

The Standard Bearer

A Reformed Semi-Monthly Magazine • April 15, 2024

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This cover was used from March 2010 to September 2017. It marked the first incorporation of the Dutch tulip into the Standard Bearer design. The table of contents through these years also featured a retitled book review rubric, "Bring the Books": "Read! (Especially Reformed Books!)", (Vol 86 No 6), in which many RFPA books have been reviewed. The SB staff in this cover's time included Prof. Barry Gritters, who will retire from editorship of the SB this year (2024). Prof. Gritters, who initially joined the staff in October 1985 to co-write the rubric In His Fear, has been writing for and editing the SB for 38 years! The staff and the RFPA thank Prof. Gritters for his many years of faithful service to the publication.

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Meditation

Rev. James Slopsema, minister emeritus in the Protestant Reformed Churches and member of First PRC in Grand Rapids, Michigan

Taken by temptation

There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way of escape, that ye may be able to bear it.

I Corinthians 10:13

You may find yourself in a situation where you are sorely tempted by the powers of darkness. You have struggled against this temptation for a long time. You are not making progress in overcoming this temptation but perhaps are even slipping. You may be desperate, fearful of being destroyed by a sin. Could it be that you are ready to give up in despair?

To that situation the verse we have for this meditation speaks a very encouraging word.

There has no temptation taken you but such as is common to man.

God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted above that you are able.

He will make a way of escape.

A terrible reality

The saints of Corinth had been taken by temptation.

Temptation is the attempt of the powers of darkness to allure God's people into sin and also into sin's destruction. Temptation is the work of the powers of darkness. These powers include Satan and his host of fallen angels, the world of the ungodly, and lastly, our own sinful nature. They seek constantly to allure the saints of God away from God into sin and eventual destruction.

The powers of darkness seek to do so in a number of different ways. They dangle the pleasures of sin before the saints. They make sure there is a nasty price to pay for obedience to the Lord. When God's people are in distress, the powers of darkness tempt them to be bitter against Him and turn against Him in rebellion.

It would appear from the context that the saints of Corinth were tempted especially by the sins of idolatry and fornication. And we can easily see why this was so tempting for them. They were Gentiles for whom idola-

try, fornication, and drunkenness had been a way of life in the past. To leave this was to leave not only a thing they had found to be very pleasurable but also to forsake old friends and family and perhaps even to bring persecution on themselves.

So severe were these temptations that Paul says they had been "taken" by temptation. That means that these temptations had seized, laid hold of them. This language indicates that the Corinthian saints had for some time now been very sorely tempted by the sins of idolatry and fornication. They were falling to these temptations so that from a human point of view they were in real danger of being overcome by these temptations, being led away from the faith into sin and destruction. The saints themselves perhaps felt trapped, not knowing how to overcome these temptations.

And we too are often taken by temptations. The powers of darkness know how to make sin's pleasures so appealing, beckoning us to leave the Lord to indulge in them. The approval of men (often called peer pressure) often tempts us to forsake God's ways. This is especially true for young people, but not only for them. The harsh realities of life often tempt us to find unbiblical solutions to our problems. Couples in a struggling marriage are often tempted to resolve their problems through divorce and remarriage. The laborer struggling to make ends meet financially is often tempted to join the godless labor union or work on sabbath. The businessman whose business is not doing well is tempted to engage in unethical practices. In the face of adversity, we are tempted to be bitter against God and even question His faithfulness. Sometimes these temptations can so take hold of us that they are ever present. Repeatedly they lead into sin. They threaten to lead us far from God so that we become greatly concerned.

A wonderful assurance

In this situation the Word of God assures us that there has no temptation taken His people but such as is common to man.

One can often feel that somehow his situation is unique. There is the alcoholic, who took to drinking because of his problems and finds that drinking only made his problems worse. He often concludes that his problems are far greater than anyone else's. There is the woman who wants to divorce her husband. No one has had to deal with the problems she has. There is the teenager who has parents worse than any one else.

To think that somehow one's situation is unique brings devastating results. It makes one feel sorry for himself and takes away the power to deal with his struggles against temptation effectively. It can make one give up in despair. There seems to be no help or way out. It even leads people to justify their sinful behavior. They even convince themselves that God will somehow understand.

However, the Word of God assures us that there is no temptation that has taken you but that which is common to man. Whatever situation you find yourself in and whatever temptations you face, others have faced similar situations. Your situation is never unique. Many others have, are, and will face similar situations. The conclusion is that you have no excuse to continue to cave in to your temptations. You are rather to be encouraged. Others have faced the same temptations and have overcome them. You also can overcome them in Jesus Christ. They are not insurmountable.

In addition to this we read that God is faithful. That God is faithful means that He is loyal. He always stands by His redeemed people. He always keeps His word to them, especially His word to keep and preserve them. We are not always faithful. But God is.

In addition to this we read that God is faithful. That God is faithful means that He is loyal. He always stands by His redeemed people. He always keeps His word to them, especially His word to keep and preserve them. We are not always faithful. But God is.

In His faithfulness God will not allow His people to be tempted above what they are able to bear. "To bear" means to bear up under something without being crushed. The temptations that seize hold of us are as so many heavy burdens that threaten to crush us. But God will never "allow" this to happen. God does not tempt us; the powers of darkness do. Yet God controls the temptations we face. And our faithful God will not allow us to be tempted above that which we are able to bear so that we are led away from Him into destruction.

He may allow us to be led away into sin for a time. He may providentially bring us into tempting circumstances and then withdraw His grace so that we are led

into the misery of sin for a time. When He does this, it is to teach us that sin is not to be taken lightly. This is God's chastisement. But even during such chastisements, God will never allow us to be crushed by temptation. After we have been duly chastened, God will lead us back to Him in true repentance to live a holy life. Jesus taught us to pray that this severe form of chastisement not be necessary for us: "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

Notice in this connection, that when faced with overwhelming temptation, God will always provide a way to escape, literally, a way out. God's way out of temptation is one of two things. He may in His good providence alter the circumstances in which you find yourself so that you are no longer bothered with a specific temptation or perhaps not tempted so severely. And secondly, God in all our temptations provides abundant grace in Jesus Christ to resist and overcome. That is the ultimate escape!

An implied calling

Do not despair in the face of temptation.

Take courage!

There is a way out of every temptation and every problem. Others of God's people have found and taken that way out. There has no temptation taken you but such as is common to man.

And remember that the way out of temptation is God's way out. Too often the saints try to find their own way out of temptation. They will fight and seek to overcome temptation in their own strength or in the power of man. This is doomed to failure.

The way out of temptation is God's grace that enables you to bear it. And this grace is received only through diligent prayer, the proper use of the Word, and the help of one's fellow saints. In a very real sense the Word, prayer, and the communion of saints are God's way out.

Make diligent use of God's way out that you may be able to bear the temptations that take hold of you.



Editorial

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

Catechism and confessing faith: Head or heart?

I have heard from friends who made confession of faith about 50 years ago (which betrays my age) that when young people wanted to confess their faith, it was common for groups of a dozen and more to be allowed into the consistory room. Each was asked a few questions from a book of prepared questions and, with very little more, were approved to make public their confession of faith and come to the Lord's Supper. Memories can be faulty or weak of course (I remember little of my own appearance at consistory except being very nervous), but I have heard this story enough to know that it is not apocryphal.

If this is surprising, it should not be because for *some* in the past the exam at the consistory for confession of faith had the goal only to find out whether the person was doctrinally sound and committed to live inoffensively—a life that did not bring shame to the name of Christ or His church. How a consistory could give access to the Lord's table via only one or two objective questions was not because the elders did not have time to examine more extensively, although consistories were busy then, too. Instead, it was a certain view of confession of faith that, in our minds today, ought to be considered faulty.

Which leads to the question of catechism, and whether catechism aims only at the intellect or also at the heart. The connection to catechism is that catechism *prepares* for confession of faith, and if confession of faith is only objective, catechism may be also. Thus, the question: does catechism aim at the head, or heart?

Behind this question is some history that is worth looking at.

The history is back in the Netherlands, but the story is told from the Christian Reformed Church's history in America. Again, in 1924.¹ There was an ongoing struggle in the CRC to define confession of faith, to determine what questions ought to be asked of prospec-

tive members and whether consistories should require *certainty* of faith or could allow hesitation about one's relation to Jesus Christ and salvation. In the CRC the debate started in 1890, appeared again in 1902, 1904, 1922 and 1924, ending in 1926.

What does a consistory look for when a young person asks permission to come to the Lord's table?

The CRC Synod commissioned a study committee to answer that question and bring advice. The committee did research into the matter back in the Netherlands where most CRC members had come from only recently. Their study noted that there was a theological and spiritual divide between the "objective Northern" Reformed churches and the "subjective Southern" Reformed churches. Put perhaps too simplistically: in the north the intellect was primary, in the south the heart. And because many in the south could not come to heartfelt certainty of their faith—they struggled with doubts—the Dutch synods left the questions objective. Do not offend the sensitive brothers in the south. Allow to confess faith (and come to the Lord's Supper) those who only "hope" that they are saved but do not yet "know" they have forgiveness. Let them confess the "need" more than the "possession," and express the "desire" more than the "certainty." So the Dutch in the old country.

The CRC study committee presented the Synod of 1926 with four possible sets of questions for confession of faith: two options had questions that were more objective and two options had questions more subjective. Some, that is, emphasized *truth*; the other sets included address to the heart and personal appropriation of Christ. The CRC committee recommended that their synod follow the Dutch and limit confession to the objective: do not make confession of faith questions that required *certainty* of faith. Make them promise to *seek* their life in Jesus Christ, and *desire* to love and serve God, but permit them to stop short of saying that they *trusted* in Jesus Christ and truly *loved* God.

