

THE STANDARD BEARER

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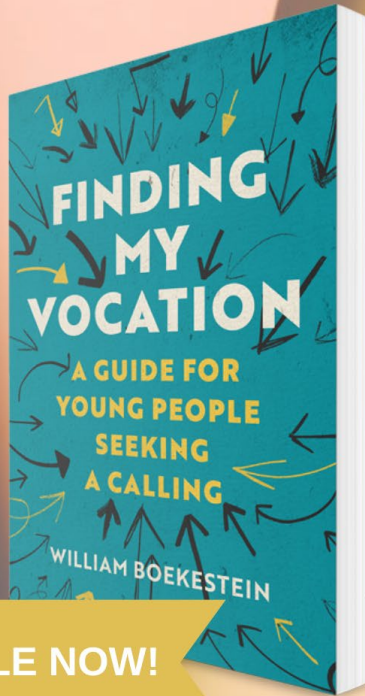
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by the author of *The Story of...* series and *Glorifying and Enjoying God: 52 Devotions through the Westminster Shorter Catechism*



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IMITATORS OF GOD

REV. STEPHAN REGNERUS

Pastor of Hull PRC in Hull, Iowa

Be ye therefore followers of God, as dear children; and walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweetsmelling savour—Ephesians 5:1, 2

We are, by nature, imitators one of another. We become like the people who are closest to us. Children resemble parents; church members tend to dress and speak in a similar way; students imitate teachers and fellow classmates.

While it is true that we naturally imitate fellow human beings, we are not, by nature, imitators of God. Indeed, of ourselves we do not want to bear any resemblance to God whatsoever. The gospel is foolishness to us; it is human nature to be ashamed of both the gospel and the God who gives us the gospel. The apostle Paul understood this reality, so by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit he exhorted the saints at Ephesus to imitate God.

THE CALLING

The command as we read it in the King James Version is: “Be ye therefore, followers of God.” To follow someone is to walk after them; it is to place your feet in their footsteps. The Old Testament Israelites did this, quite literally, for the forty years of their wilderness wandering. The cattle and wagons, parents and children, followed the Lord’s presence in the pillar of cloud. This was the way of life for them. To deviate from the Lord’s presence and from the nation of Israel would mean certain death in the wilderness.

But there is more to the idea of following after God. Literally, the idea of the word in the original is to imitate God. The Greek word is *mimeteys*, from which we receive the English word *mimic*. We are to observe God, learn from Him, and then emulate His holy words and actions.

Astounding that the Scriptures call us to imitate God! It almost seems out of place to suggest such a thought. Who has the power to know, much less imitate God? Did not the Devil tempt Eve to eat of the fruit so that she and Adam would be as gods, knowing good and evil? Perhaps, we could better understand if we were commanded to imitate *fellow man*. To imitate man we can understand, for the neighbor we can know.

But to imitate God, who is worthy? Who is able? Zophar, a counselor of Job, asked rhetorically, “Canst thou by searching find out God? Canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection? It is as high as heaven; what canst thou do? Deeper than hell; what canst thou know?” (Job 11:7-8). And now we are to imitate Him? Even the angels in God’s presence covered their faces with two wings and cried out, “Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts. The whole earth is full of his glory” (Is. 6:3). Isaiah, struck with the knowledge of his sin, exclaimed, “Woe is me! For I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips...for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts” (Is. 6:5). Unable to comprehend the Almighty, and sinful besides, how can we even begin to imitate Him?

There are certain respects in which we cannot and never will be able to imitate Jehovah. He is the exclusive Creator who in wisdom made heaven and earth. He is the independent God, the self-sufficient “I am that I am,” who needs nothing and no one outside of Himself. He is infinite, boundless in perfection, eternal and everywhere present. In these respects, we admire Him but do not imitate Him. We stand in awe of His transcendence but do not mimic it. We love the truth of His providence but do not presume that by imitation we can likewise control all things in our lives.

Rather, we imitate God only insofar as He gives

us ability to. Our covenant God is pleased to share with us some of His perfections (what we call the “communicable attributes”). Peter teaches that He makes us “partakers of the divine nature” (II Pet. 1:4). By the Spirit of Jesus Christ, He creates within us His likeness, so that in a creaturely way we bear a resemblance to our God. These are the perfections that Jehovah is pleased to share with us, His people.

To imitate God, then, is to be holy as God is holy. It is to walk in the light of His commandments and not in the darkness of rebellion. It is to love what is pure and upright and to hate what entices man unto ungodliness.

Imitating God impacts our relationships. It means that we walk in love, as verse two specifies: “And walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us....” Here is how you imitate God: by loving God and your neighbor. Love is not self-seeking but self-denying. The Christian’s love is patterned after the love of Christ, who gave Himself as an offering and sacrifice. Love is the daily activity of seeking the good of the neighbor, even when the neighbor does not deserve it.

THE POSSIBILITY

What is the possibility of imitating Jehovah God? We recognize the impossibility of doing so ourselves. How demanding is this calling! How short we fall of the mark of loving God and the neighbor as we ought. Every day we are struck with the reality that we are prone by nature not to love but to hate both God and the neighbor. Nowhere do the Scriptures assure us that following God will be an easy life. Oftentimes God leads His people through difficult places. For forty years Israel followed God through the barren wilderness until an entire generation passed away. Most of that journey was not glamorous or exciting; today one might conclude it was not “Instagram worthy.” Even the manna that fell from heaven soon became odious to their tastebuds, and they longed for the garlic and leeks of Egypt.

The text teaches us the possibility of imitating God: it is because we are His children. We are born again by the Spirit in the likeness of God, so that we call Him *Father* and He counts us His children. Children are teachable. Children do not imagine that they know all (or at least they ought not to presume they know all!). Children will enter the classroom this fall, and there stands the teacher in the front of the room. And the children know

that it is their duty to be still and listen to the teacher. The teacher will guide them through many different subjects, including history, Bible, math, and science. As the students absorb the instruction of the teacher, they will become more and more like the teacher.

But the text goes further: we are not merely called children, but we are *dear* children. You are beloved children, in whom the Father delights! You are part of God’s family, the object of the Father’s love. He loves you as His adopted child. He proves His love for you through His only begotten Son, who is the express image of the Father. The Son gave Himself up at Calvary so that you might be adopted sons and daughters. The Father pours upon us the Spirit of Christ who bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God, whereby we cry “Abba, Father.”

As God’s child, you have life within you. This is a new life that is given at regeneration. This is a spiritual life—not visible to the world—that comes from your union with Jesus Christ. This life within you is powerful; the Devil cannot quench it. Man may stumble as he endeavors to follow God, but he will never fall from grace.

Do not be ashamed, fellow Christian, of the fact that you are a child. You are God’s child! This is no criticism but a privilege. This is not merely a stage of life through which one is passing. The struggle so many children have is that they do not want to remain children. They want to grow up! They want the freedoms and abilities that come with maturity. But the apostle does not exhort us to leave behind childhood. Once a child of God, always a child of God.

Let us live as God’s children. Let us be curious as children are. May we ever be interested in God, and His kingdom, and His revelation to us in the holy Scriptures. Let us approach God’s house with humility and teachable spirit. May we dwell in the house of the Lord with a desire to “enquire in his temple” (Ps. 27:4).

Always, let us live as part of the church. The text does not use the singular; it does not speak of the lone child following the Lord. The independent, self-seeking, and proud individual would try to do that. He imagines that he does not need the church institute and the communion of the saints. But the text uses the plural: “Be ye therefore followers of God, as dear children.” It is not in isolation that we grow in holiness, but in the context of the covenant community, the church of Christ.

THE CONFIDENCE

The confidence we have is that our heavenly Father, for Jesus' sake, is transforming and will transform His children into His own image. He will make us to be faithful followers. "This is the will of God, even your sanctification," states Paul in I Thessalonians 4:3. God's will always is efficacious. More and more God does change us, so that we do not resemble this world, or the idols of this world, or the so-called heroes of this world. Instead, we are made to resemble God.

How beautiful is this image-bearer of Jehovah! The faithful, sincere, imitator of God radiates with holy glory. Her beauty is not the "outward adorning of

plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold," but the "inner man of the heart...even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price," (I Pet. 3:3-4). This God-fearing individual shines with the beauty of holiness.

How lovely is this person to Jehovah! God delights in those who follow after Him. Earthly parents have no greater joy than to hear that their children walk in truth (III John 4). How much more so does not our heavenly Father delight in those who follow after Him! We are God's workmanship; let us walk in love to the honor of God's name.

EDITORIAL



REFLECTIONS ON SYNOD 2024 AND THE EXPERIENCE OF SALVATION (2)

REV. JOSHUA ENGELSMAN

Pastor of Crete PRC in Crete, Illinois

INTRODUCTION

In my last editorial, I indicated that it was my intention to write several articles on the decisions of the recent synod of the Protestant Reformed Churches regarding a case of doctrinal error. I also noted that I intended to focus on the truth of the believer's experience of his salvation and various doctrines related to it.

The first editorial in this little series grounded the entirety of the believer's salvation—therefore, necessarily also his *experience* of salvation—in the saving work of Jesus Christ.

