

THE STANDARD BEARER

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A REFORMED SEMI-MONTHLY MAGAZINE

FROM THE DESIGNER

This new design is not only a fresh look for the *Standard Bearer*, but it is the summation of the periodical's 100-year design history.

As foreshadowed by the centennial stamp design, the original 1924 masthead font is revived and boldly crowns the magazine's cover. The complete table of contents is placed back on the front cover as it appeared from the 1990s–2010s, a welcome sight for the magazine's eager readers.

The defining style is a modern interpretation of 1920s Art Deco design, which was characterized by opulent colors and striking geometry. Art Deco is an

on-trend aesthetic and appropriate nod to the era in which the *Standard Bearer* originated.

The interior features a clean typographic layout. Free from clutter and gimmicks, the truths explained inside are unimpeded to fill the minds and, by grace, pierce the hearts of the readers.

It is my prayer that through the *Standard Bearer* the good news of Jesus Christ will reach many sinners who need a Savior and strengthen the faith of all who have been redeemed. Ephesians 3:14–21!

Erika Kiel
Kalamazoo, Michigan



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Editorial office

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

Business office

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

United Kingdom office

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

rfpa.org / prca.org



GRACE THROUGH OUR THORN

REV. DENNIS LEE

Pastor of Kalamazoo PRC in Kalamazoo, Michigan

And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong— II Corinthians 12:7–10.

When I am weak, then am I strong. Does not that statement of the holy apostle get your attention, dear reader? One reason for that is because it states a paradox. For how can we be strong when we are weak at one and the same time? The answer to that question is found in these verses. For they teach that God made the apostle spiritually strong by causing him to live in the reality of daily, confessed weakness. God would accomplish this by supplying grace sufficient to the apostle for each day.

And He would do that through a means of grace. However, it is not the means of grace that we might expect. The means of grace that God employs is not the preaching of the gospel. Nor is it the sacraments. But it is a thorn! It is a painful thorn that God was pleased to administer and leave embedded in the flesh of the apostle. Through that special, personalized, painful means of grace, God would change Paul. He would strengthen him, make him a more faithful child of God, and a more effective servant of His.

OUR NATURAL DESIRE

The apostle expresses a natural desire to have his thorn removed when he makes this request of God three times. But is that not also *your* desire and *mine*?

The apostle speaks of a “thorn in the flesh.” What is a thorn? Literally, a thorn is a sliver. It is a small, stiff and sharp-pointed object. When it pierces our skin, it hurts. Our children and grandchildren who have experienced this will cry out in pain and anguish, and ask for it to be removed. It is only natural that they do so.

But it is obvious that the inspired apostle was not speaking of a sliver piercing and being embedded in his flesh. Rather, he was using a figure of speech to describe something just like that literal thorn in the flesh, only this thorn afflicted his *soul*, causing him *spiritual* anguish and pain.

So, what exactly was Paul's thorn in the flesh? A quick survey through Bible commentaries identifies three theories about this. One theory is that Paul's thorn in the flesh was a spiritual temptation or sinful weakness, akin to substance abuse, such as addiction to wine. A second theory is that the thorn was a reference to Paul's opponents or enemies. To be sure, the apostle, who held fast and faithfully to the teachings of Jesus Christ and stood on the frontline of spiritual battle, had many enemies. Indeed! For as Paul tells us, not only here in verse 10 but also in several other epistles, he suffered “reproaches and persecutions.” Yet a third theory explains Paul's thorn in the flesh simply to be a physical ailment or bodily weakness.

What can we say concerning these theories? It is the firm conviction of this writer that Paul's thorn in the flesh could hardly be referring to a sinful weakness. For does not the apostle tell us later that he *stopped* praying

for the removal of his thorn? One can hardly imagine that the godly apostle would be content with a sinful weakness in his life and stop praying for deliverance from it! Dear reader, you would not do that if you had a sinful weakness, would you? However, beyond that, we must say we do not really know what Paul's thorn in the flesh was. It could be referring to one of Paul's enemies constantly reproaching him and giving him grief. Or it could be referring to a physical weakness, such as a defect in his speech, or a difficulty in walking and moving around. We cannot be certain because the Word of God does not identify clearly and specifically what Paul's thorn in the flesh really was.

Here we find the heavenly beauty and wisdom of God's Word shining through! At times when there is need of wisdom to be narrow and specific, whether it be a specific sin, a specific detail of doctrine or event, God's Word is clear and precise so that we may be left without a doubt as to what exactly God is saying to us. But at other times, such as here, God directs the inspired writer not to be specific and narrow. This has the effect of making the application of God's Word as broad as possible for the comfort of all of God's people. Dear reader, you who suffer spiritual pain and anguish in your life, this Word is for *your* comfort! Great is the wisdom of God and the fatherly love He has for us, His people!

Verse 10 further gives us four broad categories of Paul's afflictions wherein that thorn could be found: *infirmities, reproaches, persecutions, and distresses for Christ's sake*. And these are categories that we certainly can identify with the apostle, can we not? Just as the apostle suffered these kinds of afflictions, so also do we! And just as any one of these afflictions could have caused the apostle great spiritual anguish and pain, so also is it the case with us!

And so, it is only understandable that one would ask the Lord for its removal. This is what the apostle did—and did three times (v. 8). But God's answer to him was “No.” Notice how this is put in verse 9: *My grace is sufficient for thee....* What do those words mean? They mean that God gives us grace to see through each and every day of our lives—especially in days of trouble! It means that when we face difficulties and adversities, God always holds us up by His grace! He always sustains us and never leaves us to suffer them on our own strength! He is always faithful to us!

While all of that is true, it is not the main point of God's answer to Paul. So, what is the main point? Notice the full sentence of verse 9a: *My grace is sufficient for thee; for my strength is made perfect in weakness*. In other words, God was saying to the apostle, “I am going to give you grace—which will be sufficient for you. But you will experience grace and strength from me *in your weakness*—the weakness and pain from your affliction. I am going to give you grace *through* your affliction, *through* your thorn. That thorn is my special means of grace for you, my child! That is how my grace and strength is made perfect in your weakness.”

GOD'S GRACIOUS PURPOSE

So, in denying Paul's request for this thorn to be removed, God had a gracious purpose. And we discover this gracious purpose upon further consideration of verse 9.

To begin with, let us recall what the word “grace” means. Most basically, grace means beauty. So, first and foremost, the grace of God refers to His great and beautiful character. Then second, it describes His beautiful attitude towards us, His people. It refers to His unmerited favor and great love for us in His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, third and finally, it refers to His amazing power and strength to make us, dead and ugly sinners by nature, beautiful in Jesus. It is this third meaning that applies here in verse 9: the power of Christ from the cross of Christ is going to make Paul beautiful!

Further, this grace of God must be “made perfect,” that is, it must be brought to the goal and purpose God has for His dear children. When God's grace brings us to that goal, it is made perfect. The reality of grace being made perfect in us and in our weakness is when we come to humble and conscious confession of our weakness to God. It is when we cry out to Him from the depths of our soul, “Lord, I am weak and I am nothing! I am unable to accomplish the task Thou hast for me! I need Thy strength! I need Thy grace! Please, give me grace!”

For this reason, all pride must be emptied from our souls! And that is God's gracious purpose of giving Paul his thorn, and supplying grace to him *through* it. For pride was exactly what Paul confessed to be his problem in verse 7 when he said twice, *And lest I should be exalted above measure*. The pain and affliction of Paul's thorn would daily serve to empty the soul of the

apostle from all pride. It would cause him to daily cry out to God in weakness. And in that way, God would supply him grace sufficient for each day! In this way of God's inscrutable wisdom, He would strengthen His servant, making him a holier child of God and a more effective servant of His!

Dear reader, could He be doing the same with you?

THE ASTOUNDING CONFESSION

That the apostle did indeed receive grace through his thorn is evidenced by the confession he makes, *Most gladly therefore will I rather glory* [that is, take pleasure] *in my infirmities*. What an astounding confession that is! For which of us would have such an attitude towards our infirmities? Our natural desire would be a deep longing to be delivered from them! But it is not so

with the one who has received grace from God through his thorn! The confession of that one is that he takes pleasure in his infirmities and is most glad to be able to do so! Why? Because it is precisely through his very infirmities that God strengthens him!

Dear reader, is the apostle's astounding confession also yours? If so, then you too have received grace from God through your thorn, and you will also be able to say together with him, *When I am weak, then am I strong*.

May His grace flow like a steady river through those thorns in our lives so that this astounding confession lives more consciously and deeply in our hearts and minds! Praise God from whom all blessings flow though the inscrutable ways He bestows!



