we should know about the LORD's thoughts.

First, they are *His eternal counsel*. We read in Psalm

33:11, "The counsel of the LORD standeth for ever, the thoughts of his heart to all generations." Note that the phrase, "the counsel of the LORD" is parallel to "the thoughts of His heart" in the poetic symmetry of the verse. Accordingly, the two are one and the same: The LORD's thoughts are His eternal counsel! So, being His eternal counsel, what are those thoughts? They are His eternal determination of all things: of the world, of history, of the church, of every member in the church, and every detail in the world. Still more, His counsel is always and eternally *present*. This means that they are *always in the foreground*, not buried in the background and distant past, and therefore quite unlike our thoughts. How often have we not had good thoughts and intentions for someone, and plan to do them good, only to forget! In stark contrast, God's thoughts are *always* and *eternally present*. It is as if He has an eternal and infinite *Random Access Memory* (RAM) that stores all His thoughts and knowledge in the foreground.

Second, God's thoughts are *all-comprehensive*. Absolutely nothing is excluded from them. Consider what King David wrote under inspiration in Psalm 139:17, 18, "How precious also are thy thoughts unto me, O God! how great is the sum of them! If I should count them, they are more in number than the sand: when I awake, I am still with thee." God's thoughts towards King David were innumerable. They were innumerable because they were all-comprehensive. And they were all-comprehensive because He is omniscient and all-knowing. There is not one thing that God does not know. He knows David's downsitting and uprising. He knows his every movement. He knows every tear he shed. He knows David from eternity to eternity—*through and through!* And what He knows about David, He knows about every one of His people. He knows every tiny detail of everything about us! In Jeremiah's time, God knew every distress, every discouragement, and every despair of His people. And it is the same with us too. He knows every suffering, every heartache, every distress, every discouragement and every despair—and in the very circumstances we face

them—whether it be in the home and family, at work, at church or in the denomination of churches to which we belong!

Third, His thoughts are unchangeable. Psalm 33:11 tells us this: “The counsel of the LORD *standeth forever...*” His thoughts *never* change! And they never change because *He* never changes. While we change, God never changes! Therefore, we may rely on Him totally! Let us remember especially who He is in relation to us, His people: He is *the LORD*, the God of *unchanging love* towards us (cf. Mal. 3:6).

Dear reader, are you distressed, discouraged, or in despair? Know that our faithful, covenant God has a plan—a plan from all eternity, a plan that is all-comprehensive in scope, and a plan that is unchangeable and of unchanging love in relation to us—in *every* detail! That was true for Judah in Jeremiah’s time, and that is true for us today!

Their good, peaceful purposes

God’s thoughts towards us are only good! They purpose good and peace for us! They are “thoughts of peace, and not of evil...” and therefore, contrary to evil, are good!

God is always good to His people—His friends! And, on the other hand, He is always *non-good* towards His enemies. This is an axiom and principle of God, and one that Asaph learned with many tears before he finally confessed: “Truly God is good to Israel, even to such as are of a clean heart” (Ps. 73:1). For there was a time when he was “envious at the foolish, when [he] saw the prosperity of the wicked” (Ps. 73:3). It was only when he went “into the sanctuary of God” and understood their terrible end (Ps. 73:17-19) that he realized he was wrong. God is good and only good to us, and thus has only good, peaceful purposes for us!

The greatest proof of this is none other than our salvation, a salvation out of the deepest and lowest misery to the highest good, which is life and friendship with God! Dear reader, we may never forget the price that God paid to bestow that salvation to us! That price is not silver or gold, but the precious blood of His only-begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ (I Pet. 1:18)! *Dear reader, if that was the price He paid so dearly for your salvation, what good will He withhold from you? What possible evil would He purpose for you?* When salvation comes our way, we enjoy only peace with God through Christ Jesus, the Prince of Peace. God’s ways with us are always motivated by peace! He only has good, peaceful purposes for us!

Why, then, are there troubles in our lives?

It is not uncommon that these troubles are many and great. That was certainly the case with God’s people in

Jeremiah’s time. They were held in captivity in Babylon for seventy years! Imagine the mocking and scoffing they had to endure against them! Imagine the heartache of separation from loved ones in their homeland! We can only imagine how discouraged and distressed they must have been! Dear reader, you have your troubles too, do you not? How do we understand these troubles? God’s Word tells us how: they are always for our good. They work together for our good (Rom. 8:28), and specifically, the good of our salvation.

These troubles serve our salvation, which have one important purpose: that we might be holy (Eph. 1:4)! So, one important reason why God gives troubles to His people is that they be renewed and established in holiness. There is clear indication that this was the case in Jeremiah’s time from the verses that follow: “Then shall ye call upon me, and ye shall go and pray unto me, and I will hearken unto you. And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart. And I will be found of you, saith the LORD: and I will turn away your captivity, and I will gather you from all the nations, and from all the places whither I have driven you, saith the LORD; and I will bring you again into the place whence I caused you to be carried away captive” (Jer. 29:12-14). The LORD, the covenant God of His people, had wisely and lovingly determined that His people in Jeremiah’s time needed to go through His refining fire to burn away the dross of their sins. It is this fact and truth that His suffering captive people needed to know! And in that way, therefore, were they to receive Jeremiah’s instruction to be prepared to live in Babylon for a while, rejecting both false hope as well needless distress and despair.

Dear reader, are you in the midst of experiencing many troubles during recent years in the churches to which you belong and hold dear? Just as the LORD was purifying His people in Jeremiah’s time and renewing their holiness by having them go through His refining fire of trial and trouble, the unchanging LORD could well be doing the same with you and with me, and with the churches to which we belong and which we hold dear.

If that is the case, we have no reason to be distressed or in despair. Nor should we harbor any false hope of a swift and painless end to trouble. We need to remember that His thoughts and ways are far higher than our thoughts and ways (Is. 55:10)! We need to know that they are not evil, but only good! They serve His good and peaceful purposes for us!

Our response of hope

Therefore, our response to the LORD’s thoughts towards

us is one of hope! We have a good hope for the future, even in the midst of our present troubles.

For we are told that we have an “expected end,” or literally, “end and hope.” The Holy Spirit gives us a beautiful word picture here through the original word for “hope.” Hope is pictured as a cord, a cord to bind us in safety and keep us from falling! In other words, we may be absolutely certain of our end, a good and peaceable end.

Why?

Because hope is that which binds us in safety. In particular, it binds us safely to the wonderful, eternal, all-comprehensive and unchanging counsel of God.

And it is a counsel that purposes only a good, peaceful end and future for us!

Having this hope, let us submit to the perfect ways of the LORD for us with perfect peace and trust. Doing so, we may be troubled on every side, yet are we not distressed. Doing so, we may be perplexed by our circumstances, yet are we not in despair! (II Cor. 4:8).

Having hope of a good and peaceful end and future, we not only enjoy quiet submission, but also an abiding confidence and a cheerful spirit.

So dear reader, cease not, but continue in hopeful labors and service in and for the LORD in the churches to which you belong and which you love!



Editorial

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

Using social media with Christian intentionality

The *Standard Bearer* is in its 100th volume year. Our ancestors in the faith who began this magazine in 1924 were as versed in the social media of X (Twitter), TikTok, YouTube, Facebook/Meta, Instagram, and Snapchat as their Dutch fathers in the Secession of 1834 were accustomed to producing sermon manuscripts on a mechanical typewriter, taking notes with a ballpoint ink pen, or cruising from town to town in a Ford Model A. Technological innovation develops in astonishing ways from century to century. While the term “social media” and a platform like “X” would have been unheard of through most of the history of the *Standard Bearer*, there are compelling reasons to address the topic of our use of social media in 2024. In order to do so, I will take direction from a recently published source: *The Wolf in their Pockets: 13 Ways the Social Internet Threatens the People You Lead*, Chris Martin. Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2023.

Chris Martin is editor of BibletoLife.com and content marketing editor at Moody Publishers. He has written another book published in 2022 under the title, *Terms of Service: The Real Cost of Social Media*. The author is hailed by some as one of the foremost Christian thinkers on the topic of the social Internet. Martin used his own research and experience to write *The Wolf in their Pockets*, but he also reached out to other pastors and church leaders to hear their assessment of how so-

cial media is changing the people of their congregations, whether for good or bad. His personal conclusions were confirmed by others every step of the way.

Martin contends that social media “is arguably the most pervasive discipleship force in the world right now” (p. 12). With it we must reckon. While there are many benefits to social media for socializing, evangelizing, marketing, networking, educating, and more, it seems that comparatively few authors today are writing books attempting to convince us of all the *benefits*. Most, like Martin, with his descriptive title, *The Wolf in their Pockets*, are persuaded they must point out the *dangers*. Martin writes, “Our relationship with the social internet is profoundly changing us, often away from Christlikeness, not toward it” (p. 22). Even if we do not use social media, we need to be aware of it and address it, because it is a mainstay in nearly every home and it is having a profound effect on everyone.

Martin argues that there are two wrong ways to approach social media, and they are the two ends of a spectrum: uncritical embrace and passive ignorance. The wise, more difficult, middle way is intentional engagement (p. 12). We must be very intentional in using such an incredibly powerful and ever-evolving tool. For example, we do well to face the question (repeatedly and with feedback from trusted friends): What role ought a platform like Facebook/Meta or Instagram play in my

brief life of 70—80 years as I walk here below in covenant communion with my God and in service to others? The value of Martin’s book is that he not only describes specific dangers but gives good guidance on how to live faithfully.

For this article, I will highlight only three dangers raised by Martin, and then I will conclude with three questions that embody Christian intentionality. I define Christian intentionality as the Christian’s conscious use of social media in conformity to goals and standards established from Scripture.¹

Entertain me!