In this editorial, I want to relate the believer's experience of salvation to the doctrine of God's forgiveness of his sins.

THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS

Let's begin by defining the doctrine of the forgiveness of sins (synonyms of which are the remission of sins and the pardon of sins).

Forgiveness is a legal concept. It has to do with one's legal standing before God. It addresses not sin's power

and pollution but sin's guilt and punishment. The guilt of sin refers to the fact that we have done contrary to God's law and therefore we are liable to and deserving of God's punishment.

Forgiveness means that we are pardoned or acquitted by God. It means that God absolves us of our guilt and releases us from the liability to punishment.

Answer 56 of the Heidelberg Catechism says that forgiveness means: "God...will no more remember my sins" (cf. Jer. 31:34 where God's forgiveness is identified as His not remembering sin). Because God is all-knowing, He knows every sin that we have committed. But when He forgives, He declares that legally He will not remember our sins. He is saying that He does not view us in the light of those sins, He does not deal with us on the basis of them, and He does not enter into judgment with us for them.

Answer 56 also says that forgiveness means: "God...will graciously impute to me the righteousness of Christ." The idea of *impute* means to credit, attribute, reckon something to someone's account. In forgiving

us, God declares that He does not impute our sins to our legal account (cf. Ps. 32:2). But our status is not that we are brought from negative to zero. In forgiving us, God positively imputes to us righteousness, so that our legal standing before Him is as if we have perfectly obeyed Him.

Answer 56 concludes its explanation of forgiveness by saying, “that I may never be condemned before the tribunal of God.” To be forgiven means that there is no condemnation for us on account of our sin. God does not condemn us now, nor will He condemn us in the final judgment.

An important aspect of forgiveness is that God declares it to the conscience of the sinner. Forgiveness is not only a word of God in a heavenly courtroom, but also that declaration brought home to the conscience of the sinner so that he hears it and knows it.

To help understand what forgiveness is, we can use the illustration of financial debt. The New Testament word for forgiveness literally means “to let go, release,” and the idea is the letting go or releasing of a person from a debt so that he is no longer required to repay it. Imagine that you have borrowed a large sum of money from another person. That debt belongs on your account with that person and you are under liability to repay it. But say the other person decides to forgive your debt. To forgive means that you are released from the debt and the obligation to repay. The same thing is true of God’s forgiveness of us. We are in debt to Him on account of our sins. In forgiving us, God absolves us of our debt and releases us from the liability to pay the penalty for our debt.

THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Forgiveness belongs to the doctrine of justification. When we talk about forgiveness, we are dealing with the doctrine of justification.

This is plain from the fact that in Romans 4:6-8 the apostle Paul, in setting forth the doctrine of justification by faith alone, quotes from David’s words in Psalm 32 where David describes the forgiveness of his sins of murder and adultery.

To be precise, the forgiveness of sins is one of the two essential elements of justification. Reformed theologians have consistently defined justification as God’s forgiving His people of their sins and His

imputing to them positively the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

Justification is something that takes places at a specific moment in the life of the Christian, when we are first savingly called and brought to conscious faith in Jesus Christ. Justification is perfect and complete. Canons V, 6 refers to “the state of justification” that cannot be lost even in great falls into sin. Justification is not a process. It is complete at once and for all time. There is no more or less in justification or degrees of justification. A man is either fully justified, or he is not justified at all. To be justified means that one has a right standing with God that can never be lost. The state of the justified child of God is not one of constant fluctuating between being the object of God’s favor and then the object of God’s wrath. As justified children of God, we are forever the objects of His favor and are forever free from the liability to punishment. Romans 8:1, in describing our justification, says “there is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus.”

If this is true, why then do we talk about the need for forgiveness every day and why does Jesus teach us to pray daily for the forgiveness of our debts? A person might wonder: “I am a child of God in a state of justification. Why do I need daily forgiveness if all my sins have already been forgiven? Why do I need to pray for forgiveness?”

While the believer is in a state of justification that is perfect and can never be lost, he does need the daily forgiveness of sins. This was true of Abraham; as a believer he was justified long before the specific justification of which we read in Genesis 15:6.¹ This was true of David; he was justified long before he spoke of the blessedness of forgiveness in Psalm 32. It is helpful in this connection to note that Canons V, 6 says that even in our great falls into sin we cannot “forfeit the state of justification,” but then in Canons V, 7 it speaks of how we “seek and obtain remission in the blood of the Mediator” for those sins.² What this shows

1 On this point, see John Owen, *The Doctrine of Justification by Faith*. I am using an unpaginated, digital edition; the appropriate reference is found at the very end of chapter 5.

2 The Westminster Confession of Faith makes this point in Chap. 11.5: “God does continue to forgive the sins of those who are justified; and although they can never fall from the state

is that even the justified child of God needs the daily forgiveness of his sins.

The explanation for this is that, even as justified children of God, we daily sin against Him. When we sin against God, that sin brings with it a sense of guilt and a troubled conscience. In praying for God's fatherly forgiveness, we do not fear condemnation, but we are pricked in our consciences by our sins. We do not fear that He is going to cast us off, but we do feel a sense of guilt over what we have done. Because our sins trouble us, we need to know that they are forgiven and the debt created by them is removed.

What this means then is that we daily need a renewed application to our conscience of our once-for-all justification.³

SUPREMELY MERCIFUL

God's forgiveness of our sins is an act of supreme mercy.

This is not to take away from the fact that it is also strictly just. According to strict justice, God forgives us for the sake of Jesus Christ.

The basis for our being forgiven, as we noted last time, is both the atoning death and the lifelong obedience of Jesus. Both aspects of His saving work are imputed to our account. Thus,

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there is a great exchange that takes place. First, the guilt of our sins has been imputed to Christ's account. When God forgives our sins, He does not simply remove them and ignore them. But He took those sins off our record and put them on Christ's account. That is why Christ had to die the accursed death of the cross. All our sins were on His permanent record, so that He was declared guilty and liable to punishment. And because our sins are off our account and on Christ's, God pardons us and delivers us from punishment.

Second, this exchange means that God takes Christ's righteousness and credits it to our account. On Christ's permanent record is perfect, sinless obedience to the whole law of God. When He forgives us, God declares that He has applied Christ's perfect righteousness and obedience to our account. God not only expunges our legal record of all wrongdoing, but

He also applies to our record perfect obedience and righteousness.

What is an act of strict justice is, at the same time, an act of supreme mercy.

This mercy is eternal. His forgiving of us does not involve a change in God. The eternal source of our being forgiven is God's eternal decree of election. We can distinguish between God's eternal decree of justification and justification itself

that takes place in our lifetime, just as we can distinguish between God's eternal decree of sanctification and preservation and His actual sanctifying and preserving of us in our lifetime. In His decree of election, God chose certain people out of the human race to be His own, set His love upon them, and decreed the whole of their salvation and the way and means of their salvation. In the fulfillment of that decree, He sent Jesus Christ to suffer the death of the cross. And in fulfillment of that decree, He actually forgives us in this life for the sake of Christ's death.

Forgiveness then is an act of pure mercy and is wholly undeserved.

Earlier we used the illustration of financial debt. You are in debt to another person, and that other person decides to forgive your debt. The forgiveness of that debt is free and gracious! This is infinitely more

of justification, yet they may, by their sins, fall under God's fatherly displeasure, and not have the light of His countenance restored unto them, until they humble themselves, confess their sins, beg pardon, and renew their faith and repentance."

³ The idea of daily forgiveness being a renewed application of justification comes from Geerhardus Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015), 4:159: "Moreover, when the consciousness of sin awakens in the believer, again and again there must be a renewed application of justification to the conscience. To that extent, one can say that justification is repeated. In the forum of heaven or before God it occurs only once, but the application of this single pronouncement to the conscience occurs again and again in renewal. Scripture calls that the forgiveness of sins (1 John 1:9; Matt. 6:12; 1 John 2:1). At the same time, however, resident in this forgiveness is the consciousness that it is an application of the absolute justification that is granted with the first exercise of faith."

true of God's forgiveness of us. We are infinitely in debt to God, and by nature hate Him. Yet in an act of astounding grace He sent His Son to die for us! And in an act of astounding grace He forgives us of our sins! Forgiveness is wholly free and unmerited and gracious!

RELATED TO OUR EXPERIENCE

Why spend the time explaining the doctrine of God's forgiveness of our sins? What does this have to do with the matter of the believer's experience of his salvation?

The truth of the forgiveness of sins has everything to do with the experience of salvation! The believer has no experience of his salvation apart from justification and the forgiveness of sins.

This is the case because the forgiveness of sins is the foundational benefit of our salvation merited by Christ and applied by His Spirit. It is not the only benefit of salvation; sanctification and preservation are also necessary and precious benefits of salvation. But the forgiveness of sins is the foundational benefit. This is plain from the fact that sanctification follows upon and is dependent upon justification. This truth regarding forgiveness applies also to the experience of one's salvation: forgiveness is foundational to experience.