PREVIEW OF SYNOD 2024

REV. JOSHUA ENGELSMA

Pastor of Crete PRC in Crete, Illinois

The Synod of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America (PRCA) will be hosted this year by Trinity PRC (Hudsonville, MI). A pre-synodical worship service will be held on Monday evening, June 10, 2024, to ask God for His blessing prior to taking up the work. The ten minister delegates and ten elder delegates will assemble to begin the work on Tuesday, June 11, at 8:00 A.M.

REPORTS OF STANDING COMMITTEES

The agenda for synod, per usual, includes the reports from the synodical standing committees who labor in the interim between meetings as servants of synod. What follows sums up the more notable matters from these reports. The reports include many other items, all of which are important, but perhaps not all as noteworthy.

The Catechism Book Committee (CBC) is responsible for overseeing the material used in catechizing the children and young people of the denomination. The committee recommends that synod make some minor modifications to the questions and answers of the books used to teach the Juniors Bible History classes (grades 4–5).

The Contact Committee (CC) reports on visits to and interactions with sister churches and other churches with whom the PRCA have varying levels of contact. The CC presents two noteworthy recommendations. The first is a recommendation to approve the calling of a Protestant Reformed minister as a minister-on-loan to serve Provident PRCP, one of our sister churches in the Philippines that is without her own pastor. The

second noteworthy recommendation is to approve the establishing of a “corresponding relationship” with the Bekennende Evangelisch-Reformierte Gemeinde (Confessing Protestant-Reformed Congregation) of Giessen, Germany, a congregation the PRCA have had contact with since 2006. This relationship is one of the two official relationships allowed in the Constitution of the CC, the other being a full sister-church relationship.

The Domestic Mission Committee (DMC) reports on the labors of the home missionary, Rev. J. Laning, in the last year. Rev. Laning has come into contact with a group of interested individuals in Dallas/Fort Worth, TX and another group of individuals in Budapest, Hungary. Plans are being made to make follow-up visits with these groups in the near future. The DMC notes that it has drafted a “church planting manual” as a possible way of developing a concrete field of labor for our missionary. The DMC also reports on its work to increase coverage of radio broadcasts in the areas of Pittsburgh, PA and Spokane, WA (the latter with coverage that extends into the western half of Washington, parts of Idaho, and northeastern Oregon) as well as its ongoing work of revamping the denominational website (prca.org).

The Foreign Mission Committee (FMC) reports on the conclusion of our missionary labors in the Philippines after nearly thirty years of involvement there. They also summarize the ongoing work of Hope PRC in Myanmar and the ongoing work of Georgetown PRC in India. They also report on new contacts that have been made with individuals in Mexico, Malawi, and Peru. They also propose financial guidelines regarding giving financial assistance in foreign lands, in fulfillment of a mandate given to them by Synod 2018.

The Theological School Committee (TSC) reports on the faithful labors of the professors, support staff, and students in the past year. With the conclusion of this past school year, Prof. R. Cammenga has finished his final year of teaching in the seminary, having served the churches faithfully in this capacity for the past twenty years. His replacement, Prof. B. Huizinga, will now fully transition into his role as Professor of Dogmatics and Old Testament Studies. The TSC is proposing that Synod grant permanent tenure to Prof. D. Kuiper as Professor of Church History and New Testament Studies. Regarding students, the TSC is recommending the admission of two men into the seminary for the upcoming school year:

one intends to serve in the PRCA, and the other intends to seek ordination in the United Reformed Churches in North America. A matter for thanksgiving is the examination and anticipated graduation of our fourth-year student, Mr. Arend Haveman, a son of Trinity PRC. Mr. Haveman’s examination will likely stretch over parts of Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, and his graduation is scheduled for Thursday evening, June 13.

REPORTS OF SPECIAL COMMITTEES

In addition to the regular standing committees of synod, there are also several special committees that have been laboring on various important projects in the last year.

With the 100th anniversary of the PRCA swiftly approaching, the 100th Anniversary Committee and its various sub-committees have been busy making preparations for the celebration. The celebration will be held at Calvin University from June 2–6, 2025. The theme of the celebration is “Grace: The PRCA at 100.” Those interested in learning more can check out the website (prca100.org). Members and friends are encouraged to attend as we recognize with humble thanks what God has done for us as churches in the last century!

Since 2015, the PRC have been participating in an Inter-Denominational Psalter Revision Committee along with representatives of the Heritage Reformed and Free Reformed Churches. Since that time the Committee has been laboring to make improvements to the songbook used in our denominations. In 2020, Synod also appointed a Protestant Reformed Psalter Revision Review Committee (PRRC), a separate committee comprised of members of the PRCA who were tasked with reviewing the proposed revisions to the Psalter. The work of these committees is now finished. The PRRC is proposing to this year’s synod that it “adopt the revised Psalter, as proposed, for worship and general use in the churches of the PRCA, and declare that each church is free to use the revised Psalter in place of or along-side the existing Psalter as it desires.” The committee also makes recommendations regarding printing and publishing, including a recommendation that one copy of the revised Psalter be given free of charge to every PRCA household to promote familiarization with the revised Psalter.

In response to an overture, last year’s synod appointed an Abuse Guidelines Committee. Their mandate was to “produce a concise manual outlining

key biblical, confessional, and theological principles to guide consistories in understanding and addressing abuse.” The Committee was not able to complete its work in the past year, but does present a partial first draft of its work. The Committee desires that synod approve of the general direction and content of this draft and provide feedback and constructive criticism as they continue working in the coming year.

Last year’s synod, in response to a different overture, also appointed an Ad Hoc Committee to hire a third-party organization to investigate sexual abuse in the PRCA. The Committee reports on its interactions with the third-party organization (Guidepost Solutions) and the work done to agree upon and sign a Letter of Engagement to have them do this work. The agreed-upon investigation is to take a two-pronged approach: the first phase involves an assessment of the volume and nature of sexual abuse reports, and the second phase involves an investigation of sexual abuse reports and the PRCA’s response. Guidepost is finishing up the first phase of the investigation, and the Ad Hoc Committee hopes to receive a report from them in early May which will then be submitted to synod for its consideration. The second phase of the investigation—an investigation of sexual abuse reports and the PRCA’s response—has only just begun.

PROTESTS AND APPEALS

Synod’s agenda includes a number of protests and appeals.

Six members of the denomination have submitted protests of the above-mentioned decision of last year’s synod to hire a third-party organization to investigate sexual abuse. The protestants argue that hiring a third-party organization to do this work violates biblical, confessional, and church political principles.

A considerable portion of the agenda consists of four appeals submitted by three individuals and one consistory, who are not satisfied with the ruling of a minor assembly (Classis East, in this case) and thus appeal to synod to rule on the case. The case goes back to 2021 and involves contested statements in a series of articles written by a minister in the denomination. In 2021, the minister’s consistory judged statements in the articles to be in error and required of him a public apology, which apology was made. In 2022, another individual protested the

action of the consistory, believing that the body erred in charging the minister with being guilty of the public sin of teaching false doctrine. After lengthy correspondence, the two parties agreed that they were at an impasse, and appeal was made to Classis East. Classis East decided in October 2023 to sustain the appellant and ruled that the consistory had erred in their judgment of the minister’s writings. A number of protests against that ruling of classis were lodged with the following meeting of Classis East held at the beginning of 2024, and classis affirmed that the consistory was in error in its evaluations of the minister’s statements. Several of the individuals who protested to classis now appeal to synod to take up the matter and rule that Classis East was in error.

CONCLUSION

At times some might have the mentality that synod is the highest ruling body of the church, and thus the work that takes place there is the most important work that takes place in the church. But that is a wrong understanding of the church. A key principle of Reformed church polity is that the local congregation, through its consistory, is autonomous and self-governing. It is only in the local congregation that the gospel is preached, the sacraments are administered, and Christian discipline is exercised. Classes and synods do not rule over churches and consistories. Rather, these are advisory assemblies arising out of the federation of local congregations. They may only take up matters that could not be finished in minor assemblies or matters that pertain to the churches in common.

That being said, the matters that come before synod do give a good sense of what is going on in the denomination and the issues being faced by the local congregations and their consistories.

And as the lengthy agenda (500+ pages) for this year’s synod shows, there are many important matters facing the churches. Some are matters of joy and thanksgiving; others are matters of sin and sorrow. How important then that we continue to press on in faithfulness to God and His Word, and do so depending upon Him for our strength and guidance. Please continue to pray for the needs of our churches as a whole, including the need for unity and peace in the truth. And please pray for the delegates that God would equip them with wisdom to make good decisions that serve the well-being of the churches.



THE MINISTRY OF ARCHIPPUS

MR. KYLE BRUINOOGUE

Teacher of New Testament history at Covenant Christian High School in Walker, Michigan and a member of Faith PRC in Jenison, Michigan

And say to Archippus, Take heed to the ministry which thou hast received in the Lord, that thou fulfil it—Colossians 4:17.