In this, the CRC committee even had the support of the respected Dutch theologian and Church Order expert

¹ See my editorial of February 1, 2024 and the Sabbath struggle at the CRC's Synod of 1924.

Harm Bouwman, who said: "...not all those who uprightly declare that Jesus is *precious* to them and that they *seek* their salvation in Christ, dare to declare that they *have* the forgiveness of sins in the blood of the Savior."²

But in the good providence of God the committee also made mention of a Rev. Menno Borduin who had participated in the discussion in church magazines.³ Borduin taught that assurance *belongs* to faith, and thus that "seeks" is the wrong verb (too weak) and "trusts" is right to describe the confessing member's relation to Jesus Christ.⁴ Though our forefathers in the CRC went in Bouwman's direction, the PRC today would be on the side of Borduin.

How this CRC history may be known is from a PRCA study committee formed in 1977. Lynden PRC presented an overture to synod to revise our 'form' for confession of faith⁵ by adding a preface and concluding remarks. The story is too long to be told here, but may be found in the *Acts of Synod 1981*. After twelve years of intermittent work, no changes were made either to the questions or by adding remarks. The mountain labored and brought forth not even a mouse. But in the end one thing was certain in the PRCA: confession of faith includes the subjective confession of belonging to Christ.

The PRCA is of the conviction, then, that the Dutch synods ought not to have catered to the uncertainty of those in the south. For faith is not only objective, but also subjective; and a faith without certainty is not true faith but unbelief.

Why would it be a question for a Reformed Christian whether faith is *personal conviction*? Or that confession of faith before the consistory and then the congregation

2 Quoted in *CRC Agenda 1926*, Report VI. Translation of the Dutch by Rev. C. Hanko; emphasis added. See *PRC Acts of Synod 1981*, p. 109.

3 Ordained in 1896, Rev. Borduin served the CRC, among other places, in Conrad, MT (1911-1915; 1925-1934). He was the great (x2) grandfather of current PRC seminary student Aaron VanDyke.

4 Of course, the believer does "seek" his salvation out of Christ, as our Lord's Supper Form puts it; but the choice of "seek" in the CRC's discussion was a rejection of "trust."

5 The PRCA does not have a 'form,' but merely three questions:

1. Do you acknowledge the doctrine contained in the Old and New Testaments and in the Articles of the Christian faith and taught here in this Christian church to be the true and complete doctrine of salvation?
2. Have you resolved by the grace of God to adhere to this doctrine; to reject all heresies repugnant thereto; and to lead a new, godly life?
3. Will you submit to church government, and in case you should become delinquent (which may God graciously forbid), to church discipline? (PRC Psalter, p. 90.)

is confession of *certainty*? Or that catechism must aim at nurturing *personal* conviction and real *heartfelt* trust?

There ought not be a question.

First, because the Reformed confessions define faith as personal certainty. The Heidelberg Catechism (Lord's Day 7) defines faith as "certain knowledge" and "assured confidence"—confidence that *to me* belongs salvation. *To me* is freely given forgiveness and everlasting righteousness. Not only to others, but *to me* also. And in Lord's Day 1 the believer confesses: "I belong to Jesus; He fully satisfied for *my* sins; by His Holy Spirit He assures *me* of eternal life; He makes *me* sincerely willing and ready to live unto Him."

Second, because Scripture teaches that there are two kinds of faith, one genuine and the other counterfeit, and those who claim to follow Jesus must confess true, not possibly counterfeit, faith. Devils 'believe' and tremble; some who followed Jesus 'believed' but did not confess Him; Agrippa 'believed' and mocked Paul. But consistories may receive as members and allow to the Supper only those who say, "From my heart I believe and with my mouth I confess that Jesus Christ is mine!" Even though they may say, "Help thou my unbelief!" they also say, "I believe!"

So when elders receive into the consistory room a young man or lady who wants to confess faith, what questions are appropriate?

A *few* doctrinal questions is wholly insufficient. *Only* doctrinal questions is insufficient.

It would be fitting to start with two simple questions, with all the other questions (and there should be more) flowing out of these two: "First, what is faith?" "Second, do *you* have *true* faith?" The rest of the examination will flesh out their testimony, "I have true faith." Along the lines of the three questions for public confession of faith, the elders may ask about their certain knowledge of and adherence to the biblical truth of Christ as explained in the creeds (Q1 and Q2a), about their commitment to live the new life of Christ (Q2b), and about their willingness to submit to the rule and discipline of Christ through the elders (Q3).

Because the gate in the fence around the Lord's table is being opened for them, the elders may also use the language of the Form for the Lord's Supper: 1) "Do you abhor and humble yourself before God, considering your sin and the punishment you deserve because of them?" 2) "Do you believe the faithful promise of God that there is forgiveness for you for the sake of Jesus Christ and that His righteousness is imputed to you freely?" 3) "Do you purpose to walk uprightly be-

fore God and in true love with your neighbor?” This is how the Heidelberg Catechism describes the person for whom the Lord’s Supper is instituted (LD 30).

Because confession of faith is so personal, the exam could conclude (or even begin) with: “What is your only comfort in life and death?” The one asking permission to become a member in full standing, seeking all the rights of a church member, may give personal testimony of his own experience: “That I with body and soul...am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Savior Jesus Christ....”

To ask these questions and more requires an examination of at least twenty minutes, with one person in the consistory room at a time. Gone should be the days of large groups asked only a few questions each. Welcomed are the days when, busy as they are, the elders do some of the most delightful work on their agenda—hear the heartfelt confession of faith of the young people, one happy confession at a time.

After 10 years of heart-directed catechism, the young man or woman is ready to make this confession, because he/she has embraced the truth in Christ as the richest treasure they could ever find. They have learned all the biblical history (grades 1-7) as their *own* history. From “history’s light” they truly learned to “hope in his

God and walk in His sight,” to “fear and obey” God and not “turn from His way” (Psalter #213, stanza 3). In Heidelberg Catechism (grades 8, 9) they learned the personal, warm, comforting truth, as it addressed them *experientially*, and are now ready to say, “I belong to Jesus! I am not my own!” In Essentials of Reformed Doctrine (grades 10, 11), the first question and answer rings and rings in the young person’s ears: “*To me*, what is above all things precious is the knowledge of the true God through Jesus Christ.”

One of these years I will have to step aside from the catechism lectern. That will be a day, not to be sad, but to reminisce about the joy of teaching covenant youth. What greater joy than to see the children of the church learn the truth and walk in it? To see the Holy Spirit work faith in them by the Word—true faith!—and then observe that faith work by love, in even the littlest children. Is there anything better than to hear them sing “I love the Lord, the fount of life and grace,” and “I love the Lord, His strength is mine”? I cannot think of many things better than that, because “*I love the Lord Who heard my cry and granted my request.*”

Let us never abandon the good practice of teaching catechism—the preaching of the Word for the youth.

Through their head, but to their *heart*. And from that heart, faith is confessed.



Taking heed to the doctrine

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

The *ordo salutis* (6)

Justification: Justified freely by God’s grace

Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

Romans 3:24

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, we come to the subject of justification, which in the *ordo salutis* is in *fifth* place: “Regeneration, Calling, Conversion, Faith, *Justification*, Sanctification, Preservation, and Glorification.” Fifth place is not in order of importance, but in logical, even temporal, order. Remember that the

ordo salutis is the logical sequence of the Spirit’s work. God planned salvation in eternity; Christ purchased salvation at the cross; the Holy Spirit applies salvation in the lifetime of the believer.

For some, justification is really the *only* aspect of salvation that should be discussed, preached, and believed. For them salvation is not the rich, multifaceted work of God with distinct, beautiful benefits, but justification, justification, justification. Appeal is sometimes made to Belgic Confession, Article 23: “We believe that our salvation consists in the remission of our sins for Jesus Christ’s sake, and that therein our righteousness before God is implied.” My translation from the French is as

follows: “We believe that our happiness [French: *notre béatitude*] lies [French: *gît*, from the verb *gésir*, to lie] in the remission of our sins for Jesus Christ’s sake and that in that is contained [French: *qu’en cela est contenue*] our righteousness [French: *notre justice*] before God.” Thus the Confession does not teach that salvation is only justification, but that our happiness or blessedness lies in the pardon of our sins. Nevertheless, justification is fundamentally important, for without it we stand condemned before God. Happy, indeed, are we who are justified freely by God’s grace.

God’s legal declaration of righteousness

We begin with a simple definition: Justification is God’s legal declaration of righteousness. Justification is a legal declaration. When God acts in justification, He acts as the Judge. When a judge decides a case, he has only one concern: what is this person’s relationship to the law? Nothing else matters. The issue is: did the defendant keep the law or did he break the law? There are only two possible relationships to the law: either a person is guilty and worthy of punishment, or he is righteous and free from punishment. A judge, then, has two options: he condemns or he justifies. Deuteronomy 25:1 teaches, “If there be a controversy between men, and they come unto judgment, that the judges may judge them; then they shall justify the righteous and condemn the wicked.” Proverbs 17:15 is similar: “He that justifieth the wicked, and he that condemneth the just, even they both are abomination to the Lord.” To condemn is not to make wicked, but to declare that someone is wicked and to punish him accordingly. Therefore, to justify is not to make righteous, but to declare that someone is righteous and to reward him accordingly.

A judge renders a verdict, which is an official declaration or pronouncement about the defendant. The judge speaks: “I find the defendant guilty.” Or the judge speaks: “I find the defendant innocent: I acquit him; I justify him.” In justification *God* speaks: He renders a verdict; and His verdict cannot be questioned, overturned, or appealed to a higher court. God’s verdict is the final, decisive verdict. What a judge does *not* do is to change the moral character of the defendant. If the defendant is guilty, he declares him so; he does not make him so. If the defendant is righteous, he declares him so; he does not make him so. So justification is God’s legal declaration.

