

THE STANDARD BEARER

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No Room (Luke 2:7)

MEDITATION | **REV. MICHAEL DE VRIES** | 103

A Reactionary Body (2 and 3)

EDITORIAL | **PROF. CORY GRIESS** | 105

Nahum (7) Good Tidings of Peace (2)—Nahum 1:15

SEARCH THE SCRIPTURES | **REV. RONALD HANKO** | 109

The Living Testimony of Stephen

BIBLE BIOGRAPHIES | **MR. KYLE BRUINOOGHE** | 112

The Works of God's Hand

ALL AROUND US | **REV. DAVID NOORMAN** | 114

How Faith Grows

TAKING HEED TO THE DOCTRINE | **REV. JAMES LANING** | 117

What the Layman Should Know about Textual Criticism: Bible Versions

PILLAR AND GROUND OF THE TRUTH | **PROF. DOUGLAS KUIPER** | 119

In the Multitude of Words

MINISTERING TO THE SAINTS | **REV. DANIEL HOLSTEGE** | 122

If My Brother Sin...the Potent Medicine of Matthew 18 (3)

FOR THE CHURCH | **PROF. BARRETT GRITTERS** | 124

Proper Christian Money Management

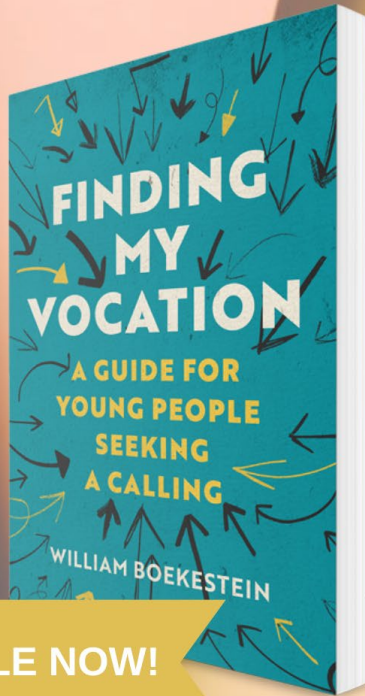
STRENGTH OF YOUTH | **REV. HEATH BLEYENBERG** | 127

RFPA Annual Secretary's Report

REPORTS | **MR. RICK GRITTERS** | 129



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NO ROOM

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And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn—Luke 2:7

In a very real sense this is the account of a birth that only children, spiritual children with a child-like faith, can receive. Many learned men and women stumble over this story. Yea, the mysteries of the kingdom are hidden from the wise and prudent and revealed unto babes. Our children and young people know and understand what took place in Bethlehem that night some two thousand years ago. They know and understand that the baby Jesus was born of the virgin Mary. They know and understand that He is the very Son of God. They know and understand that He came to save His people from their sins. Perhaps this meditation could be read with the family. Certainly we must together hear and believe as little children, with a child-like faith.

No doubt some of us have had the following experience when traveling, perhaps while on vacation, at the end of a long day on the road. While passing through a small town in which we hope to find lodging for the night, we find that the lone motel has a neon sign lit up: *No Vacancy*. We find it frustrating, even concerning, that no rooms are available for us to spend the night.

That is what Joseph and Mary found when they stopped at the inn in Bethlehem at the conclusion of their arduous journey from Galilee: no vacancy! The rooms were all taken. No one had lodging available for Joseph and Mary.

Now from a certain point of view that was not so strange. For there were many Jews who claimed descent from David and who had traveled to Bethlehem, the city

of David, to enroll for the taxation as Caesar Augustus had decreed. After all, Bethlehem was not a large city, and the inn itself was likely quite small.

But, on the other hand, had the people in Bethlehem become so cold and inconsiderate that no room could be found for this young woman who was almost ready to deliver her baby? It must have been obvious to the innkeeper and many others that this couple had traveled a great distance, and that they were very weary, in desperate need of lodging. After all, the Jews were known for their hospitality. They knew that to show kindness to strangers was an important rule of their laws.

It would not be that way today, would it? Today it seems that almost everyone is concerned about making the holiday season a happy time also for the poor and homeless. Many people and organizations are involved in the effort to see to it that no one is left out in the cold in the Advent season.

Today it would appear that many people have room for a certain Jesus. After all, almost everyone celebrates the Christmas holiday in one way or another. Most people go along with the sentimental notion of a sweet little baby in a manger cradle. Many would follow the good man of Galilee who tries to make this world a better place in which to live, feeding the hungry and healing the sick. Some would even follow Him to the cross, focusing on His example, that even as He, so we must be ready to make sacrifices for our fellow men. The whole world would adore a Jesus who speaks only of love, peace, and brotherhood. There is plenty of room for this sort of Jesus. The inn of this world would welcome him!

But, let us not be deceived! Such a Jesus is a figment of their vain imaginations. He is as make-believe as,

and in many respects quite similar to, their fabled Santa Claus. In stark contrast stands the Jesus of Scripture. He is the Christ who is the only begotten Son of God, conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary. He will still find *no room* in all the world! When He speaks of sin, righteousness, and judgment, the whole world still casts Him out. They have no room for the Jesus of the Bible who commands, “Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me!” There is still no room for the true Jesus who came to shed His precious blood on the cross to atone for the sins of His people, those given Him of the Father. There is still no room for the Jesus whose kingdom is not of this world!

From this perspective we can well understand that “there was no room for them in the inn.” The stable with its manger is the only place for Christ: “And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger...” No other place will do! This is where the Lord Jesus really fits—in a manger, just a feeding trough, wrapped in swaddling clothes, just strips of rough cloth used only by the very poor, in a foul-smelling stable. This is the place for Christ!

For the stable was a picture of the poverty into which Jesus entered. Jesus was born into abject poverty—so poor, so very poor. He came into this world under the lowliest of circumstances. It could scarcely have been worse!

But so it was, in the providence of our God, that it would point to the poverty of our human nature into which He entered. For remember, He is the very Son of God! As such He is co-equal with the Father and with the Holy Spirit. He shares all the glory and infinite perfections of the eternal Godhead. He is, as God, the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. He is Lord over all, the Lord of glory!

Yet in the fullness of time He came to lie in a manger, in a smelly stable, as a helpless baby! His great glory and infinite majesty are hidden behind the weak and helpless nature of an infant. And it all points to the utter humility into which Jesus entered when He was born of the virgin Mary.

His awful poverty is a sign of our poverty! This helpless baby lying in a manger speaks powerfully of the fact that this was the way He had to come in order

to save His people. This awful poverty is what was necessary. And it took this because the people He had come to save were sunk so deeply into the miry depths of sin and death. The smelly stable shouts of the terrible depths of wickedness and death into which we had plunged ourselves even in the fall of our first parents, Adam and Eve. The birth of the Lord of glory had to be this way. He had to come so low because our spiritual poverty is so deep, so dreadful!

So there is no room for Christ—no room anywhere. And from the moment that He was born, there were many that stood ready and eager to kill Him. King Herod tried while Jesus was in His infancy and forced Him to flee for His life into Egypt. When Jesus began His public ministry, the wicked Jews sought His life every step of the way. There was never any room for Jesus in all of His earthly sojourn among us. Jesus Himself said, “Foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head” (Matt. 8:20). And finally they succeeded in casting Him out—they nailed Him to the cross.

Yes, there is no room for Christ in all the world. There is no room for Him because He is God’s Son. And all men by nature hate God and God’s Christ. This is the horrible poverty of sin, yea, the poverty of *our* sin! Our poverty was so great that by nature we too hate Him and would cast Him out! And it is wickedly hypocritical when people boast that they would have given Jesus room, or that they would certainly make room in their hearts and lives for Him. What foolish pride—for it simply cannot be done! Bethlehem shows us that we have no room for Jesus in the world or in our hearts!

Our blessed comfort is that even though there is no room for Christ anywhere because we will not and cannot give Him room, He nevertheless makes His own room. Jesus makes room for Himself. By the power of His Spirit and grace He comes and makes His way into the hearts of His people.

These are the glad tidings of Christmas! In the fullness of time God sent His Son. According to the prophet of old He would be despised and rejected of men. Never was there room for Christ, not in all the world. And finally He was cast out with screams and curses, “Away with him; crucify him!” And they nailed

Him to the accursed tree of the cross. In that deep way our Lord Jesus Christ shed His blood in perfect obedience to the Father. In that deep way He bore the full burden of the sin and guilt of His people. Having accomplished salvation, Christ arose victoriously and ascended to His Father's right hand to reign in majesty.

The rich blessings of His salvation He now applies irresistibly by His Spirit unto our hearts and lives. He dwells with us and abides with us forever! Ultimately, upon the basis of His atoning sacrifice, He brings His beloved bride, the church, into the great glory of the new heavens and the new earth.

The apostle conveys it so powerfully in 2 Corinthians

8:9, "For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich." Let us be humbled as we behold our wretched poverty into which He entered at His birth. May we be filled with gratitude as we see that that poverty culminated at the cross. May we be comforted in the triumph of His resurrection.

Thank God there was no room for Jesus! The Christmas gospel is exactly here! Rejoice that He has made room so that we know Him and love Him and serve Him!

O, come, let us adore Him, Christ the Lord!



A REACTIONARY BODY (2)

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Last time (November 1, 2024) we considered the possibility that a reactionary state is found in the PRCA body, enough that, in the judgment of this writer, it ought to be addressed and discussed as a concern of the whole. I offered a few possible signs of this and asked you to discuss the matter. In this article I point out some harmful effects upon a body of Christ if she continues in such a state. In the editorial immediately following (in this same issue) I propose biblical helps.

EFFECTS

As is true of the human body, living in a reactionary state can bring about long-term damage to a church body. Medical doctors will tell you that when your body is in a reactionary state, it is inflamed. The longer the inflammation persists, the more damage is done to the physical body.

The long-term damage to the *body of Christ* in a reactionary state includes at least these five things:

1. *Extreme responses in controversy.* The physical body overreacts in extreme ways when it is inflamed. With any new stress it encounters, the body does not properly respond but reacts or even overreacts. Similarly, in a reactionary body of Christ, each time there is a new issue or re-occurrence of an old one, there is reaction, which in turn produces an equal and opposite reaction. For example, if a doctrinal matter arises, and some members promote vicious polemics, even breaking the ninth commandment, a reactionary body produces other members who despise polemics altogether (to the destruction of the church!). In turn, the first set of members react with increased vicious polemicizing, and the proverbial boat continues to rock back and forth.

Another example concerns the way some have wickedly treated women in the church. There can be (and has been) proper reactions to this, praise the Lord! Simultaneously, have there also been overreactions, including rebellious attitudes against the clear teaching

of God's Word? And has there been reaction to this so that some people shut their ears to learning and growth? If so, both attitudes are erroneous, *and* they tempt other people to go on reacting. The reaction builds as two sides oppose one another. Tension develops. A vicious cycle gains control pulling the body apart, while issues that need addressing are not addressed.

It is easy to look at the groups who have split off from the PRCA and call them reactionary (which they have been), but are we guilty of the same in less obvious ways?

2. *Hyperfocus on one issue while ignoring other issues.* When the human body is in a reactionary state, it gives all its energy over to one perceived need in the body, leaving itself vulnerable to other dangers. So too, a reactionary body of Christ can become so focused on one issue or set of issues that she is blind to other needs in her midst. While the church is telescoped in on one issue, albeit an important one, the Devil is meanwhile able to sneak completely different evils into her. The Devil is a master of sleight of hand. What Christian has not succumbed to this particular devilish wile in his own personal life? How much more does the Evil One love to use this trickery in the church? Yet, when the body of Christ is reactionary, she is only focused on the matter or matters to which she is reacting, debating, discussing, overreacting. She may leave herself vulnerable to the Devil's surreptitious work.