The Scriptures teach this connection between forgiveness and experience. What was David's experience when he refused to confess his sins of murder and adultery? He says, "When I kept silence, my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long. For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me: my moisture is turned into the drought of summer" (Ps. 32:3-4). He speaks of his experience in terms of bones being broken (Ps. 51:8), of feeling cast away from God's presence (v. 11), of not knowing the joy of his salvation (v. 12). Miserable experience! But what was his experience knowing God's forgiveness of his sins? "Blessed [happy!] is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed [happy!] is the man unto whom the Lord imputeth not iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no guile" (Ps. 32:1-2). He speaks of forgiveness in terms of hearing joy and gladness (Ps.

51:8) and having restored to him the joy of his salvation (v. 12). Wonderful experience!

This relation between forgiveness and experience is also the teaching of key passages in the New Testament. In Romans 5:1 Paul says, "Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." What is the believer's experience being justified by faith? Peace with God! He experiences blessed calm knowing that God is not against him but that he is right with God. In Romans 8:1 Paul says: "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in

Christ Jesus." What is striking is that this statement comes after he speaks of the believer's wretchedness in chapter 7 in terms of "the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do." The comfort in the face of this miserable experience is in knowing that, because he is justified, there is no condemnation!

Joy and peace! Is that not the heart of the believer's experience of his salvation? Such experience is the precious benefit of the forgiveness of sins.

This relation between forgiveness and experience is also the teaching of the Reformed creeds. Article 23 of the Belgic Confession says: "We believe that our salvation consists in [literally, "lies in"] the remission of our sins for Jesus Christ's sake...as David and Paul teach us, declaring this to be the happiness of man, that God imputes righteousness to him without works." Later it says: "This is sufficient to cover all our iniquities and to give us confidence in approaching to God; freeing the conscience of fear, terror, and dread."

The Canons of Dordt are the only place in the Three Forms of Unity where the word "experience" is found. In two significant places, that experience is tied to forgiveness. Canons V, 7 speaks of God's restoring those who fall deeply into sin and lose the sense of His favor for time: "[He] certainly and effectually renews them to repentance, to a sincere and godly sorrow for their sins, that they may seek and obtain remission [forgiveness] in the blood of the Mediator, may again experience the favor of a reconciled God...." Then

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Canons V, 9, in speaking of the believer's assurance, says that "they experience forgiveness of sins."

There are other things the believer experiences—such as sorrow for sin, gratitude for the work of Christ, love for God—but these experiences all rest upon the experience of peace and joy that we have knowing

our sins are forgiven and we are right with God for Jesus' sake.

Any doctrine of the experience of salvation must accord with and rest upon the truth of God's free, gracious forgiving of sins.

ALL AROUND US



PCUSA AND PCA GENERAL ASSEMBLIES, AND CRC AND URC SYNODS

REV. DANIEL HOLSTEGE

Pastor of the Wingham PRC in Wingham, Ontario, Canada

As many of you know, the very liberal Presbyterian Church in the USA (PCUSA) began its downward spiral into apostasy already well over a hundred years ago. J. Gresham Machen wrote a famous book in the 1920s contrasting true Christianity from the liberal theology that was running rampant in the Presbyterian church in which he was a pastor at the time. In the 1970s, the PCUSA gave their blessing to same-sex unions.

You will not be surprised to learn then that, according to *World* magazine, their general assembly in Salt Lake City, Utah recently decided by a vote of 389-24 to "add gender identity and sexual orientation to a list of protected classes in the denomination's constitution."¹ The decision now goes to the presbyteries for their approval. By next summer, the PCUSA's Book of Order will officially guarantee full participation in church worship, government, and life not only to people of all nations, tribes, and tongues—as well it should—but also to all who identify as and practice the lifestyle of a lesbian, gay, bisexual,

transgender, queer, or such like. By this decision, the PCUSA shows itself ever more clearly to be a group of false churches, the great whore who rides on the beast, so that it is proper to call believers who are members of those churches, "Come out of her, my people, lest you share in her sins, and lest you receive of her plagues" (Rev. 18:4).

What underscores this is the fact that a second recommendation also passed, by a vote of 297-130, that requires "candidates for ordination to be vetted for their commitment to guarantee church participation and representation to protected classes." In other words, aspirants to the ministry in the PCUSA will have to pledge that they will not discriminate (for example, admonish or pursue discipline) against any woman who lives in a lesbian relationship with another woman, any man who habitually satisfies his sexual lust for another man, and persons who do not accept the biological sex in which God created them. By contrast, the apostle taught Timothy and Titus that a pastor must not only be blameless in his own life but must also preach the Word, reprove and rebuke sinners, and hold fast to the faithful Word that he has been taught (II Tim. 4:2; Titus 1:9).

¹ Elizabeth Moeller, "New PC(USA) policy could require pastors to be LGBTQ affirming," *World*, July 5, 2024 (<https://wng.org/sift/pcusa-approves-amendment-affirming-lgbtq-lifestyle-1720205334>).

PCA GENERAL ASSEMBLY

The Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), the second largest Presbyterian denomination in America, came out of the PCUSA and began as a new denomination just over fifty years ago. They had their 51st General Assembly (GA) this summer in Richmond, Virginia. There were reportedly fewer controversial matters debated this year than last year.

The PCA as a whole is moving in the opposite direction of the PCUSA when it comes to what is required of officebearers in regard to sexuality. The general assembly of the PCA just gave final approval to a revision of their Book of Church Order which requires an officebearer (who must be male in the PCA) to “conform to the biblical requirement of chastity and sexual purity in his descriptions of himself, and in his convictions, character, and conduct.”² He must be personally chaste, but also personally convinced of what the Bible says about all matters of sexuality.

Ben C. Dunson, founding and contributing editor of *American Reformer* and visiting professor of New Testament at Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, was a voting delegate (a commissioner) at the GA this year. He writes about another item that was treated:

One of the items receiving extra attention is that of who may use the titles of elder or deacon. This one is important because it addresses the fact that women in some PCA churches have been called deacons, though the polity of the PCA requires that this ordained office be only filled by men. Of all the GA debates, I was most surprised by the reasoning of those who opposed the overture that would explicitly forbid the title of elder or deacon being applied to anyone not ordained to that office.³

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Apparently there are some in the PCA who disagree with the denomination’s stance against women serving in office, particularly as deacons, and some have commissioned women to serve as unordained deacons and given them the title of deacon. But the General Assembly passed the overture, which was approved by a supermajority of the presbyteries over the course of last year. They have added to their Book of Church Order the sentence, “Furthermore, unordained people shall not be referred to as, or given the titles of, the ordained offices of pastor/elder, or deacon.” They have thus clarified that the titles (and offices) of pastor, elder, and deacon may only be given to qualified and ordained men, as the Word of God clearly teaches. The conservatives in the PCA were happy with the decisions of this year’s General Assembly.

CRC SYNOD

The conservatives in the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) were also pleased. The synod of the CRC met in Grand Rapids, Michigan this past June. The synod decided by a vote of 134-50 that churches out of harmony with the denominational stance on homosexuality must repent or leave the denomination within a year.⁴ In the last couple of years, the CRC has made clear that it considers homosexual sex a sin. But a significant number of LGBTQ-affirming CRC churches have not backed down or submitted to the decisions. Rather, they have declared themselves churches “in protest.” Now they must repent and

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2 <https://theaquilareport.com/pca-general-assembly-51-summary-and-10-key-decisions>.

3 Ben C. Dunson, “PCA General Assembly Recap: Encouraging News and Some Surprises,” *American Reformer*, June 14, 2024 (<https://americanreformer.org/2024/06/pca-general-assembly-recap/>).

4 Kate Shellnutt, “CRC Tells LGBTQ-Affirming Congregations to Retract and Repent,” *Christianity Today*, June 26, 2024 (<https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2024/june/christian-reformed-church-crc-lgbt-affirming-discipline.html>).

demonstrate their repentance by retracting public statements that contradict the denomination's stance, by desisting from any advocacy against that stance, by pledging not to recognize same-sex marriages or officiate at same-sex weddings, and by not ordaining homosexuals into office.⁵

Trish Borgdorff, a female elder from the Eastern Avenue Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, was given the floor to say farewell to the denomination. Eastern Avenue CRC has been a part of the CRC for almost 150 years and has been openly LGBTQ-affirming since 2022. They are one of the churches "in protest" that have been told to repent or disaffiliate (leave the CRC). They plan to disaffiliate. Elder Borgdorff is very grateful for the CRC but very sad that it has come to this. She will not repent of her wicked opinion that God welcomes practicing homosexuals into His kingdom just as they are, without converting from that way of life. "After her farewell address, delegates stood and clapped. Buikema [the president of synod] said, 'We love each other, and we love all the brothers and sisters in this denomination.'"⁶

That is all fine and good. But does it make sense to give a standing ovation to an individual who refuses to submit to the Word of God that says homosexuality is a vile sin, and who publicly rejects the call to repentance? Between now and next summer, I expect we will hear of many LGBTQ-affirming CRCs leaving the denomination.