Moreover, justification is a legal declaration of *righteousness*. Righteousness is an exceedingly important concept in Holy Scripture. The word *righteousness* comes from the word *righteous*. Other words for righteous are just, upright, or straight; the opposite of right-

eous is twisted, crooked, or perverse. If something is righteous, it conforms to, or is in harmony with, a standard. If something is unrighteous, it deviates from, and is out of conformity with, a standard. In justification the standard is *God’s* standard, which is God Himself. Specifically, God’s standard is His law. If someone conforms to God’s law, he is righteous; if he does not, he is unrighteous. In justification God the Judge declares that we, who believe in Jesus Christ, are righteous. God says about us who believe in Jesus Christ: “You are in full conformity to, and in perfect harmony with, my standard, which is set forth in my law. That is your legal status before me. And because that is your legal status, I do not punish you, but I declare you worthy of eternal life.”

This is the teaching of Romans 3:24: “Justified [declared righteous] freely by his grace.” This is the teaching of Romans 3:26: “That he might be just, and the justifier [the one who declares righteous] of him which believeth in Jesus.” This is the teaching of Romans 3:28: “A man is justified [declared righteous] by faith without the works of the law.” And this is also the teaching of Romans 3:30: “God which shall justify [declare righteous] the circumcision [the Jews] by faith and the uncircumcision [the Gentiles] through faith.”

A legal declaration of righteousness consists of two things: one positive and one negative. First, in justification God grants the forgiveness of sins. In Romans 3:19 the apostle puts all men (including us) into the category of “guilty before God.” In verse 23 he writes, “All have sinned,” which includes us. Sinners must be justified. Therefore, our urgent need as those who stand before God is the forgiveness of sins. Listen to Heidelberg Catechism, A. 60: “...My conscience accuses me that I have grossly transgressed all the commandments of God, and kept none of them, and am still inclined to all evil.” That is why it is utter folly to appear before God *without justification*. Yet there are many who, knowing that they are guilty, seek to stand before God *without being justified*. They are not interested in justification or they presume that they are already justified although they have no just reason for thinking so.

Second, in justification God positively declares us righteous. That is one step further than the forgiveness of sins. It is one thing for God to declare, “I forgive your sins: you are not guilty.” It is another and much greater blessing for God to declare, “You are positively righteous. You are in perfect conformity to, and in perfect harmony with, my standard in the law.” That, too, is Heidelberg Catechism, A. 60: “God without any merit of mine, but only of mere grace, grants and imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ; even so, *as if I never had had*

nor committed any sin; yea, as if I had fully accomplished all that obedience which Christ has accomplished for me." That would be like a career criminal hearing a declaration from the judge: "You have a perfect record: you have never committed any crimes. As far as this court is concerned, you are a model citizen. And, therefore, you are worthy of the freedom of the city." We are not only *not* guilty before God, but we perfectly conform to God's standard, and, therefore, are worthy of eternal life:

"Justified freely by his grace" (Rom. 3:24).

The basis

Perhaps the reader perceives a problem, a very serious problem that demands a solution. How can God, who is just and holy, and who always speaks truth, justify *us* when clearly we are sinners, not righteous. That appears to be a dilemma, does it not? Does God not then do what He forbids human judges to do: to justify the wicked, which is an abomination?

First, God does not in justification *pretend* that we are righteous when we are not. Imagine that a murderer stands before a judge: the judge ignores the evidence of guilt and says, "I will ignore your guilt and simply pretend that you are innocent." Such a judge is unjust, even an abomination. In justification we stand before God: God knows all of our sins; He knows that we have broken His commandments (and we do, too); He knows that we have a corrupt nature (and we do, too); and yet God says, "I declare you innocent, righteous, worthy of eternal life."

Second, God does not justify us on the basis of our good works, or on the basis of our works of faith, or on the basis of our faithfulness, or on the basis of anything that we do. Justification by works, whether in whole or in part, is the error of Roman Catholicism, liberal Protestantism, and the Federal Vision. One common view is that God will accept sinners on the basis of their good works. Others who are more subtle will say that God justifies sinners on the basis of good works that are worked in them by the power of the Holy Spirit. Still others argue that sinners are justified on the basis of faith *and* faith's obedience. All of those views share this in common: the basis of justification is imperfect obedience. The Heidelberg Catechism reminds us, "The righteousness which can be approved of before the tribunal of God must be absolutely perfect, and in all respects conformable to the divine law" and "our best works in this life are all imperfect and defiled with sin" (A. 62).

The irony is that justification by works makes God pretend that we are righteous: God sees our imperfect obedience and accepts it *as if* it were perfect obedience.

That is for God to pretend that we are righteous when, in fact, we are not. That is for God to lower His standards, and accept something less than perfect harmony to His law as the basis for justification. That would be as if a judge would say: "You are guilty of murder and armed robbery, but I also see that you have begun to improve your life, so on the basis of the improvements that you have made I will not punish you for your crimes of murder and armed robbery." Such errors are rejected by the Canons of Dordt: "The Synod rejects the errors of those...who teach...that God, having revoked the demand of perfect obedience of the law, regards faith itself and the obedience of faith, although imperfect, as the perfect obedience of the law, and does esteem it worthy of the reward of eternal life through grace" (Canons II, Rejection of errors, 4).

Scripture and the Reformed confessions reject any notion of justification by works. Romans 3:21 declares, "But now the righteousness of God *without the law* is manifested." Romans 3:24 adds, "Being justified *freely by his grace*." Romans 3:28 concludes, "We conclude that a man is justified by faith *without the works of the law*." Romans 4:2 argues, "If Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory, but *not before God*." Romans 4:5 teaches, "But to him that *worketh not, but believeth* on him that justifieth the ungodly." And Romans 4:6 concludes, "God imputeth righteousness *without works*." Notice verse 24: "justified freely by his grace." "Freely" means *gratis*, for naught, gratuitously; it means without any cause in the recipient. "By his grace" means simply that God favored, with free unmerited, undeserved favor, the one whom He justified. Heidelberg Catechism, A. 60 teaches, "without any merit of mine, but only of mere grace." Belgic Confession, Article 24 teaches, "Though we do good works, we do not found our salvation on them." Justification is *not by works*. Good works are entirely excluded from justification.

Instead, the basis of our justification is the righteousness of another, namely, Jesus Christ. When God declares us righteous, He does not pretend that we are righteous: we *are* righteous, but our righteousness is *not ours*, but Jesus Christ's. That is the wonder of justification.

Two things make up Christ's righteousness: first, His lifelong obedience to God's law; and second, His sufferings and death. Jesus Christ, as the Son of God, is personally righteous: He is in perfect conformity to, and in perfect harmony with, God's standard. The Son of God placed Himself under the law in order to keep it *for us* (Gal. 4:4-5). From the beginning to the end of His life Jesus worked to keep God's commandments per-

fectly. He loved God with His whole heart, soul, mind, and strength; He loved His neighbor as Himself; and He never deviated from obedience in the smallest degree. Belgic Confession, Article 23 extols “all His merits and so many holy works which He has done for us and in our stead.” Heidelberg Catechism, A. 60 speaks of “the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ.” When you look at your works, and you are tempted to despair at the imperfections and blemishes in them and when you mourn over your incomplete obedience, remember Christ’s perfect works. Those are the basis for the believer’s justification before God.

But if Christ simply obeyed the law perfectly for us, that would be insufficient because we are guilty of many sins, for which a penalty must be paid. Therefore, as the second part of Jesus’ righteousness, Jesus suffered His whole life long, and especially on the cross, to pay for our sins. God exacted from His beloved Son the penalty that our sins deserved. Romans 3:24-25 expresses it thus: “Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood.” Three words are significant: redemption, propitiation, and blood. *Redemption* is the release of a captive or a slave by the payment of a ransom price; *propitiation* is the appeasing of, and turning away of, God’s wrath by the payment of price; *blood*, Christ’s blood, is the price: it refers to violent, sacrificial death.

Those two things: obedience and atonement constitute Christ’s righteousness, which is the basis on which God declares that we are righteous before Him.

Imputed righteousness

How, then, does the perfect righteousness of Christ become ours? The answer is *imputation*. Imputation is an exceedingly important term. Impute, like justify, is a legal term. The meaning of impute is to consider, to reckon, or to account. It is used multiple times in Romans 4: “It was counted unto him for righteousness” (v. 3); “Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt” (v. 4); “His faith is counted for righteousness” (v. 5); “God imputeth righteousness without works” (v. 6). It is also used in the Reformed creeds. “God, without any merit of mine, grants and imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ” (Heidelberg Catechism, A. 60). “Jesus Christ, imputing to us all His merits and so many holy works which He has done for us and in our stead, is our righteousness” (Belgic Confession, Art. 23).

Paul speaks about this truth also in Romans 3:21-22 without using the word “impute.” In verses 19-20 the apostle demonstrates that justification and righteous-

ness are impossible by the law. The standard of the law is too high; the law shows us our sin but cannot deliver us from our sin. In verses 21-22 the apostle speaks of “the righteousness of God.” This righteousness is something that, first, is “without the law”; second, is revealed by the law and prophets (in the Old Testament); third, is “by faith of Jesus Christ”; and, fourth, is “unto all and upon all them that believe.” In other words, this righteousness is given to believers. This, of course, presupposes that Christ is our legal representative before God: what He did, He did for us, in our place, and in our stead. God gave His Son to be our legal representative. God placed our sins upon Jesus; Jesus willingly stood in our place; He is our Redeemer. So you see how the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ becomes ours: by imputation.

To summarize: Justification is God’s legal declaration that we are righteous, which means that we are in perfect conformity to, or in perfect harmony with, God’s standard, which is the law. The righteousness on the basis of which we are justified is not our works, not our faithfulness, not our imperfect sanctification, but the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ (His obedience, sufferings, and death), which is imputed to us or reckoned to our account freely by God’s grace.