One grave danger of social media is that it can create the powerful and lasting impulse, “Entertain me!” Martin explains that social media has three core values: entertainment, attention, identity. As a rule, the most *entertaining* content gets the most *attention*, and how much attention one’s content receives becomes an important part of one’s *identity*. If you can *entertain*, whether by being funny, successful, beautiful, interesting, or by picking a fight with someone, then you will attract a crowd, and for many users, drawing attention is deemed more important than manifesting the fruits of the Spirit (p. 17).

Humans have always valued entertainment, but one hundred years ago, the average person would have had little time to be entertained as he labored from sun-up to sun-down and had little interaction with other people outside of his field, factory, or hometown. Now, through the ever-evolving vehicles of entertainment, we have come to realize that we have a very strong desire for entertainment, and we prioritize it as a fundamental aspect of our existence. The Blackberry that was a wonder of its day and used by many businessmen for *work* purposes was replaced by a smartphone with a new and unlimited *entertainment* capacity that can even make us all entertainers and performers (pp. 27-29). Now, we simply *need* to be amused with internet content, for it makes the time pass so pleasantly.

Whether we like it or not, the driving force behind the smartphone and social media is entertainment, entertainment, entertainment. The brilliant minds that design social media platforms engineer their algorithms to prioritize content in our feeds that they believe, based on our previous actions, will make us feel good, or at

least keep our attention so that we stay on that platform as long as possible (pp. 45-46, 72). This creates a snowball effect, and because we cannot achieve the same satisfaction with the same dosage, we need progressively more. The impulse “Entertain me!” grows.

Consequently, instead of talking to each other in the restaurant or taking a moment to observe our surroundings from the park bench, bus seat, or waiting room, we go to our phone with an impulse that nothing else can satisfy. Children rise from their beds with an insatiable desire to be entertained and go straight to the nearest screen. If they cannot gain access, they mindlessly walk in circles or lie down on the floor murmuring as if life is not worth living any longer. And then as the evening draws to a close, how many people go to bed with their smartphone, and lie there scrolling through entertaining content until their eyelids are too heavy to pay attention? Entertain me!

My online world is my real world!

Another real danger of our use of social media is that it can deceive us into thinking that our online world is our real world (p. 44). We like the online community because in that world so many “like” what we do, “smile” at our pictures, and “heart” our posted opinions. Instant affirmation feels good—very good—and we



crave more. Also, in the online world we can present a distorted version of reality with digitally enhanced photos of ourselves that eliminate all our blemishes and imperfections. That, too, can feel good, very good. Then the more we are on social media and see all the success, beauty, and accomplishments of others (or at least the image thereof)—and we know our offline story cannot match their life’s story—perhaps we go all in and create an artificial identity online to keep up.

Or, it goes the other way and we expose to the online community our struggles. Martin relates a story of a woman who posted a message to social media in-

¹ Like Martin, when I discuss the use of social media, I will group all people together and use the first-person plural pronouns, “we” and “us,” or to be particularly pointed, I will even use the singular, “I” and “me.” If I intend to limit my remarks to us as Christians, I will specify that.

forming everyone that she was having a terribly difficult week. Someone saw this as the woman's cry for help, called the woman's church to ask for someone to follow up with her to see what could be done to help encourage her. Someone did, and the woman was offended and responded: "I posted asking for encouragement from my *online* community, not my *offline* community" (pp. 43-44). The woman was not looking for any real-world, face-to-face help from members of the church as the body of Christ, she only wanted to voice her sorrows to her network of friends on social media and gain *their* empathy. Her online world was her real world.

Or, if we make our online world our real world by losing ourselves for hours each day in information and entertainment, then it makes the real world seem burdensome. Cuddling with a child or completing an act of service for the church becomes a chore (p. 74). The child loses. And so do others as we withdraw from life in the church where we are called to serve God, witness of the gospel, have meaningful relationships, and serve others. And with our disordered priorities, we ourselves lose, for our Lord taught it is better to give than to receive.

If we divide our life between online and offline worlds, do the same values and principles apply to both worlds? The doctrine of the "communion of the saints" requires that I readily and cheerfully employ my gifts for the advantage and salvation of other members of the church (Heidelberg Catechism, LD 21, Q&A 55). Does that apply on every social media platform? We are called to be witnesses of Christ for the gathering in of others. Does that apply to everything I post or like on the Internet? God commands us to be chaste in the single life or in holy wedlock, but is it acceptable for a married man to strike up a romantic conversation with another woman in his online world? Dividing his life into two worlds, he can assume a new identity and new standards of morality in his online world, and it does not seem to violate his conscience. Is there a firewall between the online world and the real world so that God's rules do not apply online?

Are we living a real, authentic, godly life in the here and now, or does this life consist of little more than constant selfies, pictures, and videos that are immediately posted to social media platforms so that we can vicariously live our life through that uploaded content and people's responses to it? There are not two worlds, but one. There are not two laws, but one. Love God and your neighbor as yourself, always and everywhere.

I'm drawn to conflict!

Martin repeatedly makes the point that social media is not a neutral tool like any other medium throughout

history (pp. 112-114). What it takes for social media to be successful is diametrically opposed to human flourishing because those who design and engineer social media platforms know that the best way to keep people on social media is to keep them fighting with one another. They develop their algorithms to exploit the proud sinner's vile attraction to divisiveness. What content keeps people engaged, clicking, tapping, commenting, and sharing? Conflict. Conflict over political issues, ideological differences, religion debates, or petty locker-room spats. In a recent book, Paul Tripp unpacks his thesis that human communication has gone through a seismic change with the development of social media, and by means of that legitimate tool, a toxic culture of reactivity has been normalized so that online responses (to this, that, and the other thing) are driven by emotions, anger, disrespect, self-righteousness, vengeance, individualism, love of controversy, and tribalism (we form our own little tribe of people who think just like us and we dismiss everyone else).²

In this vein of conflict, Martin laments how the social Internet has given rise to what he calls "discernment bloggers" (p. 84). A discernment blogger is someone who creates "Christian content" (Martin uses the term: "hateful screed") on his blog/page/channel by criticizing the theology and practices of churches and ministers with whom he disagrees (pp. 84-85). What is worse, people who are severely lacking in judgment pay attention to this "evangelical tabloidism" and "circus in which the clowns hold all the microphones" (p. 85). "Indeed," says Martin, "there seems to be some sort of belief that if someone makes an accusation online—of bad theology, ministry malpractice, etc.—that there is a burden of proof on the accused to defend themselves against the accusation of the 'discernment' blogger(s) who levied the charge" (p. 85).

Becoming a "discernment blogger" in the internet age is not difficult. Anyone can create his own page or channel without any gatekeepers, fancy himself an authority on some subject, and start spouting off (p. 141). Talent, money, established expertise, or connections are unnecessary. One of the primary ways social media users are provided with content is through a share or retweet function that causes content to spread at lightning speed (for example, Facebook/Meta's "Share" button). Research has shown that misinformation, because it is novel and sensational, is 70% more likely to be shared than true stories. And according to "Brandolini's Law," an internet term, it takes exponentially more

2 Paul David Tripp, *Reactivity: How the Gospel Transforms Our Actions and Reactions* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022).

energy to refute false information on the Internet than it does to create and perpetuate it (p. 88-89). Therefore, the work of a discernment blogger in spreading misinformation about people is simple. Post it and let a social media mob take it to the earth's remotest ends.

How can this be? Why do these people successfully draw an audience? Because deep in the heart of every sinner is a love for and fascination with conflict, and social media platforms are designed with algorithms that reward conflict. Martin writes,

Social media is designed by sinful humans and used by sinful humans. In our sin, we are attracted to conflict. At the root of creating conflict is a desire to exhibit strength and pride. The primary currency of social media is attention, and you accrue the most attention when you have an adversarial posture, when you put up a front of strength and pride. Notifications are the rewards we earn when our content gets attention or engagement, and these notifications are what create the steady flow of dopamine in our brains, the chemical that makes us feel good and continue to want to use social media (p. 102).

Three questions for all users

If we are committed to Christian intentionality, then we should examine ourselves in light of three questions derived from statements made by the inspired apostle Paul to the saints living in the throes of immorality in Corinth.

Is it profitable for me? I Corinthians 6:12, “All things

are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient [profitable]....” Does my use of social media cause me to advance in greater knowledge of God, greater love for the gospel, greater hope for heaven, greater faith in the Scriptures, greater faithfulness to the church, and greater godliness of life? Think this through in terms of your own impulse for entertainment or conflict.

Does it dominate me? I Corinthians 6:12, “...all things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any.” Am I a slave to bad social media habits or to an online world? Am I constantly drawn to online “discussions” that put me in a bad spot mentally, distract me from the work God called me to do, sap my spiritual energy, and make me easily irritable so that the slightest matter can lead me to blow up on my family? Yet I keep going back?

Does it edify others? I Corinthians 10:23, “All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but all things edify not.” Does my use of social media—what I post or share, and the time I spend—build up others so that they are more useful in the kingdom of heaven?

Hallelujah for the gospel of the blood and Spirit of the Savior who was and is intentionally committed to God's dear children. It is time to pray to the Father in repentance, for forgiveness, and for the grace of Christian intentionality so that our use of social media is profitable, controlled, and edifying.

Ask the same three questions tomorrow.



A word fitly spoken

Rev. Justin Smidstra, pastor of First PRC in Holland, Michigan

Device

All sorts of devices pass through our hands and before our eyes each day. The way the world works nowadays, it can be hard to imagine things otherwise. Many jobs involve various devices, or revolve around developing them. The smartphone has become man's constant companion, the Internet his bank of knowledge, the screen the first place to lay his eyes in a spare moment.

The Bible has much to say about devices. True, many of the things we call devices were not around when the Bible was written. But what the Bible says is full of in-

struction for us today. We can glean a few lessons by looking at the word *device* in Scripture. In II Corinthians 2:11 Paul makes a comment about the Christian's awareness of the Devil's operations in the world: “for we are not ignorant of his devices.” This ought to give us pause and make us think.