URC SYNOD

The Synod of the United Reformed Churches (URC), which meets at least once every three years (last synod was in 2022), met again this summer, in Escondido, California. There were a number of things on the agenda, including a couple of overtures to change the Church Order from saying that *each consistory* shall send two delegates to synod (making over 200 delegates) to *each classis* shall send twelve delegates (making 96 delegates). But that overture did not pass,

5 Kristen Parker, "Synod Sets a Course of Discipline for CRC Churches Acting Contrary to CRC Teachings," *The Banner*, June 19, 2024 (<https://www.thebanner.org/news/2024/06/synod-sets-a-course-of-discipline-for-crc-churches-acting-contrary-to-crc-teachings>).

6 <https://www.thebanner.org/news/2024/06/synod-hears-a-farewell-from-grand-rapids-east-delegate>.

so the URC will continue to have representatives at synod from every church in its federation.

The synod did adopt a report that a committee appointed by the last synod brought on "Corporate Worship in an Age of Technology." In light of the COVID-19 restrictions of previous years, this report outlines the now official views of the URC on corporate worship in a digital age. A couple examples from the report:

Statement one:

According to Scripture and our Reformed Confessions, corporate worship requires in-person gathering of the congregation under the direct oversight of the consistory.

Statement three:

Willfully forsaking the assembly is an act of disobedience. Consistories should therefore admonish members who are content to utilize digital means as a replacement for attending corporate worship....

The synod also adopted a report that seeks to make a biblical and confessional statement on human sexuality. Some examples of statements in this report:

We affirm

1. That God made two biological sexes at creation: male and female, created in the image of God....
2. That attempts to change or identify as having a sex other than the biological sex God created is a sinful act of rebellion against God's creative handiwork....
3. That knowingly using pronouns or language that identifies an individual as having a sex other than the biological sex God created is condoning such sinful rebellion and is not speaking the truth in love to our neighbor....

We affirm

1. That marriage is designed to be a lifelong, monogamous, covenantal union between one biological man and one biological woman....

The interested reader can find these newly adopted statements on the URC website: https://www.urna.org/pastoral_advice.



IS THE NEW MAN THE HOLY SPIRIT? (1)

REV. WILLIAM LANGERAK

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This is a study of the biblical and confessional doctrine of the old man and the new man. It is presented under the title of a question that became the occasion for this study. The reason is not because the answer is difficult. The answer is plain. No! The new man is not the Holy Spirit! The biblical proof is also plain: The new man is man (Eph. 4:24); the Holy Spirit is God (I Cor. 12:3).

There are three basic reasons for this study. First, to explain and develop the doctrine of the old man and the new man because it is critical to understanding sanctification as the work of the Holy Spirit to realize the covenant of grace. Second, to address several serious errors including identification of the new man as the Holy Spirit, which is essentially idolatry that denies the person and work of the Holy Spirit. Third, this particular error seemed new and kept resurfacing, which is strange: The proofs are simple; there is nothing of this in our creeds or Scripture; and our father Herman Hoeksema left no doubt who the new man is, and he is not the Holy Spirit.

This particular question originates from the belief that the Scripture and Reformed creeds teach that the regenerated sinner cannot love God, faith is wholly passive, faith does nothing, you do nothing, and you do not believe, but God believes for you; faith is God's act. Therefore, it is concluded, the new man must be the Holy Spirit. Obviously, something is wrong here, but the logic follows. So, the plain answer to the question required more proof and explanation, which is presented here, along with an in-depth study and development of the Reformed doctrine of the old man and the new man, in the hope that it may help us grow spiritually in certain faith and ardent love, or even convince those who disagree to examine critically what they believe.

The doctrine of the old man and the new man is neither obscure nor piffling. Numerous Bible texts teach it. The most lengthy and explicit is Ephesians 4 and 5. Ephesians 4:20-24 explains the nature of the old man and the new man, calls those who have learned Christ to put off the old man and put on the new man, and explains what this means in the rest of chapters 4 and 5. Colossians 3 is similar. Verses 1-4 explain the nature of the old man and the new man; verses 9-10 say believers “have put off the old man with his deeds” (explained in the context, vv. 5-9a), and “have put on the new man” (explained afterwards, vv. 11-25). Three sequential passages in Romans are about the old man and the new man: Romans 6:3-11; Romans 7; and Romans 8:10-13, although only the old man is mentioned explicitly. Finally, although it uses neither term, II Corinthians 5:14-17 also teaches about the old man and the new man. And there are others. In the creeds, the doctrine of the old man and the new man is explicitly taught in the Belgic Confession, Articles 24 and 34, and Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Days 16 and 33. And it is implicitly found in other places, for example, Canons III/IV, 11-12.

Here are four more simple, conclusive proofs that the new man is not the Holy Spirit. First, “the new man...is *created after* God in righteousness and true holiness” (Eph. 4:24). The Holy Spirit is not created after righteousness and holiness; He is the Righteous and Holy Creator after whose image the new man is created. Second, “the new man is *renewed in* knowledge after the image of him that created him” (Col. 3:10). The Holy Spirit is not renewed in the image of God but is the Renewer in knowledge (Baptism Form)—also the “him” created by “him” [God] is “the new man.”

Third, the new man is *put on* (Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10). No man can put on the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is given (I Thess. 4:8), poured out (Acts 2:17), put in and breathed into us by God (Ezek. 37:10, 14). Fourth, there is a *quickening* of the new man (I Pet. 3:18; H.C., Q&A 90). The Holy Spirit cannot be quickened for there is no death in Him; He is the Living God who quickens (Belgic Confession, Arts. 22, 24; Canons III/IV, 16; John 6:63).

To help explain who the new man is, if not the Holy Spirit, we will next examine Herman Hoeksema's treatment of the old man and the new man in his *Reformed Dogmatics*, beginning with a broad survey of his references there to the subject, which is itself instructive.¹

First, as you might expect, Hoeksema treats this doctrine under soteriology, or the study of salvation. This is significant because he views salvation as “the work of God through Christ whereby He *realizes in the hearts of the elect His covenant*, by making them partakers of all the benefits of that covenant,” with emphasis on “the necessity of grace” and “the Holy Spirit as the author of our salvation” (437). For Hoeksema then, salvation and the covenant are related but distinctly different; the covenant is not a means to salvation, but salvation serves to realize the covenant; and God accomplishes this work by the Holy Spirit—so error regarding the old man and the new man is error regarding the work of the Holy Spirit to realize God's covenant of grace.

Second, Hoeksema treats the old man and the new man specifically under sanctification. The subject, therefore, concerns the work of the Holy Spirit “whereby He delivers the justified and regenerated sinner from the defilement and dominion of sin as a spiritual, ethical power, renews him according to the image of Christ, and enables him to walk in all good works, which God has prepared for him” (520). In other words, the work of the Holy Spirit to realize the covenant affects both the old man and the new man because the justified and regenerated person is given power over the corruption

and bondage of sin so that he looks, thinks, speaks, and acts like Christ.

Third, although Hoeksema treats the old man and the new man near the end of the order of salvation, he mentions the new man already in the first of the order, when he defines regeneration in terms of the new man. Regeneration is “the act of God whereby He implants the seed of the *new life* into the heart of the sinner...a *new creation*, through which in principle *the sinner becomes a new man* in Christ Jesus...” (460). This reflects Hoeksema's conviction that the new man originates in regeneration, is located in the heart by implanting, and is entirely “sanctified in principle,” which means he “cannot sin, for...he is born of God” (461).

Fourth, Hoeksema next brings up the old man and the new man when discussing saving faith and conversion to reinforce this point. Saving faith has an immediate, radical, and principle effect on both the old man and the new man—conversion in principle—yet also continues progressively in life:

This faith in its operation is at the same time the conversion of man in the spiritual sense of the word.... By the power of faith, both mind and will are changed from sin unto righteousness, and turned in the direction of the living God in Christ. By this change of mind and will through faith, the mind observes and judges in a radically different way than before about guilt and sin. And thus man comes to condemn himself before God and to true repentance...and man comes to hunger and thirst after righteousness. *The old man is mortified, and the new man is quickened*. And thus by faith the conversion of man is accomplished in principle, a conversion which, of course, continues throughout his whole life (490-91).

Fifth, when Hoeksema treats justification, he also brings up the old man and the new man. He does so to demonstrate a basic difference between justification and sanctification. Justification is an act of God that is forensic, removes the guilt of sin, and results in a state of righteousness. Sanctification is an act of God that is ethical, removes the pollution of sin, and results in a condition of holiness—essentially by God giving the new man power over the old man.

...it is evident that δικαλουν [to justify] does not refer to any real or ethical righteousness, but to the legal act of justification, that is, of placing man, and

1 Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids, MI: RFPA, 1966), 534-546. He also treats the subject at length under Lord's Day 33 in *The Triple Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, MI: RFPA, 3rd ed., 1990), Vol. 3, 76-89. Any italics within quotations will be my emphasis, unless otherwise noted.

especially the sinner, in the state of righteousness before God. This emphasizes...the difference.... Sanctification removes the pollution of sin and causes the *life of regeneration to triumph over the old man of sin*. But justification removes the guilt of sin and clothes the sinner with the righteousness of God in Christ (494).