The means: by faith alone

One more thing must be explained: how is righteousness imputed to us? The answer is that we are justified *by faith* without works or we are justified *by faith alone*. While it is true that faith is the activity of knowing, trusting, and receiving Christ, it is not a work. Faith is an activity by which we receive our salvation with all its benefits from God. Faith, says Belgic Confession, Article 35, is the “hand and mouth of our soul.” With the hand and mouth we receive; we do not give. Faith is also not our contribution or a condition that we fulfill; faith is a gift of God and it is part of salvation.

The creeds very carefully explain this: “Not that I am acceptable to God on account of the worthiness of my faith” (Heidelberg Catechism, A. 61); “However, to speak more clearly, we do not mean that faith itself justifies” (Belgic Confession, Art. 22); “The obedience of Christ crucified alone, which becomes ours when we believe in Him” (Belgic Confession, Art. 23); “We by faith, inasmuch as it accepts the merits of Christ, are justified before God and saved” (Canons II, Rejection of errors, 4).

The Bible always uses the prepositions “by” or “through” when describing the role of faith: “By faith of Jesus Christ” (Rom 3:22); “*through* faith in his blood” (Rom. 3:25); “justified *by* faith” (Rom. 3:28); never on

account of, on the basis of, or because of faith. Similarly, Paul writes, “We have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified” (Gal. 4:16); and “not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith” (Phil. 3:9).

In short, faith is the sole instrument by which God imputes Christ’s righteousness to us, and the sole instrument by which we receive His righteousness in our justification. When we believe in Christ, God forgives our sins, and He imputes to us Christ’s righteousness. God says “You, who trust in my Son, are righteous; I justify you not because you believe, but through faith alone; I forgive your sins; I declare you to be in perfect

conformity to, and in full harmony with, my perfect law; I declare you worthy of everlasting life. I do this not because you deserve it, not on the basis of any of your works, not even because you believe, but by my grace, through the gift of faith, and on the basis of what my Son has done for you.”

Thus we respond to the Heidelberg Catechism’s question, “But what doth it profit thee now that thou believest all this?” with this answer, “That I am righteous in Christ, before God, and an heir of eternal life” (Q&A 59); or as Paul writes, God is “just and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus” (Rom. 3:26).

That is the happiness of the believer; is it yours? It is, through believing in Jesus.



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: Internal evidence

Previous article in this series: March 1, 2024, p. 280

New Testament textual criticism is the scholarly work of comparing two or more 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.

When two or more manuscripts have different readings, how does one decide which reading is probably that of the inspired original? The last article answered this question by giving general principles regarding how to decide which textual reading is probably authentic. In sum, many textual critics make decisions based on the age of the Greek *manuscript*, but more helpful is knowing the age of the *reading* of that manuscript. So one must study various Bible versions and the writings of church fathers quoting Scripture, not only Greek manuscripts. And one has a strong witness to a correct reading when a majority of manuscripts, from various geographic regions, spanning many centuries, contain that reading. Specific principles require a more detailed knowledge of individual Greek manuscripts, and of the Greek language.

In addition to knowing Greek and being familiar with Greek manuscripts, textual critics must understand the kinds of errors a scribe might have made, and why he

might have made them. This is known as “internal evidence,” evidence *in* the manuscript itself. We will review the kinds of changes a scribe may have made, and then see how this understanding can be helpful.

Scribal changes

As scribes copied manuscripts, they made changes to the manuscript’s reading. Sometimes these changes were unintentional; they were mistakes. Perhaps one scribe, between the time that he read the words on one manuscript and wrote them on another, forgot exactly which word he was to write. Maybe he used a synonym instead, or maybe he misspelled the Greek word, with the result that an entirely different word was used. To use a hypothetical English example, “rain” became “ran.”

Maybe he remembered which words to write, but changed the order in the new manuscript. Or perhaps he was not *reading* the original, but *listening* to another scribe read it aloud to him and several others. He might have heard a short vowel sound and mistakenly made it a long vowel sound; “pull it” became “polite.” Or he might have heard *ebalon* and switched it to *elabon*. This last example represents two Greek words that mean “I threw” and “I received.”

Adding to the difficulty, some manuscripts were written with all capital letters, and all early manuscripts lacked punctuation and spaces between words. So the scribe had to figure out where one word or sentence ended and another began: “atonement” could become “at one me,” with the last two letters being joined to the next word.

Another difficulty is that some scribes used abbreviations; the Greek word for God, *theos*, was often written “ths,” with a line above the “s” to indicate that the scribe had abbreviated.¹ Yet another is that some Greek letters look similar, so a scribe could have inadvertently changed one into the other.

Then there are changes that a scribe may have made intentionally. To be clear, early scribes generally had a high view of God’s Word, and were not careless with it. But one scribe may have thought that the person who wrote the manuscript that he was copying forgot a cardinal rule of grammar, so the copying scribe decided to make the statement accord with rules of grammar. Perhaps he tried to fix what he thought was a historical, factual, or doctrinal error in the manuscript he was copying.

In their own way, scribes were doing the work of textual criticism. They were trying to figure out what the autographa (inspired originals) really said. They did not, however, have many manuscripts to compare.

Recognizing and evaluating these changes

When comparing two manuscripts, it is not difficult to recognize places where scribal changes explain the difference in readings. A simple change in word order, without a change in the words, is most likely explained this way. And in Greek, word order does not affect the meaning of the sentence, so inverting words is not a significant textual critical problem. One still knows which words God spoke to the church through the apostles.

A textual critic who sees that the difference in manuscripts is between a short vowel and a long vowel will recognize that a scribal error may explain the difference. In the end, the tense or mood of the word may have changed, and the textual critic must figure out which is correct.²

1 In I Timothy 3:16, the KJV has “God was manifested in the flesh,” while other versions have “he was manifested.” The Greek word for God, if abbreviated, looks very much like the relative pronoun “who,” which could explain the translation “he.”

2 See Herman Hoeksema, *Righteous by Faith Alone* (RFPA: Grandville, MI, 2002), 182, 188. Hoeksema explains the difference between the KJV and RV in Romans 5:1; the issue, at bottom, is the difference between a short vowel and a long vowel

Recognizing is one thing. Determining with certainty which scribe or manuscript was correct is a different matter. Was the first scribe really wrong, and the second scribe truly helpful? Or was the second scribe too sure of his own judgment, and did he corrupt the reading? If in every instance we knew the ancestry of every manuscript, we could look back and see more easily where the scribes made mistakes. But we do not know in every instance which manuscript was copied from which.

Textual critics use several guidelines to help them in such instances. Following are six guidelines. First, the more difficult reading is probably correct; scribes were more likely to try to make a difficult matter more clear, rather than make a clear matter more difficult. Second, the shorter reading is probably correct. Scribes were more likely to add words than to omit words. Third, when you have an instance of three readings in which two readings are clearly different and the third tries to integrate both, the reading that appears first in the sentence is usually correct.³ Scribes are more likely to insert first that of which they are certain, and then add the less certain words.

Fourth, in the case of parallel readings (the same narrative in different gospel accounts), a reading that does *not* harmonize with the parallel is more likely correct. Scribes were more likely to try to explain what Matthew said by what Mark said than they were to add a detail that no other gospel account contains. Fifth, that reading is less likely correct when one can easily explain how it was the result of a scribal error. Finally, the reading that fits the context is more likely true.

These guidelines have an apparent logic to them, but they are not flawless. First, they make *assumptions* about why a scribe may have done what he did. The textual critic living in Europe or North America in the last two centuries might think these assumptions are safe. But what are we overlooking? What thoughts did a fifth-century scribe in Constantinople have? What led him to make the choices he made? And how can a twenty-first century textual critic be sure of the mind of the scribe?

Second, the answer the textual critic gives to these questions is *subjective*. His answer is an educated guess that convinces him and others. But that answer is only his sense of what the right answer must be. Why did the scribe make the choice that he made?

in the Greek verb. The short vowel presents the verb in the indicative mood, and the long vowel in the subjunctive mood.

3 As an example, one manuscript uses the word “trees,” a second uses the word “birds,” and a third combines them to read “the trees and the birds.”

Third, not infrequently the guidelines lead to conflicting answers. When the more difficult reading (to be preferred) is the longer reading, the first and second of these guidelines come into conflict. Perhaps a reading in Matthew does not harmonize with Mark and yet seems not to fit the context; then the fourth and sixth guidelines conflict.

The value of internal evidence for textual criticism

In textual criticism, more weight must be placed on the external evidence (the Greek manuscripts, Bible versions, lectionaries, and church fathers) and less weight on the internal evidence. “Less weight” does not mean no weight at all; but internal evidence must bear less weight than the external.

The previous paragraph is controversial. Most textual critics who give more weight to two “earliest and most reliable manuscripts” than to the majority of manuscripts also assign more weight to internal evidence. Why would a scribe change what the “earliest and most reliable” had?

But I stand by what I said two paragraphs ago. One can evaluate external evidence more objectively than internal. The Greek manuscripts, Bible versions, and church fathers speak for themselves. How or why a scribe made a change is not unimportant to ask, but in

the end our goal is to recognize what most likely was the change and what was the reading of the autographa. Using the basic principles set forth in the last article, and summarized in the second paragraph of this article, we can determine in most instances what the autographa read.

So the main value of internal evidence for textual criticism is that it provides supportive evidence when one has already made a strong case for a reading by using external evidence. When one has studied the Greek manuscripts, the Bible versions, and the church fathers, and come to a conclusion, and then finds that by understanding why and how one scribe might have introduced a change, one is the more convinced that he knows what the autographa probably read.