3. *Applying a "fix" that results in unintended negative consequences.* In an attempt to heal physical inflammation of the body, a person may take medicines or follow a therapeutic diet or follow a therapeutic lifestyle regimen. Sometimes these medicinal attempts do more damage. So too, caught up in a trial and the resulting genuine emotion, the body of Christ can be tempted to apply a "balm" that does other damage, often worse. We can fail to consider the law of unintended consequences. That law states that without careful reflection, actions taken to address an immediate concern can produce unintended effects that are worse than the original problem. I can give you an example in one word: bloodletting.

Of course, no finite person or body of people can foresee every unintended consequence, but a reactionary body will foresee much less than it should.

4. *Self-focus that prohibits service.* When the physical

body is unhealthy, it requires time and attention to the exclusion of other things. How many doctor appointments there are when the physical body is reactionary! Similarly, the reactionary body of Christ must deal with herself, help herself, and heal herself. This takes time and attention away from being able to look outside of herself to the service of others. How many man-hours are taken up with this work that could be spent serving others within and without. And even if this is never entirely avoidable in the body of Christ (even when she is *not* reactionary), when the body *is* reactionary, she must focus on herself almost to the exclusion of her other responsibilities.

5. *A false identity.* If one's physical body is perpetually in a reactionary state, a person is tempted finally to identify himself by his malady. This is who *I am*. Similarly, if the body of Christ is in a reactionary state, church members are increasingly tempted to identify themselves by the particular thing they are reacting to, rather than by their life in Christ. How we identify ourselves is such an essential matter, and the consciousness of our identity in Christ can so easily slip away. In fact, one of the great purposes of preaching is to remind God's people of their identity in Christ week after week. Monday-Saturday we so often answer the question "who am I?" in wrong ways (sometimes without even realizing it). We need spiritual recalibration in the Lord's house on Sunday (Ps. 73). When the body of Christ is reactionary, an individual believer can be tempted to identify him/ herself almost entirely by a particular issue, or by a "tribe" that shares an opinion on an issue. Unintentionally, this child of God forgets his/her core identity and becomes estranged from other believers who do not share the same opinion. While it is true, as I said in the beginning, some issues are worth getting very passionate about. And there are issues that are a matter of right and wrong and concerning which no other opinion ought to be considered. Yet we forget that our first and most fundamental closeness is found in redemption in Christ, we can lose our central identity and be unwilling to consider our brother and his helpful thoughts and even corrections. The result is that we do serious spiritual damage to ourselves and the church.

Do you see any of these ill effects beginning to take root in your own life, and/or in the church?

A REACTIONARY BODY (3)

THE WAY OF HEALING

What can bring down spiritual “inflammation” in the body of Christ?

1. *The first prescription is regular, faithful preaching of the whole counsel of God, centered on the cross of Jesus Christ.* If the preaching of the Word does not declare the whole counsel of God, it will be easier for overreaction to take place, unintended consequences to be missed, and unhealthy passions to flare. If the minister rides a hobby horse, he will add to the reactionary state of the body. If he is more concerned about getting particular people or groups of people to like him and cares not for the legitimate concerns of others, he will only exacerbate the rocking of the boat. If he wants to say controversial things in order to see the downloads pile up, he will only further inflame the body. The ministry of the Word must urgently and directly confront issues with biblical truth without fear or favor. But as the long-term health of the physical body is maintained by a simple healthy, well-balanced diet, so also the long-term health of the body of Christ will be maintained by a regular course of the whole counsel of God. A steady diet of the full Reformed and biblical truth, distinguished from error and properly applied to all aspects of our lives, will heal spiritual inflammation and prevent future maladies.

At the heart of that whole counsel of God is the cross and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Without this at the heart of the minister’s weekly preaching, even as he preaches all the doctrines of Scripture, the minister will not help the inflamed body. Our identity in union with Christ is found especially in the preaching of this Christ as our all. Show the Healer in all His facets and powers! Christ then takes us at the most fundamental level, and we are delivered from identifying ourselves by anything other than Him. Without this, all else is vain. With this, we are united to each other as we are identified together in Him.

2. *The second prescription is careful but open discussion of the issue by the church.* So, I ask you again, do you think the PRCA body of Christ is reactionary right now? Or do you disagree? The matter could be profitably discussed by consistories, families, friends, and more. But let discussion of the issue not

focus on certain “other” people or groups of people. Instead, ask, Am *I* in a heightened state of spiritual inflammation? And if so, why? If I see this problem in myself, what particular dangers do I need to avoid? What can I do to help bring healing? What must *I* do to reduce inflammation?

3. *The third prescription to heal a reactionary body is wise, careful ministers, elders and deacons, teachers, and leaders who can discern a 2 Timothy 2:25-26 situation from a Titus 1:9-11.*

Second Timothy 2:25-26 says,

And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all *men*, apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth; And *that* they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will.

Titus 1:9-11 says,

Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers. For there are many unruly and vain talkers and deceivers, specially they of the circumcision: Whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole houses, teaching things which they ought not, for filthy lucre’s sake.

It takes wisdom to know which situation requires a gentle and patient approach and which situation requires the stopping of mouths. Proper execution here will help calm the reactionary body. “The heart of the righteous studieth to answer” (Prov. 15:28). If the leaders are themselves reactionary, applying Titus 1 to a 2 Timothy 2 situation and vice versa, they will further inflame the body, and the other members of the body of Christ will see this example and follow suit.

4. *The fourth prescription for the inflamed church is long-term faithfulness.* One of the most unheralded aspects of the fruit of the Spirit is “faithfulness.” Someone once helpfully described faithfulness as a long obedience in the same direction. Sometimes change in direction is right before the face of God as required in His Word; but most often, long-term commitment is the will of God, an evidence of sanctification, and a tool of the Sanctifier.

The call to faithfulness is found in the Bible in the oft repeated admonition to “patience,” which usually means, “endurance.” For example, in Luke 21:17-19 Jesus says, “And ye shall be hated of all men for my name’s sake. But there shall not an hair of your head perish. In your *patience* [endurance] possess ye your souls.” In the way of endurance in our place and callings our souls are secure!

It is striking how often the Lord admonishes the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3 to faithful commitment. In spite of the fact that many of these are troubled churches, the charge is not, “pull up your tent pegs and go somewhere else.” Rather, it is “be thou faithful” (2:10); “hold fast till I come” (2:25); “strengthen the things that remain...and hold fast” (3:3); and “hold that fast which thou hast” (3:11). Add to that the repeated commendations for faithfulness that are already there: “I know thy...patience” (endurance, 2:2); “thou holdest fast” (2:13); “I know thy...patience” (endurance, 2:19). And then there is the stirring word to each of the seven churches at the end of each letter: “to him that overcometh...,” which at least in part is, “to him that endures....” The Lord values and calls to faithfulness in the place He has put us. And such collective commitment to serve Him faithfully in big things and little things day in and day out in a long obedience in the same direction will ease the reactionary nature of a body in due time.

5. *A fifth prescription that helps calm a reactionary body of Christ is the Christian virtue of humility, before God and before each other.* What do I need to learn from those who see this matter differently than I do? Perhaps I am not convinced by their view, but even so, there can be cautions, balances, wisdom, in humbly seeking to understand the concern of another. “Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall. Better it is to be of an humble spirit with the lowly, than to divide the spoil with the proud” (Prov. 16:18-19). Shall we not give every effort to remember this when we interact with each other face to face, or when we go on Facebook to discuss “church matters”? It is better that we do not go on social media at all if we cannot remember this truth. It is easy to unleash oneself in comments on social media because there are few immediate social consequences for what we say. But what reins us in ought not be merely social

consequences, but the face of our Father before whom we ought to humbly live.

6. *The sixth help is a willingness to praise those who react properly (zealous yet humble) to obvious evil.* Sometimes this one is not appreciated when he should be. If there is obvious false doctrine or evil and some appropriately rise up to meet it for the Lord’s sake, appreciation can be an encouragement. It can also help convince one that he does not need to overreact to make progress. Others see the matter and are thankful for the attention drawn to it.

7. *Seventh, a focus on gratitude.* When Colossians 3:15 says, “And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also ye are called in one body; and be ye thankful,” there is a two-way street. “The peace of God” ruling in the heart leads to thankfulness. And being “thankful” leads to peace in the heart. There are so many blessings we take for granted. There are blessings of home, school, and church, the full significance of which we do not even really know because we have never been without them. Ministers and other leaders (grandfathers!) ought to help us see these blessings and thank God for them. And all of us ought to imagine what it would be like if these blessings were taken away, giving thanks to God that He has generously given them to us, even in spite of us. Greater thankfulness for the overwhelming gifts He gives to us will calm the reactionary body.

8. *Finally, everyone needs an Abigail in his/her life to stop him/her from obvious overreaction.* Recall that David was about to overreact to Nabal’s insolence. Abigail was able to reason with David and stop him. David recognized the help that this was to him in 1 Samuel 25:32-33:

And David said to Abigail, Blessed *be* the LORD God of Israel, which sent thee this day to meet me: And blessed *be* thy advice, and blessed *be* thou, which hast kept me this day from coming to *shed* blood, and from avenging myself with mine own hand. For in very deed, *as* the LORD God of Israel liveth, which hath kept me back from hurting thee, except thou hadst hastened and come to meet me, surely there had not been left unto Nabal by the morning light any that pisseth against the wall. So David received of her hand *that* which she had brought him, and said unto her, Go up in peace to thine house; see, I have hearkened to thy voice, and have accepted thy person.

Seek out someone to be present in your life, and I

must in mine, who can carefully and wisely, as Abigail did, help you not to overreact when a more careful response is called for.

May the Spirit of Christ work these things in us. And may the day come when, just as God shows us in

our own individual lives, we can collectively look back and see God's hand leading us and guiding us, helping us, faithful to us. And let us be sure that His fatherly care over us will form us into more faithful servants of His for the glory of His name.

SEARCH THE SCRIPTURES



NAHUM (7) GOOD TIDINGS OF PEACE (2)

REV. RONALD HANKO

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Previous article in this series: October 2024, p. 10.

Behold upon the mountains the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace! O Judah, keep thy solemn feasts, perform thy vows: for the wicked shall no more pass through thee; he is utterly cut off—Nahum 1:15

We have seen that the messenger of whom Nahum speaks is the prophet himself and all who follow in his footsteps as preachers of the gospel. Romans 10:13-15 shows this and shows that when these messengers are sent by Christ with His message, He speaks to His people through that message. Romans 10:15 reminds us, then, that Nahum is speaking not just about the coming of the message of Assyria's destruction to Jerusalem, but about the preaching of the gospel in every age. The messenger is the preacher and the message is the good tidings of peace.

But Nahum's message is almost all a message of judgment! How can the announcement of Nineveh's fall and of God's judgment on Assyria be the preaching of the gospel of peace and glad tidings of the good things of salvation? How can that announcement be the hearing by which faith comes and the way in which men call on Him in whom they have not believed?

Is the message of coming judgment sufficient to save? Is the only thing we and unbelievers need to hear something like Jonathan Edward's sermon, "Sinners

in the Hands of an Angry God"? Will sinners be frightened into the way of salvation by being told they are like spiders dangling by a thread over the fire, or that a day is coming when the hills will melt like wax? Will God's people be forced into new obedience by the threat of judgment and eternal punishment?

Primarily an announcement of coming judgment in Nahum, the prophet's words are called both in his prophecy and in Romans the gospel or the good tidings. It does not matter whether Nahum 1:15 refers to what has preceded it or to what follows: It is hard to see how God's digging a grave for the king of Assyria (1:14), or the coming of the one who "dasheth in pieces" (2:1) can be called the gospel, though both meant deliverance from enemies for God's people.