Lastly, Hoeksema considers the truth of the old man and the new man “of greatest significance for the doctrine of sanctification” (535) and reinforces this three ways in his chapter on that subject. First, he begins his chapter on sanctification by referring to the old man and the new man to stress again that, although justification and sanctification “can never be separated,” which “is very precarious for faith and life,” they “must certainly be distinguished.” Justification “*is not a process*, but...a perfect change of our state.” Sanctification “*follows a process*, a continued mortification of the old man and a quickening of the new” (520). Confusion of the two with regard to completion or process, like separation of them, is equally precarious for faith and life.

Second, after treating the relation between God’s work and man’s activity (a significant section by itself), Hoeksema uses the truth of the old man and the new man to refute perfectionism—the error that believers can achieve a sinless condition in this life. Against this, he says that Ephesians 4-5 does not present “an ideal that is already attained, but...one that must constantly be striven after” (532). This is the same reality of Colossians 3:5-10; Galatians 5:16-23; Romans 8:12-13, and “everywhere in Scripture,” because “all the admonitions that are directed to the saints presuppose... that they must continually put off the old man and put on the new man in Christ Jesus. Everywhere the Christian...is presented as indeed perfect in principle, but very imperfect according to his sinful nature that remains with him until the grave” (533). For Hoeksema, then, it is basically perfectionism to explain the old man and the new man apart from a process, or divorce the believing person from either old man or new man, two common errors with regard to this doctrine.

Third, Hoeksema’s specific treatment of the old man and the new man is the final and most lengthy subject treated in his chapter on sanctification. Hoeksema transitions to the subject of the old man and the new man from his refutation of perfectionism with an extensive

explanation of Romans 7, which he says describes “the experience of the people of God...of a battle... between the old and the new man...[which] raises the question: what is the old, and what is the new man?” He acknowledges, “Its apparent dualism cannot easily be explained. One would almost reach the conclusion that in [Rom. 7] two entirely different persons are speaking” (534-35). Hoeksema then critiques the view of Abraham Kuyper, which is precisely that—Kuyper divides the person into a regenerated center and sinful periphery that he calls a dual ego.² Hoeksema then discusses the old man and the new man in relation to man’s nature, and the effect of sin and grace and the continued presence of sin in man’s nature.

Finally, Hoeksema concludes his treatment of both sanctification and the old man and the new man by redefining the former in terms of the later:

Sanctification consist[s] in a continual putting off of the old man and the continual putting on of the new man, and in a continual battle...to let the power of grace from the heart dominate the motions of sin which are in the members of the believer. The Christian must fight the good fight of faith against Satan, the flesh, and the world to the very end (546).³

Next time, we will examine more closely Hoeksema’s definition and explanation of the old man and the new man.

2 Kuyper’s view is in Vol. 2 of *Gemeene Gratie* (*Common Grace*), and Vol. 3, chapter 12 on “The Old Man and the New,” in *The Work of the Holy Spirit* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 1995). G.C. Berkouwer, former professor of systematic theology at the Free University of Amsterdam, which Kuyper founded, also criticizes him in *Faith and Sanctification* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1952). “We must demur, however laudable his effort in explaining Romans 7; for this division of man...is a denial of the...Spirit’s operation in the whole of man” (61). He also called it “scarcely a help,” his metaphors “confusing,” and concludes “Kuyper arrives at a kind of Perfectionism” (88-89).

3 Compare this to his opening definition of sanctification as “that act of God whereby He delivers the justified and regenerated sinner from the defilement and dominion of sin as a spiritual, ethical power, renews him according to the image of Christ, and enables him to walk in all good works, which God has prepared for him” (520).



REDEEMING THE TIME AS HUSBAND AND WIFE

MR. TOM CAMMENGA

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In Ephesians 5:16 and Colossians 4:5, the apostle Paul, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, uses the phrase, “redeeming the time.” In both verses, the exhortation of Paul has to do with walking in wisdom, rather than foolishly, and therefore taking advantage of every moment we have been given. Ephesians 5:16 directs that redemption of time primarily to our own walk and personal life as Christians, while in Colossians 4:5 it is directed more to our walk regarding our witness to “them that are without.” In both cases, however, the admonition of the apostle carries with it an urgency born from the knowledge that time is, as we are reminded in stanza 5 of Psalter number 247, “an ever-rolling stream.” In other words, time is precious because none of us knows just how much of it God has given to us or to our loved ones.

This admonition should sound loudly in our ears as we near the end of time, for certainly, as Paul states in Ephesians 5:16 as the reason for his directive, “the days are evil.” If this could be said of the time in which the apostle Paul lived, how much more can it be said of the time in which we live? If ever there was a time in history that Satan, our great adversary, goes about as a roaring lion, it is now. Having failed in his attempt to destroy Jesus and therefore the redemptive plan of God for His chosen people, he now focuses all his power and hatred on the church, the beloved bride of the Lamb. And although Satan has not yet been completely loosed (Rev. 20:3, 7-8), nevertheless, certainly his attacks are grievous and powerful; with his only aim and goal the complete destruction of the church.

Though not exclusively, many of those attacks are focused on the families within the church. If Christ is the foundation of the church, and He is, then the godly families within the church are the walls upon which the church is built. Destroy those families and

the church will, in time, collapse. If Satan cannot have Christ Himself, then he would have the bride for which Christ gave Himself, not simply to vex or to hurt, but to completely devour.

Though we cannot do so exhaustively as space is limited, it is our intention to focus on this admonition of the Holy Spirit through the apostle Paul to redeem the time as it relates to the life of a family in a Christian home. In this article we will focus on redeeming the time as husbands and wives, and in a succeeding article, the Lord willing, we will focus on redeeming the time as parents and as grandparents.

Over the past several months my wife and I have been going through a devotional that was written by a husband and wife who were in the middle of raising their family of six children. Because of this, many of the devotions have some application to the proper or improper raising of children. Recently, after going through one of the devotions, we commented that it would have been good to have gone through this devotional when we ourselves were raising our own children and what a help it would have been for us.

As empty nesters, or at least as close to that as we will ever be, often are the times that we look back as a couple, frequently spurred on by one of the devotions we have read and see our failings in the raising of our children. This, of course, is quite natural and I suspect that this is the case for all parents. Furthermore, I also believe it is good to ponder those failings from time to time, especially as we can relate them to our children in raising their own children. There is a danger, however, that rather than simply pondering them, we dwell on them and worry ourselves about the “what ifs” and the “if onlys.” The danger of this, of course, is that in focusing on those failings, we fail

to see and marvel at the great and amazing grace of God, who used those failings to carry out His good and perfect will, for our good and the good of our children, and for His glory.

I believe it is important, however, if we intend to apply this redemption of time to the raising of our children, that we first understand what it means to redeem the time regarding the relationship between a husband and wife. I attended a wedding many years ago in which the man officiating told the bride and groom, who happened to be his grandson and new granddaughter, that the order of priority in our relationships within the family must begin with God, then each other as husband and wife, and then any children that God may be pleased to give us. I have carried that wise counsel with me throughout the years and have often had to remind myself of the truth and the necessity of it. God must always come first, whether that is in my own life and walk or whether in my life and walk with my wife and with my children and grandchildren. This is the truth that we are reminded of every Sunday morning when we hear the summary of the law of God, often as that is read from Matthew 22:37: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy mind.”

Certainly, this is true in the marriage relationship. How can a couple expect to live together in love and in fellowship, much less to raise godly children, if God is not first in their lives? If we do not love God, how can we ever hope to love one another? Although this should be a given in the life of a Christian, so often we move God from the top of the list to somewhere in the middle, or even to the bottom, frequently with our children taking the top spot and therefore all or most of our energy and focus. Sadly, it is not abnormal for a husband and wife to raise their children, a high and important calling to be sure, only to become, as the apostle Paul says in I Corinthians 9:27, a “castaway” themselves within their marriage. In other words, once the children have been raised and are out of the house, the husband and wife look across the quiet kitchen table, which once was a place of fellowship and joy, at a person they no longer know.

How then do we put this into practice and how do we redeem the time when it comes to placing God at the center of our marriages? There are many ways this can

be done, but we will focus on what I believe to be the most important.

First, it must be the case that each, the husband and the wife, puts God at the forefront of their own lives personally. God must be their all in all from a personal perspective. God must be the center of their individual life if He is ever to be at the center of their married life. This is one of the reasons for the command of the apostle Paul to the Corinthian believers in II Corinthians 6:14: “Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness?”

Do you seek God and His glory in your personal life? Do you have personal devotions that direct you to Him and to all that He has done for you? Do you spend time meditating on the enormity of your own sin and the wonder of the amazing grace and boundless mercy of God that has removed the guilt of your sin so that you stand before Him as if you had never sinned at all? Do you avail yourself of the priceless gift of prayer and, as the apostle Paul urges in I Thessalonians 5:17, do you “pray without ceasing?” A personal relationship with God is essential if a husband and wife hope to place God at the center of their marriage and then in the raising of their children.

Second, our redeeming the time to put God at the center of our marriages must be purposeful on the part of both the husband and wife together as a couple. It must be the true desire of both to seek God and His glory together, within their marriage, before all else, and it must be a constant desire. If either is unwilling to place God before themselves, their spouse, or their children, God will never be at the center of that marriage. It begins then with living a life together that is dedicated first and foremost to God. And because it is dedicated to God, it is a life dedicated to following His Word and living as He has commanded us to live.