We typically use the word *device* to refer to a useful physical invention. The Bible often uses the word to describe a plan, plot, or scheme with intelligence and intent behind it—often malicious ones. A device is something skillfully contrived and often deceitfully em-

ployed to ensnare or harm another person for the gain of the one who devised it. There is no greater deviser of wicked devices than the Devil himself, the father of lies, the murderer in the beginning, whose devices deceived and ensnared our first parents, bringing ruin to our race. Sinful man fashions his own gods “graven by art and man’s device” (Acts 17:29), exchanging the glory of the incorruptible God into an image (Rom. 1:23). Man’s heart is both an idol factory and a foundry of deceitful devices. By nature man bears the image of the father of lies, unless, by grace, he is conformed to the image of Christ. David recounts in Psalm 21:11 how God’s enemies have ceaselessly “intended evil against thee” and “imagined a mischievous device.” Job answered one of his miserable comforters “I know your thoughts, and the devices which ye wrongfully imagine against me” (Job 21:27). With tears Esther besought Ahasuerus to “put away the mischief of Haman the Agagite, and his device that he had devised against the Jews” (Esther 8:3). Behind Haman’s wicked device was Satan’s own device deployed to destroy the line of Christ. The persecuted Jeremiah lamented, “their device [is] against me all the day” (Lam. 3:63). Fallen man’s nature is that he “deviseth wicked devices to destroy the poor with lying words, even when the needy speaketh right” (Is. 32:7). He employs “wicked tricks and devices” to exploit his neighbor, “whether by force or appearance of right” (Heidelberg Catechism, LD 42 Q&A 110). Apart from grace, we must all confess “we will walk after our own devices, and we will every one do the imagination of his evil heart” (Jer. 18:12).

But for the believing child of God, there is comfort and there is hope. God thwarts the devices of Satan and every weapon formed against His people. There are “many devices in a man’s heart,” but “the counsel of the LORD, that shall stand” (Prov. 19:21). The Lord “disappointeth the devices of the crafty, so that their hands cannot perform their enterprise” (Job 5:12). Jehovah brings “the counsel of the heathen to nought: he maketh the devices of the people of none effect” (Ps. 33:1).

Jehovah’s counsel stands! His counsel concerning our redemption in Christ! No scheme of man or device of Satan or even of our own hearts can pluck us from

His hands. God has disappointed the devices of the subtle serpent, the old dragon, through Jesus Christ, His cross, and His empty tomb. God in His justice causes the wicked to “be taken in the devices that they have imagined” (Ps. 10:2).

As Haman’s device returned “upon his own head” (Esther 9:25), so the serpent’s own device resulted in the crushing of his own head. For as Satan bruised Messiah’s heel upon the cross, pouring out his venomous hatred against the Christ, it was then, in giving Himself to death, that Christ vanquished the foe, and sprung our souls from the snare (Ps. 124:6-7). Christ was taken and by wicked hands crucified and slain (Acts 2:23), yet it was our salvation, and the utter undoing of every device deployed against us.

“We are more than conquerors through him that loved us” (Rom. 8:37)!

Take heart people of God! Every wicked device the just God will in due time unravel. “Rest in the LORD, and wait patiently for him: fret not thyself because of him who prospereth in his way, because of the man who bringeth wicked devices to pass” (Ps. 37:7) The wicked shall not truly prosper. For God declares they shall “eat of the fruit of their own way, and be filled with their own devices,” and “a man of wicked devices

will He condemn” (Prov. 12:2). “A man of wicked devices is hated” (Prov. 14:17).

But let us be watchful! “For we are not ignorant of his devices” (II Cor. 2:11). Or are we ignorant? Naive sometimes? The many digital devices we use day by day are not evil in themselves. But do we use them wisely? Or do we use our devices in ways that make us easy prey for Satan’s devices?

May this awareness of Satan’s devices lead us to sanctified vigilance in our use of every device that passes through our hands and before our eyes each day, that it be not a snare but a servant, to Christ’s greater glory.

Jehovah’s counsel stands! His counsel concerning our redemption in Christ! No scheme of man or device of Satan or even of our own hearts can pluck us from His hands. God has disappointed the devices of the subtle serpent, the old dragon, through Jesus Christ, His cross, and His empty tomb. God in His justice causes the wicked to “be taken in the devices that they have imagined” (Ps. 10:2).



Search the Scriptures: Bible characters

Mr. Kyle Bruinooge teacher of New Testament history at Covenant Christian High School in Walker, Michigan and an elder in Faith PRC in Jenison, Michigan

The forgiveness of Philemon

Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy our brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellowlabourer, and to our beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellowsoldier, and to the church in thy house: Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Philemon 1:1-3

In the last article on Onesimus, we examined the narrative of Philemon from the perspective of the runaway slave. We saw the beautiful evidence of God's eternal love in bringing Onesimus into contact with the gospel, assuring him through the labors and letters of Paul that his sins were forgiven in Christ, and that he needed to seek Philemon and be restored.¹

Now we examine the narrative from the master's perspective. Philemon, a Gentile from Colossae, 100 miles from the coastal city of Ephesus, was probably converted through Paul's expansive labors in Ephesus on his third missionary journey (Acts 19:10; Phile. 19). As a successful businessman, proven through his ownership of slaves, Philemon traveled the trade route that connected Ephesus to Colossae's northern neighbors, Laodicea and Hierapolis. Ephesus would have been Philemon's contact point with Paul, for Paul himself had not traveled to Colossae on any of his journeys (Col. 2:1).²

The other possibility for his conversion is through Epaphras, the founder of the Colossian church, who was converted through Paul in Ephesus. This faithful pastor brought the gospel from Ephesus to his native Colossae (Col. 1:7; 4:12).³

In Philemon 2, Paul greets Philemon, his wife Apphia, son Archippus, and the "church in thy house," a striking indication that Philemon's home was used for many gatherings, as well as Sabbath worship. In the early church, this practice of gathering in homes was common, even necessary (Acts 16:15; I Cor. 16:19; Rom. 16:5, 23; Col. 4:15).

Philemon was greeted as a "fellowlaborer," which reveals he had a passion for the truth of Jesus Christ. He was not merely a wealthy man in town who could be persuaded by the gospel so that his large home could be an asset to the new Christian community. Rather, he became a strong witness of the good news of the crucified, risen, and ascended Jesus Christ. Philemon *worked* diligently to illuminate this Christ in the surrounding areas of darkness.

The context of Paul's letter to Philemon is Paul's beseeching for the runaway slave Onesimus (Phile. 10). Because the institution of slavery drove the Roman economy, runaway slaves were often branded and beaten, never to run away again. Often writers and bloggers on the New Testament choose to create purposes for Paul's letter that are simply not evident. There are claims that Paul was "making a statement on slavery" with his letter to Philemon, with an ultimate purpose of demanding freedom for Onesimus, voicing a cry of injustice at the institution in place. After all, Paul is writing from Rome as a prisoner himself, the result of a different injustice (Acts 25:6-12; Phile. 10).

These claims are false.

Not false is the claim that Paul's imprisonment was an injustice, for it certainly was! Not false is the claim that masters mistreated their slaves and violated all the principles laid out in Scripture. Rather, the false claim is that the focus of Paul's letter to Philemon is about the injustice of slavery. On the contrary, Paul's letter to Philemon had a simple twofold purpose: to relate the good news of the conversion of Onesimus (Phile. 11, 13,

sian-Philemon context, see "The Story of Epaphras," *Standard Bearer*, vol. 96, no. 5 (December 1, 2019), 109-111.

1 See "The Planned Departure of Onesimus," *Standard Bearer*, vol. 100, no. 2 (October 15, 2023), 33-35.

2 Politically speaking, Colossae was the least significant city to which Paul wrote a letter; yet, Paul shows a deep love and interest for this small Christian community. Interestingly, Colossae's low status in the Roman world is supported by the fact that there have been no major attempts to excavate the 500-acre area. However, recently, the Turkish government approved archeological efforts to be carried out through Pamukkale University. Preliminary site work began in 2021 and they hope to begin digging this year.

3 For further study on Epaphras and his place within the Colos-

16) and to seek spiritual restoration between Onesimus and Philemon, two brothers in Christ (Phile. 15, 17, 18).

Note that Paul had plenty of opportunity in writing half of the New Testament to speak out against slavery. In the first century, the number of slaves was estimated conservatively to be 6 million out of a total population of 60 million in the Roman Empire (10 percent), and in Italy alone, there were 1 to 1.5 million slaves out of a total population of 5 to 6 million (20-30 percent).⁴ With these significant numbers in the backdrop, Paul chose instead to lay out the principles for godliness for men and women in these culturally inevitable relationships (Eph. 6:5-9; Col. 3:22-4:1).

Additionally, in sending Onesimus back to his master, Paul was recognizing the authority of the master over his slave (regardless of his personal viewpoints), further evidence of his submission to Roman law. It would be futile to reach into the letter to Philemon and attempt to pull out evidence of early attitudes of Christians towards slavery.⁵

All this being said, the reader must not draw a distorted conclusion from this that serious violations of mankind within the institution of slavery in history may be minimized, or that Christians are authorized to approve, or even promote slavery in concept as long as certain principles are followed. Certainly not. Rather, the purpose here is to focus on Paul's inspired writing within these contexts to proclaim the *gospel* of Jesus Christ, a gospel with the exclusive power to bridge the divide between men and women, Jew and Gentile, and between slave and master (I Cor. 12:13; Eph. 6:8).

Therefore, for Philemon, the governing principle is that he must "forbear threatening, knowing that [his] Master also is in heaven" (Eph. 6:9). Additionally, as a slave-owner, Philemon must "give unto [his] servants that which is just and equal; knowing that [he] also [has] a Master in heaven" (Col. 4:1). Notice the consistent thread in both words to Philemon: *know that your Master is in heaven*. The ascended Christ, sitting at the right hand of God, pours out His Spirit in rich abundance, governing all relationships in the church, *including* between a master and his slave within the context of the Roman empire in the first century.

Additionally, the relationship itself between Paul and Philemon also refutes those false claims of Paul's purposes for the letter to Philemon as indicated above.