In the last article, we saw why the “oldest” manuscripts are not necessarily the most reliable. This point is furthered by noting the difficulty of using internal evidence. We do not dismiss the earliest manuscripts as unimportant. But even they are dated almost two hundred years after the original gospel accounts and epistles were written. The scribes that copied them were as capable of making mistakes as were any later scribes.

In the end, as we said last time, the real issue is not the age of the manuscript, but the age of the reading.



Go ye into all the world

Rev. Richard Smit, pastor of Randolph PRC in Randolph, Wisconsin

The three-self formula and PRCA foreign missions (12)

Previous article in this series: April 1, 2024, p. 324.

In this article, we conclude our observations from the book of Acts that the early New Testament churches, established by means of the mission labors of the apostles, manifested in their institutional life the threefold Christian character of being self-governing, self-propagating, and self-supporting. In particular, we consider now that these churches were self-propagating and self-supporting.

After the history of the Jerusalem church at the end of Acts 2, newly established churches were self-propagating. Although this would be true of all the congregations established in the apostolic age, clear examples

of this are the churches in Jerusalem and Antioch. They not only had the Word of God preached in their midst faithfully (Acts 2:42; Acts 11:26), but they also sent out preachers for the spread of the gospel outside their congregations. The church in Jerusalem sent out Peter and John to Samaria (Acts 8:14), Paul to Tarsus (Acts 9:30), and Barnabas to Antioch (Acts 11:22). The church in Antioch sent Barnabas and Paul on their missionary work (Acts 13:3-4) and then sent Paul and Silas on Paul's second missionary journey (Acts 15:40).

The churches continued to approve and ordain ministers of the Word for the growing demand for preachers.

A clear example of this is found in Acts 15:35, “Paul and Barnabas continued in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.” Paul and Barnabas did not preach singlehandedly, but there were many others also who assisted them in the self-proclaiming work of the church in Antioch. Furthermore, the ordination of these additional preachers in the church of Antioch did not need the approbation of the church in Jerusalem, but the church in Antioch had the right to preach the Word through her own trained, approved, and ordained ministers of the Word. Later, the apostle Paul admonished Timothy and the church at Ephesus regarding the duty of the church to train new ministers of the Word in order to supply preachers to the churches and to the work of missions (II Tim. 2:2).

Regarding the characteristic of being self-supporting, the churches throughout Palestine and other areas in the Roman Empire, after the history of Acts 2, showed this equally important aspect of their threefold Christian character.

There is evidence that the churches faithfully supported the ordained ministers of the Word and sacraments. As the people of God were fed with the spiritual things of the Word of God, they in thankfulness to the Lord provided for the earthly needs of the apostles and other ministers of the Word. The apostle Peter was lodged by the saints at Lydda and by Simon, the tanner, at Joppa (Acts 9:32-43). He, along with the accompanying delegation, was lodged by Cornelius and his household in Caesarea (Acts 10:48). After Lydia’s conversion and the baptism of her and her household, Lydia provided lodging for the apostle Paul and his colleagues. Later, after their unjust imprisonment, Paul and Silas returned to the house of Lydia for continued lodging (Acts 16:15, 40). The Philippian church provided ministerial support to Paul even while he was laboring in Thessalonica (Phil. 4:16). Later, during his first imprisonment, Paul instructed the churches in Ephesus and Corinth that they provide their preachers their rightful and fitting ministerial support (I Tim. 5:18; I Cor. 9:14). Thus, the churches in the apostolic age learned and demonstrated that it was their sacred duty to provide financial support for their preachers so that they could devote themselves to the administration of the spiritual things of God’s Word unto the churches.

Further, there is evidence that the churches faithfully supported the poor with benevolence. The apostles and the churches in the Roman Empire understood their institutional work and duty towards the poor saints with benevolence through the work of deacons. This faithfulness to the support of the poor was shown in the church in Jerusalem. The care of the poor went so well

that the Scripture records that “neither was there any among them that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold and laid them down at the apostles’ feet: and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need” (Acts 4:34-35).

What happened when churches in a particular locality or region, due to some calamity or severe persecution according to God’s providence, were not able to support sufficiently the poor under their care with benevolence? Churches in the apostolic age supported other churches in times of calamity with inter-church, or inter-diaconal, benevolence assistance. When the famine that was prophesied by the prophet Agabus came to pass in Judea, the church in Antioch answered the great benevolence need of the suffering saints in Judea and Jerusalem: “Then the disciples, every man according to his ability, determined to send relief unto the brethren which dwelt in Judea: which also they did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul” (Acts 11:29-30). Upon receiving the gift, the elders would have entrusted to the deacons the faithful distribution of the benevolence to those in need.

Years later, the churches in Galatia, Macedonia, and Achaia were admonished by Paul to give cheerfully to the need for benevolence, not only in their local churches, but also to the cause of benevolence for the poor saints at the church in Jerusalem (Rom. 15:25-27; I Cor. 16:1-3; II Cor. 8-9). This inter-church, or inter-diaconal assistance, for the work of benevolence helped the poor saints in Jerusalem so that they had their own daily bread and could continue to support their own preachers according to their duty.

The need for the churches to support the poor under their care was emphasized by the apostle Paul when he gave his farewell remarks to the church of Ephesus upon his departure at Miletus. Paul said, “I have shewed you all things, how that so laboring, ye ought to support the weak, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). The church in Ephesus was given the grace to adhere to that instruction. As a result, the Ephesian church was observed and remembered by Paul, not only for their faith and knowledge of the truth in the Lord Jesus, but also for their love unto all the saints, which love would have included their benevolence support for their needy, fellow saints (Eph. 1:15).

These biblical examples from the history of churches in the apostolic age are an encouragement for Protestant Reformed foreign missions. This is an encouragement that the labor of foreign missions continues to aim towards the goal of newly formed mission churches, sub-

ject to the Lord's will and blessing, that embrace and demonstrate their three-self autonomy under and in the service of our Lord Jesus Christ. As demonstrated before, but worth repeating here, that aim stands in harmony with the Belgic Confession, Article 30, regarding the goal of instituted churches, with the three church offices, demonstrating its threefold Christian character of self-government, self-propagation, and self-support.

We believe that this true church must be governed by that spiritual policy which our Lord hath taught us in His Word; namely, that there must be ministers or pastors to preach the Word of God, and to administer the sacraments; also elders and deacons, who, together with the pastors, form the council of the church: that by these means the true religion may be preserved, and the true doctrine everywhere propagated, likewise transgressors punished and restrained by spiritual means: also that the poor and distressed may be relieved and comforted, according to their necessities.

When this goal is pursued by faith within faithful labors and much prayer, then foreign missions may know

and be assured of the Lord's blessing upon its work towards native, Christian, distinctively Reformed churches who are from their outset self-governing, self-propagating, and self-supporting. For the attaining of that goal, faithful missionaries may trust in Jehovah and His indispensable blessing that He will make those labors effectual by the wondrous power of His Holy Spirit (Ps. 127:1). Jehovah will do that for the ingathering of His church, through His daily and pre-determined additions of believers, in His time and according to His purpose (Acts 2:47).

Accordingly, then, let foreign missionaries, as they are lawfully sent by the church to their specific field of labor, go and tell!

Declare his glory among the heathen, his wonders among all people. For the LORD is great, and greatly to be praised: He is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the nations are idols: but the LORD made the heavens. Honour and majesty are before him: strength and beauty are in his sanctuary (Ps. 96:3-6).



Pertaining to the churches in common Domestic Missions

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

Domestic Missions Newsletter

Dear brothers and sisters in our Lord,

Recently my wife and I made trips to Texas and Hungary. According to the decision of Synod 1993, Hungary and all of Europe fall under Domestic Missions. It was a great joy to begin to get to know some of the saints in both places, and we are very much looking forward to working with them in the future.

Texas

Our trip to Texas in December went very well. We had an opportunity to visit with five men named Brandon, Jeffrey, Leonard, Rusty, and Samuel.

We have come into contact with a number of people through Samuel. He is a widower in his forties who has contact with many people in the Fort Worth area and elsewhere. His work involves overseeing those who live in a number of half-way houses for those who have been recently released from prison. This brother has a gift for

teaching. A number of the contacts that he has directed to us have come to know the Reformed faith through his instruction.

After we returned home we started a Zoom class with those whom we met in Texas as well as some others. Since starting these Zoom classes we have met (via Zoom) three others who have joined the class. Two of the men talked with their mothers and they joined the class as well.

Those in the Zoom class are often watching it on their phones. The goal is to provide not only doctrinal, but also practical and personal instruction. Those in the class are given opportunity to ask questions or make comments along the way.

Hungary

The trip to Hungary went extremely well. We visited quite a few saints during this trip and plan to start a Zoom class with them on February 15.

We met a number of young adults who show a zeal for receiving instruction. Some of the ones we visited were Ádám, Kornélia, Dalma, János and his wife Eszta, and Bendegúz and Mária and their three children.

Ádám, Kornélia, and Dalma are single adults in their thirties. They and some of the others whom we met speak English fluently. Others can understand a fair amount of English, but sometimes need a translation.



The children of Bendegúz and Mária are learning English in school, and we were able to converse a little bit with their oldest daughter.

We gathered together for worship on both of the Sundays that we were there. Ádám had rented a room at a building that was about a ten-minute walk from where we stayed. We met at 2:00 in the afternoon, so that the ones who came could also attend the church that they normally do on the Lord's day. The first Sunday I spoke on John 10:27-29 about the Good Shepherd saving His sheep. I took this opportunity to give instruction on salvation by grace alone or what we often call the TULIP. The second Sunday I spoke on Psalm 25:14 and gave instruction on God's unconditional, everlasting covenant. Ádám read the Scripture passages in Hungarian and translated what I said. We sang from Hungarian psalters which Ádám brought with him. We expressed to these saints what a joy it was for us to worship together with them.