For a husband and wife this means devoting time to the active study of God’s Word and time for devotions together where they can discuss spiritual things. In relation to this, it also means time spent together without children or other distractions so that each can focus completely on the other. This can be challenging with the busyness of life and in the raising of a family, but a godly husband and wife need time

alone. Certainly, this is important for the physical aspect of marriage, but I would contend that it is even more important for the spiritual aspect of marriage. This will look different, of course, depending on the couple and their circumstances. For some it may mean getting away for a day or a week, or it may mean going to the grocery store together and spending a little time alone together over a cup of coffee, or it may be the quiet time that blissfully comes once all the children are in bed and sleeping.

Third, and this is closely related to number two, a husband and wife must pursue one another. This is where much humility, self-sacrifice, grace, and mercy are required. My wife is fond of saying that each spouse must be a constant study of the other; what do they like, what do they not like, what makes them happy and what makes them sad, what are they interested in and what are they not interested in? Then based on what has been observed, making a conscious decision to serve the other based on those observations. I may add here, because it is of the utmost importance, that each must always seek to see the other through the eyes of Christ, which requires much grace.

Remember, we are sinners married to sinners and it is so easy for us to see only the sinner but not the saved. There must be a constant and conscious effort on the part of both the husband and the wife to live for the other, and when that happens, how beautiful and God glorifying that marriage is. Remember too, that our marriages are a picture, imperfect though it may be, of the marriage between Christ and His church. Christ, in His great love for us, has pursued us and has given Himself for us. Openly, He expressed and continues to express His love for us through His Word. We too must do this, and not just in mere words but in our actions toward our spouse. May God give us merciful hearts and the ability to show the same grace and mercy to our spouse that He has shown to us.

Fourth, a husband and wife must encourage each

other with words, with our actions, and especially in prayer. I believe that this may be one of the more difficult things for us to do. Each has their callings within marriage and far too often those callings become expectations, and therefore we do not always recognize them as we ought. As a husband, when was the last time you praised your wife for the meal she prepared, or for keeping the house clean and neat, or for caring for the children, or for making sure there is always food in the house? Wives, when was the last time you praised your husband for working to support the family, or for mowing the lawn, or clearing the driveway of snow, or for fixing that annoying faucet that would not stop dripping? This can also be done when talking about our spouse to others. Rather than belittling them and speaking negatively of them, we lift them up, praise them, and express our thankfulness to have them for a spouse.

We must also pray for them. This should be done when praying together, as a family, with the children, or in our individual prayers. Some of the most comforting words I have heard my wife say are that she is praying for me. Comforting because I know that God hears and answers those prayers. And think of the impression and the example that is left when we regularly pray for our spouse and for ourselves as husbands and wives during devotions with our children. Be assured that God will not only hear and answer those prayers, but He will use them to influence the children as well.

In all of this, our one and constant goal is and must be to bring glory to our great God. He is the One who has brought us together and it is only through His grace and mercy that our marriages—one of the most beautiful things

on this side of heaven as they demonstrate the perfect relationship between Christ and His beloved bride the church—will truly reflect *the* marriage.

May God graciously grant that our marriages and families stand strong in the face of the attacks of the Evil one and that in and through them, God's great name is glorified.

REMEMBER, WE ARE SINNERS MARRIED TO SINNERS AND IT IS SO EASY FOR US TO SEE ONLY THE SINNER BUT NOT THE SAVED. THERE MUST BE A CONSTANT AND CONSCIOUS EFFORT ON THE PART OF BOTH THE HUSBAND AND THE WIFE TO LIVE FOR THE OTHER, AND WHEN THAT HAPPENS, HOW BEAUTIFUL AND GOD GLORIFYING THAT MARRIAGE IS.



VENOM, VITRIOL, AND VICTORY

MR. JOEL MINDERHOUD

Science teacher in Covenant Christian High School and member of Hope PRC in Grand Rapids, Michigan

They have sharpened their tongues like a serpent; adders' poison is under their lips—Psalm 140:3.

Snakes such as mambas, cobras, and rattlesnakes engender fear, not just because they are scaly, fork-tongued, belly-slithering, lurking creatures, but primarily because of the toxic venom with which they could suddenly poison us. This venom is feared for good reason—it can have serious biological effects, culminating in paralysis and even death if left untreated. Similarly the Bible teaches that our venomous tongues, particularly malicious slander and false accusations, dishonor God and cause great spiritual harm to the body of Christ. “Their throat is an open sepulchre; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips” (Rom. 3:13).

The saints during biblical times were very familiar with vipers. When the Israelites “spake against God, and against Moses,” complaining about God’s provision for them, “the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died” (Num. 21:5-6). The great and terrible wilderness in which they wandered for forty years was full of fiery serpents (Deut. 8:15). On the island of Melita, a viper—a “venomous beast”—fastened onto the hand of Paul as he was gathering sticks (Acts 28:3-4). Consequently, the many biblical passages that referenced vipers and their venom resonated with the Israelites. For the many of us who are less familiar with these creatures and their poison, we consider it briefly in this article to heighten our awareness of the spiritual dangers noted in those passages.

THE VIPER’S VENOM

One family of snakes is the viper (Viperidae). Vipers are venomous snakes that have hinged and hollow fangs allowing for deep penetration and injection of

venom. Of the 3,500 different species of snakes on the face of the earth, only about 600 are venomous—200 venomous enough to seriously harm or kill someone. They are found primarily in desert-like climates or in rainforests. Some of the more well known venomous snakes in the world are the In-land taipan (Australia—world’s most venomous; one bite can be lethal enough to kill more than 100 adults), Black mamba (Africa), Egyptian cobra (Africa, Middle East), King cobra (India, Philippines), Nose-horned viper (Middle East, Europe), Diamondback rattlesnake (USA, Mexico), and the Bushmaster (South American rainforests).

Vipers inject damaging toxins into their prey. These toxins are a complex chemical mixture that can have several different effects on the victim, attacking various cells and tissues of the body, disrupting normal bodily functions even to the point of death. The longer the toxin is left untreated in the body, the greater damage it will do. According to the World Health Organization, over 80,000 people die each year due to venomous snake bites, and roughly another 250,000 people suffer amputations or other permanently debilitating effects from snake bites.¹ We focus here on two major disruptive effects of injected venom on the body—neurological and cardiovascular.

The venom of some vipers has a predominantly neurotoxic effect, damaging the prey’s nervous system. To understand how the neurotoxin works, one must understand that nerve cells are not physically attached to neighboring cells but are separated by a small gap. In the case of nerve and muscle cells, that gap is the neuromuscular junction. Electrical signals must pass from the nerve cell to the muscle cell across the gap by means of chemicals. These chemical messengers (neurotransmitters) released from a nerve cell attach to an appropriate receptor

1 Snakebite envenoming (who.int) accessed July 17, 2024.

on the muscle cell and thereby deliver the message that triggers the muscle cell into action. The neurotoxins in snake venom interfere by binding to the receptors of the muscle cell, effectively blocking the neurotransmitters from connecting with the receptors and preventing the transmission of the message. This results in a lack of muscle control (flaccid paralysis). When this happens to the victim's diaphragm muscle, the victim experiences respiratory failure and imminent death.

Other venom toxins, known as hemotoxins, act on the prey's cardiovascular system (blood and heart). These toxins might cause the blood to coagulate (thicken and clot) or in other cases, destroy the outer membrane of the tiny and numerous capillary vessels in the body, causing them to rupture and bleed excessively. In addition, these hemotoxins can destroy oxygen-carrying red blood cells or destroy other tissues, such as muscle tissue, immobilizing a victim, making capture of prey much easier. Finally, hemotoxins can also cause a significant drop in blood pressure, cardiac arrest, and restricted airways.

VITRIOL

As venom disrupts the body, causing pain, paralysis, and potentially death, so vitriol (bitterly harsh and caustic speech), especially in the form of slander and false accusations cause great spiritual distress within the body of Christ. The Devil, "that old serpent," is rightly described as the crafty deceiver (Rev. 12:9), and in that same context is referred to as "the accuser of our brethren" (Rev. 12:10). The Devil, "a murderer from the beginning" and the father of the lie (John 8:44), has sought from the beginning to undermine God and His Word (Gen. 3:4). He deceives many by the toxic poison of lies and deliberate misrepresentations of God and God's people. He attacks God, accuses the brethren (Rom. 8:33ff.; Jude 1:9), and stirs up division among God's people by the venomous means of their lying tongues. "With their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips: whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness: their feet are swift to shed blood: destruction and misery are in their ways: and the way of peace have they not known" (Rom. 3:13-17).