There are words of comfort and peace for God's people in the first chapter of Nahum's prophecy, but even there the overwhelming emphasis is on the coming judgment and its terrors. Is that the gospel of peace, or is the gospel only the few words of comfort in Nahum 1:7, 12? To put it in a different context, were Jonah's mere words to the Ninevites a generation earlier sufficient to bring those Assyrians to repentance and faith?

Do we say that this was the gospel in the Old Testament, but that in the New Testament we preach in addition Christ and Him crucified? Do we then leave sin, the wrath and judgment of God, and any mention

of hell out of the preaching in the New Testament? Romans 10:15-17 say otherwise by quoting Nahum. Nevertheless, if we think of the gospel only in terms of enemies and their destruction, that message seems more about vengeance than about salvation and its good news.

The destruction of enemies is always part of our deliverance and salvation. The destruction of persecutors, heretics, and hypocrites brings deliverance, a deliverance that looks forward to the final deliverance of God's people when persecution ends and the sheep are brought into their fold, forever beyond the reach of hirelings and wolves. Judgment on enemies is part of the gospel, therefore.

In Revelation 14:6, 7 the angel's announcement of the arrival of judgment's hour is called the gospel:

And I saw another angel fly in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach unto them that dwell on the earth, and to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people, saying with a loud voice, Fear God, and give glory to him; for the hour of his judgment is come: and worship him that made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and the fountains of waters.

It must also be understood that when the Bible speaks of enemies, it never has in mind only those who persecute and speak evil of God's people. Behind and with those obvious enemies stands Satan and all the power of the kingdom of darkness. Scripture often identifies the nations and their rulers with Satan, the king of Babylon with the fallen Lucifer in Isaiah 14:3-23, and the king of Tyre with the anointed but fallen cherub in Ezekiel 28:11-19. That realization makes it easier to understand God's anger with these nations and their kings, but also makes it easier to understand that deliverance from them is also deliverance from sin and from the Wicked One.

When we remember that our enemies include our own sinful natures, then it is even easier to see that judgment on enemies is also good tidings of salvation. I am an Assyrian by nature and my deliverance includes deliverance from myself. When I am finally delivered from my own sins and sinfulness, then my deliverance and salvation will be complete. Thus the message that is brought to the mountains of Jerusalem is: "For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible

shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory" (1 Cor. 15:53, 54).

The good tidings of Nineveh's destruction are the good tidings of deliverance from Belial and all his counselors, the great Deceiver and Jailer of all. They are the good tidings of deliverance from those who oppress and persecute God's people, who have nothing but scorn for all they represent and for their way of life, who use them for human shields and for clearing minefields, who treat them as the off-scouring of the earth. They are the good tidings of deliverance from the inner Ninevite, who always sides with Belial and those who serve Him.

Even the chastisement that comes through the powers of evil brings salvation, for by it God's people are delivered from the worst of their enemies, the enemy within, their own sinfulness and sinful nature. That, too, is part of the good news of the gospel.

All that being said, we would expect to have some reference to Christ and His saving work when we hear the preaching of the gospel. He is the Good News!

Though it might not appear that there is any reference to Him in Nahum 1:15, it is there. He is the messenger who brings the good news of Nineveh's fall and of deliverance not only from that wicked city but from all the enemies of the church. Indeed, He is not only the messenger but the One who brought judgment on those enemies, who as King of kings brought Babylon to Nineveh's gates, opened those gates to the armies of Babylon, and brought down all Nineveh's might.

For us He is also the One who during three hours of darkness, assaulted the gates of hell and brought them down in ruin: "Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world be cast out" (John 12:31). In Isaiah 52:7, Isaiah not only speaks of the beautiful feet of this Messenger but immediately begins to speak of how He brought down Nineveh and all the enemies of His people (Is. 52:13-53:12). He is the Servant of Jehovah, the One who is exalted and very high, but also the One whose visage was marred more than any and His form more than the sons of men, who was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities, but whose suffering was the chastisement of our peace.

Especially at the cross salvation accompanies judgment, for it was there that the judgment due us, who are enemies and aliens by nature, fell on Christ and His judgment became our salvation. There the darkness of which Nahum speaks and the rent rocks were for Him that we might be delivered from the just judgment of a God who does not acquit the wicked. Salvation in Jesus Christ and His cross cannot be preached apart from judgment on all wickedness, for it was there that the judgment due to us fell on Him: “for the transgression of my people was he stricken” (Is. 53:8). “Who can stand before his indignation? and who can abide in the fierceness of his anger? his fury is poured out like fire, and the rocks are thrown down by him.” So Nahum prophesied and the only answer to his question is found in those words out of the darkness, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”

Nahum’s message in 1:15 is still heard today:

Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, and is become the habitation of devils, and the hold of every foul spirit, and a cage of every unclean and hateful bird. For all nations have drunk of the wine of the wrath of her fornication, and the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and the merchants of the earth are waxed rich through the abundance of her delicacies. And I heard another voice from heaven, saying, Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues. For her sins have reached unto heaven, and God hath remembered her iniquities (Rev. 18:2-5).

Not, “will fall,” but “is fallen,” and it matters not whether she is called Babylon or Nineveh or the Gates of Hell, for He has come whose death is the end of all the power of the kingdom of darkness, and whose life holds the promise of life everlasting for those who believe in Him. “O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 15:55-57).

When God comes in judgment, then the wrath He has reserved for His enemies will be reserved no more (v. 2). Then He will show that for all His forbearance, He does not acquit the wicked (v. 3). Then He will have His way in the whirlwind and in the storm. Then the mountains will quake at Him, and the hills melt, and

the earth be burned at His presence, yea, the world, and all that dwell therein (v. 5). Then will be brought to pass the saying that is written,

And the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men, and every bondman, and every free man, hid themselves in the dens and in the rocks of the mountains, and said to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb: For the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand? (Nah. 1:6; Rev. 6:15-17).

Then He will make an utter end of the place thereof and pursue His enemies into darkness (Nah. 1:9). Then not only Belial’s counselors, but Belial himself will be cast into the lake of fire (Nah. 1:11, 14).

Before the nations in that day God will prove Himself a stronghold in the day of trouble and, when the book of life is opened, He will show beyond any doubt that He knoweth them that are His (Nah. 1:7). Then He will say to us, “Though I have afflicted thee, I will afflict thee no more” (Nah. 1:12); never again any tears or sorrow or death or crying or pain (Rev. 21:4). The messengers of the King will need to run no more on the mountains of Judah, and we will hear those words from the mouth of the King Himself, though so utterly undeserving, “Well done, good and faithful servant: enter thou into the joy of thy Lord” (Matt. 25:21).

And when that day comes again, Judah will keep her solemn feast, the wedding feast of the Lamb, to which all other feasts pointed. Then the wicked will no more pass through God’s people and will be utterly cut off, for “there shall in no wise enter into it any thing that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination, or maketh a lie: but they which are written in the Lamb’s book of life” (Rev. 21:27).

“Behold upon the mountains the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace!” for He is coming again and will bring in everlasting righteousness and peace. Behold, and believe! Keep your solemn feasts. Perform your vows, for Belial shall no more pass through thee. He is utterly cut off. Death is swallowed up in victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. We are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.



THE LIVING TESTIMONY OF STEPHEN

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And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep—Acts 7:59, 60

In the early days of the Christian church, amidst the fervor of newfound faith and the shadows of a coming persecution, there emerged a figure whose courage and conviction revealed him to be a living testimony of Jesus Christ. And it led to his death.

But his death was only a beginning—for himself personally, but also for the church universal.

Stephen's story began in Acts 6 with his selection as one of the first deacons. In the early church, there grew a murmuring against the Hebrews that the Grecian widows were being neglected (6:1). This backdrop to the office of deacon revealed the tension between the Aramaic-speaking Jews (Hebrews) and the Greek-speaking Jews (Hellenists).¹ This interplay between Jews of different backgrounds provided context for Stephen's selection as a deacon in Acts 6. For he himself was a Hellenist.²

Acts 6 tells us that Stephen, because he was “a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost” (v. 5), discharged

his office faithfully, for “the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly” (v. 7).

Additionally, Stephen was given power through the Holy Spirit to do “great wonders and miracles among the people” (Acts 6:8). Always, the purpose of the miracles was to confirm the truth of the gospel. The purpose was never to exalt a man and bring him recognition.³

Therefore, Stephen performed miracles *in faith*, but the gospel that he preached (which accompanied these miracles) was not well-received by some who accused Stephen of blasphemy. These “blasphemous words,” spoken by false witnesses (Acts 6:9), were Stephen's preaching *against* the power of the laws of Moses and the symbolism of the temple to bring salvation (6:11-14).

They wanted nothing to do with that word. They hated that word.

That word was the very reason they crucified Jesus Christ.

Then, as Stephen was brought before the Sanhedrin, being accused of preaching the truth that “Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us” (Acts 6:14), his face shone like that of an angel (6:15). As one filled with the Spirit of Christ, he was a living testimony of Jesus who conquered the grave and fulfilled the law to which his accusers stubbornly clung.

And so, with an illumined countenance and the

1 The name of the latter group originated with a ideal of Aristotle centuries before called “Hellenization” or “Hellenism,” which believed in imposing Greek language, culture, and religion on the ancient world. This ideal continued with more vigilance in the years following and had a tremendous impact on the Jews living throughout the Roman Empire, including Palestine, who were more assimilated into Greek culture.

2 In fact, all seven of these first deacons had Greek names and were likely Hellenists (Acts 6:5). See F.F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of Acts*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1977), 129. This demonstrates wisdom on the part of the early church to select those who understood the Greek perspective to assist and minister unto the Grecian widows.

3 Paul and Barnabas experienced this in Lystra when they were hailed as gods after healing a lame man. They were horrified by this reaction and immediately reiterated their desire that the Gentiles turn from their idols to the living God. The crowd still struggled to refrain from honoring the missionaries (Acts 14:8-19). Because of experiences like this, Paul often wrote that miracles confirmed the preached word of Christ. (See Rom. 15:18, 19.)

presence of Christ's Spirit, Stephen launched into a powerful speech as recorded in Acts 7:1-53.

The speech was rich with Old Testament history. It proved, through the experiences of Abraham, Joseph, and Moses, that God promised a fulfillment of the law and temple, and the spreading of the gospel outside the Jewish nation (Acts 7:1-46). His climactic statement about the temple was this: "But Solomon built him [God] an house. Howbeit the most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands" (7:47-48). Then, to demonstrate their unbelief, he emphatically declared, "Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost" (7:51). He concluded by identifying them as those "who have received the law by the disposition of angels, and have not kept it" (7:53).⁴

Being accused of hypocrisy by a follower of Jesus in this manner was more than they could bear.

For what they heard sounded so familiar. Recently, Jesus of Nazareth had proclaimed to be the Son of God, performed miracles, and had repeatedly condemned their hypocrisy. Now, here, before their very eyes, Stephen was testifying of Jesus' very word. The Sanhedrin clearly saw through Stephen that Christ was *alive*. The Spirit of Christ was evident in Stephen, and he was *living proof* that Jesus rose from the dead.

So, "they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth" (Acts 7:54). The same description was used in response to Peter (Acts 5:33), but now, within the context of their precious temple, the Sanhedrin reached their breaking point. Their fear and unbelief led to the events of Acts 7:54-60, the end of Stephen:

When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth. But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God, and said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God. Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord, and cast him out of the city, and stoned him: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul. And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.

And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

Astonishingly, in a vision just prior to his death, Stephen saw Jesus in a posture not recorded anywhere else in Scripture: *Standing*. What a sight! Seeing his personal Savior *standing* at the right hand of God! And Jesus ready to receive the soul of Stephen, to give him his reward.

Further, two petitions were movingly spoken by Stephen. "Lord, Jesus, receive my spirit", and then, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge."

