

THE STANDARD BEARER

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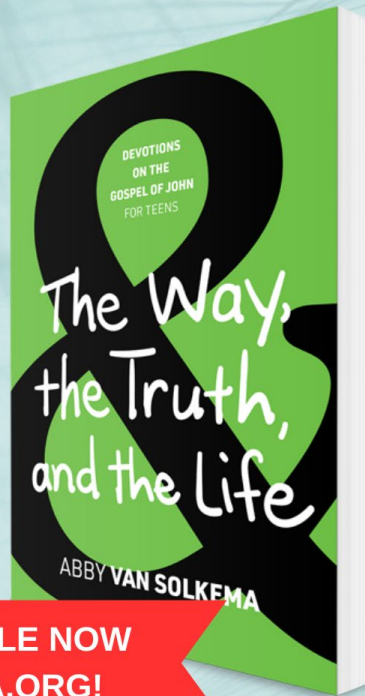
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THE DESPERATE NEED FOR DIVINE STRENGTH

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For they all made us afraid, saying, Their hands shall be weakened from the work, that it be not done. Now therefore, O God, strengthen my hands—Nehemiah 6:9

The troubles would not cease for God's servant Nehemiah. Whenever one problem would be resolved, another would arise. After having confronted a terrible sin within the congregation and having seen the power of God's grace work repentance, Nehemiah continued leading the people of God in the building of the walls of Jerusalem, only to find renewed opposition from the familiar enemies Sanballat and Tobiah, but also attempts from within once again to weaken Nehemiah's resolve and influence. Nehemiah was running himself ragged from one problem to another.

Although sometimes weary in his labors, he pressed on for the love of God and His people. He pressed on only by being sustained and strengthened by God Himself. What we read in Nehemiah 6 demonstrates Nehemiah's desperate need for divine strength.

THE EVIL PLOTS FACED

The unrelenting attempt of Satan to undermine the work and to weaken Nehemiah's leadership came in the form of four evil plots that followed one after another.

First, we are told of a plot to draw Nehemiah outside Jerusalem, presumably to kill him. The work on the walls was almost complete. The one aspect of the work that remained was the hanging of the doors in the great gates of the city. The enemies of Judah were left with but a very brief period of time in which to frustrate the cause and perhaps prevent the completion of the project.

Sanballat and Geshem sent to Nehemiah, saying, "Come, let us meet together in one of the villages in the plain of Ono." Their proposed reason for this meeting as

presented to Nehemiah is not given us, but the proposal had to be one that might have enticed Nehemiah to accept the invitation, perhaps the proposal of peace and "let's be friends." If an enemy of God were to say to you, "Let's be friends," what would be among your initial thoughts? Who wants to be known as rejecting people? Who wants to be portrayed as one who has no desire to get along with others? Again, Satan has a ready entrance into our minds, and would influence our thoughts in such a way as to draw us into fellowship with the ungodly.

Nehemiah discerned an evil motivation in the invitation of Sanballat and Geshem. "They thought to do me mischief" (v. 2). Given the history of opposition and threats from Sanballat and his cohorts, Nehemiah was wise to recognize their evil intentions. He knew that the murderous nature of men is not changed except by true repentance and conversion. Nehemiah, however, responded in a way that did not expose his awareness of their intentions. He avoided language that would inflame the madness that was in their hearts, but simply "sent messengers unto them, saying, I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down: why should the work cease, whilst I leave it, and come down to you?" (v. 3). In other words, he told them what his priorities involved.

Think about that. You realize how many distractions Satan throws at us in his attempts to get us to take our minds off Christ and His cause. You realize, too, how quickly we succumb to those distractions. What are your priorities? Nehemiah, with his eyes fixed upon the promised Messiah, and what God's cause in Jerusalem represented, had a priority from which nothing might be allowed to distract him. He termed it *a great work*, because it was God's. When you understand the riches of the gospel and the privileged calling God gives us to

serve Him as members of His redeemed family, then you understand that you also are involved in a great work, a work in which God's grace is magnified in every aspect of the work.

Even though Sanballat and Geshem persisted four times in the attempt to draw Nehemiah away from his spiritual focus, each time Nehemiah answered them the same way. It did not take provocative words on Nehemiah's part to make the enemy angry with him. They hated him because they hated God and God's cause. When Nehemiah refused to respond as they had intended but instead made clear his faithfulness to the cause of Jehovah, the enemies turned to another plot.