In modern Turkey, the Lycus River, with its source near Mount Cadmus, flows past a trifecta of significance from the Roman world: Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis. Perhaps not significant to the average Roman in Paul's day or to most Christians today; nonetheless, this important river valley is the geographical backdrop of multiple, important narratives in the New Testament.

We saw in the last two *SB* articles, from the perspectives of both Onesimus and Philemon (residents of Colossae), the truth of God's eternal love through the reconciliation of a master and his slave.

In Philemon 2 Paul greets a household: Philemon, his wife Apphia, and his son Archippus. In the closing verses of his letter to the Colossians, Paul, writing both Colossians and Philemon from prison in Rome, gives a striking, emphatic command to Philemon's son Archippus: "Take heed to the ministry which thou hast received in the Lord, that thou fulfil it" (Col. 4:17).

What *was* this ministry of Archippus? Ministry can refer to the calling of the ordained servant of the Lord to preach the gospel, but it also has a broader meaning of striving to bless and serve others for the sake of Christ. "As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God" (I Pet. 4:10). In the case of Archippus, his ministry very well could have been more specifically any of the three special offices in the church (pastor, elder, deacon), likely being the leading pastor in the Colossian church.

The evidence points to an official capacity for Archippus' ministry. Due to the departure and imprisonment of

Epaphras, the founder of the Colossian church (Col. 1:7; 2:1; Phile. 23), Archippus was called now to take heed to the ministry of the gospel, faithfully to proclaim Jesus Christ to Colossae and the entire Lycus River Valley. In addition, Paul greets Archippus in the letter to Philemon as his "fellow soldier," a term revealing that both he and Paul had work in common as ministers of the gospel. Finally, such a strong, urging message by Paul seems to point to official ministry as a servant of the Lord. There seems to be a special companionship between Paul and Archippus in this regard.

While we cannot be certain of the exact nature of Archippus's ministry, *he* did, and that is all that matters. With certainty, he knew what he was being commanded to take heed to, and he *fulfilled it*, understanding full well that his important ministry required none other than "to be discharged in a spirit of Christian faithfulness."¹ For his ministry was from the Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

Tychicus, the man tasked with delivering Paul's letter to the Colossians (and to the Laodiceans), is given an important mission by Paul in Colossians, through the encouragement of the church, to assist Archippus in his ministry (Col. 4:7–9). Not just "say to Archippus" the very *fact* of his ministry; but, rather, encourage and support Archippus so that he *takes heed* to his ministry. Tychicus, along with the church herself in Colossae, was used by God to both command *and* to work alongside Archippus in his important ministry.

There arises a question as to *where* Archippus' ministry took place. Notice the exhortation of Paul to Archippus in Colossians 4:17 within the context of the preceding two verses:

1 F.F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1984), 186.

15. Salute the brethren which are in Laodicea, and Nymphas, and the church which is in his house.

16. And when this epistle is read among you, cause that it be read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and that ye likewise read the epistle from Laodicea.

17. And say to Archippus, Take heed to the ministry which thou hast received in the Lord, that thou fulfil it.

It is possible that Archippus' ministry *and* residence were in neighboring Laodicea, a ten-mile float eastward on the same south bank of the Lycus River. Or, a day's journey on foot. The parents, Philemon and Apphia, therefore, resided in Colossae, with Archippus *taking heed* to his ministry in Laodicea. A real possibility, supported also through Christian tradition that cites Archippus as later bishop of Laodicea, and not of Colossae.²

Regardless, there was such a close connection between Colossae and Laodicea that the open communication that existed between them would serve to maintain Archippus' ministry in both cities.

But what *prepared* Archippus for ministry? Like his father Philemon, he may have been converted through Paul's extensive missionary efforts in Ephesus (Acts 19:10). Because Epaphras was also converted at this same time, Archippus may have been brought to know Jesus Christ through Epaphras, the man who had faithfully labored in Colossae, as well as through the faithful instruction and influence of his parents.

There are two things to note in this connection. First, Archippus received on-the-job training. Likely a younger man, Archippus is given a significant task in maintaining the truth of the gospel in a church filled with novices and false teachings (Col. 2:16–23). A church consisting of novice Gentiles from pagan backgrounds and misguided

Jews, these Christians needed clear direction and sound doctrine, and the weight of this responsibility now falls on a man who has both his mentors far away in chains. Even more reason for Paul to be emphatic.

The false teachings described in Colossians 2 (angel worship and asceticism³), and which stretched beyond simply the city limits of Colossae, affecting also neighboring Laodicea, were the very reasons for Epaphras' departure from Colossae to seek advice and direction from Paul in Rome.⁴ Archippus, receiving faithful instruction and preparation, now faces the challenge of combating the false teachings that were present. This very well may have been the reason for Paul's urgent *take heed*. This was serious.⁵

Second, there is a “minister-tree” in this narrative. The sports enthusiast will understand the concept of “coaching trees” where assistants become head



coaches, hiring their own assistants who become head coaches, and so on. Paul, throughout his own ministry, was faithful to train new leaders Timothy and Titus in preparation for his immanent departure from this world (II Tim. 4:6–8). Mentorship in the ministry is

2 J.B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1955), 309–310.

3 Asceticism involves an extreme level of self-denial and rejection of forms of earthly pleasures. This practice is judged a “doctrine of devils” in I Timothy 4:1.

4 See “The Story of Epaphras,” *Standard Bearer*, vol. 96, no. 5 (December 1, 2019), 109–111.

5 For further study on the heresies in the Colossian church, see Bruce, *Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 17–26.

an important concept, begun thirty years ago in the Protestant Reformed Churches with the internship program for the fourth-year seminarian student. In the case of Archippus, Jesus Christ, the Lord of the church, instructs and trains Paul, who instructs and trains Epaphras, who instructs and trains Archippus.

However, even with that understanding of training and with the woven thread of *faithfulness* by the pastors involved, Archippus received the necessary gifts for his ministry and calling directly from the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

Now, Archippus was prepared and ready to take heed to the ministry and fulfill it. And he had Tychicus to walk alongside him and encourage him in his important work.

While there would be challenges and struggles for Archippus as he faithfully carried out his ministry, there would also be the shining example before him of the restored relationship of a master and his slave.⁶ Much has been written in commentaries of the runaway Onesimus and his master Philemon within the Greco-Roman context. But not much has been written on Archippus.

That is unfortunate, for this man was able to witness the power of the gospel over social barriers, to see a

⁶ See “The Planned Departure of Onesimus,” *Standard Bearer*, vol. 100, no. 2 (October 15, 2023), 33–35 and “The Forgiveness of Philemon,” *Standard Bearer*, vol. 100, no. 11 (March 1, 2024), 274–276.

severed relationship mended at the befuddlement of the observant non-Christian master. Archippus would testify to this restored brotherhood as he brought the truth of the gospel from house to house. Through the reconciliation of Philemon and Onesimus, Archippus could boldly and confidently preach the reconciliation of God’s elect people to Himself through the atoning work of Christ on the cross.

That is a tremendously important and serious ministry.

But yours is, too.

You may be thinking, *My ministry isn’t so serious and important*. False. God calls each one of us to different ministries, places us in different circumstances, and gives us varying capacities—spiritually and physically—to fulfill what He has called us to do. “But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal” (I Cor. 12:7).

So, what is your ministry? Are you taking heed to it? Are you fulfilling it?

Be encouraged through the narrative of Archippus and hear the Spirit’s command to you: Take heed! Take heed to the ministry He has given to *you*! Fulfill it!

For only *He* will give you the strength to do so.

As character witnesses of the ascended Jesus Christ, let us heed the example of Archippus by fulfilling what He calls us to do in our own ministry. For the blessing of others. For the truth of the gospel. And for the glory of His name.

WORD FITLY SPOKEN



VENGEANCE

REV. JOSEPH HOLSTEG

Pastor of First PRC in Grand Rapids, Michigan

Vengeance is a scary word. We are inclined to shy away from it, knowing as we do that “desire of revenge” is a sin serious enough that God “accounts” it “as murder” (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 106). Our mothers were

right when they taught us not to throw back the rocks at those who first cast them at us.

Part of what makes vengeance so scary is just how intense it can be. Long before any novel or ballad put

words to the inferno that ignites in the heart of a person who catches his spouse in the act of adultery, we find this warning in the wisdom literature of the Bible: “Whoso committeth adultery with a woman lacketh understanding.... A wound and dishonor shall he get; and his reproach shall not be wiped away. For jealousy is the rage of a man: therefore he will not spare in the day of vengeance” (Prov. 6:32-34). Even the vengeance of God can make us cringe and may raise questions that are disturbing to us. “O daughter of Babylon, who art to be destroyed; happy shall he be, that rewardeth thee as thou hast served us. Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones” (Ps. 137:8, 9). “The righteous shall rejoice when he seeth the vengeance: he shall wash his feet in the blood of the wicked” (Ps. 58:10). To those of us who have never seen a public beheading, walked on a battlefield littered with corpses, or lived through the sacking of a city by soldiers filled with uncontrolled bloodlust, this language is shocking.