Where had these words been heard before?

From Jesus Himself.

Jesus: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).

Stephen: "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge" (Acts 7:60).

Jesus: "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46).

Stephen: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" (Acts 7:59).

The parallels in these statements regarding the deaths of Jesus and Stephen are remarkable. In his final moments, as stones rained down, Stephen's gaze was not fixed on his murderers, but heavenward. His dying prayer, testifying of Christ's same petition, was a plea for mercy for his executioners. Against all human intuition, Stephen demonstrated a love that transcended human hate and mirrored his Savior. The living testimony now was to become a faithful martyr, received for eternity into the arms of Jesus. To *live* forever.

And Saul was there. And he heard those words.

And he would never forget them.

But upon witnessing Stephen's death, all Saul knew was hate for Stephen's testimony. Rising as a temple leader of the Pharisee sect, he now observed this living testimony and approved of his martyrdom (Acts 7:58). And it led him to go on a rampage of terror for the early church (Acts 8).

But meanwhile, as Saul was consenting unto (approving of) Stephen's death (Acts 8:1) and preparing his assault, "devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him" (8:2). They mourned him, not only because he was a faithful friend and leader, but because it marked the beginning of a period of suffering for the early church. His martyrdom magnified the cost of being a living testimony of Christ.

But notice the contrast of Acts 8:3, 4:

As for Saul, he made havock of the church, entering into

⁴ For further analysis of Stephen's arguments in his speech before the Sanhedrin, see F.F. Bruce, *Peter, Stephen, James & John: Studies in Non-Pauline Christianity*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979), 54-57.

every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison. Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word.

Incredibly, Stephen's death led the early church to continue spreading the good news of the gospel. Not a "scattering" like fire-ash that dissipates in the wind, but a scattering *to be planted*. Persecution gendered the beginnings of the universal church by the power of the Husbandman's grace.

That truth affects *you*. God's providence in history through Stephen's martyrdom brought the gospel, centuries later, to *your* continent. To *your* family. To *you* personally.

What a wonder of grace!

And as God was gracious to you, He was gracious towards Saul. For at the climax of his anger, as he prepared to continue persecution in Damascus, God sought Saul out as one lost and brought him unto Himself (Acts 9:1-7). And He would now use *Paul* as a living testimony of Christ to those beyond Palestine in distant lands.

As a humble servant, Paul remembered his past and recalled it to mind, publicly, to demonstrate the power of God to change his heart. Years later, in a compelling speech before an angry mob in Jerusalem, Paul confessed the sin of his part in the death of Stephen. "And when the blood of thy martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by, and consenting unto his death, and kept

the raiment of them that slew him" (Acts 22:20).⁵ That scene was engrained in his mind. Perhaps it was even the thorn in his flesh (2 Cor. 12:7-9). But God used it to remind him continuously of the power of His grace so that when *his* time came to give his life for Jesus, he would have stuck out his neck willingly.

You, like Stephen, are a living testimony of Jesus Christ. Hear His voice through the preaching and serve Him as one "who has been with Jesus" (Acts 4:13). He is in you. He loves you. Testify of Him, and He will testify of you to the Father. "He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels" (Rev. 3:5).

In the next decade of this century, it will be two millenniums since the martyrdom of Stephen. Alongside just men made perfect, Stephen has lived in perfection with Christ, his face illumined with the glory of his Lord.

Like Stephen, your end will also be a beginning. Therefore, be a living testimony, *now*, and cling to the hope that you will *live* forever with your Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

5 In this later passage in Acts, there is the additional detail of Stephen's shed blood. Further on the significance of this, see Prof. B. Huizinga, "Martyr," *Standard Bearer*, vol. 100, no. 15 (May 1, 2024), 366-367.

ALL AROUND US



THE WORKS OF GOD'S HAND

REV. DAVID NOORMAN

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What dost thou mean by the providence of God? The almighty and everywhere present power of God, whereby, as it were by His hand, He upholds and governs heaven, earth, and all creatures...yea, and all things come, not by chance, but by His fatherly hand—Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 10, Question and Answer 27

GOD'S HAND IN HURRICANE HELENE

Hurricane Helene was one of a few tropical storms that God sent to the southeastern United States this fall, and the most powerful and destructive of those recent storms. Helene was reported to be 350 miles wide, moving along an 800 mile long path, producing 140 mph winds at landfall, bringing nearly 30 inches of rain

to the North Carolina mountains. As of October 29, 227 deaths have been attributed to Hurricane Helene.

Anytime we observe such power, destruction, and death in the world, we must humble ourselves before the God who has sent it by His almighty and everywhere present power. Even if the hurricane does not touch us directly, the magnitude of the storm should move the entire country to consider the power of our God, His righteous judgment, our sinfulness, our frailty, and our only refuge in Christ.

I was edified and encouraged by the reported responses of some Christians affected by Hurricane Helene. Perhaps these will encourage you in the midst of the storms God has sent you.¹

“Fairview Christian Fellowship Church is in one of the hardest-hit areas of Highlands Country, North Carolina. With no electricity and spotty cellular reception, Pastor Trevor Allen had no way of letting people know whether there would be a worship service on September 29, but 19 people showed up anyway. They sang and prayed together, celebrated the Lord’s Supper, and listened to a sermon from Matthew 14.... Allen asked people to pray that the church would bring both physical and spiritual nourishment to the Fairview community. ‘We want to point people to waters that flow from the throne of grace that don’t destroy, but lift them up. I want people to know the Lord through this,’ he said.”

“Praise God for our safety and ask God to help us be a light in those good works he has prepared for us to do. God is good, even in the devastation, God is good.” Pastor Steve Mirich, Covenant Presbyterian Church, Hendersonville, NC.

“In the midst of the devastation, we have seen many examples of God at work. Teams of men, women, and

children went out from the church on Saturday and Sunday to begin cleaning up and praying with those who are hurting.... Please pray that many come to faith and the kingdom of God expands in Citrus County through the continued outreach of our people for weeks and months to come.” Pastor Brandon Lauranzon, Seven Rivers Church, Lecanto, FL.

Words on a page cannot capture the devastating impact that Hurricane Helene and the other storms have had on various families, churches, schools, and communities in the Southeast. Let us consider our brethren in prayer and, as we have opportunity, with acts of service. May the hearts of all God’s people rest in that comfort that abides through every circumstance: All things come, not by chance, but by His fatherly hand.

Whether the election results bring you excitement and celebration, or whether they have prompted disappointment and fear, remember that it is our Father’s hand that has done it, and He works all things for our advantage.

GOD’S HAND IN POLITICS

This article will be published nearly a month after the United States Presidential Election is finished, but I am writing this portion of it on November 4—the eve of the election. I do not know the outcome of the election at this point, or the state of the union at the time of publication. I intend to take advantage of that ignorance. Since I do not know what is ahead, you may be assured that what is written here is not a reaction but a preparation, no matter what takes place on November 5 and thereafter.

No matter what.

No matter which candidate is now the President-Elect. No matter how the election unfolded, or how the media portrays it, or the people or the parties respond. No matter what, we can take comfort in the sovereignty of God over all these things.

I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like me, Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure.... Yea I have spoken it, I will also bring it to pass; I have purposed it, I will also do it (Is. 46:9-11).

¹ These three quotes may be found at <https://byfaithonline.com/updates-from-churches-impacted-by-hurricane-helene>.

Whether the election results bring you excitement and celebration, or whether they have prompted disappointment and fear, remember that it is our Father's hand that has done it, and He works all things for our advantage.

The November 2024 issue of *WORLD* included a timely Christian perspective on the November 5 elections written by Hunter Baker, the provost and dean of faculty at North Greenville University in South Carolina.²

He reflects on elections past and present:

"As part of that [1968] Vietnam-era second run at the White House, [Richard] Nixon employed the dramatic slogan 'Vote like your whole world depended on it.' While it mattered that Nixon won that race, there are not many who would argue that his presidential term from 1969 to 1973 proved to be decisive or really saved the world of Americans."

"It seems that every four years, we experience a rising crescendo of rhetoric claiming that everything rides on the election. As a nearly lifetime student of politics, I have tended to be one of the most committed to the idea that each contest is one for the fate of mankind. But the older I get, the more it seems me that such claims are untrue."

Baker is balanced in his short article. Election results matter. Carrying out our civil responsibilities is important. But at the same time, Christians should have a perspective that reaches beyond the present time and circumstances. Our country and our world are not in the hands of politicians, voters, poll workers, or talking heads. All things are in the hand of God.

Baker points out that the founders of our country "conceived of a government that acts to frustrate sudden waves of passion and cataclysmic changes in policy." There are many ways political power in our country is checked, balanced, and separated. We may be thankful

for this gift of God's providence too. God has brought Americans under a form of earthly government that has allowed many generations—*our* generations—to assemble for public worship and lead lives of godliness. Pray that He will continue to give us these freedoms.

Baker continues,

But second, and more important, is the longer view that Christians should take in the light of God's sovereignty. If God is going to judge us by giving us the kind of ruler we may deserve, then that will come to pass. If He is going to bless us with a great leader, then that will also happen. None of us will prevail by conceiving some plan that will surprise the Lord.

If I may add to Baker's more important point: Not only is God sovereign. Not only is God just. But God is good, and we may hope in His mercy, for Christ's sake. This puts our hearts at rest in the midst of the adversity that He sends.

You (hopefully) know the election results by now. What has God done? Do you believe that God has done it? Let us trust that God Himself has set up the President-Elect (whoever that is!) for our advantage, and let us respond in such a way that pleases Him.

Our country and our world are not in the hands of politicians, voters, poll workers, or talking heads. All things are in the hand of God.

GOD'S HAND IN ALL THINGS

Hurricanes and presidential campaigns have dominated the news for the past few months. These are a couple of *great* things that God has done. Great things, which we ought to observe and consider.

But these are not the only things over which God is sovereign. God knows *all His works* from the beginning of the world (Acts 15:18). All creatures are so in His hand, that without His will, they cannot so much as move.

If God has sent you prosperity, be thankful. If God has sent you adversity, be patient. No matter what God has been pleased to do in your life, be mindful of, and comforted by, the presence and power of our Father's hand.

² Hunter Baker, "Elections and Eternity: No outcome in politics should cause Christians to despair," *WORLD*, November 2024, p. 106. (All references are to this article.)



HOW FAITH GROWS

REV. JAMES LANING

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Inspired by the Spirit, Paul told the church in Thessalonica that their “faith groweth exceedingly” (2 Thess. 1:3). How did that happen? What must have been taking place in a church where the faith of the saints was growing like that?

Some might answer by making reference to trials. In the context there are references to this. In the very next verse the apostle thanks God for their “patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that ye endure” (2 Thess. 1:4). God certainly does use afflictions for our profit. All things work together for good to those who love God.

Yet that last phrase, “to those who love God,” indicates that not everyone profits in afflictions. God says the ones who do profit are the ones who have their mind on that which is unseen: “For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal” (2 Cor. 4:17-18).

Afflictions are beneficial specifically for believers who are looking at what cannot be seen with the eye of the body. In other words, we benefit in our trials when we are thinking upon and believing what our Lord has promised us.

So what is the central means that the Spirit uses to teach us about what God has promised us? How do we come to know what the will of our Lord is for us?

The preaching of the gospel is the chief means God uses to teach us about eternal, unseen things. By this means the Spirit works in us faith.

Then, in our trials, the Spirit reminds us of what He has taught us. We grow more to meditate on what He

has said, clinging to what He has promised, and placing our firm trust in our faithful Lord and Savior. The Spirit works faith in us by gospel preaching, and the Spirit confirms our faith by the use of the sacraments. These two means are often referred to as means of grace. They are means that the Spirit uses to cause us to “grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 3:18).