The Devil's accusations are so reprehensible because they are ultimately an attack on God—His sovereignty, His perfect love and care for us, and the efficacy of His work. In times of trial the Devil's poisonous accusations tempt us to doubt God's perfect will and way. "Has God

said he would always protect you? Can God furnish a table in the wilderness? How can this circumstance be good for you or your children?" The devil also attacks the efficacy of God's work. "No child of God would ever commit *that* sin! Your God has forsaken you! Your sin will always have dominion over you!" His false accusations are an attack on God's Word. "Does God's word really speak to *all* circumstances? Where is the promise of His coming? Is marriage only between one man and one woman? Is joy and gladness found only in the way of walking in God's precepts? 'It is vain to serve God: and what profit is it that [you] have kept his ordinance, and that [you] have walked mournfully before the LORD of hosts?'" (Mal. 3:14). The beautiful comfort of the Holy Scriptures, however, is that God's Word is true, His promises are sure, Christ's work is effectual, and His love, unchanging, full, and free. Therefore, we must abhor anything that would cast doubt on God or disparage *any* aspect of the work and Word of God.

In addition, the Devil seeks to attack God by disrupting the unity of the body of Christ. God's holy name is trodden underfoot, and His people suffer grievously. As slanderous accusations were used against Jesus Christ Himself by twisting His words (Ps. 56:5) and by falsely accusing Him (Matt. 26:61), so the church will endure similar slander. In theological disputes, for example, one can misrepresent another's position by twisting his words, or even by quoting them directly but out of context, all in order to make the other appear to be teaching something that was never his intention. We do well to hearken to the wise pastoral instruction of our fathers, who, enduring the slanders of the Remonstrants, warned God's people not to judge the faith of the Reformed churches from "the calumnies² which on every side are heaped upon it; nor from the private expressions of a few among ancient and modern teachers, often dishonestly quoted or corrupted and wrested to a meaning quite foreign to their intention" (Canons of Dordt, Conclusion). We must be careful to represent another's views as accurately as we can, for God hates a false charge; it will not go unpunished (Prov. 19:5). By nature our tongues are full of deadly poison (James 3:8) and we are prone to sow discord

2 Miriam Webster—"Calumny: A misrepresentation or false accusation intended to harm another's reputation."

among brethren (Prov. 6:19). Like Diotrephes, we are inclined to “[prate] against [each other] with malicious words” (III John 10). Let us who are regenerated put away all malice, bitterness, wrath, anger, clamour, and evil speaking (Eph. 4:31) and endeavor “to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3).

Just as viper venom has its deadly effects, so the poison of the Devil’s proud accusations harm the church. The vitriol can intensify false guilt, fears, and anxieties in its victims. The venom spreads in the body as the slanderer sows suspicion and strife “distressing the consciences of the weak...and render[ing] suspect the society of the truly faithful” (Canons, Conclusion). As God’s children, we rightly seek to know our own sin and sinfulness, our forgiveness in Christ, and grow in our desire to honor God. When influenced by the viper’s poison, however, we can be easily distressed. Out of fear of false charges, one may hesitate to express his opinion freely in Bible study discussions, or a preacher might be disinclined to preach on certain doctrines of Scripture.

As the venom they are, false charges and twisted words will have their evil effects unless rooted out and treated by the “antivenom” of the truth of God’s Word. In response to vitriol, look on Christ and rely on His Word. If we do not know the Scriptures and are not living in communion with Christ as we ought, we are susceptible to the viper’s venom. Therefore we must truly know the Word of God and live in faithfulness to it. While the Devil seeks to cast doubt on Christ and to turn us away from Him, we are admonished to “submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he

will flee from you. Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you” (James 4:7-8).

VICTORY

Thanks be to God who has given us the victory over the great slanderer through our Lord Jesus Christ by “crushing the head of the serpent” (Gen. 3:15; Rom. 16:20; Heb. 2:14-15). Though we have sinned and deserve everlasting death (pictured by the Israelites dying in the wilderness due to deadly snake bites, Num. 21:6), we are saved because the Son of Man was lifted up on the cross as the propitiatory sacrifice for us (John 3:14; I John 2:2). To Him we may confidently look for grace to help in all our warfare against our threefold enemy. “For we have not a high priest which cannot be touched with the feelings of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come *boldly* unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:15-16). Pray, therefore, for a season of richer grace to endure and to deal rightly with the venomous attacks of the Devil. Pray for our pastors and officebearers that God may continue to equip them to be faithful—unashamedly preaching the full counsel of God and ruling wisely by His Word. Pray for wisdom that we all use our tongues—including on social media!—in a God-honoring way. Pray that we abound in the grace of God. “For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously” (I Pet. 2:21-23).

PERTAINING TO THE WORK OF THE CHURCHES IN COMMON—COMMITTEE FOR CONTACT WITH OTHER CHURCHES



CORRESPONDING RELATIONSHIP WITH THE BERG

REV. MARTYN MCGEOWN

Pastor of Providence PRC in Hudsonville, Michigan

Synod 2024 of the Protestant Reformed Churches approved the Contact Committee’s (CC) proposal

to establish a corresponding relationship with the *Bekennende Evangelisch-Reformierte Gemeinde*

(BERG), which translates as the Confessing Evangelical-Reformed Church in Giessen, Germany. The PRC recognizes two official relationships. The first is a full sister-church relationship that includes, among other things, “mutual acknowledgement of offices, so that ministers of sister churches are allowed preaching privileges in one another’s congregations and are eligible to be called by congregations in sister churches” and “mutual acknowledgement of member attests” (CC Constitution, V, B, 1-2).

The second is a corresponding relationship that may be established where “significant and broad agreement exists” but where “differences are important enough to preclude a sister-church relationship” (V, C, 1). In both instances “these relationships shall be established only with those churches that not only accept the Reformed standards [which includes the Westminster Standards], or confessions consistent with the Reformed standards, but also maintain them in their ecclesiastical life” (V, B, 4; and V, C, 1, b). In 2009 such a corresponding relationship was established with the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Australia (EPCA); in 2024 a second corresponding relationship was established with the BERG.

SIGNIFICANT AND BROAD AGREEMENT

Official contact with the BERG was first approved by Synod 2006, eighteen years ago. At that time the BERG was described as “a very small Reformed congregation that is manifesting a sincere desire to maintain the Reformed truth in the ecclesiastical wasteland in Germany” (*PRC Acts of Synod 2006*, p. 63). Although the BERG has grown, its commitment to the truth has not been compromised. Since 2006 through numerous visits and much theological discussion the PRC’s relationship to the BERG has developed and deepened, so that, for example, an ART-BERG committee made up of members from Faith PRC and Zion PRC was established to support the *Akademie für Reformatorische Theologie* (ART), the BERG’s seminary.

Synod 2024 has officially recognized that “significant and broad agreement exists” between the BERG and the PRC on subjects as wide-ranging as the Heidelberg Catechism (which is one of the BERG’s creeds), the infallibility and inspiration of sacred Scripture, biblical creation, the particularity of grace

(with a rejection of common grace and the well-meant gospel offer), the unconditionality of the covenant of grace governed by election, Reformed worship, and the antithesis in doctrine and life.

As with the EPCA, the PRC do differ with the BERG on a number of important matters; however, these do not hinder a corresponding relationship with our German brethren, although they do at this time, despite lengthy discussions on these topics over several decades, make a full sister-church relationship impossible. The most important of these differences are 1) divorce and remarriage—the BERG holds a stricter-than-Westminster view, so that in precisely defined circumstances remarriage after divorce is permitted, although not encouraged; 2) the necessity of the office of deacon—the BERG views deacons differently than the PRCA.¹ Deacons are appointed in the church, but have no authority. Thus, women may serve as deacons, but always under the authority of the elders. They are committed to the biblical teaching that women may not exercise authority in the church; and 3) the place of creeds.

Make no mistake: the BERG is creedal; the letter “B” for *Bekennende* means “confessing.” Currently, the BERG has four creeds: the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (1978), the Berlin Declaration (1909), and The Theological Declaration of the Kamen Initiative (2000). Although the BERG agrees with the teachings of the Belgic Confession and the Canons of Dordt, our German brethren do not subscribe to them. In addition, the BERG is currently in the process of

1 We quote from the BERG’s Church Order: “Deacons...are called and commissioned by the consistory.... Deacons are also responsible for practical, and, where applicable, material, assistance in the congregation.... They are responsible to the consistory or to an elder appointed by [the consistory] for their actions and omissions.... Deacons...are not members of the congregational leadership and have no voting rights in the consistory....” In the introduction to the BERG’s CO we read, “With reference to the first chapters of Holy Scripture, [the apostle] unequivocally prohibits women from acting and teaching authoritatively in the church (1 Tim. 2:12ff). Men are only permitted to assume a position of oversight in the church if they meet all of the named criteria” (1 Tim. 3:1-13; Tit. 1:5-9)” (translation—MMcG).

forming a Reformed denomination in Germany, and to that end they are working on a new confession and a new church order. The BERG will retain the Heidelberg Catechism and their new confession will combine the three aforementioned creeds for use in Germany.

Our readers will have questions about this, as did Synod 2024. First, why does the BERG not subscribe to the Belgic Confession or the Canons of Dordt? The simple answer is that the Heidelberg Catechism, unlike the Belgic Confession or the Canons, is a German creed, written in Heidelberg, Germany in 1563; therefore, it is familiar to Germans. Second, why does the BERG subscribe to three other creeds unfamiliar to us? The reason is the German ecclesiastical culture: to distance themselves from the liberal German state church and the Pentecostal-Charismatic churches, the BERG and other Reformed churches explicitly maintain biblical inerrancy and reject extra-biblical revelation. In this way they show themselves to be faithful to Scripture.