Yet as Christians we must come to understand the reality—the *necessity*—of vengeance. In the Bible, we see God putting on the “garments of vengeance” for His clothing (Is. 59:17). We find Him sharpening His “glittering sword” which He will use to “render vengeance” on His enemies and to “reward them that hate” Him (Deut. 32:41). There is no doubt that the God of the Bible is a God of vengeance. “God is jealous, and the LORD revengeth, and is furious; the LORD will take vengeance on his adversaries, and he reserveth wrath for his enemies” (Nah. 1:2.).

Those who are on God’s side are not ashamed of this, nor do they deny the place of vengeance. On the contrary, they plead for it (Jer. 11:20—“let me see thy vengeance on them”); they cry out for it with a loud voice (Rev. 6:10—“How long, O Lord...dost thou not...avenge our blood on them that dwell on earth?”); and they hope for it in the midst of their sufferings (Belgic Confession, Art. 37—“the consideration of this judgment is...most desirable...to the righteous and elect.... [For] they shall see the terrible vengeance which God shall execute on the wicked, who most cruelly persecuted, oppressed, and tormented them in this world...”).

Vengeance is an awesome revelation of the true God who is “an awful, irreprehensible, and righteous

judge and avenger” of all sin and unbelief arising from the human heart (Canons of Dordt I, 15). “Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord” (Rom. 12:19; cf. Heb. 10:30; Deut. 32:35). That is, He will repay the evildoer in society by means of the sword in the hand of the higher power, whom He has appointed as His “revenger” (Rom. 13:4). He will take notice of the brother who is defrauded in the church by another, for He is “the avenger of all such” (I Thess. 4:6). “In flaming fire” He will take “vengeance” on all who do not know Him and who “obey not the gospel” (II Thess. 1:8). And as for any in the Christian church who think it a light thing to walk away from Jesus Christ, thus trampling “under foot the Son of God” and counting the “blood of the covenant...an unholy thing,” be warned of the coming vengeance of the Lord, for “it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb. 10:29, 31).

And yet, for all that, there is good reason the sober-minded Christian hesitates at the thought of revenge. It is one thing to cry out for *God’s* vengeance, or even to seek vengeance by incessant appeal to the powers that be (such as the importunate widow in Jesus’ parable in Luke 18:3-5). This is in keeping with the pursuit of the justice of God while waiting patiently for God to execute that justice.¹ It is a very different matter to take vengeance into one’s own hands, however. Though the desire of revenge is terrifyingly common in the human heart, to take revenge in any way is a violation of one of the two great commandments at the center of God’s law. “Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself” (Lev. 19:18; cf. Matt. 22:39). Indeed, no small part of what marked David out as the man after God’s own heart was his dogged refusal to take revenge even on a man who relentlessly and mercilessly oppressed him. David’s faith rather led him to give the matter over to the only true Revenger. “The LORD judge between me and thee, and the LORD avenge me of thee: but mine hand shall not be upon thee” (I Sam. 24:12).

There is nothing that feels so righteous to the offended human heart as the pursuit of payback. To

1 The Greek word *dike*, “justice,” is the root of the word *ekdikesis*, “vengeance.”

the hurting man, or the hurting woman, revenge and justice are too often one and the same. The oppressor, the persecutor, the enemy, the thief—he will get what is coming to him one way or the other. Such is the logic of human passion and the self-righteousness of the wrath of man (James 1:20).

But what will mark the Christian is the logic of grace, as well as the resolute confidence in a vengeance far more pure, far more thorough, far more perfect, and far more just than anything the mind of man could conjure or invent. And that confidence sets the Christian free from a burden that is much too big for him or her to shoulder, which burden belongs to God alone. It sets the Christian

free from his obligation to pay back what he owes for his own offenses “against the most high majesty of God” (Heid. Cat., Q&A 11), since vengeance for his sins has fallen on Christ in his place. It sets the Christian free to live in such a way as to confound the wisdom of the wise of this world by doing what the heart of man would never conceive to do.

“Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath....” And this: “If thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:19-21).

TAKING HEED TO THE DOCTRINE



THE *ORDO SALUTIS* (6a) JUSTIFICATION AND ASSURANCE: NO CONDEMNATION TO THEM WHO WALK AFTER THE SPIRIT

REV. MARTYN MCGEOWN

Pastor of Providence PRC in Hudsonville, Michigan

There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit—Romans 8:1.

INTRODUCTION

In the last article I defined justification, the fifth step in the *ordo salutis*—regeneration, calling, conversion, faith, *justification*—as “God’s legal declaration of righteousness.” God as the Judge makes an official pronouncement upon, or an official verdict concerning, the believing sinner that he is righteous, that is, that he is in perfect conformity to, or in complete harmony with, God’s standard of holiness set forth in His law. That status of righteousness is granted solely on the basis of Christ’s righteousness, which is Christ’s lifelong obedience, atoning sufferings, and death. Christ’s righteousness is given by imputation, by God reckoning it to the account of the believing sinner, and it is received by faith alone without any works. As the Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 23, expresses it, “inasmuch as I embrace such benefit with a believing

heart (A. 60); and “I cannot receive and apply the same to myself any other way than by faith only” (A. 61).

One matter I did not address for lack of space was the assurance of our salvation, especially the assurance of our justification. The assurance of our justification is our consciousness of it, our certainty concerning it, and our confidence about it. We must also be assured of our justification before God; we must be assured that we are justified if we are to enjoy peace.

ASSURANCE AND GODLINESS: THE RELATIONSHIP

Our Reformed confessions help us answer questions about assurance. The Belgic Confession, Article 23, states, “The obedience of Christ crucified alone, which becomes ours when we believe in Him...is sufficient to...give us confidence in approaching to God; freeing the conscience of fear, terror, and dread.” The same article warns us not to rely on ourselves or on any other creature. Belgic Confession, Article 24, concludes,

“Thus, then, we would always be in doubt, tossed to and fro without any certainty, and our poor consciences continually vexed, if they relied not on the merits of the suffering and death of our Savior.”

Notice that in both articles the Belgic Confession is concerned about that on which we rely. In other words, the Confession is concerned with the *object* of our trust and confidence. In justification, as in all of our salvation, we rely upon, we lean upon, we rest in, *Jesus Christ alone*. We do not rely on our good works.

The Canons of Dordt, too, address the matter of assurance, for the Arminians in their corruption of the doctrine of salvation also corrupted the doctrine of assurance. The Arminians contended that “there is in this life no fruit and no consciousness of the unchangeable election to glory” (Canons I, Rejection of Errors, 7) and that “without a special revelation we can have no certainty of future perseverance” (Canons V, Rejection of Errors, 5). The fathers at Dordt refuted the Arminians: believers have assurance of their election (Canons I, 12); they have assurance of their regeneration (Canons III/IV, 13); and they have assurance of their perseverance and preservation (Canons V, 9-13).

In assuring a soul of its election and perseverance, the creeds, especially the Canons, do not exclude good works. “The elect...attain the assurance of this their eternal and unchangeable election...by observing in themselves...the infallible fruits of election” (Canons I, 12). Primary among those fruits is faith, but faith is not the only fruit of election; in fact, Canons I, 9 explicitly states that holiness is one of election’s “fruits and effects” (the same Latin word, *fructus*, appears in both articles). The biblical reference is Ephesians 1:4: “According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy.” Indeed, if a person claims to have assurance of his election while he walks in sin, the Canons charge him with “rash presumption” because he “refuses to walk in the ways of the elect” (Canons I, 13).

Similarly, the Canons connect a walk in good works to the assurance of perseverance. “This assurance” [among other things, of perseverance]...“springs from...a serious and holy desire to preserve a good conscience and to perform good works” (Canons V, 10). Primary again in this assurance are “faith in God’s promises” and “the testimony of the Holy Spirit,” but

a serious and holy desire after godliness may not be neglected; one who neglects such a holy walk will be deprived of the comfortable assurance of persevering. That expression, “a serious and holy desire to preserve a good conscience and to perform good works,” demands further explanation. The word “desire” is *studium*, which even one unfamiliar with Latin can see is more than a wish on the part of the believer. A *studium* (a desire) is a study of something, an endeavor after something, a zeal for something; here it is a study of, an endeavor after, a zeal for a good conscience and good works.