On the subject of the means of grace there are a number of important matters to consider. We begin by considering what grace is and what is meant by means of grace.

GRACE AND MEANS OF GRACE

The Greek term for grace is closely related to the Greek word for joy. The term properly means that which is pleasant and affords joy. The term also has the idea of favor.

That latter idea of favor is evident in various meanings of this Greek word. I list a few of these meanings here, because it is important that we know in what sense we are speaking of grace when we speak of means of grace:

1. *A pleasant quality that attracts others.* Consider, for example, how people enjoy hearing gracious words.
2. *One's favor or beneficent disposition towards another.* That God is gracious toward someone means that He shows favor to him or her. Seeing as we deserve the opposite of God's favor, grace in this sense is often referred to as unmerited favor.
3. *The power of the Spirit received by one whom God favors.* Paul says “by the grace of God I am what I am” (1 Cor. 15:10).
4. *A response to the favor shown by another.* In this sense the word is sometimes translated *thanks*. It

is translated thus in the statement, “But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 15:57).

When we speak of means of grace, we are referring to grace in the third sense listed above. By grace we mean the power of the Holy Spirit that comes into those whom God favors.

FAITH AND THE MEANS OF GRACE

The Heidelberg Catechism treats the means of grace in relation to faith. After going through the Apostles’ Creed as a summary of what we must believe, the Catechism turns to the subject of the source of a person’s faith. It asks: “Whence [that is, from what source] does faith proceed?” (Lord’s Day 25).

The short answer to that question is this: the Holy Spirit is the source of our faith. Faith is entirely a gift of God, and the Spirit of Christ is the One who works it.

Then the Catechism goes on to mention the means the Spirit uses to work and confirm faith. It says the Spirit “works faith in our hearts by the preaching of the gospel, and confirms it by the use of the sacraments.” We note first of all that it is in the heart that the Spirit works faith. Faith is not a mere intellectual assent. True faith is worked by the Spirit in the very heart of a person.

Yet what exactly is faith, and why are these the two means that the Spirit uses to work and confirm faith? To answer that second question it is beneficial to consider the answer to the first one. If we know what true faith is, that will help us understand why the means of grace are what they are.

WHAT FAITH IS

Lord’s Day 7 defines true faith this way:

True faith is not only a certain knowledge, whereby I hold for truth all that God has revealed to us in His Word, but also an assured confidence, which the Holy Ghost works by the gospel in my heart; that not only to others, but to me also, remission of sin, everlasting righteousness, and salvation are freely given by God, merely of grace, only for the sake of Christ’s merits (Heidelberg Catechism, A. 21).

A few points the Catechism makes here regarding faith help us to understand why the preaching of the gospel is the chief means the Spirit uses to work it in our hearts.

First of all, it says that faith is knowledge. It is

knowledge whereby we hold for truth all that God has revealed in Scripture. How are we going to grow to understand all that God has revealed? Undoubtedly, the Scriptures must be explained to us. That is how we will come consciously to know what God says to us in His Word. This explains why the preaching of the gospel is the chief means the Spirit uses to work faith.

Second, we should also not pass over the fact that it speaks specifically of the gospel. The gospel is the good news concerning salvation in Jesus Christ the Mediator. Gospel preaching is the authoritative declaration that “remission of sin, everlasting righteousness, and salvation are freely given by God, merely of grace, only for the sake of Christ’s merits.” It is important to stress that these benefits are received “only for the sake of Christ’s merits.” It is the preaching of that good news, the news concerning unconditional salvation by irresistible grace, that is the message the Spirit uses to work faith.

Lord’s Day 25 mentions the gospel not only when speaking about the preaching, but also when talking about the sacraments. It gives this explanation of what the sacraments are: “The sacraments are holy, visible signs and seals, appointed of God for this end, that by the use thereof He may the more fully declare and seal to us the promise of the gospel....”

So the Spirit works faith in our hearts by the gospel, and that gospel is proclaimed in the preaching and is more fully declared and sealed unto us by the sacraments.

Third, we see that true faith is a knowledge that can be expressed in words. We were not able to express it while we were an infant, of course. Yet gradually we come to conscious faith and throughout our whole life we grow in our ability to express what God has taught us. As Lord’s Day 7 says, true faith is knowledge. It is a knowledge of what God says in His Word, and thus it can be expressed in words.

Fourth, faith is confidence, and both the preaching and the sacraments are given to assure us. The sacraments are given to assure God’s people that as really as they partake of the signs, so really do they partake of what they signify.

Thus it is easy to see how gospel preaching and the sacraments are the means that the Spirit uses to

work and confirm the knowledge and confidence of faith.

THE MEANS AS MARKS

The Heidelberg Catechism treats the means of grace in the section that speaks of the marks of the true church. Though we often turn to the Belgic Confession for a creedal explanation of the marks of a true church, the Heidelberg Catechism also has a section on these marks, though it does not refer to them explicitly as marks.

Lord's Days 25-31 taken together amount to an explanation of the marks of the true church:

- LD 25—Gospel preaching and the sacraments as means of grace
- LD 26-27—Baptism
- LD 28-30—Lord's Supper
- LD 31—Gospel preaching and Christian discipline as the keys of the kingdom

The means of grace (gospel preaching and the sacraments) and the keys of the kingdom (gospel preaching and Christian discipline) are treated right next to one another in the Heidelberg Catechism. These Lord's Days taken together refer to what the Belgic Confession calls the marks of the true church (that is, the pure preaching of the gospel, the proper administration of the sacraments, and the proper exercising of Christian discipline).

THE COMMON NEGLECT OF THE MEANS

Both means of grace are found in the instituted church.

Yet many professing Christians sporadically, rarely, or even never attend the worship services in a faithful church. Perhaps they are uninterested in hearing the Word of God explained. Or perhaps they are mistakenly thinking that a person can forsake the assembling of ourselves together, neglect the means of grace, and yet grow in faith.

Those who think this way are greatly mistaken. God uses the means of grace to work and confirm faith. He also works in such a way that we grow together. Just as the members of a body grow together, so the members of the church (the body of Christ) grow together.

This is illustrated by the Lord's Supper. A believer does not partake of the Lord's Supper sitting by himself or herself alone. Rather, the saints come together and partake together. What is true regarding the Lord's Supper is also true regarding the preaching of the gospel from week to week. God saved us not to live in isolation from others, but to commune with the other members of Christ's body. Together our Lord feeds us, and together we grow.

May we make good use of these means. In these last days may we not be like so many that forsake the assembling of ourselves together. Rather, may we come each week, eager to hear what our Lord says. May we also use the sacraments, believing the promise that they signify and seal. By these means our Lord directs us to think on the unseen things that are eternal, and causes our faith to increase to the glory of His name.

PILLAR AND GROUND OF THE TRUTH



WHAT THE LAYMAN SHOULD KNOW ABOUT TEXTUAL CRITICISM: BIBLE VERSIONS

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Six previous articles briefly introduced us to the history, principles, and practice of textual criticism. My purpose was to respond to comments in some Bible versions (ESV and NIV, for example) that say that certain

manuscripts omit a certain passage. As case studies, we looked at Mark 16:9-20 and John 7:53-8:11.

The comments, frankly, are unhelpful. First, they state a fact that the average Bible reader does not

have the background, skill, or knowledge to evaluate. Second, they state *selective* facts that regard *certain manuscripts*. They make and promote the assumption that these manuscripts are more reliable than others. This common assumption of many textual critics leads to poor *methods* of textual criticism and must be challenged. Finally, the effect they have on the reader is to raise questions. The believer comes to Scripture to read *God's Word*, to fellowship with Him. In reading these passages, did we truly have fellowship with Him? Do they contain a gospel message that is relevant today? How could they, if they are not genuinely God's Word?

The last article, defending the inclusion of John 7:53-8:11 in Scripture, closed by asking this question: What implications does textual criticism have for the version of the Bible we use? This article will answer that question in two ways. First, we should recognize that the textual basis of the New Testament of the KJV is one of its strengths. Second, we will ask what the churches should do if they conclude that, its strength notwithstanding, the KJV must be replaced.

A STRENGTH OF THE KJV IS ITS NEW TESTAMENT TEXTUAL BASIS

That the KJV is old—413 years old—is a fact. Some people think it is *too* old. They think that people and churches that still use the KJV are out-of-date in the modern age. Some argue that using the KJV leaves the church unable to defend Christianity against the great threats of postmodernism and that it hinders our evangelism work.

None can deny that the KJV uses words that we would not use today, or words with an obsolete meaning. The matter should not be overstated: The KJV uses the English language, and by far most of the vocabulary of the KJV is current. But the matter should also not be understated: The KJV uses some archaic words, pronouns, and verb structures (“Thou sayest”).

Yet one of the KJV's strengths is its New Testament *textual base*, that is, the Greek manuscripts on which it is based. Many who love the KJV do not realize this, and many who do not prefer the KJV are unaware of this. Remember the third goal of our examination of the subject of textual criticism, as I stated in the first article on this subject:

The third goal is to demonstrate that the Greek

textual basis underlying the New Testament of our King James Version is sound and reliable. That, really, is the bigger issue at stake. The late 1800s saw a shift in views of Scripture and views of the Greek texts underlying the New Testament of the English translations. Consequently, almost every English Bible translation since the Revised Version of 1881 (United Kingdom) and the American Standard Version of 1901 (United States) is based on a different Greek textual basis than is the KJV. The only exception to this is the New King James Version, which uses the same textual basis as the KJV itself.¹

I reiterate that point.

To say that the KJV's New Testament textual base is one its strengths does not suggest that this textual base (known as the *Textus Receptus*) was inspired or is absolutely without error. God's Word is inspired and without error, but just as no Bible version or translation is inspired or without error, neither is any textual base. Some make the mistake of speaking as if this textual base is faultless in every respect. Nor does the assertion I am making mean that the work of textual criticism that integrates more recently discovered Greek manuscripts is unnecessary.

For two reasons, the New Testament textual base of the KJV is one of its strengths. First, even with the discovery of more Greek manuscripts since the 1600s, the vast majority of *known* manuscripts—90% and more—support the reading of the KJV. Note that the *reading* is not the same as the *translation*. The *translation* regards how the Greek words and sentences are transferred into English. The *reading* regards whether a certain section or verse or phrase or even word belongs in Scripture. The illustrations from Mark 16 and John 8 in the last two articles regarded *readings*. Less than 10% of manuscripts disagree with the KJV on whether sections, verses, or phrases belong. The New Testament textual basis of the KJV is solid.

Second, this textual basis is a strength of the KJV because it was not the product of the poor assumptions and principles that characterized textual criticism starting in the 1800s. A previous article briefly set forth some of these poor assumptions. Among them are the idea that when the reading of two oldest manuscripts disagrees with the reading of 90% of manuscripts, the

1 *Standard Bearer*, December 1, 2023, 132.

reading of the two oldest is to be preferred. The men who developed the *Textus Receptus* did not make this faulty assumption. The KJV translators present every passage as properly belonging in Scripture.

What some modern translations tout as a strength of theirs—using older and more reliable manuscripts—is in fact an aspect of their weakness. Their weakness is not that they *use* older manuscripts, but is the *assumption* that these older are more reliable and give us a better idea of which words, phrases, sentences, and sections of speech are to be included in the Bible, and which are not.

AN ESSENTIAL CHARACTERISTIC OF A GOOD ALTERNATE VERSION

What if the church decides that the KJV needs replacing because it is too far removed from the language of the common reader? What criteria should factor in deciding which version to use next? An essential criterion must be the New Testament textual basis of the version.

In addition to this criterion are others, of course. We desire a version that presents God's Word clearly, readably, in twenty-first century English, and in a dignified manner. But the fundamental criterion must not regard the *end product*; it must regard the *textual starting point*. A version that meets other good criteria but is not based on a sound text ought not be used in the churches. The reason is this: the reader must be assured that he is reading the phrases, verses, and sections that God spoke.