Paul calls Philemon his "dearly beloved" and "fellowlaborer," indicating a close bond between Paul and Philemon. In this light, Paul would not have taken advantage of his close Christian friendships with Philemon and Onesimus, including the conflict between them, to take a stand against the institute of slavery in the Roman empire.⁶ For in an attempt to be an abolitionist, the cause of the gospel would have been adversely affected.

Strangely, Paul is sometimes criticized for not directly condemning the institution of slavery in his letter to Philemon (or Ephesians and Colossians). If true, then any criticism must be directed to the Holy Spirit. No one would dare launch such a charge.

But Paul does condemn slavery. He does! The pure gospel message of grace that pours out of his inspired writings turns the institution of slavery upside-down! Paul's instruction in Ephesians and Colossians regarding the master-slave relationship was so radical for the culture of Rome. Similarly, his radical message about love and submission for husbands and wives was on equal footing in attacking the social mores of the Roman era (Eph. 5:22-29; Col. 3:18-19).

These truths and principles were scandalous. A master being just and fair? A husband loving his wife as Christ loves His church? Remember, though, that the truth of the cross itself is scandalous. The eternal Son of God coming into time in utter humility to atone for the sins of His people? Counter-intuitive to all man-centered philosophies in seeking meaning and significance in this world since the dawn of time.

But while Paul writes in I Corinthians 7:21, "Art thou called being a servant [slave]? Care not for it: but if thou mayest be made free, use it rather," he understood that the power of the gospel is greater than any social message.

Paul's elegant message in his letter to Philemon is neither extreme: indifference to the institution of slavery nor an emancipation proclamation. Rather, his praiseworthy report of Onesimus' conversion and his desire to see master and slave reconciled is only meaningful in relation to the gospel message of eternal love through Jesus Christ.

While the central message of the letter to Philemon stands clear, the questions that naturally arise regarding Philemon's treatment of Onesimus upon his return are twofold. Did he forgive Onesimus? Did he break the chains of Onesimus and declare him a free man?

Assuredly, Philemon forgave Onesimus, for he knew his own forgiveness in Christ. Philemon knew his former life as a pagan. He knew his past idolatry and self-seeking.

4 Walter Scheidel, "Quantifying the Sources of Slaves in the Early Roman Empire," *Journal on Roman Studies*, vol. 87, 1997, 156-169.

5 Jennifer A. Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity*, (Oxford University Press 2002), 98.

6 Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity*.

But he now knew that the gospel was for *him*. He knew there was forgiveness at the cross. Therefore, upon honest self-reflection, he knew his Master in heaven was also the Master of Onesimus; therefore, if Onesimus was forgiven in Christ, then he must forgive Onesimus. The Master, Jesus Christ, conquered *both* of their hearts, implanting new life in each of them by the power of His grace!

But after this certain forgiveness and reconciliation, did Philemon free Onesimus? An interpretation of Philemon 21 could support this: “Having confidence in thy obedience I wrote unto thee, *knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say*.” The latter part of that verse could suggest that Paul expected Philemon to free Onesimus, to go above and beyond spiritual reconciliation to making Onesimus a free man. Further supporting evidence for Onesimus’ freedom is Christian tradition that Onesimus was made bishop of Berea in Macedonia later in the first century.⁷

On the other hand, Philemon could “do more” than Paul requested by giving Onesimus opportunity for mission work; by treating *all* of his slaves in the same manner; or by urging all other slave-owners to follow his example in holding to the principles laid out by the apostle Paul.⁸ Additionally, the verse could even mean that Paul is confident that Philemon’s ability to forgive and restore Onesimus would be more than Paul could even envision, considering the serious consequences of

slaves running away from masters. Therefore, it would be erroneous to read Philemon 21 with an exclusive interpretation that Philemon freed Onesimus.

Regardless, the *essence* of Philemon is Paul seeking a restored relationship between two Christians, not transforming social status. Paul himself desires to see that new relationship in person, for he writes to Philemon, “But withal prepare me also a lodging: for I trust that through your prayers I shall be given unto you” (Phile. 22). Paul expresses a desire to visit Colossae for the very first time after sending them a letter, to see his good friend Philemon in a restored relationship with Onesimus. We cannot be certain whether that desire became reality, but what a reunion among Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus that would be!

For God’s people today, an important lesson within the context of slavery and Paul’s letter to Philemon is to know that *our* Master is Jesus Christ, and that He reigns in heaven at the Father’s right hand. When relationships are bruised, even shattered, only the Master, the Great Physician, can heal. If Paul can transitively seek restoration between Philemon and Onesimus through the lens of his Christian brotherhood with each of them, then the church today, as difficult and painful as it can be, must strive for the same restoration when possible.

We are *all* brothers and sisters in Christ, regardless of our sinfulness, gender, race, socio-economic status, and even levels of spiritual gifts.

One church. One body. Elected as one and reconciled as one to Jesus Christ. And finally, in perfect fellowship in eternal glory, we will each one see with our own eyes the perfect restoration of each son and daughter—to one another—and to the King and Master Jesus Christ.

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

8 William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Philipians, Colossians and Philemon*, (Baker Book House: Grand Rapids, MI, 1964), 224.



Taking heed to the doctrine

Rev. Martyn McGeown, pastor of Providence PRC in Hudsonville, Michigan

The *ordo salutis* (5)

Saving faith: Given to believe

For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake.

Philippians 1:29

Introduction

In the *ordo salutis*, the logical sequence in which the Holy Spirit applies the benefits of salvation decreed

by God in election and purchased by Christ on the cross, the fourth step after regeneration, calling, and conversion is *saving faith*. Faith is both the activity of the regenerated, called, converted sinner, and the gift of God. We believe (our activity) because it was given to us to believe (God’s gift, cf. Phil. 1:29 above).

One of the most beautiful definitions of faith is found in the Heidelberg Catechism. In LD 7 the Catechism

asks, “What is true faith?” The answer defines what faith is: “It is not only a certain knowledge...but also an assured confidence” (Q&A 21). Faith includes two activities: knowledge, the activity of knowing God; and confidence, the activity of trusting God.

The activity of knowing

Faith is knowledge of God, as He is revealed in Scripture and especially in Christ by the gospel. When we say that we believe or that we have faith, we contemplate an object, that is, true faith concerns God, Jesus Christ, and the works of God revealed in Scripture. God has revealed that He is the Creator; we believe that. God has revealed that He has a Son, Jesus Christ, the Savior; we believe that. God has revealed that His Son became incarnate, was crucified, and rose from the dead; we believe that. In short, we believe the history, the doctrine, and the promises of God’s Word; and centrally, the object of faith is our Lord Jesus Christ set forth in the gospel.

If faith is knowledge, then we know what faith is *not*.

Faith is not ignorance. Ignorance is the lack of knowledge, for if a man is ignorant, he does not know. Certain unbelievers call themselves agnostics. An agnostic does not know; he says, “I do not know whether God exists or not.” An agnostic, therefore, does not have faith. The believer is not an agnostic. He does not say, “I do not know if God is the Creator.” The believer *knows*. He does not say, “I do not know if Jesus is the Son of God.” The believer *knows*. He does not say, “I do not know if Jesus rose again from the dead.” The believer *knows*. Knowledge differs from implicit faith, which is unthinking trust in spiritual authority. If one says, “I believe whatever my church says, or whatever my favorite minister or theologian says,” even though he has never really understood it, you could well suspect him of having implicit faith. A believer is not satisfied with implicit faith; he desires to grow in his understanding. He might not be able to articulate the truth as clearly as he would like, but he hungers to know more.

Faith is not mere intellectual assent to the facts of the Bible. There are people who can relate many facts about the Bible, but they themselves do not hold them for truth: they have not embraced them with the mind, heart, and will. That is a false kind of faith called “historical faith.” Even the devils have such historical faith, but they do not embrace the truth.

Faith is not doubt. The doubter says, “I am not sure.” Doubt is sin, and misery. Believers do not have perfect faith; therefore, we have doubts. Every believer struggles to one degree or another with doubts. Such doubts are not good, but the presence of doubts does not make us unbelievers. “The Scripture moreover testifies that believers

in this life have to struggle with various carnal doubts” (Canons V, 11). Doubts are “carnal,” that is, they are *of the flesh*. Faith is not of the flesh, but is a gift of the Spirit.

Faith is not a merely emotional response to the truth. Jesus speaks of this in the parable of the sower: “But he that received the seed into stony places, the same is he that heareth the word *and with joy receiveth it*” (Matt. 13:20). Such a person is excited about the gospel, but his excitement does not last, especially when persecution comes; then he falls away. One with faith is not merely excited emotionally; he holds God’s Word for truth, it deeply affects his heart and life, and he does not let go of the truth. When persecution comes, he says, “I believe and I will not be shaken.” Hebrews 10:38-39 states, “Now the just shall live by faith, but if any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him. But we are not of them who draw back unto perdition, but of them that believe to the saving of the soul.” Those who draw back from their profession of faith perish, but those who by God’s grace believe obtain the salvation of their souls.

The activity of trusting

Faith is “an assured confidence” (A. 21), which is a description of trusting. The Reformed confessions emphasize the confidence of faith. The Heidelberg Catechism says about God: “On whom I rely so entirely that I have no doubt” (A. 26) and “We place our firm trust in our faithful God and Father” (A. 28). The Belgic Confession teaches about faith: “An upright faith which embraces Jesus Christ with all His merits, appropriates Him, and seeks nothing more besides Him” (Art. 22). You embrace someone whom you trust; you appropriate (take something to yourself) something that you trust; you seek something or someone that you trust. Faith embraces, appropriates, and seeks Jesus Christ alone.

Trust or confidence is also the focus of Hebrews 11:1, where Scripture comes very close to defining faith: “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” The word “substance” has the idea of a solid basis, or a strong foundation; it means steadfastness of mind or confidence. Faith is the confidence of things hoped for: faith is our confidence that the things hoped for, or the things promised, are true and that they are ours.