There were a couple of others in attendance when we worshiped on Sunday. Kornélia had invited one man to join on the first Sunday we were there and another man to worship with us on the second. It was great to see how zealous she was to invite others.

On the Tuesday between the two Sundays we took the subway and an intercity train to travel a little over an hour south of Budapest to a town called Sárbogárd. There we had a very nice visit with Pastor Bálint and his wife Kati and their three children. They have visited Covenant PRC in Northern Ireland and have stayed with

the Stewarts. Pastor Bálint is a minister in the Hungarian Reformed Church and has translated a number of RFPA books into Hungarian. He is the main one providing Covenant PRC with Hungarian translations of various works which are then posted on Covenant's website.

There are others in Hungary with whom we have come into contact since we returned. Ádám told us about a woman named Zsuzsuanna who desires to be part of the Zoom class. Ádám wrote to me also about a woman named Krisztina whom he thought would be interested in the class. When I sent out a group email about the Zoom class she quickly responded and said that she would like to be a part of it. Recently Ádám wrote me about a man named Alexandru who lives in Transylvania, which is part of Romania. Ádám thought that he also would be interested in the class.

The place where we stayed worked well. It was centrally located in the city, and they have a very good public transportation system. It was easy for us to travel to others and for others to get to us. It was also at a junction called Kalvin tér, where nearby there was a statue of John Calvin and a restaurant called Kalvin Kabob.

Going forward

To give more personal instruction to the saints in both locations it will be good for us to visit them again soon. Paul spoke of giving instruction publicly "and from house to house" (Acts 20:20). Undoubtedly it is going to be very important to have this "house to house" or at least "face to face" instruction in addition to the Zoom instruction from week to week.

We will likely also come into contact with more saints just by getting out there. As was the case this past time, some may visit us when they hear that we are in the area, just as Sergius Paulus "called for Barnabas and Saul, and desired to hear the word of God" (Acts 13:7). With this in mind we are planning to make another trip to Texas in April and are discussing the possibility of returning to Hungary in June.

The saints in Hungary desired us to express to you their appreciation for sending us to visit with them. It was such a joy to study and discuss the Scriptures together and to worship with them on the Lord's day. We have also been enjoying spending a bit of time studying Hungarian. When we were about to leave, the three whom we visited with the most gave us a New Testament with English on the left column and Hungarian on the right. We thanked them for the gift, and expressed to them that it has been a joy to get to know them and that we are looking forward to our future work together.

In the service of our Lord,
Rev. James Laning



Strength of youth

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

A conspiracy against the word

...Preserve and increase Thy church; destroy the works of the devil and all violence which would exalt itself against Thee: and also, all wicked counsels devised against Thy holy Word.

Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 48

Satan's ploy in history

Three hundred years after the first coming of King Jesus, the Devil used an antichrist named Emperor Diocletian to organize the most violent persecution against Christ's church that the world has yet known. The prior persecutions under rulers like Nero and Domitian were considered minor in comparison to the shocking atrocities under Diocletian's edicts. Heeding the advice of his son-in-law Galerius, the king began his carnage with two decrees: first, the destruction of all church buildings; and second, the confiscation and burning of all Bibles.¹

Satan has always devised wicked conspiracies against the preaching and reading of the inspired Scriptures. He knows the benefit of the Scriptures. He knows they are "able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus" (II Tim. 3:15). He knows the God-breathed Word is "profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" (II Tim. 3:16). He knows that when a young man or woman learns the Scriptures from youth, he is made perfect and "thoroughly furnished unto all good works" (II Tim. 3:17). Thus he hates that Word, and he never ceases to rage and scheme against it. This is not a conspiracy *theory* along with many others found online; this is a conspiracy *reality* exposed by God Himself in Scripture, the confessions, and church history.

During the Middle Ages, the very church leaders who were supposed to give the Word to God's people withheld it from them. In 1199, the pope raged against the common people reading God's Word: "As by the old law,

the beast touching the holy mount was to be stoned to death, so simple and uneducated men were not to touch the Bible...."² The church officially forbade the laity to have the text of Scripture in their own language, insisting on its preservation (or imprisonment) in Latin and threatening the excommunication of those who dared translate it into the vulgar (common) tongue. German Archbishop Bertholdt claimed that "the Scriptures are not to be given to simple and unlearned men and, above all, are not to be put into the hands of women."³ In this way, the Prince of darkness tried to keep the Word of the gospel from shining into the hearts of the people.

Clearly recognizing the ploy of Satan, the leaders of the Reformation did all they could to translate the Scriptures. It was especially the translation of Scripture into English that faced vehement opposition. Well known are the words of William Tyndale: "If God spares my life, I will make it so in England that ploughboys will know more of the Bible than many of the priests do now."⁴ In angry response to Tyndale's translation and publication of the New Testament, the bishop of London purchased as many copies of the new translation as he could and held a public burning of them. Then in 1536, the Roman church strangled and burned Tyndale himself. Such is the Evil one's hatred of the Word.

Satan's ploy today

Some of the Devil's strategies against the Word are easy to discern; others are far subtler than burning Bibles. Are God's people aware of his tactics today? Or do they foolishly imagine that he has decided to give up on his plan to take the Word away from God's people?

The young person and his parent, living in our modern society of affluence, might be skeptical that this is still the Devil's ploy. After all, do we not still have many

¹ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church: Ante-Nicene Christianity A.D. 100-325* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006), 64-70.

² Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church: The Middle Ages A.D. 1294-1517* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006), 723.

³ Schaff, 725.

⁴ Diana Kleyn and Joel Beeke, *Reformation Heroes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2007), 64.

printed copies of the Bible? Do we not have unlimited access to electronic versions of the same Scriptures on our devices? Why should we be concerned? If anything, there seems to be a proliferation of the inspired text, not an incineration. Are there not many other conspiracies that we should be concerned about?

Beware of his subtlety! For he will never cease to plot the removal of God's Word from God's people. Imagine a day, not far in the distant future, when hard copies of the Bible have been mostly discarded and replaced by the electronic versions at our fingertips. How easy the Bible is to access! Yet how easy also for those in power to deny our access. It is not difficult to envision the day when you attempt to open up your Bible app and a white box appears on the screen saying, "Update required." If an antichrist like Diocletian one day virtually incinerates all Bible app options and updates, how many people will find a Bible to use? The Serpent's subtle maneuvers may already be in motion as we store much of our memory of the Word in the cloud and other online platforms.

The greatest concern, however, ought to be the Devil's present stratagem of preventing the Word from entering the minds of people. He deludes us when we are put at ease with the illusion of a million copies of the Bible available on our touchscreens. He whispers the lie of modern technology that it is no longer necessary to use our brains to store the Scriptures because of all the gigabytes of memory in our devices. He grins as entertainment so stimulates, distracts, and addicts so that for many, reading full sentences word for word becomes impossibly boring. As media displace books in our libraries, amusement displaces clear musing. Those still able to focus long enough to read or listen to a book or sacred text have extreme difficulty comprehending what they read, and very few who manage to comprehend actually engage in the exercise of meditation or critical thinking. So shallow is the thinking and so darkened is the understanding that for many, the Bible may as well be in Latin as it was in the Middle Ages.

In 1943, C.S. Lewis published a book still very relevant and worth a re-reading in which he depicts a senior demon named Screwtape writing letters of advice to a rookie demon. As you read these demonic strategies, recognize how Satan lures many away from the Word in an eerily similar manner:

Jargon, not argument, is your best ally in keeping him from the Church. Don't waste your time trying to make him think materialism is *true*! Make him think it is strong or stark or courageous—that it is the philosophy of the future. That's the sort of thing he cares about....

Your business is to fix his attention on the stream. Teach him to call it "real life" and don't let him ask what he means by "real." ...One day, as he sat reading, I saw a train of thought in his mind beginning to go the wrong way.... If I had lost my head and begun to attempt a defense by argument, I should have been undone. But I was not such a fool. I struck instantly on the part of the man which I had best under my control, and suggested that it was just about time he had some lunch.... Once he was in the street the battle was won. I showed him a newsboy shouting the midday paper, and a No. 73 bus going past, and before he reached the bottom steps, I had got into him an unalterable conviction that, whatever odd ideas might come into a man's head when he was shut up alone with his books, a healthy dose of "real life" (by which he meant the bus and the newsboy) was enough to show him that all "that sort of thing" just couldn't be true.... Do remember you are there to fuddle him. From the way some of you young fiends talk, anyone would suppose it was our job to *teach*!⁵

Distraction is one of Satan's most successful stratagems. Distract from the Word. Whether it be with lunch, a newsboy, and a bus or with sound notifications, social media posts, and online games, his ploy is distraction from thinking about that Word. Since what is real or true is found in the Word, Satan more than ever before lures us away from it with modern technology. Further demonic advice:

...but all has been occupied by Noise—Noise, the grand dynamism, the audible expression of all that is exultant, ruthless, and virile—Noise which alone defends us from silly qualms, despairing scruples, and impossible desires. We will make the whole universe a noise in the end. We have already made great strides in this direction as regards Earth. The melodies and silences of Heaven will be shouted down in the end. But I admit we are not yet loud enough....⁶

Can young people focus on the Word above the noises on their phones and in their heads? Can we read and think in the midst of all that noise? He doesn't need to burn the Bibles or keep it in Latin. He can simply make the world full of noises and pictures from the Internet to distract your mind and heart from thinking too deeply about the Word of God.

Resisting his ploy

Knowing the Devil's wicked counsels devised against

⁵ C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Macmillan, 1969), 8-10.

⁶ Lewis, 103.

God's Word, how are we responding? We should not be afraid. "For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind" (II Tim. 1:7). We trust in the promises of God in Jesus Christ that He will preserve us unto the end. Yet our response may not be passivity. What are we doing about it? While trusting in our Savior, we ought to be taking measures to resist the Devil.