Does using a "sound text" mean that the translators must use the exact same text that the KJV translators did? I suggested that in an earlier article, but need to modify what I said. In my first article, I stated: "But if, in the providence of God, before our Lord returns, a new Bible version is produced that can really equal the KJV as regards its textual basis, it must be a version that uses the same textual base as the KJV uses, and does not think that two ancient manuscripts outweigh hundreds of others."²

Carefully note what I am saying. To say that another Bible version should use "the same textual base as the KJV uses," strictly speaking, is to require translators to use only those manuscripts that the KJV translators

had available to them in the early seventeenth century. I did not mean this. To state it as I did overlooks the facts that more manuscripts have been discovered, and that the work of textual criticism can be done beneficially.

Rather than insisting that another Bible version use "the same textual base," I should have said that a sound, modern Bible translation is one whose translators use sound methods and principles of textual criticism. Its textual base will be *broader* than that of the KJV, because more manuscripts have been discovered, but it will *not be essentially different*. *For proper methods and presuppositions of textual criticism can demonstrate that the textual basis of the KJV was not inferior, as many claim today, but was sound!*

To bring this more concretely to bear on the question of an alternate version to the KJV, I conclude with three comments.

First, almost every English Bible version today is based on a text that is the product of bad textual-critical methods based on bad presuppositions. The ESV and NIV are a case in point. While more can be said regarding the pros and cons of the ESV and NIV, in this article I am evaluating them on *only one* criterion: the textual base. In this area, neither rise to the level of the KJV. The brackets at Mark 16:9-20 and John 7:73-8:11 are not the only examples of this, but are the most obvious examples to the English reader.

Second, to produce a *new* translation that rivals the KJV in its textual basis would be a significant undertaking. If done, it may not be done by individuals or publishers who commit themselves to the cause; it *must* be the undertaking of a denomination or group of denominations that recognize the need for yet another version, and agree regarding the essential criteria. But that would require a significant investment of time and resources.

Third, there is one English Bible version in existence that is almost fifty years old, but uses essentially the same textual basis as the KJV. It is the New King James Version.

2 *Standard Bearer*, December 1, 2023, 132.



IN THE MULTITUDE OF WORDS

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“In the multitude of words there wanteth not sin: but he that refraineth his lips is wise” (Prov. 10:19). I would like to “minister to the saints” in this article by calling your attention to this proverb that shows us the wisdom of God for our lives when it comes to our use of words. When we pour out a multitude of words without restraining ourselves, there is no lack of sin in what we say or write. I believe we all need to hear this. We seem to live in a time of increasing polarization, meaning we are quick to form sides on various issues and to think in terms of “us” versus “them.” We seem to be more emotionally reactive nowadays whenever someone on the other side of a controversial issue speaks up. But we always need to be reminded to guard our tongues and restrain our lips because of the depravity of our sinful flesh.

When is there a multitude of words in our lives? Well, there are many times and situations. Whenever we pour out a long stream of consciousness in conversations with friends or family on the phone, there can be a multitude of words. Whenever we go on and on sharing personal stories or expressing personal opinions in social settings, we are multiplying words. When we react to every post, text, email, or comment that we see with a long and unfiltered stream of our own opinions in posts, texts, emails, or comments of our own, what a multitude of words can come out of us! Whenever we open our mouths or grab our phones to defend ourselves or criticize someone else, without pausing to reflect and pray before we speak, look at all the words that we are able to produce! For that matter, there is a multitude of words if we are constantly raising our hand at ecclesiastical assemblies to ask for the floor and heaping up more and more words either for or against a motion or in response to a former speaker. Of course, we could “multiply”

examples, but you get the point. When a multitude of words comes out of us, sadly, there is no shortage of sin against God and the neighbor.

But let’s not misunderstand. It is not the mere multiplying of words that is sinful, for “the mouth of a righteous man is a well of life” (Prov. 10:11). “The tongue of the just is as choice silver” (v. 20). “The lips of the righteous feed many” (v. 21). “The mouth of the just bringeth forth wisdom” (v. 31). The virtuous woman “openeth her mouth with wisdom; and in her tongue is the law of kindness” (Prov. 31:26). The tongue of the man who speaks a multitude of things that are just, true, and lovely is like silver of the highest quality. The woman who opens her mouth to speak numerous words of wisdom and kindness in her own household or in the household of God is virtuous indeed. So is the believer who pours out a multitude of words in prayer to God, and the preacher who preaches a multitude of the words of the gospel from the pulpit. Nor does the proverb mean that extroverts, people who are more expressive with their words, are fools.

But the point of the proverb is that it is foolish to multiply words *without restraint*, without thinking before we speak, without controlling our reactions. In the multitude of uncontrolled and undisciplined words that we speak or type there is no lack of sin. For example, there is no lack of *pride*. “In the mouth of the foolish is a rod of pride: but the lips of the wise shall preserve them” (Prov. 14:3). When we have a lot to say, we are often displaying pride. We are proudly showcasing how much we know. We are proudly taking pleasure in correcting the mistakes of others or refuting the arguments of simpletons who are beneath us. There is no lack of *talebearing* (gossip), too, when there is a multitude of words. “A talebearer revealeth

secrets: but he that is of a faithful spirit concealeth the matter” (Prov. 11:13). If we are talking a lot, it is often because we are spreading rumors of the failures of others and telling juicy tales of scandal. In a multitude of words, there is also no want of *complaining* about the things and people we do not like, even though we are exhorted, “Do all things without murmurings and disputings” (Phil. 2:14). In a multitude of words, there is no shortage of rash or harsh *judgment* of brothers and sisters in Christ, even though our Lord calls us to focus on the beam in our own eye (Matt. 7:1-5). In a multitude of words, there is often no lack of *angry ranting* and *foolish jesting*, even though we are taught to put these off as works of the flesh (Eph. 4:26, 5:4).

The second part of the proverb states, “But he that refraineth his lips is wise.” It is the wise man who has learned to restrain his lips from always and immediately pouring out whatever pops up in his mind in reaction to an opponent in debate. It is the wise woman who has learned to discipline herself so that she does not react with an outburst of words every time people say things that offend her. He who refrains from speaking all the time, who tries hard to keep his mouth closed, who listens carefully to what others are saying, and who takes great care when debating sensitive and difficult issues with fellow believers is wise. He is wise who controls his tongue and forces himself to stay silent, when many times he would like to speak. She is wise who thinks carefully before she speaks out on a major issue. The Scriptures here and elsewhere praise the man or woman who gives heed to the calling to “keep thy tongue from evil, and thy lips from speaking guile” (Ps. 34:13), who has learned that there is “a time to keep silence, and a time to speak” (Eccl. 3:7), so that he or she has become “swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath” (James 1:19).

But let’s not misunderstand this either. The idea is not that *all* restraining of our lips is wise. There *is* a time to speak. We must not restrain our lips from speaking against heresy and abuse, slander and backbiting, in the right way, at the right time, and in the right place. If we do not speak against the evil, we are not wise, but foolish and cowardly. We must not refrain our lips either from speaking of “the wonderful works of God” to our neighbors (Acts 2:11), or “that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers” (Eph. 4:29), or words that are “seasoned with

salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man” (Col. 4:6), or words of comfort at the graveside (1 Thess. 4:18). Nor is the proverb saying that those who are naturally shy or introverted are automatically wise. No one is automatically wise.

But the point is that it is wise to restrain our lips from speaking everything that comes to mind. “A prudent man concealeth knowledge: but the heart of fools proclaimeth foolishness” (Prov. 12:23). That is easier said than done, because of our sinful flesh. But we who would be wise must trust in the Holy Spirit to silence our foolish and quarrelsome old man of sin. We need to ask God to help us stop reacting to everything that we hear with an instantaneous stream of words. We need to learn to pause and reflect on what a person said or wrote and to consider carefully whether we really need to respond or might just let it be. We ought to ask ourselves with utmost seriousness, how important is it really that I respond? Is this the time to speak or a time to be silent? When we do respond, we ought to judge others with the same charity with which we would like them to judge us. We ought to choose our words carefully, so as to speak truthfully but also with the right tone of voice, not using inflammatory or sarcastic language. “The heart of the righteous studieth to answer: but the mouth of the wicked poureth out evil things” (Prov. 15:28).

Are our consciences pricked by this? Having read this, do we feel how weak we are and prone to stumble and fall? Who among us can avoid multiplying words that are full of sin? Who can avoid saying the wrong thing, at the wrong time, in the wrong way, or with an excessive amount of words? Who can tame the tongue, that unruly member that is full of deadly poison? (James 3:5-8).

Let us flee to Christ. Christ was the only man who was not prone to hate God and His neighbor with His words, but as the Son of God, He could only use His tongue to speak words of truth and love. All the words He spoke throughout His life were without sin. On the other hand, He restrained His lips when a multitude of wicked words were flung into His face, and He took upon Himself the enormous multitude of sinful words that we have spoken. Look up at Jesus on the cross suffering and dying for all our words of pride and gossip, murmuring and judgment, angry ranting and foolish joking. Look at His bloody wounds that have

washed away the uncleanness of our lips. For Christ's sake, God forgives our multitude of words that have been full of sin.

He also commands us to go and sin no more with our lips. Let us not be mere readers of the Word, but

doers. Let us be resolved to grow in wisdom and pray that God will give us that wisdom that is from above, which is "first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy" (James 3:17).

FOR THE CHURCH



IF MY BROTHER SIN...THE POTENT MEDICINE OF MATTHEW 18 (3)

PROF. BARRETT GRITTERS

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Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican—Matthew 18:15-17

Jesus' prescription for sin in the church has basic 'ingredients': 1) a believer 2) admonishes 3) privately 4) a fellow believer 5) for impenitent 6) sin of conduct or life that cannot be overlooked, 7) which sin was private, known only to them. Matthew 18 also has important principles embedded in it: 1) love for the brother, 2) protection of the church, 3) maturity of both parties, 4) privacy, and 5) grace. Understanding these principles well will help us follow Jesus' "Directions For Use," to continue the analogy that Matthew 18 is Jesus' "medicine" for treating sin in the church.

DIRECTIONS FOR USE

Just as earthly medicines (especially potent ones) should have simple and clear directions for use, Jesus writes very brief but clear directions for administering His medicine. Still, they do require some explanation and interpretation. This is potent medicine and carefulness is necessary.

There are three main steps to follow, with each succeeding step being carried out only if God did not bless the preceding step with success; that is, if the sin persists. Outlined briefly, the steps are:

1) If a brother sins, go to him alone to tell him his fault. If he repents, forgiveness is granted, and the matter is finished. No one else must know. 2) If he does not repent, take one or two witnesses and repeat step one: tell him his fault. If he repents, forgiveness is granted, and the matter is finished. No one else must know. 3) If he still does not repent, the offended brother goes to the church, accompanied by the witnesses, to report the matter there. If he repents, forgiveness is granted, and the matter is finished. No one else must know. But if he remains impenitent, the church excommunicates and counts him as a heathen and publican.

In this article, we consider the first of Jesus' directions for dealing with sin: Go alone to the brother who sins.

IDENTIFYING SINS THAT I MUST ADDRESS PRIVATELY

We can be reminded here that the sin in view is not a public sin. Even though a public sin *may* be addressed privately, public sins *must* be addressed publicly by the consistory. I should go to my brother whose sin is widely known, but I will also make sure that the consistory knows and is addressing it. We can also be reminded here that the

sin in view is one I cannot overlook. Some sins should be overlooked, to a man's "glory" (Prov. 19:11), but the sin Jesus speaks to here offends and threatens the spiritual well-being of the sinner and the church family.