That explains the actions of the believers in Hebrews 11. God had made promises to them of future salvation, and they believed those promises, they saw those promises afar off, and they embraced those promises. Abel had the promise of the Seed of the woman; faith was Abel’s confidence concerning such things. Noah had the promise of deliverance in the coming flood; faith was Noah’s confidence concerning such things. Abraham had the promise of a seed through which all the families of the earth should

be blessed; faith was Abraham's confidence concerning such things. We have the promise of everlasting life in Jesus Christ; faith is our confidence concerning such things.

Faith is also the evidence of things not seen. Substance is confidence, while evidence is conviction. Faith is the believer's unshakable conviction about things that are unseen, that is, things that God has promised. We do not see God, but we are convinced that He is the true and living God; we do not see Christ, but we are convinced that He is the Son of God; we do not see salvation, but we are convinced that we possess and enjoy salvation.

Hebrews 11 is also full of examples of believers who were convinced of the truth of things not seen. Abel was convinced that the Seed of the woman would crush the head of the serpent, although he did not see Him; Noah was convinced that God would send a flood, although he had never seen a flood; and Abraham was convinced that God would make him the father of many nations, although he and his wife were too old to have children.

Moreover, faith is our confidence and conviction that the promises of God apply *also to us*, that is, personal assurance. It is one thing to believe that God is the Creator, but it is another to trust in Him as our Father and to say "My help (yes, *my* help) cometh from the LORD which made heaven and earth" (Ps. 121:2). It is one thing to believe that Jesus the Son of God is the Savior, but it is another to trust Him as our Savior and to say, "The life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me (yes, *me*), and gave himself for me (yes, *me*)" (Gal. 2:20).

That, too, is the emphasis of the Catechism. "By His Holy Spirit He assures me of eternal life" (A. 1). "Not only to others, but *to me also*, remission of sin, everlasting righteousness, and salvation, are freely given of grace, only for the sake of Christ's merits" (A. 21).

The gift of faith

Faith is a gift of God's grace. We read in Philippians 1:29, "For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake." Significant in that verse are the words "it is given." That gift is "in the behalf of Christ" or "for Christ's sake." "In the behalf of Christ" is theological shorthand for the cross of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ the Son of God suffered on the cross, died, was buried, and rose again in order to purchase for us the gift of faith. When the Spirit works faith in us, we believe. It is a privilege to believe and it is a privilege to suffer as a consequence of believing. Suffering for Christ follows faith in Him as a second gift.

The creeds are replete with references to faith as the gift of God. In Heidelberg Catechism A. 21 we read that "the Holy Ghost works by the gospel in my heart." In

Q&A 65 the Catechism asks, "Whence doth this faith proceed?" and answers, "From the Holy Ghost who works faith in our hearts by the preaching of the gospel." In A. 74 we read that the Holy Spirit, "the author of faith," is promised to [the elect] children of believers.

"The Holy Ghost *kindleth* in our hearts an upright faith" (Belgic Confession, Art. 22). Our hearts are cold and lifeless until the Spirit kindles faith within us. "Election is the fountain of every saving good from which proceed faith, holiness, and the other gifts of salvation, and finally eternal life itself" (Canons I, 9). "But as many as truly believe...are indebted for this benefit solely to the grace of God" (Canons II, 7). "[God bestows] on [the elect] alone the gift of justifying faith.... It was the will of God that Christ by the blood of the cross...should confer upon [the elect] faith, which together with all the other saving gifts of the Holy Spirit, He purchased for them" (Canons II, 8). "Faith is...in reality conferred, breathed, and infused into [man].... He who works in man both to will and to do, and indeed all things in all, produces both the will to believe and the act of believing also" (Canons III/IV, 14).

Faith also as faculty

Faith is the gift of God also with respect to its faculty, which is the ability to believe. Perhaps the easiest way to distinguish faculty from activity is to compare it to sight. A man with the faculty of sight is able to see, whereas a blind man possesses no faculty of sight, with the result that he cannot see. A man with the faculty of sight might close his eyes, so that he does not see, but he still has the ability to see. A blind man, whether he opens or closes his eyes, cannot see because he lacks the faculty of sight. The unbeliever is spiritually blind: he cannot see. Only the miracle of regeneration, by which spiritual eyes are opened, will cause an unbeliever to believe. As believers, we always have the faculty of faith, but we do not always actively believe. There are times when our faith is weak: perhaps, we struggle to believe God's faithfulness in a difficult trial; perhaps we struggle to believe a particular truth because it is offensive to our flesh; or perhaps our sins are such that we interrupt the exercise of faith (Canons V, 5).

Sometimes the gift of faith or the faculty of faith is called the bond of faith, but neither the Bible nor the confessions explicitly call faith a bond. That we are united to Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit is certainly a biblical truth, but in the Bible and in the confessions the emphasis is on faith as the activity of believing. The Catechism defines faith not as a bond, and certainly not as a passive, lifeless bond, but as an activity: "What *is* true faith?...It *is* not only a certain knowledge...but

also an assured confidence” (Q&A 21). Therefore, it is more accurate to call the bond with Christ “the mystical union,” and to call “faith in Christ,” which is the activity of believing, the fruit of that union.

But does not the Catechism in LD 7 speak of being “ingrafted” into Christ by faith? It does, but the German word *einleiben* (ingraft) does not refer to, or even imply, a passive, subconscious bond—we are ingrafted into Christ by believing in Him; that is our conscious connection to Him. The German verb translated “ingrafted,” *eingeleibt*, means “made one body with” someone (the German word for body is *leib* and the verb has nothing to do with botany). Similarly, in A. 65 we read of being “implanted into Christ by a true faith” (the German is *eingepflanzt*, which has as its root the German word for plant, *pflanze*—planted into). We become members of Christ’s body or one plant with Him by believing in Him. Faith, we read in Belgic Confession, Article 35, “is the hand and mouth of our soul.” Hands and mouths in healthy people are active, unlike the sluggard who “hideth his hand in his bosom, and will not so much as bring it to his mouth again” (Prov. 19:24).

The language of the Catechism comes from Romans 6:5 (“planted together in the likeness of his death”) and Romans 11:17 (“Thou, being a wild olive tree, wert grafted in among them”). In the former passage, faith is not explicitly mentioned, while in the latter passage we read, “Thou standest by faith” (v. 20), which means that the Roman Christians stood as they believed in Jesus Christ. In John 15 Jesus describes His relationship with the disciples as a vine with its branches; in that chapter neither a graft nor faith as a bond/graft are mentioned. The emphasis is on the calling of the believer to abide in the vine by faith, that is, by believing in Him with the result that he is fruitful (John 15:5-8, etc.).

In summary, the Holy Spirit unites us to Jesus Christ in the mystical union by kindling in our hearts the mysterious gift of faith, so that we consciously receive Him. As a consequence we know, we trust, we embrace, we appropriate, we seek Him, which Jesus calls abiding in Him. The Bible and the confessions know nothing of a passive receiving of Jesus Christ. According to LD 7 we *receive* all of Christ’s benefits by a true faith, which the Catechism defines as an activity (the German word is *annehmen*, which has an active idea—it actually means “accept,” although we typically avoid that word lest it should sound like such acceptance depended on man’s freewill, which it does not). The Belgic Confession speaks of *embracing* Jesus Christ, of *appropriating* him, and of *seeking* only him (Art. 22), and by such faith we are kept in communion with Christ (Art. 22). The same Confession speaks of “relying and resting upon the obedience

of Christ crucified alone, which becomes ours when we believe in Him” (Art. 23). When the Catechism speaks specifically of justification it says: “I embrace (German: *annehmen*) such benefit with a believing heart” (A. 60); “I cannot receive (German: *annehmen*) and apply the same to myself (German: *mir zueignen*; to appropriate to myself) any other way than by faith only” (A. 61).

We cannot boast of the activity of believing because faith both in its faculty and in its activity is the gift of God. “Faith is the gift of God...it is in reality conferred, breathed, and infused into [man]” for God “produces both the will to believe and the act of believing also” (Canons III/IV, 14). At the same time, “man is himself rightly said to believe and repent by virtue of that grace received” (Canons III/IV, 12).

Salvation, including faith, is entirely God’s gift.

The role of faith in salvation

Finally, faith is not a condition, that is, an activity of ours on which our salvation *depends*. God does not save us on condition that we believe; God saves us by working faith in us, so that we believe. When Paul said, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house” (Acts 16:31), he did not make faith a condition. He simply expressed the divine order: first, a sinner believes by the grace of God, who gives him faith as a gift; then, he is saved or comes into the possession and enjoyment of his salvation.

Faith is an activity of the regenerated, called, converted sinner, but it is not a work. The Bible contrasts faith with works, not because faith is not an activity, but because the activity of faith is very different from the activity of works. Quite simply, when we do good works, we are giving God something. We are responding to God in gratitude for what He has given us in Jesus Christ: “that so we may testify by the whole of our conduct our gratitude to God for His blessings” (A. 86). When we believe, we give God nothing, but we receive blessings from God. Working is the activity of giving; believing is the activity of receiving.

The role of faith in our salvation, then, is simply this: faith is the instrument, the God-worked instrument, by which we consciously receive the benefits of Jesus Christ. “Faith is only an instrument by which we embrace Jesus Christ our righteousness...faith is an instrument that keeps us in communion with Him in all His benefits” (Belgic Confession, Art. 22). We hold for truth what God has revealed; we trust in Jesus Christ; we embrace Him; and we appropriate Him. Through that instrument, which is God’s gift to us, we consciously receive the benefits and blessings of salvation.

By faith alone. Not by works, so that we may never boast.



Pillar and ground of truth

Prof. Douglas Kuiper, professor of Church History and New Testament in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary and member of Trinity PRC in Hudsonville, Michigan

What the layman should know about textual criticism: The right method

Previous article in this series: January 15, 2024, p. 206.