What, then, is the relationship between this serious and holy desire to preserve a good conscience and perform good works and the assurance of perseverance? It belongs to the *source* of our assurance: this assurance “springs *from*” (Latin: *ex*, “out of”) faith, *from* the testimony of the Holy Spirit, and lastly *from* a serious and holy desire (*studium*) for a good conscience and good works. The word “lastly” (Latin: *denique*, “finally”) indicates that the third is not coordinate with the first two, but is dependent upon them. Good works without faith and the testimony of the Holy Spirit cannot assure anyone, but good works should also not be neglected or despised as insignificant or unimportant.

Similarly, Canons V, 13 warns that the recovering backslider, that is, one who fell into a terrible sin in the past, has since repented, and now experiences afresh the favor of a reconciled God, is “much more careful and solicitous to continue in the ways of the Lord, which He hath ordained, that they who walk therein may maintain an assurance of persevering.” Notice that God Himself has ordained a path along which a believer may be assured of his perseverance: it is not the path of licentiousness; it is not the path of disregarding piety; it is the path of godliness. It is foolish presumption to seek assurance along any other path.

Finally, Canons V, Rejection of Errors, 5 states, contrary to the Arminians, that “the Holy Scriptures deduce this assurance...from the marks proper to the children of God.” If one lacks those marks, which are, among other things, good works, godliness, and piety, one does not—one *may* not—enjoy the assurance of future perseverance.

JUSTIFICATION—UNIQUE ASSURANCE?

To that the objection is sometimes raised: Yes, good works play a role in our assurance of election—Canons I, 12 is clear; yes, good works play a role in our assurance of faith—Heidelberg Catechism, LD 32 is clear; yes, good works play a role in our assurance of perseverance—Canons V, 10-13 are clear. But, it is objected, assurance of justification belongs to an entirely different category: in justification, including assurance of justification, good works, godliness, or piety must be entirely excluded.

Let me be unmistakably clear. Good works are not the basis or ground of justification before God; the only ground is Christ's righteousness. Good works are not the instrument of justification; the only instrument is faith. That is what Belgic Confession, Article 24 means when it teaches, "[Good works] are of no account towards our justification" (French: *elles ne viennent point en compte pour nous justifier*; "they come not at all into account to justify us"); and "we do not found our salvation upon them."

Nevertheless, the Canons do not put justification into an entirely different category. First, the Canons distinguish between the state of justification, which cannot be forfeited by a believer even in his melancholy falls (Canons V, 6), and the consciousness, enjoyment, or assurance of justification. The latter can be lost—and is lost—by one who walks deliberately and impenitently in sin; the Canons warn that such a person "incurs a deadly guilt," which is surely incompatible with the assurance of justification (Canons V, 5). Second, the fathers at Dordt in Canons V, 10, where "a serious and holy desire to preserve a good conscience and to perform good works," is connected to assurance, had more in mind than merely assurance of perseverance. Canons V, 10 begins with a demonstrative pronoun: "This assurance." Which assurance? "The certain persuasion that [1] they ever will continue true and living members of the church, [2] that they experience forgiveness of sins, and [3] [that they] will at last inherit eternal life" (Canons V, 9). Notice that this assurance (Canons V, 10) includes the persuasion that believers experience (present tense) forgiveness of sins (Canons V, 9). Forgiveness of sins is virtually synonymous with, although narrower than and inseparable from, justification. Therefore, "a serious and holy desire to

preserve a good conscience and to perform good works" is necessary in one who would have the assurance of the forgiveness of sins and, therefore, assurance of his justification.

Let me put it negatively: if a person is walking in darkness, that person cannot know, cannot be assured, of the forgiveness of his sins or of his justification before God. That does not mean that he must look to his good works, godliness, or piety in order to *find* assurance of his justification; no, he must look to Jesus Christ alone, but while he walks in darkness, he is not looking—and he cannot look—to Christ alone. Such a person must repent with a "sincere and godly sorrow for [his] sins, that [he] may seek and obtain remission in the blood of the Mediator" (Canons V, 7).

We may not corrupt the teaching of Heidelberg Catechism, LD 23, which says about the believer, "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," yet, "I am righteous in Christ before God." The Catechism does not say, "I walk (present tense) impenitently against all the commandments of God and I keep (present tense) none of them," as if that were the believer's current way of life. The Catechism looks backwards: "I have grossly transgressed...I have kept none of them." That is, if you will, my sinful record with which I enter the judgment, on which I dare not rely for my justification. But if you say, "I walk (present tense) against all the commandments of God" and "I keep (present tense) none of them," not only are you not justified, but you contradict Heidelberg Catechism, LD 44, A. 114, which states, "With a sincere resolution they [the converted] begin to live [present tense] not only according to some, but all the commandments of God."

Zacharias Ursinus, one of the authors of the Heidelberg Catechism, unhesitatingly connected good works to the assurance of faith and justification. In his commentary, under the heading, "Why good works are to be done, or why are they necessary?" he writes, "That we may be assured of the fact that we have obtained the forgiveness of sins through Christ and that we are justified for His sake. Justification and regeneration are benefits which are connected and knit together in such a way as never to be separated from each other. Christ obtained both for us at the same time, viz: the

forgiveness of sins and the Holy Spirit, who through faith excites in us the desire of good works and new obedience.”¹ For Ursinus, too, good works are not the ground/basis or the instrument of justification, but they are the evidence and confirmation of justification.

SYNOD 2018

But did not the PRC Synod of 2018 equate justification with assurance and experience of justification, and did not Synod 2018 teach that both justification and its assurance are by faith alone? Synod 2018, in response to a former minister who had preached, “We look at our good works...[for] help in finding and maintaining assurance that God has justified [us] through Christ and Christ alone,” stated the following: “True faith cannot look to its works to help find or maintain the assurance that is found in Christ alone.... The experience and assurance of justification in one’s consciousness is justification, and justification is by faith alone in Christ alone.... Good works... do not function as helps for finding and maintaining assurance of our justification.... Justification, *which includes the experience* of justification in the sinner’s own consciousness, is by faith alone in Christ alone to the exclusion of all good works. Good works contribute nothing to and have no role in our being justified by God” (*PRC Acts of Synod 2018*, pp. 68, 69, 71-72; italics added).

Synod 2018 is correct, but since synod is answering a concrete case, it is necessarily incomplete. Synods do not produce comprehensive theological treatises that cover every possible aspect of a doctrinal issue. As demonstrated above, the Canons distinguish between the state of justification and its conscious enjoyment and they link good works to assurance, something Synod 2018 did not address. Synod 2018 also did not deny that good works serve as *the evidence of a believer’s justification*; indeed, one without good works is evidently not justified. Synod 2018 also did not deny that good works are the fruit of a believer’s justification; indeed, a fruitless person is *not* justified and may have no assurance of justification. Synod 2018 explicitly taught that good works are the fruit of justification.

While good works are neither the ground/basis nor the instrument of justification, good works are evidence to us and to others that we are justified.

NO CONDEMNATION—TO WHOM?

That good works are the evidence of justification is the clear teaching of Romans 8:1, especially in the last clause: “There is now no condemnation,” writes the apostle. “No condemnation” is justification stated negatively, for if one is not condemned, he is justified. The justified are identified in two ways in Romans 8:1. First, they are in Christ Jesus, which means that they are elect, redeemed, regenerated, and believing. And, second, they “walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit,” a phrase repeated in verse 4. That phrase, “who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit,” further describes those who are “in Christ Jesus;” it further describes those to whom there is no condemnation; it further describes those who are justified. And if it describes you, then you ought to be assured that you are justified; if it does not describe you, then you ought not to be assured that you are justified.

These, then, are the characteristics or marks of those who are justified: they do not walk after the flesh; that is the negative. They walk after the Spirit; that is the positive. Walking after the flesh is a life in harmony with and pleasing to the sinful nature. It is a life of malice, envy, hatred, covetousness, lust, pride, evil speaking, and wicked, ungodly behavior. If we walk after the flesh, we live in darkness, we fulfill the lusts of the flesh, and we live deliberately and impenitently in sin. If we live that way, walking after the flesh, we are not justified—we are condemned; we may not assure ourselves of justification; we may not claim the verdict of “no condemnation.” If we do, we are liars and we deceive ourselves (I John 1:6-7; 2:3-5). God does not say about those who walk after the flesh, “There is no condemnation.” Rather, He says, “Condemned!”

On the other hand, walking after the Spirit is a life in harmony with and pleasing to the Holy Spirit. If we walk after the Spirit we live in the light, we love God and the neighbor, and we keep God’s commandments: “with love and delight [we live] according to the will of God in all good works” (Heidelberg Catechism, LD 33, A 90). As we live in that way, pleasing God, which is the fruit of faith, which is the fruit of being

¹ *A Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism* (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, repr., 1956), 483-484; italics added.