God's people must resist together. "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (James 4:7b). As Daniel and his three friends in the midst of Babylon wisely refused to eat of the king's table, we ought seriously to consider total abstinence from digital usage until a certain age. That is wisdom, not legalism. At the very least, wisdom would mean a drastic limitation of device usage among our children and young people. Parents and teachers in our Christian schools should be making a concerted ef-

fort to help our children limit their screen-time—not only with rules for the children but with careful explanations and by their own example of self-control.

While limiting the consumption of media, our youth should be consuming books—yes, the kind with thick spines to hold and thin pages to turn. And most importantly, we need to be reading *the Book*, slowly, word for word, meditating, without distractions nearby to interrupt our quiet thoughts upon divine revelation. Search the Scriptures daily as those Bereans (Acts 17:11), meditating on His law day and night (Ps. 1:2), hiding His Word in your heart (Ps. 119:11).

Fight for true knowledge of the Scriptures, young people. Constantly and strenuously engage in the battle against the Devil and all his wicked counsels against God's holy Word.



Church and state

Mr. Brian VanEngen, member of the Hull PRC in Hull, Iowa and a practicing attorney

Congress and the Supreme Court review exclusion of religious and conservative groups

It is not often that we would think of an article on banking regulations as a topic that would fit in a rubric addressing Church and State religious liberty matters. However, a recent gaffe by the late-night comedy show "Saturday Night Live" recently brought attention to an issue that is of growing concern to Christians. The comedy show, which frequently mocks religious and conservative individuals, often includes a segment called "Weekend Update," depicting a news report in which the actors portray news reporters and anchors. In a recent episode, the show attempted to mock former President Donald Trump's use of the term "debanking" in a campaign speech in New Hampshire. The show indicated that the former president had a mental stumble and had made up the term, joking that he may have to take "de-ambulance to see de-doctor."

Many different sources were quick to point out that "de-banking" is in fact a recognized banking term, and that Saturday Night Live may wish to vet their jokes better before attempting to mock someone. However, the whole incident brought light to an issue that is

of growing concern. Debanking, which is sometimes referred to as "derisking," is the practice of closing a customer's accounts when the bank perceives that the customer poses a financial, legal, regulatory, or reputational risk to the bank. More traditionally, this practice would be used to eliminate customers that the bank thought might embroil them in legal matters or damage the bank's reputation by affiliation with seedy businesses engaged in activities such as money laundering, illegal drugs, or prostitution. The concern is that more recently, it appears that this practice is being used to eliminate customers who hold unpopular moral or political views, such as groups with conservative religious and political stances.

Under the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, as well as individual state constitutions, citizens have the right to practice their religions as they see fit. The Supreme Court has long held that government can only infringe on these rights if there is a compelling government interest, and any infringement must be narrowly tailored to accomplish a legitimate

government purpose.¹ The First Amendment also guarantees the right to Free Speech, which allows citizens to express their beliefs without fear of reprisal from the government, with very limited exceptions. Any action of the government to the contrary may be struck down as unconstitutional.

However, the freedoms guaranteed in the First Amendment are freedoms from infringement only by the government, and work to restrain the government, not private businesses. Therefore private businesses can generally limit speech or religious exercise of those with whom they deal. For instance, a business can refuse to print a message that the owners disagree with, as long as they are not discriminating against a protected class, such as members of a certain racial group. As has been discussed in this rubric, the Supreme Court has even held that a Christian baker did not have to bake a cake celebrating a homosexual marriage.²

The problem that the debanking issue highlights is the possibility of the government using regulations to pressure banks or other businesses to take actions against certain religious or political groups. Using this means, the government could work to stifle free speech or limit the free exercise of religion through a business, when it could not do so itself. There is evidence that such government coercion is taking place today.

In today's world, most of our day-to-day transactions are accomplished through electronic transactions connected with a bank or a credit card issued by a bank. Imagine if your bank were suddenly to terminate your accounts, effectively eliminating your access to your funds to buy groceries, to fill your car with gas, or to purchase airline tickets. An organization that experiences this would not be able to carry out its normal day-to-day functions, effectively shutting it down until other arrangements could be made, new accounts established, and those accounts linked to suppliers as necessary.

This is the scenario experienced by Indigenous Advance Ministries, a Christian non-profit that helps Ugandan widows and children. Bank of America notified the organization that it was closing their deposit and credit card accounts, first stating that “we have determined you’re operating in a business type we have chosen not to service at Bank of America.”³ The bank later indicated that the non-profit “no longer aligns with the bank’s risk

tolerance.” The disruption resulted in the organization scrambling to find a new bank, while five employees in Uganda went without a paycheck for an extra week.

A number of religious or conservative organizations have been terminated in similar manner, some with vague explanations, some with more overt reference to their religious or political viewpoints. The Ruth Institute, a Christian non-profit organization, was informed by Wells Fargo that their account was being terminated because it was “affiliated with a product/service that promotes hate, violence, harassment and/or abuse.”⁴ Heartbeat International, Inc., a pro-life organization, was bluntly informed by its insurer that its policy was canceled and that Heartbeat’s stance on legalized abortion precipitated that move.⁵

The actions of some of these companies may be explained in part by a desire to increase their Environmental, Social, Governance (ESG) score.⁶ There is increasing demand by activists to rate companies based on these factors, and brokerage firms now list a company’s ESG score among the first items of information about a company. The environmental score is largely based on environmental protection policies, and the social component is based on matters such as civil rights recognition and diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) considerations. Anheuser-Busch recently created a firestorm when they put a transgender man on a can of Bud Light beer, and some suspect the move was intended to raise the company’s ESG score.⁷ Similarly, a company could raise its ESG score by terminating affiliations to individuals or companies who express disapproval of such lifestyles.

However, it appears that some state and federal government agencies may also be pressuring companies to cut off business ties to conservative and religious organizations. In order to investigate these allegations further, the House Judiciary Committee established a subcommittee known as the Select Subcommittee on the Weaponization of the Federal Government. On March 6, 2024, the Subcommittee released documents that show that the U.S. Treasury Department’s Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (FinCen) colluded with large banking institutions to monitor their customers to identify domestic threats and shared a list of “hate groups” published by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD)

1 See for example *Sherbert v. Verner*, 374 U.S. 398 (1963); *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, 406 U.S. 205 (1972).

2 *Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission*, 584 U.S. ____; 138 S. Ct. 1719 (2018).

3 <https://adflegal.org/press-release/bank-america-boots-charity-serving-impovertised-ugandans-under-vague-risk-tolerance>

4 <https://www.viewpointdiversityscore.org/resources/instances-of-viewpoint-based-de-banking>

5 Amicus Brief of Heartbeat International at 1, *National Rifle Association v. Vullo*, No. 22-842. (U.S. March 6, 2023).

6 Tedesco, Jeremy and Bahnsen, David L., “How to fight the Politicization of Business.” *The National Review*, May 17, 2023.

7 McGowan, Jon, “Was Bud Light’s Dylan Mulvaney Decision About ESG?” *Forbes*, April 12, 2023.

to help them do so. The ISD includes “Anti-LGBTQ+” as an example of a hate group. South Carolina Senator Tim Scott recently wrote to the Department of the Treasury inquiring about allegations that the FinCen has “urged private financial institutions to surveil customer’s transaction-level data using politically charged search terms.” The terms mentioned were “Trump,” “MAGA,” “Bass ProShops,” “Gander Mountain,” “Cabela’s,” and “Dick’s Sporting Goods”. The institutions were apparently also notified that people purchasing “religious texts” were another heightened risk for extremism.

The National Rifle Association (NRA) brought action against Maria T. Vullo, the Superintendent of the New York Department of Financial Services, alleging that she had encouraged financial institutions to reconsider their relationship with the NRA, and used public investigations and threats of fines to intimidate insurance companies into dropping the NRA as a client.⁸ The

U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit sided with Vullo, and the NRA appealed the matter to the Supreme Court. Arguments are scheduled for March 18, 2024. We will wait to see the ruling of the Supreme Court, both for the decision and to see the breadth of the ruling.

By this point, I am sure the reader has also had the words of Revelation 13:16-17 come to mind, where Scripture speaks of the anti-Christian kingdom: “And he causeth all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and bond, to receive a mark in their right hand, or in their foreheads: And that no man might buy or sell, save he that had the mark, or the name of the beast, or the number of his name.”

At this point in history, it is easy to envision a world where those who remain faithful will not be able to buy or sell. We can be comforted by the fact that as we see the events of history unfold, they unfold just as the Lord has revealed they would.

⁸ *National Rifle Association v. Vullo*, No. 22-842. (U.S. March 6, 2023).

Report of Classis West



Meeting March 6-7, 2024

Classis West of the Protestant Reformed Churches met on March 6-7, 2024, in Randolph (WI) PRC. The congregation did an outstanding job of hosting the twenty-five delegates from the thirteen churches in the Classis, as well as a number of visitors.

Classis began on Wednesday, March 6, with opening devotions led by the chairman of the previous meeting, Rev. John Marcus (pastor of Peace PRC), who gave a fitting meditation on Solomon’s request for wisdom from I Kings 3. After Classis was legally constituted, the meeting was capably chaired by Rev. Stephan Regnerus (pastor of Hull PRC).

Two first-time delegates to Classis signed the Formula of Subscription, the minutes of the previous meeting of Classis were approved, and the four questions of Article 41 of the Church Order were asked and answered. Routine reports of the stated clerk, classical committee, and reading sermon committee were read and approved. The church visitors reported on their work and the presence of unity, peace, and love prevailing in the churches, in spite of busyness and hardships in the last year. The chairman appointed five committees of pre-advice, and then Classis recessed to allow the committees time to prepare advice.