In the last article we surveyed the history of textual criticism (see footnote for definition).¹ We learned that some textual critics have a high view of Scripture, while others have a low view. Their view of Scripture affects why and how they do the work of textual criticism. We also learned that within the last 150 years some textual critics divided all Greek manuscripts into four families, and considered some families to be more reliable than others. For instance, if 100 manuscripts contained one reading and two contained another, but if the two were in a “more reliable” family, many textual critics would adopt the reading of the two.

This article explains the method taught in the PRC Seminary regarding how to decide which textual reading is probably authentic, when two or more manuscripts have different readings.

The tools for the method

The *autographa* are the original documents that the apostles and other Scripture writers actually wrote. The letter that the church in Rome received from Paul, for instance, was an autographa. We no longer have these originals, but numerous copies exist.

To decide what the autographa read, textual critics examine all the available evidences (witnesses) to the New Testament Scriptures. These witnesses fall into four categories. The first consists of Greek manuscripts, of which nearly 6,000 copies exist today. No two are exactly identical. About 200 contain all or most of the New Testament. Some contain an entire book or more; others contain only a few verses. All these Greek manuscripts date from the 300s to 1500s. This category of witnesses is primary, because these are copies, or copies of copies, of the originals.

The second group of witnesses are early Bible versions in different languages. These languages are primarily Latin, Syriac, and Coptic, each with various dialects. The Latin versions were found in Europe, the Syriac in Asia Minor and western Asia, and the Coptic in Egypt. About 8,000 copies of the Latin Vulgate version are available to us, and about 1,000 copies of versions in other languages.

These are of limited value to the textual critic. A translation cannot tell us which word the Holy Spirit used in the autographa, or in which order some words appeared. On the other hand, if the question is whether a verse or phrase was in the autographa, to find that verse or phrase translated in an early Bible translation suggests that it likely was in the autographa.

Lectionaries are the third category. A lectionary is a small book containing various verses or several Bible chapters that were used for reading in the church service. Because copying the entire Bible was time consuming, those passages that would be read more often (Jesus’ birth, suffering, death, and resurrection, for example) were more frequently copied. Lectionaries that are in the Greek language are helpful, for at some point they were copied directly out of a Greek manuscript. But the value of lectionaries is limited because they contain only certain parts of the Bible; furthermore, they are not always in Greek.

Excerpts from the writings of church fathers are the fourth category. These are usually copies, not originals, of the writings of the church fathers, and are almost never in Greek. As with lectionaries, these cannot solve many questions that arise in textual criticism, but they can give evidence that a verse or phrase was in the Scriptures.

The premises underlying the method

The premise underlying a *wrong* method of textual criticism is that all Greek manuscripts can be divided into four families, and those in the Neutral family (the oldest family; again, see last article) are preferred. Manuscripts are to be weighed, not counted; in *which*

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

family a manuscript is found means more than *how many* manuscripts agree with a reading. This premise and method largely ignore the three other kinds of witnesses mentioned above—Bible versions, lectionaries, and church fathers. One premise underlying the correct method, then, is that the textual critic must observe all four categories of witnesses.

Forming the foundation for the right method of textual criticism is also a doctrinal premise: God not only inspired the autographa, but also subsequently *preserved* His Word so that His church in any age and at any time has that Word. Different scholars apply this premise in different ways. I draw this conclusion at least: no newly discovered reading, the adoption of which would significantly change the meaning of a verse, can be correct. God did not hide the true meaning of all or part of His Word until the twenty-first century.

General principles governing the method

Following are *general* principles. The textual critic must also know specific principles, which assume a knowledge of the Greek language and a more specific awareness of the Greek manuscripts than I can give now. So we limit ourselves to general principles.

First, generally speaking, the *older* a Greek manuscript is, the more helpful it will be for textual criticism. This is because newer manuscripts are copies of older ones, and inadvertent mistakes get made in the copying process. No third century manuscript is an original; but in theory it will be closer to the original than a tenth-century manuscript.

“In theory” means that this basic principle is not absolute. It is possible that the reason a third-century manuscript exists in good form today is that it was seldom used because the church, already in the third century, considered it defective.

Second, more important than the age of the manuscript is its *genealogy*. Perhaps a tenth-century manuscript was copied directly from a third-century manuscript. It is probably more reliable than an eighth-century manuscript that was copied from a fifth-century manuscript that was copied from a third-century manuscript. One copying process is less likely to produce as many copyist errors as two or more copying processes. The genealogy of a manuscript is not easy to determine; but an old *reading* is as valuable as an old *manuscript*. An old reading can be found in a Bible translation, or in a faithfully copied newer Greek manuscript.

Third, a reading that is attested by manuscripts from *different geographic locations* is likely correct. If the only witness to a reading is found in manuscripts from Egypt, while churches in Syria and Europe apparently

never knew that reading, the reading is probably wrong. It could be that a scribe in Egypt made a mistake early in the copying process, and that textual error persisted in Egypt.

Yet this too is not always easy to implement: if a manuscript was located in Rome, does that mean it was written there? Not necessarily; it could have been written in Syria, and transported to Rome. For this reason, the Bible translations are beneficial: we know more readily where they were written.

Fourth, a reading is likely correct when a *majority* of manuscripts agree on that reading. Manuscripts are to be counted; majority matters. Bear in mind that in actual practice, a “majority” is often not simply a 55%, or even a 75% majority; it is usually 90% or greater.

Finally, the evidence of a manuscript is weakened when it is clear that a scribe edited the manuscript. Scribes did this at times, because they understood that mistakes could be made while copying. So, when they thought a mistake had been made, they sometimes corrected it, often by writing over or next to the letters that they thought were mistaken. Of course, it is possible that they were really fixing an error; but it is also possible that they were mistaken, and were trying to fix what was not in fact an error. To the English reader, this might sound odd; but bear in mind that most Greek manuscripts do not have corrections in them. Several prominent manuscripts that do have corrections in them have between three and eight different attempts by between three and eight different scribes! This really indicates a lack of consensus regarding what the real reading should be.

Illustration

To illustrate the point, I return to II Peter 3:10, which we noticed in our last article. In the KJV it reads, “the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up.” The ESV says, “and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.” Whether the verse should read “burned up” or “exposed” is not just a translation issue; it is a matter of asking which Greek word the Holy Spirit used.

The word translated “exposed” is really “to find, to discover.” Commentators explain it as referring to the final judgment (Christ will expose the works that are in the earth), or to the fact that Christ will declare this present creation to be useless, and therefore ready for judgment.² The point is that both options, “burned up” and “exposed,” can be explained in a sound way.

But which word did the Holy Spirit use? Let’s work

2 Simon Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Epistles of Peter and of the Epistle of Jude* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 336-337.

through it. First, from the viewpoint of Greek manuscripts, one notices that the two “earliest and best” manuscripts (to use the terms of other textual critics) contain the reading “exposed.” Several other Greek manuscripts do as well. But the reading found in the KJV is supported by the *vast majority* of manuscripts. One who understands the various methods of textual criticism sees immediately that the matter comes down to this question: do the two “earliest and best” trump the reading of the vast majority, over 90%? For us, the answer is no. For the ESV translators, the answer was apparently yes.³ But that is only one piece of the puzzle.

One church father, Origen, lends his weight to the translation “exposed.” To me this is inconclusive. No other church fathers are a witness for either reading. Neither do any lectionaries witness to either reading. That no lectionaries witness to it is not surprising, because II Peter 3 is rarely read as a stand-alone reading during a church service. Passages from the gospel accounts and more familiar passages from the epistles would be chosen for that.

The Bible versions are not all agreed, but more favor the KJV reading than the ESV reading. The ESV read-

3 While the ESV translators alert the reader that some manuscripts have “burned up,” they do not tell the reader why they went with “exposed.” The knowledgeable reader, having reviewed the evidence for either reading, can only conclude that for the ESV translators, the two earliest and presumably most reliable manuscripts trump the majority of Greek manuscripts.

ing has the support of one sixth-century Syrian version, and a marginal reading in another Syrian version. In other words, this second Syrian version does not have the ESV’s reading, but notes in the margin that it could be the ESV’s reading. By contrast, the KJV reading has the support of the Latin Vulgate,⁴ a different sixth-century Syrian reading, and two Egyptian dialects.

Which reading has the overwhelming majority of manuscripts behind it? The KJV reading.

Which reading has a wider geographic attestation? The KJV reading, if one relies on the evidence found in the 27th and 28th editions of the Nestle-Aland critical edition.

Which reading is found consistently throughout the centuries? Probably both could meet this requirement; the KJV’s reading certainly does.

Finally, which reading is older? The two “earliest and best” manuscripts date back to the fourth century. The earliest Greek manuscripts supporting the KJV reading, to which the textual critical edition alerts us, are from the fifth century.

It boils down to this question: does the reading of two fourth-century manuscripts trump the reading of the vast majority of manuscripts, which has also wide geographical support, simply because those two manuscripts are about 100 years older than the earliest known manuscripts that attest to the KJV? Some say yes; I say no.

4 The Vulgate has *solventur*. The word has various shades of meaning, but dissolve is one of them; no shade of meaning comes close to “exposed.”



When thou sittest in thine house

Mrs. Sarah Mowery, wife and mother in Loveland PRC in Loveland, Colorado

Tried by the Word

Fiery trials

Dear reader, what tries you today? I know that you are tried. I know this not only because that is my experience, but because God’s Word says it is so: “In the world ye shall have tribulation” (John 16:33). Indeed, it is through much tribulation that we must enter into the kingdom of God (Acts 14:22). Scripture assures us that those who remain steadfast under trial are blessed; yet too often our trials not only leave us perplexed at the strange things happening to us, but in despair, sure

that if God has not forgotten us, He has at the very least forgotten to be kind.

But God does not, cannot forget. And it is because He cannot forget His children that He ordains trials. Your trials. My trials. His church’s trials. Diverse trials. Common trials. Manifold trials. Fiery trials.