The brother sins "against thee." That is, he violates one of God's laws in the second table (commands 5-9, "love your neighbor") against you or your loved ones. He dishonors your authority, commits murderous actions against you or your family member, sexually sins against your spouse or child, steals your property, or maligns your name. You must go to him.

Here, an important question appears. At first glance it is a difficult one: Must I go to the brother if his sin is not directly against *me*? The question branches out in two ways. First, must I go to him if his violations are against my *neighbor*? He damages my neighbor's name or dishonors his authority.... Second, must I go to him if his violations are sins directly against God, sins forbidden in the law's *first* table (commandments 1-4)? He worships an idol, makes images, takes God's name in vain, or desecrates the Sabbath. In other words, is it proper to conclude that, since Jesus says, "If thy brother shall trespass *against thee*..." and since these first-table sins are *not* directly against me, I am free from the obligation to go?

The answer appears especially clear now that we have seen the principles of Jesus' teaching (see the October and November 1 issues).

First, the love-principle must loom large in our minds. I love my brother. But if I conclude that, since the sin is not against me directly, I must leave the sinner in his sin, I may not say that I love him. Love determines to do the brother good and does him good, but I am failing to do him the good that I alone know he needs—a heartfelt call to repentance from sin and faith in Christ. Love does not argue that, although his sin imperils his soul, I will not go to him to "convert him from the error of his way" because it is against the neighbor or against God, but does not hurt *me*.

The protection-principle also helps answer the question. We are concerned to protect the church in her purity, and to protect all her members from harm, especially the little ones. But if we conclude that, because the sin is not against me directly, I have no calling to address it with him, we expose the church and her little ones to danger. The sin may not have hurt me, but it

may "offend" the little ones (Matt. 18:6) and Father's will is that none of them "perish" (18:14). Unaddressed, the sin may spread to the other members, "leavening" the lump. His sin may hurt those around him. Maybe his own children will be harmed by his sinful actions or unbiblical confession. Therefore, if I love my brother and if I love the church, I will go to him, even if the sin is not directly against me.

That sins against God (first table) and sins against the neighbor (second table) must be treated by me is Reformed teaching. First, the Heidelberg Catechism's instruction about discipline teaches this in Lord's Day 31. Someone who maintains "*doctrines* or practices" inconsistent with his Christian confession must be "brotherly admonished" before being "complained of to the church." Second, although the first broader assembly of the Dutch Reformation churches (Wesel, 1568) *excluded* doctrinal sins (*first* table violations) from those to be addressed privately, their next assembly three years later (Emden, 1571) set the tone for future generations: doctrinal offences are included.¹ Third, Calvin explains Jesus' words "against thee" in his commentary: "...by which is meant, not that it is a business of our own, but that we ought to be wounded and grieved whenever God is offended." That is, both tables, whether directly against us or not.

I GO ALONE

Frightening and intimidating as it may be, I go to my brother alone. I tell no one else and I take no one else. The Dutch have an idiom that it is a meeting "between four eyes." Not six eyes. Not eight eyes. Four.

But is it proper or safe for one to meet another "alone" in all situations? Imagine: if a woman sins against a man, is it *proper* for him to meet with her alone? Or if a man sins against a woman, is it *safe* for her to meet with him alone? Safety and propriety. I have not found this question addressed elsewhere, but offer my own judgment, subject of course to other judgments: If the meeting must be between two of the opposite sex, the options may be either to have a private conversation but in a public place; or to meet in a private place but take along a spouse (if married) or

¹ See I. VanDellen and M. Monsma's *The Church Order Commentary* under Article 72 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1954).

a wise friend (if single). Of course, taking a spouse or friend seems to violate Jesus' mandate of "alone," and meeting in a public place may risk the appearance of evil. Still, my preference would be a meeting in a private place with a spouse or friend because this approach recognizes both biblical rules: Jesus' call to keep the matter as private as possible, and Jesus' warning about harm and the appearance of evil. In the end, because all circumstances are different, wisdom's course may be to ask advice of your consistory, without identifying the sin or the sinner.

I GO TO THE BROTHER

The verb Jesus uses ("go") allows us to think of a man getting up out of his chair, leaving his home, and walking a path to the brother's house for a meeting face-to-face. The Dutch expression "between four eyes" may *limit* the meeting to two parties, but it also emphasizes the *personal* nature of the meeting. When God met Moses on Sinai, Exodus likens it to a man speaking to his friend: "face to face" (Ex. 33:11). When John had many things he could have written with "paper and ink" to "the elect lady and her children," he instead waited to "speak face to face" (2 John 1:12). And does not Jesus' medicine really demand that a matter so serious as an accusation of sin be treated face to face? A two-way conversation, in which a brother admonishes a brother, pleading with him in love, pressing into the service of his brother's salvation his entire being—body language, facial expressions, eyes and tears.

Implied here is that some other approaches may be unwise, even unacceptable. A *text* or private social media post are probably the most impersonal, and both risk being sent without careful forethought. A *phone call* may be better, but it is not face to face. It is still less personal and, as we all know, phone calls do not best promote personal and friendly interaction, especially when the subject of conversation is so important, the emotions are so charged, and I cannot see his *face*. A *letter* in an envelope is not face to face. A letter is one-sided, even more impersonal than a phone call, and does not allow for immediate response—which love wants in case of misunderstanding. Besides, I want to do my best to convey my love and sincerity so that my brother properly sees it. And I want to give him an immediate opportunity to ask questions. All this takes meeting face to face.

FIRST, I PREPARE

The *manner* in which we bring God's Word makes a great difference to God.² And since my manner is determined by my heart, I want thoroughly to prepare my heart. My nature is proud, and my righteous anger too easily gives place to the Devil (Eph. 4:27), so I will pray for the spirit of meekness (Gal. 6:1) and that sinful anger may be subdued by the Spirit reminding me that my sinfulness is greater than my brother's (1 Tim. 1:15). I will pray for gracious love that will die to myself so that good may be done to this undeserving brother. I will pray that humility governs me. And I will pray for him: "O gracious God, use my weak means to be a means of grace to my brother. Father of mercy, save him. Soften his hard heart. Open his eyes to the truth of sin and the free forgiveness we have in Thy Son. O Lord, use me for his blessing." Sit in your chair and pray.

And I stay in my chair a while longer because preparation also includes Scripture study. With a pencil and paper before me ("love" and "grace" and "humility" written all over it), I ask: What passage will I read to him? What biblical explanation is needed to show him his fault? How will I convict him of his sin from the Word of God—the only authority for our faith and life? Careful preparation—maybe taking days—will precede my visit, so that I do not speak rashly. Pray again. Then I rise up from my chair and go.

SECOND, I SPEAK

And the first words out of my mouth—as I briefly explain the reason for my visit—convey my love for him and my desire to be careful. "I am here to speak to you of your sin.... When I do, please tell me if my understanding of the matter is accurate. I do not want to judge rashly or unheard, as the ninth commandment and the Catechism warn me. God honors our work when grace and truth mark our way."

Personal experience with a man who rebuked me for shaking hands with an excommunicated person reminds me of this important matter. One Sunday noon after church he called me and, without asking

2 See Paul's beautiful explanation of *how* he conducted himself among the Thessalonians in chapter 2:1-12. *Manner* was so important that twice in this section he calls on God as witness of it.

any questions, spent too long a time admonishing me of the wrong of shaking hands with an excommunicated person at church that morning. I hope it was to his embarrassment and learning when, at long last, I was finally able to explain that I had not done what he said I had done. Do not judge rashly or unheard.

Then (perhaps at the risk of appearing completely weak) I may even humbly ask if I was in any way the occasion for his sin.

But now is demanded the work for which I prepared: Tell him his fault. Call him to godly sorrow and true repentance. Because the *kindness* of God leads to repentance (Rom. 2:5), show him God's mercies for penitent sinners. Make clear that the barrier that now stands between you will come fully down, and that no one else needs to know what you alone know. If necessary, warn him against offending others

(millstones!), damaging God's church (His precious bride!), and imperiling his own soul (lost in hell!). In patient love remind him how deceptive sin is, how strong our depraved natures are, how slowly but surely defiant men come to complete ruin, and how offensive sin is to our holy God. God punishes sin either in *us* eternally (who are impenitent) or in His *Son* (for those who embrace Him in repentance and faith).

"BROTHER, DO YOU HEAR ME?"

If he repents, you have gained him! Now speak comfortable words of forgiveness and joy, reconciliation and peace, and rejoice with heaven's angels. The matter is finished. His sin and the knowledge of your meeting go to the grave with you.

In God's goodness, Jesus' medicine worked. A sinner was saved. God be praised!

STRENGTH OF YOUTH



PROPER CHRISTIAN MONEY MANAGEMENT

REV. HEATH BLEYENBERG

pastor of Immanuel PRC in Lacombe, Alberta, Canada

For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required; and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more—Luke 12:48

We live in an age of affluence. The majority of you reading this article right now reside in either the United States or Canada. Regarding material possessions and the luxuries this age has to offer, we have an abundance of things. The Christmas season now upon us always serves as a reminder that our culture is saturated with consumerism and materialism. And behind all this consumerism and materialism...is money.

Money is a gift from God. We are required to be faithful in all the Lord has given, especially in the use of and the managing of money.

I write particularly to the younger generation—to you young people with part-time jobs and full-time jobs

during the summer; to you recently graduated college students now earning a salary for the first time; to you young married couples starting a family. Are you wise in the use of your money? Do you find that it is hard to hold on to money once you receive the paycheck? Do you understand the concept of debt? Are you able to give to kingdom causes as you desire and are required to, as also for the relief of the poor?

Forbidden by God is a reckless use of money. Forbidden is an ignorant use of money whereby the unnecessary debt only grows and accumulates and eventually becomes crippling. Forbidden is pressing money into the service of covetousness. Forbidden is managing money and striving to become rich, all for the sake of filthy lucre. Required by God is faithfulness—faithfulness to God in all that He is given me; faithfulness in every single compartment

of my life, including my understanding and use of money.

Therefore the proper use of money is not simply a matter of earthly wisdom. There are all kinds of books available regarding financial management. There are all kinds of websites with the top ten things you need to be doing to grow wealth and be financially independent. To be sure, there is a certain measure of earthly wisdom contained in those sources. But the child of God seeks the wisdom that is from above, even regarding finances. That wisdom from above exhorts us to be faithful in all that the Lord has entrusted to our care.

We need to be aware and knowledgeable regarding our use of money. Part of the reason I write about this subject comes out of a personal experience. Although not altogether uncommon, my experience was one that left a deep impression upon me and that I reflect on yet years later. At this time thirty years ago, I was in my freshman year at a good Christian college. I was nearing the end of the first semester. The financial aid office contacted me. They needed to speak with me. Soon I found myself sitting down with the director of financial aid himself. He informed me of the news. “The first semester is about over, and you still owe (many) thousands of dollars in tuition for this semester.” Awkward silence. “And you won’t be able to continue unless you’re able to cover tuition.” More awkward silence. I asked “What can I do?” The answer was that I needed to take out additional loans. And the only additional loans for me to take out were unsubsidized federal loans.¹ After this very brief 10-15 minute conversation, I was directed to someone else in the office who was able to help me fill out the necessary paperwork. Thus, I was able to finish the semester, and complete my first year.

I learned my lesson that day. The lesson to learn at the time appeared to be this: at the beginning of every year of college I better make sure to take out the full amount of these unsubsidized loans to cover the cost of tuition so that I can avoid another awkward meeting in the financial aid office. So that is exactly what I did for the next three years. Now, I am very thankful that

having graduated, the Lord gave me a healthy fear of debt (something I intend to write about in a later issue), and I was able to pay off those loans in a few years.

As I look back at my former self during those years, I see a young man with very little financial literacy and a not-so-little measure of ignorance regarding proper Christian money management.