“in Christ Jesus,” we are assured—we may be, and we must be, assured—that there is no condemnation, but only justification, for us. About those who walk after the Spirit God says, “No condemnation!”

That, too, is Herman Hoeksema’s explanation of the text. “The assurance of our being in Christ is in the way of sanctification. The way of our being blessed is that we walk in sanctification. And the fruit of this walk in sanctification is that we say, ‘There is no

condemnation for me.’”²

Let us walk in the way of sanctification, to God’s glory, and to our own comfort. In that way, only in that way, we enjoy the conscious assurance of our justification. God’s marvelous work of sanctification will, God willing, be the topic of the next article in this series.

2 *Righteous by Faith Alone: A Devotional Commentary on Romans* (Grandville, MI: RFPA, 2002), 308.

ALL THY WORKS SHALL PRAISE THEE



CICADAS: SHOWING FORTH THE MAJESTY OF GOD

MR. DAN KUIPER

Science teacher in Covenant Christian High School and member and elder of Hope PRC in Walker, Michigan

There are certain occurrences in the creation that capture our attention with dramatic intensity. One such event is about to unfold in numerous locations throughout the eastern half of the United States, if it has not already begun in some areas. This remarkable spectacle involves the emergence of countless cicadas from underground, a phenomenon that captivates observers because of its incredible magnitude. This particular emergence involves two neighboring groups of periodical cicadas that have not emerged together since 1803, the same year that the United States made the Louisiana purchase. Following this year’s emergence, these two groups will not surface together for another 221 years.

For some, the mass emergence of cicadas evokes fear. When early colonists first encountered this phenomenon, they mistook it for a biblical plague. This initial impression has stuck with these insects — groups of cicadas are still referred to as a plague or a cloud. Even now, these insects remain a source of anxiety for some. Soon after emerging from the ground, they begin their characteristic mating song. While the songs of many cicada species are pleasant, those of periodical cicadas are more like the roar of a jet engine or the buzz

of a saw. Their cacophony can exceed 100 decibels, rivaling the noise of a chainsaw at close range. They fall from the sky, covering cars, trees, and houses. They spend only a few weeks above ground, but during that time they litter earth’s surface with their exoskeletons and dead bodies.

However, a better understanding of these remarkable insects should inspire awe and fascination rather than fear. Their distinctive appearance, with bulky bodies, bulging eyes, and membranous wings is familiar to most since they can be found throughout the world on every continent except Antarctica. Designed by God, cicadas possess remarkable attributes. Specialized structures, called tymbals, enable them to efficiently produce their loud, unmistakable songs. Additionally, their wings feature tiny structures that capture light and minimize detection by predators. The extraordinary life cycle of periodical cicadas culminates in a mass emergence that plays a vital role in their preservation from one generation to the next. Overall, cicadas are extraordinary creatures, whose life cycles and physical traits demonstrate the majesty of God, especially by revealing His order and wisdom.

CICADA LIFE CYCLES

Though cicadas emerge every summer, there is special excitement surrounding this year's emergence. To understand why, it is helpful to know that cicadas come in two main varieties: annual and periodical. Populations of annual cicadas are located throughout the world and can be found in every state in the United States. Annual cicadas have life cycles of two to five years, but because their life cycle is unsynchronized, some individuals emerge every year. In contrast, periodical cicadas are controlled by genetic factors and environmental conditions that lead them to emerge in unison every 13 or 17 years, giving them the longest known life cycles of any insect in the world. Though there are more than 3,000 species of cicadas on earth, only nine of them are periodical. Seven of the nine periodical species can be found in the United States.

Groups of periodical cicadas with the same life cycle that emerge in the same year are called *broods*. Among periodical cicadas, there are three 13-year broods and twelve 17-year broods. This year's emergence includes brood XIII, on a 17-year cycle, and brood XIX, on a 13-year cycle. Brood XIII is known as the Northern Illinois Brood and has a limited range that is restricted mostly to northern Illinois, eastern Iowa, southern Wisconsin and a few counties in northwestern Indiana. Brood XIX, known as the Great Southern Brood, is widely distributed through 15 states, many of them located in the south. Dense populations of this brood can also be found in Illinois, Missouri, and the northern portion of Arkansas. There is a small area in central Illinois, near Springfield, where these two broods may slightly overlap. Cicadas from these two broods are expected to emerge around the end of May or beginning of June in densities that range from 50,000 to 1.5 million cicadas per acre depending on the specific location. A total of more than one trillion cicadas is expected to emerge between these two broods.

Soon after they emerge, cicadas take on their adult-winged form. This is the form we are most familiar with. However, cicadas spend most of their lives underground as nymphs. Like other insects, cicadas undergo metamorphosis. This orderly process

includes three stages (egg, nymph, and adult). In years when they emerge, female cicadas deposit millions of eggs inside small tree branches, from which nymphs emerge six to eight weeks later. Once hatched, they fall to the ground and burrow underground near the roots of plants. Nymphs are created with specially designed mouthparts that enable them to penetrate the tough exterior of plant roots and access the sugary sap of the plant. Obtaining energy in this way, they serve as a key food source for animals such as shrews and moles which are unable to directly obtain energy from plants. They move through five nymph stages as they grow. In their final nymph stage, cicadas contain a light brown exoskeleton and large front limbs, designed specifically to anchor themselves to trees or other plants in preparation for their final transformation into their adult form. At the appointed time, they push their way to earth's surface, aerating the soil as they do so. Once secured to a plant, they break out of the nymph exoskeleton, leaving it behind. Over the next few hours their wings expand and their adult exoskeleton hardens. They spend around five weeks above ground before dying, leaving their bodies scattered on the ground. Important nutrients are returned to the soil as their bodies decay.

PROVIDENTIALLY PRESERVED

Populations of periodical cicadas have been preserved through many generations. The timing of their emergence is one key to the survival of this species. They emerge once the soil at eight inches in depth warms to about 64° F, indicating that conditions are favorable for survival and reproduction. They emerge near sunset to minimize their exposure to predators, since daytime predators such as birds and mammals rely on eyesight to find prey and the activity of many nocturnal predators tends to be less intense during this part of the night. Emergence at such a specific temperature also ensures that massive amounts of cicadas will surface at the same time. Above ground predators voraciously feed on cicadas when they first emerge, but they are soon filled which allows many individual cicadas to survive long enough to find a mate and reproduce.

The intricate structure of cicada wings also plays a crucial role in the survival of these insects. Cicada wings appear to be perfectly flat, but a complex array



of tiny pillars, known as nanopillars, can be seen on the surface of their wings when they are viewed under powerful microscopes. These nanopillars are smaller than the wavelengths of visible light and, therefore, trap light in the spaces between them. This prevents light from being reflected from the surface of the wing and helps them avoid detection by some predators. The wings are also coated with various waxy substances that are “naturally” water repellent and help the wing shed water. This prevents water from being absorbed into their wings, which would weigh them down and prevent them from escaping predators. Additionally, the size and spacing of these nanopillars causes bacterial cells that land on their wings to stretch and rupture, which aids in the prevention of bacterial infections that could affect their survival above ground.

The characteristic that cicadas are best known for, their songs, also plays an important role in the preservation of these unique insects. For a new generation of cicadas to form, adults must locate a mate once they have emerged from the soil. To that end, God has created male cicadas with specialized organs, called tymbals. While the exact mechanism behind the function of these organs is not completely understood, it is known that they operate through a process called buckling. In this process, special muscles in the abdomen of the cicadas rapidly pull the tymbals in and out of shape resulting in a series of clicks or vibrations that create their distinctive buzzing or chirping sounds. Cicadas also have air sacs located in their abdomens that resonate (vibrate at the same frequency) with the sounds produced by their tymbals. This serves to amplify the sounds they produce, raising them to impressive levels. Other insects, like crickets and katydids, produce songs by rubbing their legs together and, therefore, are not able to produce songs as loud as the cicada's. It is suggested that the loudness of their songs is important for establishing territories necessary for breeding and acts as a deterrent to predators. Overall, the timing of cicada emergence and their unique anatomy play a crucial role in maximizing their chances of survival and successful reproduction in the above ground world.

GOD'S MAJESTY REVEALED

When reflecting on the life cycle and physical attributes

of cicadas, several valuable lessons come to light. Firstly, it is evident that God has an important purpose for each stage of cicadas' lives and equips them perfectly for each phase. Similarly, as children of God, we are led by God's gracious hand through a variety of circumstances here on earth. Yet, none of these things fall outside of His control or eternal plan. God tenderly guides us by His sovereign hand, carefully ordering every step of our path and ensuring our preservation throughout this earthly life. Whether we encounter trials or moments of ease, every circumstance serves a purpose in preparing us for our final transformation from earthly life to heavenly glory.