Moreover, in February 2023 the consistory of the BERG informed the Contact Committee that “with regard to the confessions, the Heidelberg Catechism will remain in the BERG, but we are in the process of discussing a new confession...that will combine the contents of our previous three confessions.... This confession will also be more oriented towards confessions such as the Belgic Confession, Five Articles of Dordt, and Westminster Confession.” Synod 2024 rightly concluded, “The creedal position of the BERG with which we are already familiar will not essentially change.”

THREE UNFAMILIAR CREEDS

The Chicago Declaration (<https://defendinginerrancy.com/chicago-statements>) is a succinct declaration of what we confess in Belgic Confession, Articles 5 and 7. For example, Article VIII of the Chicago Declaration states, “We affirm that God in his work of inspiration utilized the distinctive personalities and literary styles of the writers whom he had chosen and prepared; and we deny that God, in causing these writers to use the very words he chose, overrode their personalities.” That is organic inspiration. Article XII states, “We affirm that Scripture in its entirety is inerrant, being free from all falsehood, fraud, or deceit; and we deny that biblical infallibility and inerrancy are limited to spiritual, religious, or redemptive themes, exclusive

of assertions in the fields of history and science. We further deny that scientific hypotheses about earth history may properly be used to overthrow the teaching of Scripture on creation and the flood.” To that we say a hearty “Amen.”

The Berlin Declaration, which I have not found online in English, is a short polemic against the “so-called Pentecostal movement,” which it denounces as “not from above, but from beneath.” It further warns Christians that the spirit of Pentecostalism is “a false spirit” and that “such manifestations of the Pentecostal movement, such as falling over, shrieking, uncontrollable laughter, etc.—are not God-worked.” Christians who reject Pentecostalism confess the one only historical Pentecost recorded in Acts 2: “we do not expect a new Pentecost; we wait for the returning Lord.” (Translations from the German—MMcG). Again, we enthusiastically agree with these statements and with Luther we slap the false spirit of Pentecostalism on the snout.

Finally, the BERG currently subscribes to the Theological Declaration of the Kamen Initiative (http://www.rbeg.de/TE_en.html), which begins with these words summarizing its purpose:

Our age is characterized by a great arbitrariness regarding what a person can believe. This arbitrariness penetrated all areas of the Protestant Church in Germany and is now infiltrating into the evangelical world as well. The Church is losing ground and her God-given foundations are being eroded: confessional statements are consciously toned-down and in their place cooperation in ministry and mutual love are being propagated without respect to a real consensus based on the Word. In response to this doctrinal chaos in which the believing Church finds herself, she must state afresh and in terms that obligate our practice what the Christian Faith is and what it is not. This is the task of the Theological Declaration.

What is significant is not only what the Kamen Declaration teaches on subjects such as Scripture, God, Creation, Sin, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, the Church, Man, the Means of Grace, Faith, Justification, Works, the Commandments, and the Last Things, but what it rejects: “it is more than a collection of doctrines; it is at the same time a call to repentance” and is designed to “address the deplorable situation in the church.” About creation we read: “We reject the teaching that the world

originated from itself over long periods of time; that the earth is an ecosystem that either founded itself or is permeated by an impersonal force in which God-given distinctions can be set aside; or that God let the world evolve through long periods of time.” About justification we read: “We reject the teaching that justification actually makes one righteous apart from Christ or that God declares anyone righteous on the basis of his ethical merits or his other qualities.” With respect to works we read: “We reject the view that good works are the condition for a deeper experience of grace.” And with respect to the commandments we read: “We reject the teaching that man knows for himself and can decide what is good and evil. According to the Holy Scriptures, sexual relationships before and outside of marriage, including homosexual relations, are sins. We reject feminist ideology and deny the right of women to the offices of public teaching and leadership in the Church.”

While the PRC do not subscribe to these three creeds—the Chicago Declaration, the Berlin Declaration, and the Kamen Declaration—we respect our German brothers who do. But maybe we might ask, if the BERG is revising its creed, should we not wait to see what it looks like before we establish a corresponding relationship with them? The Contact Committee reasoned thus: If we are familiar with their current creeds, if they have adhered steadfastly to their doctrinal positions as long as we have known them, and if our German brothers have assured us that their new creed will be a combination of the doctrines taught in their current creeds and even “oriented towards confessions such as the Belgic Confession, Five Articles of Dordt, and Westminster Confession,” why should

we anticipate any concerns about their new confession? Quite simply, our familiarity with the BERG, and theirs with the PRC, has fostered a relationship of trust for which we are very thankful.

THE CONGREGATION

Our German brethren worship every Lord’s Day with a congregation of 49 communicant members with 16 non-communicant members and a good number of interested visitors. Their pastor is Rev. Jochen Klautke; Jochen is the son of Dr. Jürgen Klautke, emeritus. The consistory is made up of Dr. Klautke, Pastor Jochen Klautke, and Klaus Schwabe. Rev. Klautke’s colleague in the seminary is Boris Giesbrecht, who in September will be ordained as a pastor in the BERG.

In addition, the BERG has been pursuing contacts in various parts of Germany with the goal of forming a Reformed denomination in Germany. One of those contacts is the BEG (*Bekennende Evangelische Gemeinde*), whose pastor is Ludwig Rühle. The BEG is located in Osnabrück in Lower Saxony, some 150 miles north of Giessen. The BEG also has a mission fellowship in Tübingen, some 185 miles south of Giessen. A mission fellowship, located in Nordhorn, some 200 miles northwest from Giessen and about 50 miles west of Osnabrück, will be organized into a church soon, D.V. These are encouraging and exciting developments and we look forward to seeing where the Lord leads our German brethren in the years to come.

Finally, let us pray for our brothers and sisters in Germany: they, like us—and probably more than us—live in an aggressively secular culture. May they shine by God’s grace as lights in a crooked and perverse generation to God’s glory.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

RFPA ANNUAL MEETING

Centuries ago, the average Christian read very little due to the difficulty in accessing books and a lack of education. While we have access to many books today and generally are well educated, are we a *reading people*? Do we understand the vital importance of reading, physically and spiritually? Join RFPA staff and Association members at Southwest PRC on Thursday, September 26, 2024, at 7:30 p.m. in learning about the research behind the relation of reading and the wiring of the brain in a presentation by Mr. Joel Minderhoud on “Is Your Brain Being Wired for Deeper Thinking?” Hear about the work of the RFPA Board and staff over the past year, and celebrate with us as we look forward into the next year. Friends and supporters of the RFPA are encouraged to attend this timely speech, and enjoy refreshments catered by the Taste of Hope!

THE STANDARD BEARER

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ANNOUNCEMENTS

RESOLUTION OF SYMPATHY

The Council and congregation of Hudsonville PRC express our sympathies to the Hoekstra family in the passing of their brother-in-law and uncle, **Cornie Brummel**. He passed away to his heavenly home on July 9 under hospice care at the age of 76. Cornie and his wife Edie (Hoekstra) were long-time members of Hudsonville PRC and had transferred to Providence PRC thirteen years ago. Cornie was a brother-in-law of Ed and Brenda, Marlin and Joy, Rich and Pam, and Judy Hoekstra. He was also an uncle of Josh and Sharla, and Jordan Hoekstra, and Chelsea and Kyle Zwak, all are members of Hudsonville PRC. I Thessalonians 4:13-14 "But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him."

Rich Feenstra, Clerk

HELP NEEDED AT COVENANT

The School Board of Covenant Christian High School (Grand Rapids, MI) is addressing the future needs of our administrative team due to growing enrollment, staff size, and retirements. There are needs that must be filled in the areas of Curriculum and Instruction, Student Life and Management, School Business Office, and the position of Administrator. Individuals interested in applying for any of these positions or seeking more information about the positions are encouraged to contact Mr. Rick Noorman, Administrator, (ricknoorman@gmail.com) or Mr. Dave Moelker, Chairman of the Education Committee (dmoelker9@gmail.com).

SEMINARY CONVOCATION

September 4 at Byron Center PRC, 7 P.M. Prof. C. Griess will speak on Colossians 2:8-10, "The Spoiled Pastor." All are invited and encouraged to attend.

CLASSIS EAST

Classis East will meet in regular session on Wednesday, September 18, 2024, at 8:00 A.M., in the Georgetown Protestant Reformed Church, Hudsonville, Michigan.

Rev. C. Spronk, Stated Clerk

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

Rev. J. Engelsma, Stated Clerk



REV. WILBUR BRUINSMA

- 9/1 Economic Imbalance, Rev. 6:5, 6
 - 9/8 The Gospel Preached to all Nations, Matt. 24:14
 - 9/15 The Rise of Counterfeit Christianity, Matt. 13:21-23
 - 9/22 The Emergence of the Antichristian Kingdom,
Rev. 17:9-17
 - 9/29 The Man of Sin Revealed, II Thess. 2:3, 4
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