Why does our Father try us? He tries us to test the genuineness of our faith. In the refiners fire, gold brightens, while other elements darken, smoke, and burn up. Likewise, the Lord appoints trials to purge our pride and our besetting sins and to strengthen our faith, which is

more precious than gold. In His sovereignty God also uses trials to prepare us for future work. In the hottest fires, gold melts, allowing the goldsmith to mold it and form it. So our Master uses trials to mold us into vessels meet for His use, ready for every good work.

Ultimately, the answer is God's glory. "Behold, I have refined thee, but not with silver; I have chosen thee in the furnace of affliction. For mine own sake, even for mine own sake, will I do it: for how should my name be polluted? and I will not give my glory unto another" (Is. 48:10-11). God is glorified when we find His grace sufficient for our infirmities and His strength perfected in our weakness. God is glorified when we comfort those who are afflicted with the comfort we ourselves received from Him. God is glorified as the trying of our faith produces patience, experience, and hope. And God will be glorified when the trial of our faith results in praise, honor, and an eternal weight of glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ.

The example of Joseph

When trials perplex us, we do well to consider the examples recorded for us in Scripture. The sufferings of our Savior, the prophets, and the children of Israel in the wilderness were written aforetime for our learning, "that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope" (Rom. 15:4).

I trust, reader, that you know the story of Joseph and of the trials that he endured? (See Gen. 37, 39–50). The beginning is happy: Joseph's father Jacob loved him more than all his children, for this son of his old age was handsome, intelligent, and quick to obey. When Joseph observed his brothers' evil conduct, he reported it to his father. But Jacob's favoritism and the dreams that Joseph received from God and related to his family—which recounting elicited a rebuke even from his doting father—provoked his brothers to envy. That sin would have led to its utmost—murder—but the oldest brother, Reuben, intervened. Instead, Joseph's brothers first threw him into a pit and then sold him to Ishmaelites who were on their way to Egypt. The next time they unwittingly stand before him, Joseph is the stern governor of Egypt. Over two decades have passed, but their disregard of Joseph's distress still haunts them.

How had Joseph come to this position of power? The Lord had prepared him through many more trials. Joseph was sold to Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's guard. He served his master faithfully, but within the walls of Potiphar's grand house there was another pit: Potiphar's adulterous wife. Joseph fled fornication only to be cast into a third pit, the place in which Pharaoh's prisoners were bound. Even in the darkness of that dungeon, Joseph's light shone. Before long, the prison keeper

put Joseph in charge. Then Pharaoh's butler and baker were imprisoned and dreamed dreams. Joseph interpreted those dreams and pleaded with the butler to request his pardon. But the butler conveniently forgot the young Hebrew, so Joseph remained in the pit until....

Reader, what a wonder the Word of God is! I was trained by Christian parents and have been a member of a faithful church from infancy. I have either heard or read God's Word nearly every day of my life. Still, His living Word is new every morning...and every evening too. Recently, our family was gathered about our supper table, empty plates pushed back, Bibles open, and I heard a word that I cannot remember hearing before. Psalm 105 recounts Jehovah's wondrous works, His covenant promise to Abraham and His faithfulness to that promise in delivering the children of Israel from Egypt and bringing them through wilderness. Verses 16–22 mention Joseph:

Moreover he [Jehovah] called for a famine upon the land: he brake the whole staff of bread. He sent a man before them, even Joseph, who was sold for a servant: whose feet they hurt with fetters: he was laid in iron: until the time that his word came: the word of the LORD tried him. The king sent and loosed him; even the ruler of the people, and let him go free. He made him lord of his house, and ruler of all his substance: to bind his princes at his pleasure; and teach his senators wisdom.

When you consider Joseph's life, what stands out as his greatest trial? The treachery of his brothers? Being trafficked and sold as a slave? The framing of Potiphar's wife? The pain he experienced when he was thrown into that dry pit or when—did you note these details above?—his feet and neck were shackled in iron? From among all Joseph's grievous trials, Psalm 105 notes one: "The word of the LORD tried him."

Tried by the Word

What word of Jehovah did Joseph have? He had the word of the LORD as it had been revealed to Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob.... Jehovah had established a testimony in Jacob and commanded him to teach his children that law (Ps. 78:4). Joseph also had God's word as it had been revealed to him in his dreams. And God Himself was with him in trouble, as Genesis 39 thrice affirms. His brothers sold him, but Jehovah sent him (Gen. 45:5). The LORD was with him on the auction block, in his master's house, in the pit.

How did God's Word try Joseph? God's commands tried him. When Potiphar's wife tempted him, the Word of the LORD tried him: "Thou shalt not commit adultery." The Ten Commandments had yet to be written on tablets of stone, but they had already been written on

Joseph's heart: "How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" (Gen. 39:9). And not only the seventh commandment was written there. The fifth commandment too: he submitted to all in authority over him. And the sixth commandment, for to his traitorous brothers he showed "patience, peace, meekness, mercy, and all kindness"; he prevented their hurt as much as he was able; and he did good, even to his enemies. Do you see, reader? All of God's law was written there.

But God's Word of promise tried him as well. As a youth he had received visions in which God revealed that Joseph would rule and be revered, even by his brothers, his mother, and his father. How do you think young Joseph imagined that would come to pass? I doubt he envisioned slavery or being bound in a foreign prison. This Word of LORD tried him: "I will not leave thee, until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of" (Gen 28:15b). And this word: "Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the LORD" (Ps. 119:1).

The Word of Jehovah tried Joseph; it proved and refined his faith and prepared him to rule.

When I give in to frustration and discipline my children in anger, the Word of the Lord tries me: "Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: for the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God" (James 1:19–20).

When I look in the mirror and cringe at the many silver hairs springing up on my head, the Word of the LORD tries me: "Favor is deceitful, and beauty is vain: but a woman that feareth the LORD, she shall be praised" (Prov. 31:30).

When a brother or sister sins against me or one that I love, and I determine that I will have vengeance, with my tongue, if in no other way, the Word of the LORD tries me: "Finally, be ye all of one mind, having compas-

sion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous: not rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing: but contrariwise blessing; knowing that ye are thereunto called" (I Pet. 3:8–9).

The examples from my life, reader, are endless. But now it is your turn. How does the Word of the LORD try you today?

Until

My five-year-old daughter does not like the word *until* because to her it is a word that means she must wait. I think *until* is a beautiful word because it signifies an end. An end to your trials. An end to mine. An end to Joseph's: "Until the time that his word came."

Joseph saw God's promises fulfilled in his lifetime. He ruled, and like sheaves of grain with heavy heads, his brothers bowed and made obeisance. Joseph considered his trials and confessed Jehovah's sovereignty and goodness: "But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive" (Gen. 50:20).

And yet, the fact that Joseph is remembered among the heroes of faith for mentioning the departure of Israel from Egypt and the burial of his bones shows that he also looked beyond the land of the living to the day when all trials will come to an end and all of the promises of God will be fulfilled. "For all the promises of God in [Jesus Christ] are yea, and in him Amen, unto the glory of God by us" (II Cor. 1:20).

The Word of God comes to us today. It comes in the preaching, in the recitation of a child's memory verse, in the Bible on the pillow. It comes to teach, to comfort, to reprove, to try.

May we not be found wanting.



Pertaining to the churches in common— PR Theological Seminary

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

Seminary news

The woodcut pictured on the next page, made and donated by one of the seminary's supporters, hangs from one of the walls in the seminary building. The wall joins the classroom section to the library and the professors' offices. It also faces the entrance. Visitors entering the

seminary will immediately see it off to the left. Since it adjoins the professors' offices and the library where each of the students has his study carrel, both faculty and students pass by the sign several times every day.

The woodcut illustrates a famous saying of John



Calvin: “Send us wood, and we will send you arrows.” These words were Calvin’s response to the pleas especially of Reformed folk in France. Their pleas tugged at Calvin for a couple of reasons. For one thing, Calvin was himself a native Frenchman. He had been born and raised in France, and therefore always had a heart for his native land and for the cause of the Reformation in his homeland. But additionally, France at Calvin’s time was a place in which Reformed Christians were enduring severe persecution at the hands of the Roman Catholics. France’s rulers were committed to the pope and his apostate form of Christianity. Consequently, many French Reformed Christians were persecuted and suffered martyrs’ deaths. And still they pleaded that Calvin would send them qualified preachers of the gospel—*trained men* from the Academy of Geneva—for themselves and their children.

Calvin’s response was, “Send us wood,” that is, men with the raw abilities for the preaching office, and “we will send you arrows,” that is, men who have been shaped and fashioned to proclaim the gospel “pointedly.” Arrows that can fend off the enemy and put to flight error and false worship.

We will send you *arrows*, not broomsticks or crude walking sticks, but arrows. Arrows were used as weapons of warfare, both in biblical times and in Calvin’s day. Archers were an important part of every trained army. The request, therefore, presupposes an enemy—an enemy that must be confronted and defeated. The threefold enemy of the Devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh. The enemy within and without. Arrows, now, that can be used by the great Archer in defending His church and routing its enemies. Well-aimed arrows that consistently hit their targets and do what arrows are supposed to do. Arrows that are guided by God, as God guided the arrow shot at a venture so that it found

the vulnerable place in Ahab’s armor, penetrated it, and killed him (II Chron. 18:33).

This is a sobering reminder, not only to seminary professors and students, but to all the churches that send men to be trained in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary. We are in the business of preparing gospel preachers. We are in the business of taking wood and over the course of four years of careful work by skilled craftsmen fashioning arrows—arrows for God’s quiver. Our plea is the same as Calvin’s, “Send us wood, and we will send you arrows.”

The plea is urgent. Over the last few years, the plea has become increasingly urgent in the PRCA. And as far as the immediate future is concerned, the plea is likely to become still more urgent. More wood—send us more wood!

Our student body

More. We have some, for which we are very thankful. In fact, we have students in every year of training. We are, indeed, richly blessed.