Additionally, we can be thankful that the God who orchestrates every aspect of our lives possesses boundless wisdom, as evidenced by the intricate design of cicada wings and tymbals. Even wicked men are amazed by the efficiency and detail of these structures. Currently, researchers are attempting to replicate the nanopillar pattern found on cicada wings to enhance the efficiency of solar panels and develop bacteria resistant surfaces for medical facilities and implants. The remarkable ability of the tymbal to generate exceptionally loud songs while expending minimal energy has captured the interest of the U.S. Navy, which aims to use an understanding of these structures to enhance sonar technology for underwater exploration and communication. Just as God has so wonderfully equipped cicadas with what is good for them, so He graciously provides what is best for us, guided by His infinite wisdom.

Finally, God has ordained the life cycle of periodical cicadas to bring about their emergence from the earth in immense numbers. Their great abundance and powerful songs make them impossible to ignore. God's revelation through this unique insect is loud, clear, and unmistakable. Despite the denial of many, the life of the cicada serves as yet another reminder that every aspect of God's creation provides sufficient evidence of His existence and authority, leaving all men without excuse. By the grace of God, as trillions of these insects emerge this spring, we will stand in awe and proclaim with the psalmist, “O LORD, how manifold are thy works! In wisdom hast thou made them all: the earth is full of thy riches” (Ps. 104:24). What a majestic God we serve!



RE-ENTRY: LEAVING THE MISSION FIELD AND GOING BACK (1)

REV. RICHARD SMIT

Former PRC foreign missionary to the Philippines, and pastor of Randolph PRC in Randolph, Wisconsin

For a foreign missionary, much time, energy, thought, and excitement goes into preparation for service on a foreign mission field in behalf of his calling and supporting churches, especially in a cross-cultural setting. In fact, recognizing the importance of that, many denominational mission committees, including the Foreign Mission Committee of the PRCA, have developed programs of preparation for their foreign missionaries in order to train themselves for effective and long-term service on their respective foreign fields. This policy of preparation is supported by Scripture in the example of the apostle Paul who was prepared in several ways in the interim period after his conversion and before he was sent out with Barnabas by the church in Antioch unto the mission work in Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Achaia.

Not only does Scripture address the important preparation of a foreign missionary for effective service in his field of labor, but it also addresses the easily overlooked matter of the foreign missionary's return from his field of labor to his calling church and denomination upon completion of his mandate. This and future articles will examine from the book of Acts the apostle Paul's re-entry into life and labor within his calling church in Antioch and within the other churches of his fellow Jewish saints in Palestine. Further, the plan is to explore how that example of the apostle relates to a foreign missionary coming back into life and labor among the church and denomination from which he originally was sent out.

We find in the book of Acts a few, brief examples of the apostle Paul's re-entry into the established churches in Antioch and Palestine in Acts 14:26–28; Acts 15:35; Acts 18:22–23; and Acts 21:4–14. Together, these examples show six aspects of his re-entry: release, return, refreshment, rehearsal, renewal, and refocus.

RELEASE

In each of the returns of the apostle Paul, he had been released from and relieved of his mandate to continue his work in Asia Minor, Macedonia, or Achaia. He was led by the Lord to the point where he understood that it was time for a return to his calling church and other supporting churches in Jewish Palestine. How the apostle Paul understood that he had reached that point where it was time for him to return is not always clearly revealed.

In some cases, it is clear what factors had brought an end to the apostle's missionary labors in his second and third missionary journeys. Regarding the end of his second missionary journey, the apostle informed the Ephesian saints that he needed to leave Asia Minor and go to Palestine because he “must by all means keep this feast that cometh in Jerusalem” (Acts 18:21). Regarding the end of his third missionary journey, the apostle “hasted, if it were possible for him, to be at Jerusalem the day of Pentecost” (Acts 20:16).

However, in his first missionary journey, when Paul with Barnabas had reached Derbe and preached there, we are only informed that then they revisited the brethren in Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, before eventually returning to their calling church in Antioch, Syria. We are not informed what specifically brought them to their understanding to revisit the brethren and establish them as churches with elders in Asia Minor and then to discontinue any further work in that region (Acts 14:20–23).

Although all of the details regarding the means that the Spirit of our Lord may have used to guide the apostle Paul to the end of each of his missionary tours are not revealed, yet it was clear to the apostle that his return was warranted only after their mission to that

point was “fulfilled” (Acts 14:26). He had been released for a time from the day-to-day, hands-on mission work among the Gentiles in order to go back to Antioch and Jerusalem.

Similarly, a foreign missionary begins the process of re-entry by the first step of release. This may apply to the temporary release for a short-term furlough of several weeks, a medical leave, or to a long-term furlough of many months. It may also apply to a permanent release of the missionary from both the day-to-day labors of his place of labor and also the call as missionary so that he is guided by the Lord into another charge, such as a local pastorate.

In each case of release, the Lord, through various means and through the missionary’s calling church, brings him to that point of release. That providential means could be the call out of the mission work into the pastorate of the local churches, as was the experience of Philip in Caesarea. The providential means could be a debilitating sickness for the missionary or one of his family members. The providential means could be a creational calamity in the missionary’s field of labor, a doctrinal controversy in the mission churches and calling church, a schism that affects the mission work or affects the calling church, a sudden scourge of persecution, the changing needs of the missionary family, a conflict among missionaries, which occurred already early in the history of missions (cf. Acts 15:37–39), or the physical or mental health of the missionary himself. The providential means might also be the blessed situation where the presence and the service of the missionary have come to an end because the indigenous churches have been well established through mission work so that they have the sufficient man-power and resources to continue adequately on their own. Whatever the means may be, the Spirit of our Lord brings the foreign missionary to that point where the work to which he was sent has been “fulfilled” (Acts 14:26), either in part or entirely. At that point of the task accomplished, he is released from his day-to-day labors, or, in some cases, perhaps even from the missionary call altogether.

RETURN

The apostle Paul returned to Antioch twice, and, if he had desired to do it again after his third missionary journey, the Lord prevented that with his two-year

imprisonment in Jerusalem and Caesarea and then his journey to Rome and house-arrest there. In each case, the apostle’s return took some foresight and planning ahead, involved a lot of walking and traveling by ship, and involved Christian hospitality among the churches and various fellow saints along the journey of the return. In the apostle’s case, it also involved being accompanied by others during his travels (Acts 21:1).

This phase of his return involved difficult farewells. While this undoubtedly happened frequently for the apostle who was greatly honored and loved by those among whom he faithfully served, yet one example is given in Acts 20:17–38. At that point of release, the apostle expected that he would no longer see the Ephesians again. He said, “And now, behold, I know that ye all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, shall see my face no more.” (Acts 20:25) Although in the future, the Lord did send the apostle back to labor in Ephesus, at this point he did not know that would be possible. According to that information, the saints and the apostle expected not to see each other again on this side of the grave. Because they all expected this farewell to be permanent, they prayed with the apostle, commended him to the grace of God in his travels, and then “they all wept sore, and fell on Paul’s neck, and kissed him, sorrowing most of all for the words which he spake, that they should see his face no more. And they accompanied him unto the ship” (Acts 20:37–38).

After the farewells, the apostle endured long journeys on various ships and through sailing conditions that were not usually characterized as “fair winds and seas following.” Regarding his difficult ship travels, he wrote, “thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep, in journeyings often, in perils of waters...” (II Cor. 11:25–26).

Similarly, after release, the foreign missionary enters the second step of re-entry: return. According to the nature of the release, whether it is short-term or long-term, the missionary family members prepare themselves, the missionary house, household belongings, children’s schooling schedules, care of the mission field if necessary while absent, and various other things. Plans are worked out regarding a date of departure from the mission field, arrival in the calling church and supporting churches, a visiting schedule with family and supporting churches,

church meetings, mission field presentations, and times for recovery and vacation rest.

Once all plans, necessary approvals, and funding from the calling church and supporting churches are in place, the days come for the difficult farewells. In days past, saints from the mission stations, or from the newly formed, indigenous churches, accompanied the missionary and family off to the ships that would return them to their home culture and sending churches. In recent times, it has also been the practice on many mission fields that the indigenous saints accompany missionary families to their point of departure and have a brief time of devotions together, including earnest supplication to the Lord for safe travels and His blessings upon the missionary families in their journeys. After this salutary practice, the missionary families disappear into thick crowds of travelers, through mazes of wearisome checkpoints, into cavernous hallways of airports and transportation terminals, and then into a period of patient waiting for their journey to begin.