In closed session, Classis treated the legality of sever-

al matters on the agenda in the late morning and early afternoon. In open session, Classis treated the legality of the appeal of individuals who requested of the Crete PRC consistory that they provide a thorough report of the case of Mr. Jack Lenting (a former member who was excommunicated for his crimes of sexual abuse), that they conduct an investigation by experts into the case, and that they communicate care for potential victims and families of victims. Classis declared the appeal not legally before it. But Classis then mandated the committee of pre-advice to provide advice regarding a letter that the Crete PRC consistory had recently distributed to the denomination regarding this case.

On Wednesday evening, Classis treated in closed session the report of a special committee assigned by Classis to help a consistory regarding a case of sexual abuse. Classis approved the work of the committee up to this point.

Classis then recessed until Thursday mid-morning in order to allow the committees of pre-advice time to work.

On Thursday morning, Classis continued to address in closed session the work of the special committee. Classis approved giving further mandates to the special committee as to their work with the consistory going forward.

Still in closed session, Classis considered the appeal of a couple against the discipline work of their consistory with them. Classis did not sustain their appeal, and thus upheld the discipline work of the consistory.

That afternoon, Classis considered the advice of the committee to provide advice regarding a letter that the Crete PRC consistory had recently distributed to the denomination. Classis encouraged the consistory to continue the work of compassionately shepherding those who have been subjected to the grooming and abuse of Mr. Jack Lenting; encouraged the consistory to continue its work of investigating matters related to the case, including a possible independent investigation; approved funds for a possible independent investigation; and mandated the church visitors to follow up with the consistory regarding these matters. Classis also expressed its grief over the wickedness of child sexual abuse and grooming perpetrated by Mr. Lenting, a man of influence in Crete PRC, Classis West, and the denomination. Classis grieves with all who were wickedly groomed and victimized by Mr. Lenting, sorrows over the untold anguish this has caused victims, and laments the fact that a man who had such influence in Crete PRC, Classis West, and the denomination betrayed the trust of many and caused severe pain and confusion. We pray that our just and merciful heavenly Father would comfort those

cruelly victimized with the promise of his Word: “The Lord also will be a refuge for the oppressed, a refuge in times of trouble. And they that know thy name will put their trust in thee: for thou, Lord, hast not forsaken them that seek thee” (Ps. 9:9-10). Classis also took time to pray for the victims of Mr. Lenting.

Classis then addressed a matter coming from Loveland PRC consistory, which had been tasked by a previous Classis to oversee the remaining members of the Covenant of Grace PRC (Spokane, WA) after the departure of most of their officebearers. Classis took the sad decision to concur with Loveland PRC’s decision to disband the Covenant of Grace congregation. Classis advised the remaining members to continue for the present as a fellowship under the oversight of Loveland PRC until decisions can be made about the future. Classis also advised that Loveland PRC ask the denominational Domestic Mission Committee to evaluate whether the group can continue as a fellowship. Classis instructed its stated clerk to send a letter to the saints in Spokane expressing its love and prayers for them.

Classis treated in closed session an appeal of a couple in which they objected to a consistory’s discipline work with one of its members. Classis sustained their appeal, and gave advice to the consistory going forward.

Classis made a schedule of pulpit supply for the three vacant congregations in the Classis: Hope (Redlands, CA) PRC, Loveland (CO) PRC, and Lynden (WA) PRC. Classis West also decided to ask Classis East for assistance in covering two Sundays for each of the vacant congregations in the next six months.

Classis approved the subsidy requests for 2025 for three congregations and forwarded them on to Synod 2024 for its approval.

Throughout the meeting, Classis also voted for various classical functionaries. Mr. Ed Van Egdom (Heritage PRC) was appointed to finish the term of the previous Assistant Stated Clerk. Rev. Ryan Barnhill was reappointed to a three-year term on the Classical Committee. Rev. Daniel Kleyn was appointed to a three-year term as a *primus* synodical deputy, and Rev. John Marcus was re-appointed to a three-year term as a *secundus* synodical deputy. Classis appointed Revs. Allen Brummel, Ronald Hanko, Steven Key, and Daniel Kleyn as church visitors, with Revs. John Marcus and Richard Smit as alternates.

Ministers delegated to Synod 2024 were Revs. Ryan Barnhill, Allen Brummel, Joshua Engelsma, Daniel Kleyn, and Richard Smit. Alternates are Revs. Matthew De Boer, Matthew Koerner, John Marcus, and Stephan Regnerus. Elders delegated to Synod 2024 were Robert Brands (Loveland), Duane Bruinsma (Crete), Jeff Krosschell (Ran-

dolph), Alvern Miersma (Hope), and Bert Worries (Crete). Alternates are Ted Andringa (Crete), Todd De Meester (Hope), Phil Kooiker (Crete), Joel Smits (Crete), and Steve Van Drunen (Crete).

The expenses of this meeting totaled \$13,705.24.

Classis finished its work around 7:00 P.M. on Thursday.

Classis will meet next in Hull (IA) PRC on September 25, 2024, the Lord willing.

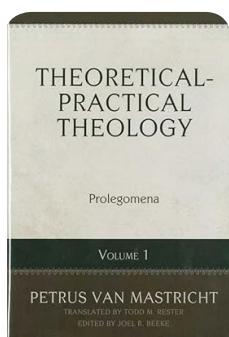
Rev. Joshua Engelsma, Stated Clerk, Classis West



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. David Engelsma, former editor of the *Standard Bearer*, Professor-emeritus of Dogmatics and Old Testament in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary, and member of Trinity PRC in Hudsonville, Michigan.



Theoretical—Practical Theology, by Petrus van Mastricht. Vol 1: *Prolegomena*. Tr. Todd M. Rester; ed. Joel R. Beeke. Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2018. Pp. xci + 238. \$50.00 hard.

Such is the esteem of Petrus van Mastricht (1630-1706) in all quarters of Reformed academia by men of the highest reputation that a reviewer of van Mastricht's great work of theology risks his reputation by any criticism of van Mastricht's definition of theology as the "doctrine of living for God through Christ." Regardless of one's standing in the sphere of Reformed scholarship, however, theology is not the doctrine of living for God.

Christian theology, also in its Reformed confession, is the sound doctrine of God in Christ, as this doctrine is revealed in Holy Scripture, confessed by the orthodox church in her creeds, and known by elect believers with their enlightened minds. Christian theology is, first and foremost, the faith that is known ("a certain knowledge") and then trusted ("an assured confidence") for salvation (Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 21). Theology has practice—a holy life—as its purpose. But practice does not swallow up sound doctrine. Neither does practice put sound doctrine in its shadow.

In the nature of the case, the inherent weakness of van Mastricht's definition of theology is not so apparent in the treatment of prolegomena. In fact, the main element of the prolegomena—the doctrine of Scripture (more than 100 pages of the slightly more than 200-page treatment of prolegomena)—is exceptionally thorough and sound. "God not only inspired the matters

[of Scripture—DJE] themselves, but he also dictated the individual words" (126). Every Reformed seminarian ought to read this section of van Mastricht's work carefully. Every believer will profit from a careful reading of this sound and timely doctrine of Scripture. It will put Reformed officebearers on their guard against corruptions of the doctrine of Scripture in the churches, including churches of some who praise van Mastricht's work highly.

But even in the prolegomena, the treatment of the various subjects is weighted heavily in favor of the practical. It remains to be seen how van Mastricht treats the doctrines themselves that make up the content of Reformed theology.

The issue of van Mastricht's definition of theology is no small matter. Is Christianity chiefly doctrinal, or chiefly practical and experiential? Is it fundamentally the doctrine of the right knowledge of God in Christ, or fundamentally the doctrine of a life? The high praise of van Mastricht by Jonathan Edwards, by the theologians of the *nadere reformatie*, and by the Marrow Men gives this reviewer pause.

van Mastricht is blunt and clear: "Christian theology is not theoretical, or theoretical-practical...but rather, it is purely and preeminently practical" (96). If "theoretical" is a cautious way of saying "doctrinal," and it is, the statement is false, and a blow against Christianity at its very heart. Christianity is "theoretical" (doctrinal), "purely and preeminently."

This caveat having been voiced and kept in mind, it ought to be recognized that the project of the Dutch Reformed Translation Society of making van Mastricht available in English is a great gift to the English-speaking Reformed churches of our day. This seventeenth century Dutch theologian represents a significant de-

velopment of post-Reformation theology. And he was a theologian's theologian. He was incredibly learned. He knew the Reformed faith in its widest extent and in its narrowest detail. He was not afraid of polemics. He defends the Reformed faith against all its adversaries, including the Arminians, the "enthusiasts" (Anabaptists), and the papists.

He was, if this is possible, biblical to a fault. Every doctrine is grounded in a number of supporting passages of Scripture. Every main section of the work is headed by a relevant passage of Scripture, which passage is explained throughout the treatment of the doctrinal subject at hand. van Mastricht demonstrates that the Reformed faith is biblical.

In addition, there is appeal to and quotation of the writings of many other authoritative theologians, from Augustine to Calvin. van Mastricht was a prodigious

reader and outstanding scholar. From his scholarship, the reader benefits.

An unusual feature of the work is van Mastricht's opening of his prolegomena with a lengthy and detailed—and beneficial—description of the right way of composing and delivering sermons. Homileticians, take heed!

This project of the Dutch Reformed Translation Society is without any doubt the most significant publishing event concerning the Reformed faith of our time. A number of volumes on the doctrinal content proper of Reformed theology are to follow.

The publication of van Mastricht's theology is significant also with regard to its teaching concerning the Reformed, Christian life.

As the important *fruit* of the right knowledge of God!

Announcements

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Classis East

Classis East will meet in regular session on Wednesday, May 15, 2024 at 8:00 A.M., in the Byron Center Protestant Reformed Church, Byron Center, MI. Material to be treated at this session must be in the hands of the stated clerk by April 15, 2024.

Rev. Clayton Spronk,
Stated Clerk