Our fourth-year student, Mr. Arend Haveman, is back in the classroom after his six-month internship. He served his internship in the Protestant Reformed Church of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The consistory of the Pittsburgh congregation supervised the internship and Rev. W. Bruinsma served as Mr. Haveman’s mentor. The internship aims to expose our students to all aspects of the work of a pastor: preparing and delivering sermons, teaching catechism, attending consistory and council meetings, participating in local evangelism, visiting the sick and shut-ins, attending the meetings of classis, engaging in pastoral counseling, conducting family visitation, and all the other duties that our ministers fulfill.

There is a difficulty, however, connected to our internship program—likely an insurmountable difficulty. The difficulty is that having tasted the actual work of the pastorate, it is with great reluctance that students return to the seminary to complete the last semester of their classroom work before graduation. I am happy to report that Mr. Haveman has indeed returned and is dutifully completing his course work, with a view to receiving his diploma.

But before being awarded his diploma, there is one last step students must take—the capstone of their four years of study as diploma pre-licentiate students. They must sit for their oral examinations before the annual PRC synod. Besides keeping up on his course work, Mr. Haveman is preparing for his synodical examination. Synod 2024 of the Protestant Reformed Churches will be hosted by Trinity PRC in Hudsonville, Michigan and will convene on Tuesday, June 11. Readers of the *Stan-*

dard Bearer are encouraged to attend Mr. Haveman's examination before the synod, if not the whole examination, some part of it. If you are unable to attend, it is very likely the examination will be livestreamed.

Our third-year student is Mr. Aaron Van Dyke. Many of you have become acquainted with Mr. Van Dyke through his leading of public worship services and teaching catechism in several of our churches in western Michigan. Since being licensed to speak a word of edification, he has also traveled to several churches in Classis West. During the holiday break between semesters, Mr. Van Dyke accompanied his father-in-law, Prof. D. Kuiper, to the Philippines. For two weeks they led Sunday worship services and visited the members of our sister churches. This was a unique opportunity that few seminary students are privileged to experience.

Beginning on July 1, 2024, Mr. Van Dyke will begin his internship. He will serve his internship in a foreign country. It is the foreign country with whom we Americans share our northern border, which, of course, is Canada. The seminary faculty is grateful that the con-



Weekly devotions led by student Bruce Feenstra

sistory of the Wingham, Ontario PRC has acceded to our request to host Mr. Van Dyke's internship and that Rev. Daniel Holstege has agreed to be his mentor. This will involve extra work for the elders and for Rev. Holstege. It is encouraging to the faculty that our congregations and ministers, recognizing the importance of our internship program, are generally eager to assist in implementing this program of our seminary. Sometime before the beginning of July, Mr. Van Dyke, his wife Sarah, their daughter Olive and soon-to-be-born second child will take up their six-month residence in Canada.

Mr. Bruce Feenstra is our second-year student. The second year of study is usually the busiest year for our already busy seminary students. For the first time, students are introduced to exegesis (biblical interpretation)

classes. Students are required to write out in full their explanation of texts that are assigned by the professors. In distinction from first-year students, the second-year students must also make and preach two sermons for each of the two semesters of the school year. This is a new and demanding exercise in addition to their other studies. There is also frequently the opportunity to lead an area Bible study society and some exposure to catechism teaching. For a second-year student to survive, he must be well organized and self-disciplined—two indispensable characteristics of the faithful minister of the Word.

We have two first-year students. The first of them is Mr. Isaac VanBaren. With the first semester under his belt, Mr. VanBaren is adjusting well to the rigors of seminary life. Trained as an engineer and after several years in that career path, Mr. VanBaren was constrained by the Lord to abandon his full-time work as an engineer and begin his studies for the ministry. Having successfully completed his first semester of seminary training, Mr. VanBaren is well into his second semester of study. He and his wife Libby have adjusted well to seminary life and their presence in the seminary family along with their two young sons is greatly appreciated.

Mr. Joseph Ophoff is also in his first year of study, although he has come into the seminary as the first student to enroll under the Special Seminary Entrance Program (SSEP), which was adopted by Synod 2023. This program provides for enrollment in the seminary of men who are older, have not fulfilled many pre-seminary requirements, and who have for several years been working at a secular vocation. The program opens the way for these men to attend seminary while fulfilling a minimum of pre-seminary requirements. Prior to this year, Mr. Ophoff had never taken any college courses and had been involved for several years in the building trade, most recently as a new home inspector. Mr. Ophoff is combining some course work at an area college with a limited number of courses taught by the seminary. He and his wife Audra and their five children seem to have adjusted to their move to Michigan from Loveland, Colorado and are fitting well into the life of our theological school.

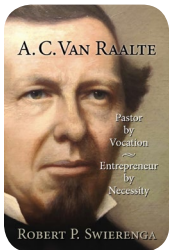
Pray for us as we continue the 2023-2024 school year. Pray that God preserves the professors in faithfulness to Scripture, our Reformed confessions, and our Protestant Reformed heritage. Pray that God equips the students and sustains them in their studies. And pray fervently that God may be pleased to supply our churches with more students to be trained for the gospel ministry—wood fashioned into sharp, effective arrows.



Bring the books...

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

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



A. C. Van Raalte: Pastor by Vocation, Entrepreneur by Necessity, by Robert P. Swierenga. Holland, MI: Van Raalte Press, 2023. Pp xxii + 680. Softcover. \$50.00.

Swierenga has done it again: He has produced a fascinating, well-researched book that regards the history of West Michigan and of the Reformed faith. His latest publication is the most deeply researched, most comprehensive, and largest biography of Albert C. Van Raalte that has yet appeared in either the Dutch or English language.

In his preface, Swierenga explains why another biography is warranted: “the early works are incomplete” (xvi). More Van Raalte papers are now available for the historian to study, and Swierenga has studied them in greater depth.

I intend to whet your appetite by noting how I benefitted from reading the book, and some lessons that it underscored. The Lord willing, a fuller review will appear in the April 2024 issue of the *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*.

Benefits

The first third of the book covers Van Raalte’s parentage, life in the Netherlands where he served three pastorates and was a seminary professor, and reasons for emigrating. The coverage of his pastorates and professorship in the old country is new material for the English reader. And, while we knew that Van Raalte was part of the 1834 *Afscheiding* (separation from the state church), the book details how he was involved and the persecutions he endured.

The book demonstrates Van Raalte’s commitment to Christian day schools, both in the Netherlands and in Holland. The RCA never shared this commitment; and neither did his fellow immigrants. For the latter, a publicly funded education in a Christian context was sufficient. Van Raalte pushed against this, and lost (chap. 11). However, he was instrumental in starting Hope College.

The book explains from a historical point of view that Van Raalte was an “entrepreneur by necessity.” Already in the Netherlands, Van Raalte provided capital for industries and sought ways to employ his parishio-

ners who were persecuted in the area of employment for siding with the *Afscheiding*. In the colony Van Raalte was even more heavily involved (chap. 12). Swierenga gives the historical reasons for Van Raalte’s involvement in land prospecting and business ventures. He suggests that Van Raalte was less a business man, than a promoter and supporter of other businessmen. Yet he rightly faults Van Raalte for this involvement, seeing he was a minister of the gospel (398, 583).

Van Raalte as a pastor, preacher, and church leader in America gets the focus in chapters 10, 14, and 15. Swierenga presents him as a man more interested in church polity than doctrine. And he was, admittedly, far too busy in other matters to do justice to his work as pastor.

Lessons

Several lessons are for ministers to take to heart.

First, the minister must be a minister *only*. He must tend to *souls*. Should he have knowledge and capital that will help the community, he must resist the urge to help in that way, and instead preach.

Second, the minister must not be a stubborn man. Van Raalte often was. He was, after all, Dutch—so we Dutchmen should take this to heart.

Third, we must be wise, and not hasty. Van Raalte’s encouragement of Classis Holland to join the RCA was not wise, and was hasty. In the end, it was a factor in the formation of the Christian Reformed Church in 1857, just ten years after the colony formed.

Another lesson the elders and lay members of the church must take to heart. Let your minister preach, and study to preach. Give him the time to do so. And *resist* any effort of a minister to direct and control the church.

In the end, the book not only explains the origins of Holland, MI, but also of the CRC, the formation of which was a grief to Van Raalte. It also gives the background for the eventual formation of our denomination, though that would be decades later. That Swierenga knows us, however, is evident from his bibliographical references to several RFPA publications.

After reading the book, you will no doubt eagerly await the publication of his next project, God willing—a history of Zeeland, MI.

Announcements

PRYP Convention request

The Program Committee from Cornerstone and Peace PRC is seeking volunteers for special instrumental or vocal numbers at the 2024 YP Convention. We'd love to highlight our talented young people! Solos, duets, or group numbers are all welcome. We look forward to how these numbers will be a blessing to all convention attendees and bring glory to God's name! If you are interested in participating, please contact Brenda Dykstra with a call or text at (708) 638-2602 or e-mail at natebren2004@gmail.com.

PRC Synod 2024

All standing and special committees of the synod of the Protestant Reformed Churches, as well as individuals who wish to address Synod 2024, are hereby notified that all material for this year's synod should be in the hands of the stated clerk no later than April 15. A signed hard copy as well as a Word/PDF version is appreciated. Please send material to:

Doug Mingerink, Sr., Stated Clerk
(doughi@mingerink.com)
4949 Ivanrest S.W.
Wyoming, MI 49418

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

Rev. J. Engelsma, Stated Clerk

Reformed Witness Hour

reformedwitnesshour.org

Prof. Douglas Kuiper, Rev. James Laning

- March 3—Honoring Father, Mother, and All in Authority (5)
Mark 7:1-13
- March 10—Loving Our Neighbor (6)
Matthew 5:21-26
- March 17—A Life of Sexual Purity and Self Control (7)
Matthew 5:27-32
- March 24—The Right Use of Our Possessions (8)
Luke 21:13-23
- March 31—The Risen Jesus Meeting the Women (JL)
Matthew 28:9

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.