The second plot was an evil attempt to slander Nehemiah, to make him afraid of what people might think and to cause the people to leave Nehemiah and the work to which God had called them. Sanballat's servant came to Nehemiah a fifth time with an open letter in his hand, a letter of accusation against the Jews and Nehemiah in particular, accusing them of preparing a rebellion against the Persian empire. Notable too that the servant came not with a letter in a sealed envelope, but with a letter open in his hand. In other words, during the journey from Sanballat, this letter had been shown to others, with the intent that its message be spread far and wide, especially among the Jews who lived outside the walls of Jerusalem. The letter said, "It is reported among the heathen, and Gashmu (that is, Geshem) saith it, that thou and the Jews think to rebel: for which cause thou buildest the wall, that thou mayest be their king, according to these words. And thou hast also appointed prophets to preach of thee at Jerusalem, saying, There is a king in Judah! And now shall it be reported to the king according to these words" (v. 6). So the letter refers to a report circulating among the heathen by unnamed sources—is that not how these rumors go? But it has been affirmed by Geshem. How does it go today? Oh, yes, the famed reporter of the *Washington Post* affirmed the report by these unnamed sources.

Let's understand the effect this might have had upon the people of Judah. For one thing, it would serve to raise suspicion concerning the true motive of their governor Nehemiah. Was he just using them to put himself in a position of assuming the throne? And how would the king respond to the report that his former cupbearer, whom he had appointed to the temporary

position of governor in Judah, now is planning an uprising? Clearly, if he believed those reports, he would send his soldiers to remove Nehemiah for treason, but also to crush the Jewish people! Nehemiah's conscience was clear concerning this charge the letter alleged against him. But how would this report affect his relationship to the people?

Sometimes we are so worried about what other people think of us, that we lose sight of what is important. Nehemiah was not beyond being moved by this report. He himself was afraid of what could come from a report like this. But in his weakness Nehemiah did not merely try to respond in his own strength. He prayed. "Now therefore, O God, strengthen my hands." When our perspective is clouded by the trials that we face, when we are confronted by slander, when our minds are drawn away from the great work to which God has called us and toward what people think of us, what we must do is to pray that God would strengthen our hands.

Again, Nehemiah had a clear conscience when it came to these evil rumors. He responded appropriately. "Then I sent unto him, saying, There are no such things done as thou sayest, but thou feignest them out of thine own heart" (v. 8). But Nehemiah's calling was not only to respond with a proper denial of the allegations lodged against him. It was to press on in the work to which God called him and to lead the people in that great calling. "Now therefore, O God, strengthen my hands." Nehemiah believed, too, that God would vindicate Him, and prayed that God would give Him strength to ignore the innuendo and to continue faithfully in the labors to which God called him. And so he did.

As the second plot failed, the enemies came up with a third evil plot, an attempt to trick Nehemiah into committing an indiscretion that would discredit him in the eyes of the people of God. Here you see the tremendous influence of Satan among those who oppose God's cause and the kingdom of Christ, even within the church. Nehemiah, in need of being strengthened spiritually, went to the priest Shemaiah. Tobiah, as is confirmed in the closing verses of this chapter, had several allies within the city, those who did not hesitate to betray the cause of God. Among them, unknown to Nehemiah when he first came to him, was this priest Shemaiah.

Shemaiah presented himself as having received a

revelation from God. There would be an attempt upon Nehemiah's life that night. Nehemiah, said Shemaiah, was to meet Shemaiah at the temple. Together they would close themselves within the house of God to hide. Nehemiah immediately discerned something wrong. He saw that Shemaiah had sold himself to the enemy. Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him to do evil to Nehemiah and the cause that Nehemiah represented. Moreover, Shemaiah was not in this alone. He was joined in this plot by some of the prophets and a prophetess named Noadiah (v. 14). There were several church leaders who, while claiming to represent the cause of God and of the coming Messiah, in fact were using their office for personal gain.

Seeing the unfaithfulness of the priest, Nehemiah answered with resolve. "Should such a man as I flee? And who is there, that, being as I am, would go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in" (v. 11). God had called Nehemiah to his office. If indeed there was to be an attempt upon his life, he would be watching for it; but the threat would not prevent him from doing the work and exercising the leadership to which God called him. So while Nehemiah would not take unnecessary risks or endanger himself foolishly, neither would he forsake his calling. Jehovah, the Deliverer of His people, would fulfill His promise. Nehemiah discerned the present in the light of life everlasting. And shall we not do the same?