In some countries and at some airports and transportation terminals, this salutary practice might not always be possible because of crowd congestion, lack of suitable space, and strict airport security rules. As a result, farewells are arranged for the preceding Sundays

in the church services of the indigenous churches and in a time of fellowship, food, and group photos.

Thereafter, it is normal that foreign missionaries with their families begin their return with mixed emotions. On the one hand, they are excited, looking forward to go to their passport countries among family and friends and to their native culture and churches. On the other hand, they are emotionally and physically drained from all of the preparation, the work of winding down their labors and presence in the mission work, and then the emotional farewells to their church family and fellow saints, usually expecting not to see the majority of them ever again face to face on this side of the grave. Such farewells before departure are as difficult and real as it was for the apostle Paul upon his departure from the Ephesian saints. This is especially true if the missionary has been released by the Lord from mission work permanently.

Once foreign missionaries with their families depart from their field of labor, one would naturally think that they are returning home. However, is it a return “home”?

We will address that question in the next article as well as explore the next elements of a foreign missionary’s re-entry.

IN MEMORIAM



IN MEMORIAM: HERMAN C. HANKO (1930–2024)

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

Rarely does God give to His church a ministry of one of His servants like that of Herman C. Hanko. This includes the length of a ministry. Ordained into the gospel ministry in the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) in 1955, Hanko was declared emeritus (retired) in 2001. God gave him 46 years of official, active labor in His church.

God made this ministry extraordinarily fruitful on behalf of the kingdom of Christ. The bulk of Hanko’s

service was the training of young men for the ministry, in the PR Seminary. After two pastorates, first in Hope PRC in Walker, MI and then in the Doon, Iowa PRC, Hanko accepted the appointment of the PRC to their seminary in 1965. There, he worked until his retirement in 2001, some 36 years. In this small seminary, with only a few professors, his duties were wide-ranging. But his major field was church history. One of the benefits

of this work in the seminary is the ongoing publication of his fresh, thorough, and insightful notes on the subject by the publishing house associated with the PRC—the Reformed Free Publishing Association.

Hanko authored many other books during his years at the seminary. All are substantial and soundly Reformed. He was a truly Reformed scholar.

As ought to be the case with every Reformed professor of theology, and as is the need of the church of Christ in all her theologians, Hanko's first love was preaching. Himself a powerful, at times mesmerizing, preacher, he devoted his instruction in the seminary to the end of giving especially the PRC capable preachers of the gospel.

Although Hanko gladly and zealously worked on behalf of the small Protestant Reformed denomination of churches, God gave him also a wider ministry. In the course of his active ministry, Hanko had the opportunity to preach and teach in N. Ireland, in the Philippines, in Singapore, and in other foreign fields. His



Prof. Herman C. Hanko
October 10, 1930–April 2, 2024

death is mourned by many in many parts of the world, if not because of the bonds established by personal ministry, then because of his influence by his writings.

A virtue of this servant of God, exactly because he was a servant of God, of benefit to the cause of the gospel, that should not go unobserved, was Hanko's vigorous defense of the truth against errors that threatened the church's confession of the gospel of grace and the holy life that the gospel calls for. In the classic, Christian

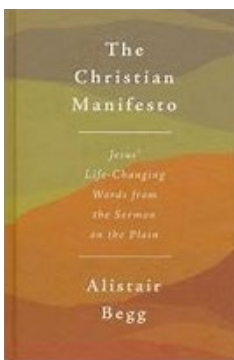
sense of the phrase, he was a "polemical theologian." Having set forth the truth, he defended it against error.

In the end, Herman C. Hanko was God's gift to the church of a "man of God," upright in personal and family life and faithful and zealous in the office of the ministry.

For him and his work, I personally and the PRC are grateful.

At God's taking of him from us, we exclaim with Elisha over the departure of Elijah: "the chariot of Israel, and the horsemen thereof" (II Kings 2:12).

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 Mrs. Brenda Hoekstra, wife, mother, grandmother, and member of Hudsonville PRC in Hudsonville, Michigan.

The Christian Manifesto: Jesus' Life-changing Words from the Plain, by Alistair Begg, The Good Book Co., 2023. Pp. 112. Hard cover, \$18.99.

Every once in a while, a book comes along that shows itself to be one that every Christian should read besides the Bible itself. For me, there were only two such books; until now. Granted, there a lot of great books that I

think should be read, especially after I just finished them. But for the Christian life, for living by faith, for our experience as Christians, this is one of those books that warrants a ‘must read’ status.

We all love Christ’s mission statements, such as the ones we find in Luke 4:16-21, John 6:38-40, or 10:14-18. The very mission of coming to be crucified for His people to save them and bring them to heaven; who does not love that? Even nominal Christians love it. Even unbelievers might commend the idea of it.

But how many love Christ’s manifesto, His ‘call to action’? You will lose most nominal Christians right there; and unbelievers will laugh. Many believers of *free grace* will choke a little on it. And plenty of otherwise conscientious, orthodox Christians will fight each other over it. Even many of us may struggle with it.

A manifesto to mankind seems to put a bit much onto man, does it not? But if Christ died for the right to redeem us, did He not also earn the right to tell us what to do and how to live? And ought we not do as He says? As long as we walk in this fallen world, He *needs*

to declare His counter-cultural directive to us, because our default setting is to run after sin.

He knew that, so He personally proclaimed to us His life-changing ‘call to action’ in two places in Scripture: one in Matthew 5-7; and an abbreviated version in Luke 6:17ff. This book expounds the latter in very simple-to-grasp words. It is packed with solid truth, even doctrinal truth. Yet, it unpacks that truth in a manner that is easy to read and understand.

Essential to your salvation is not only that you are saved and brought to heaven but also that you are changed now. Will people know you are a Christian by your godly love? This book will help you examine yourself to see if you are truly changed.

In case you are wondering what other two books this grandma thinks every Christian should read for living one’s life for Christ, the *Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment* by Jeremiah Burroughs is one. And the *Golden Booklet of the True Christian Life* by Calvin is the other.

ANNOUNCEMENT

WEDDING ANNIVERSARY

With thankfulness to God, we rejoice with our parents, **Bruce and Cherie Jabaay**, as they celebrate 50 years of marriage on June 22, 2024. We are grateful for their faithful guidance throughout the years and their beautiful example of love for each other and their children, with God always at the center. Psalm 103:17 “But the mercy of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear him, and his righteousness unto children’s children.”

Love,

Dave and Julie Steenwyk

Ben, Emily, and Samuel Steenwyk,

Jordan, Ashlinn, and Harley Steenwyk

Kedan, Cameron, Justin, Marissa, Blake, Grace

Rich and Lisa Jabaay

Brasen, Trase, Landon

Brian Jabaay

Joel and Lisa Kooienga

Taylor, Madison, Charlotte, Sylvie, Maven

Jenison, Michigan

CLASSIS WEST

Classis West of the Protestant Reformed Churches will meet in Hull, Iowa, on Wednesday, September 25, 2024, at 8:30 A.M., the Lord willing. All material for the agenda is to be in the hands of the stated clerk 30 days before classis convenes, that is, by August 26, 2024. All delegates in need of lodging or transportation from the airport should notify the clerk of Hull’s consistory.

Rev. J. Engelsma, Stated Clerk

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CALL TO SYNOD

Synod 2023 appointed Trinity Protestant Reformed Church, Hudsonville, Michigan the calling church for the 2024 Synod. The Consistory hereby notifies our churches that the 2024 Synod of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America will convene, the Lord willing, on Tuesday, June 11, 2024 at 8:00 A.M., in the Trinity Protestant Reformed Church.

The pre-Synodical Service will be held on Monday evening, June 10, at 7:00 P.M. Rev. G. Eriks, president of the 2023 Synod, will preach the sermon. Synodical delegates are requested to meet with the Consistory before the service.

Delegates in need of lodging should contact Mr. Terry Dykstra, email: terry.dykstra96@gmail.com. Phone: 616-293-3156.

Consistory of Trinity Protestant Reformed Church
Terry Dykstra, Clerk



REV. WILBUR BRUINSMA

- 6/2 Jael, Blessed Above Women, Jud. 5:24–27
- 6/9 Ruth's Vow, Ruth 1:16, 17
- 6/16 Hannah's Prayer for a Son, I Sam. 1:9–18
- 6/23 Abigail Pleads with David, I Sam. 25:28–31
- 6/30 Elizabeth's Inspired Revelation, Luke 1:39–45



PRCA 100TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION

With gratitude to our faithful God, the PRCA look forward to our 100th anniversary. All the members of the PRCA, our sister churches, and close contacts are encouraged to come together at Calvin University in Grand Rapids, MI from June 2–6, 2025 to participate in this commemorative week. Visit prca100.org for basic event information and to sign up for email updates.

Remember that the *Standard Bearer* is published only once a month during the months of June, July, and August.