THE MOTIVE

The motive of the child of God in managing his money properly is not to escape physical poverty. Poverty is a relative term. A poor man in one part of the world might be considered a rich man in another part of the world. But that is never our motive—to escape poverty.

Two things we need to remember in this regard. First, physical poverty is not sinful in itself. A lack of material possessions is not all by itself a bad thing. It is very well possible for a poor man to manage his limited resources in a very wise way, as opposed to a rich man who manages his money very poorly. Second, Jesus declares in John 12:8 “For the poor always ye have with you.” Therefore it is not the duty of the church, especially by way of the diaconate, to rid the congregation of its poor. Always in the church of Jesus Christ there will be those who are poor.

Now, to the poor Christian who is a wise and faithful steward over all that God has given, it might very well be the case that God would be pleased to lift that man out of his state of physical poverty. But that is never the motive and the singular desire of the Christian as he manages his finances—simply to escape physical poverty.

Further, the motive of the Christian in managing his money properly is not to get rich. Like poverty, wealth is not wrong in itself. We need money for our day-to-day needs. We thank the Lord for giving us employment as a means to earn the paycheck and purchase the things we need. The money and wealth all by itself is not wrong to possess. But there is such a thing as “filthy lucre” (1 Pet. 5:2). That word *filthy* does not describe the physical money, but it describes the motive of that man who shamelessly covets more and more. If our motive in money management is simply to get rich, then we are guilty of lusting after “filthy lucre” and reveal ourselves to be greedy for material profit and gain.

In this connection, beware of the “health and wealth gospel.” It is also known as the “prosperity gospel.”

¹ A *subsidized* federal loan means that the government pays the interest on the loan so long as the student is in college. An *unsubsidized* federal loan means that the interest accrues on that loan while the student is in college and is added to the principal amount of the loan.

The premise behind this teaching is that God wants you to be healthy and wealthy. God wants you to be rich and successful. As long as you demonstrate faith, as long as you are a giving and generous person (usually to the church that is teaching such a false gospel), then God will doubly bless you with health and riches. The prosperity gospel therefore teaches that riches and success in life are evidence of divine grace and a token of God's blessing upon you.

This "health and wealth" gospel is of no comfort to the child of God. This "prosperity gospel" is of no comfort to poor Lazarus in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). If the prosperity gospel is correct that God wants us to be rich and wealthy, then poor Lazarus must have been a man living in constant despair and forever doubting the blessing of God upon him because, after all, he was in such a poor miserable condition. Whereas we know the opposite was the case. This Lazarus, though poor he be, was richly blessed by God.

Therefore, in good Christian financial management, our motive is not to escape poverty, nor is it to become rich. The confession of the child of God is "...give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with food convenient for me" (Prov. 30:8).

Faithfulness. That is the motive of the child of God in money management. To be faithful with the little God has given me. To be faithful with the plenty God has given me. The child of God knows "the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein" (Ps. 24:1). What I have does not belong to me. It belongs to God. He has entrusted it to my care for a time. I will be like those faithful servants who were diligent with the talents given them (Matt. 25:14-30). I will be diligent and manage my money in a good and right way, to God's glory and for the benefit of the neighbor.

Next time we will consider some of the principles in proper Christian money management.

REPORTS



RFPA ANNUAL SECRETARY REPORT

MR. RICK GRITTERS

retiring secretary of the RFPA, and member of Trinity PRC in Hudsonville, Michigan

Would you call yourself a reader? From street signs to instruction manuals, we read every day, imparting meaning into symbols and lines that we have been trained to recognize as letters and numbers. But would you personally call yourself a reader? Beyond restaurant menus and price tags, our immediate answer—as Christians, and thus people of the Word—should be *yes*. Though in times past, much of what a Christian learned about God was passed down orally from generation to generation in poems, lectures, and songs, the church universal today is nourished and strengthened primarily by the written word. By means of books, pamphlets, magazines, and the internet, the gospel is spread to more nations, tribes, and tongues than any one person could ever reach. For this reason, we support schools and organizations that teach children to read and to spend time—by themselves, and with others—in the Word. We do our best to foster an interest in good

Christian literature, so that our children learn to be discerning, to read wisely, and to grow spiritually. And finally, it is for this reason that we sacrifice and strive for the growth of Christian publishing companies like the Reformed Free Publishing Association. By making accessible, affordable Christian literature that testifies to the truth of Scripture as understood and developed in the Reformed tradition, we glorify and honor our God, who saw fit to use the technology of books and magazines for the spread of the gospel.

We are thankful and excited to report that we have published the following nine books in the past year. A heartfelt thanks goes out to our authors, editors and designers for the time and effort put into these wonderful volumes.

The four new annual releases:

- *Crowning His Gifts* by Professor Brian Huizinga

- *Songs of Our Pilgrimage* by Reverend John Heys
- *A Cloud of Witnesses* by Reverend Herman Hoeksema
- *Lessons in Forgiveness* by Reverend Martyn McGeown

Five additional books (counting as four):

- *Biblical and Religious Psychology* by Herman Bavinck
- *Who Is Jesus?* and *Humble Servant* by Abby VanSolkema
- *Journey Through the Psalms* by Mike Velthouse
- *Finding My Vocation* by Reverend William Boekestein

In addition to producing books, the RFPA continues to oversee the publication of two periodicals, the *Standard Bearer* and *Ignited by the Word*. The *Standard Bearer*, which currently has 2,097 subscribers worldwide, continues to explain and defend Reformed doctrine as well as to promote the Reformed life of the church and believer.

All the articles are made possible by a staff of forty writers and three editors who each contribute to the various rubrics that are a part of each issue. We extend our thanks to these men and women for their time and effort put into the work of writing in the various issues and want to encourage them in their labors in the upcoming year. Quality writing is characterized by careful meditation and diligent study. It is obvious to any reader of the *Standard Bearer* that the author of each article displays these traits in his or her writing. We are also grateful to Professors Barry Gritters and Brian Huizinga, as well as Reverend Josh Engelsma for their editing labors of the magazine in the past year. Also, a special note of thanks is due to Professor Gritters who, after 20 years as co-editor of the *Standard Bearer*, is stepping down. We are grateful for his labors on behalf of the magazine over the past twenty years. Replacing him will be Professor Cory Griess. We take this opportunity to welcome Professor Griess. We pray for these men and encourage them in their well-doing as the *Standard Bearer* began Volume 101 in October.

Our children's periodical, *Ignited by the Word*, has recently entered its fifth year of publication. *Ignited by the Word* staff is comprised of three editors, one copy editor, eleven rubric writers and our new

designer, Brianna Gunnink. Through God's strength, the whole staff works very hard to gather and write material for the four quarterly issues that are sent to over 800 subscribers. A hearty thanks to our writers, designer, and to David Harbach, the editor-in-chief, as he continues to lead the magazine. *Ignited by the Word* is a tremendous blessing to God's children around the world in families and orphanages being raised in the fear of God's name.

Many of you are also aware of the timely material available on our blog. We hope you continue to read the weekly content as well as share the links to articles with family, friends, and other contacts who may be interested. Engaging blog material includes book reviews, interviews, doctrinal topics, podcasts, and more. There are many names that could be mentioned here, but at the risk of forgetting someone, we thank all those who contributed to our blog in the past year.

Our five current staff members are each involved in and oversee the day-to-day work of the organization. This work includes continual correspondence with authors and illustrators of books at different stages of the publishing process; reading manuscript samples of potential books; working on the production and marketing of upcoming books; attending Board committee meetings; traveling to conferences to promote the RFPA; producing invoices for new books, the *Standard Bearer*, and *Ignited by the Word*; keeping careful records of customers' leveled memberships, and many other important behind-the-scenes activities. As Association members, most of us are not aware of the work the staff does each day, but all of their work assists in one way or another toward fulfilling our mission and purpose. We are very grateful for staff members who work diligently and also work together well. Please pray for them as they continue this valuable work in the year ahead, and if you are in the Jenison area, feel free to stop in at the office and pay them a visit.

The RFPA Board, which consists of twelve members, does the bulk of its work through three subcommittees. The Books and *Standard Bearer* Committee is chiefly responsible for acquiring book content and overseeing book production. This committee works with authors and sets the course for new book releases. This B&SB Committee also communicates with the *Standard Bearer* editors to maintain a good working relationship between the editorial committee and the RFPA Board.

The Membership and Marketing Committee works to promote the RFPA and its writings, as well as oversees sales and advertising. The Finance and Operations/Children's Books Committee is responsible for the finances of the RFPA and also monitors the state of the RFPA building's physical structure and its office equipment. This committee is also responsible for acquiring content for children's books, as well as managing production of the books. The current Board is extremely thankful for the unity that we have had over the last several years and continue to have as we work together at both the Board and committee levels. This unity is very evident at each of the monthly meetings. This year's outgoing Board members are Terry Dykstra, Rick Gritters, Leon Kamps, and Jon Rutgers. Thanks to these men for their interest in the work of the RFPA as well as for their time and involvement at both the committee and Board level. God has given each of these men different abilities and these talents were very evident from month to month in our labors together.

Finally, we ask that you as members or supporters of the Association bring our needs to God in prayer. We truly long for your prayers because we understand that God gives His grace and Holy Spirit to those who desire them and are thankful for them. Please pray for the RFPA staff and Board in our work. Pray as well for our many authors, that God will give each one a clear mind, as well as an attitude motivated by God's glory instead of their own recognition. Give thanks also to God in prayer for what He has allowed us to have as an Association for the past 100 years. Pray that He will continue to give us the earthly ability and means to accomplish our purpose and mission: to glorify God by making accessible to the broadest possible audience material that testifies to the truth of Scripture as understood and developed in the Reformed tradition.

In Christ's name,
RFPA Board Retiring Secretary,
Rick Gritters

ANNOUNCEMENTS

RESOLUTION OF SYMPATHY

The Council and congregation of Doon PRC express our Christian sympathies to Floyd and Mary VanDenTop and Jeanette VanEngen in the death of their brother and son-in-law, **Dennis Burgers**. "In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also" (John 14: 2, 3).

Rev. Daniel Kleyn, President
Perry Van Egdom, Clerk

RESOLUTION OF SYMPATHY

The Council and congregation of Loveland PRC of Loveland, Colorado expresses Christian sympathy to Jordan and Chandra Kamps in the death of Jordan's grandmother, **Truda Jonker**, who was taken to her heavenly home on September 25, 2024. May we all find comfort from John 16:22: "And ye now therefore have sorrow: but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you."

Vice President, Robert Brands
Clerk, Joel Moore

RESOLUTION OF SYMPATHY

The Council and congregation of Loveland PRC of Loveland, Colorado expresses Christian sympathy to Pastor Steven and Nancy Key in the death of Pastor Key's mother, **Florence Key**, who was taken to her heavenly home on September 25, 2024. May we all find comfort from 1 Corinthians 15:52: "In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed."

Vice President, Robert Brands
Clerk, Joel Moore

CLASSIS EAST

Classis East will meet in regular session on Wednesday, January 8, 2025 at 8:00 A.M. in the Zion PRC, Jenison, Michigan. Material for this session must be in the hands of the stated clerk no later than December 9, 2024.

Rev. Clayton Spronk, stated clerk

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FOR BY GRACE ARE YE SAVED

REV. WILBUR BRUINSMA

The Blessings of Emmanuel's Reign (1-4)

- 12/1 1-The Desert Shall Bloom as the Rose, Is. 35:1, 2
12/8 2-Then Shall a Lame Man Leap as a Hart, Is. 35:3-6
12/15 3-The Mirage Is Become a Pool of Water, Is. 35:6, 7
12/22 Great Joy Brought to You, Luke 2:10, 11
12/29 4-A Highway Through the Desert, Is. 35:8-10



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