The fourth plot was an attempt to infiltrate the city and disrupt the cause of God by using insiders to leak information and cause Nehemiah himself to be hampered in his leadership by becoming hyper-suspicious of his fellow church members. There were those in the church, as there are today, who betray any love for God and His Christ by their fellowship with those who oppose God's cause. All along Tobiah, especially through his daughter-in-law, that apostate daughter of the faithful Meshullum, was building a network within the camp of Judah, that he might learn Nehemiah's plans, what actions were being taken, and how best to overthrow the work. We read in verse 18 of this chapter that there were many in Judah sworn unto Tobiah. They would take Tobiah's side in the presence of Nehemiah and present Tobiah in a favorable light. All the while they were betraying the cause to Tobiah, telling him everything that Nehemiah was saying and doing.

Now you realize—for many of you have experienced it—that when there are those who betray the truth for the lie, that has an effect, does it not? If we are not careful, we begin to look at others with suspicion. We tend to draw back from building new relationships, from showing hospitality, perhaps even from extending our welcome to visitors or those members we do not know very well—because we do not want to get hurt. But when we do that, we weaken the cause. The congregation is not as strong as it should be, the congregational family tie is not what it ought to be, and consequently the cause of the gospel is not portrayed in the power that it ought to be in our own lives and in the life of the congregation. Imagine how all these trials might have affected Nehemiah. He might have reacted like Elijah had in his weakness: "Lord, I alone am left!" But Nehemiah stood strong in the faith. The strength was not his own. It was not a natural courage. Remember, he expressed his fear and went to God for his strength. "O God, strengthen my hands." God answered his prayer and did not let Nehemiah stumble in his leadership role or lose sight of the fact that he labored with God's people, even though not all are Israel which are of Israel (Rom. 9:6).

THE NECESSARY RESPONSE

The necessary response to all four of these plots was born out of a continued focus on God's promise and cause. Nehemiah knew the cause was God's. He knew that he was unable to perform the labors of his office and calling in his own strength. Daily he called upon God. He lived in the hope of the promise God had given. He called upon God in the confidence that what God has spoken He most certainly maintains in faithfulness. Not only was Nehemiah strengthened in his response by his relationship to God as expressed in his prayer life, but he also saw the wonder work of God's grace concretely expressed amidst all the struggles and sorrows of the labors to which God had called him. The work was God's.

So today, the work is God's work. Our salvation and the building of the church is God's work. In the face of our discouragements, let's remember this, shall we? The way is not easy, is it? But the strength for our labors on behalf of God's church is to see the work of God in Christ Jesus. The church is His. Your life is His. The sanctifying work of His grace evident in you is His

work. And as we read in Philippians 1:6, “he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.” The sight of that truth strengthened Nehemiah and produced in him the response of faith.

THE DIVINE DEFENSE OF THE CAUSE

The divine defense of the cause was also evident, as it comes to expression in verses 15 and 16: “So the wall was finished in the twenty and fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty and two days. And it came to pass, that when all our enemies heard thereof, and all the heathen that were about us saw these things, they were much cast down in their own eyes: for they perceived that this work was wrought of our God.”

Even the ungodly had to realize the futility of their opposition to God’s cause. Satan’s is a defeated kingdom. His attacks are fierce, because His hatred of God and His Christ is an intense hatred. The Devil is a master at deceit and manipulation.

But to you who stand with your eyes fixed upon the promises of God, upon the Savior to whom everything about Jerusalem pointed, your Defender is the One who has crushed the head of the serpent. Live in that consciousness. The cause is God’s. He has shown Himself faithful, defending and building His church, for the coming of the great day of Jesus Christ. He is our Rock and our Redeemer.

EDITORIAL



PUBLIC SINS

PROF. CORY GRIESS

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INTRODUCTION

On December 10, 2024, WOOD TV 8 in Grand Rapids aired a three-part special report on sexual abuse in the PRCA under the title, “Private Sins.” For anyone who has not seen the report, you can find it here: <https://www.woodtv.com/news/target-8/private-sin-how-a-church-protected-child-molesters/>. The report further publicizes a number of high-profile cases of sexual abuse in the PRCA, also giving public voice to a number of people who experienced that abuse.

Who can fault the news station for this report? Although I will be critical of an inaccuracy, a false impression, and omissions in the news report, we ought not bear ill-will to WOOD TV or to the investigative reporter for the special report in and of itself. This is the job of an independent news media.

Regarding the title, “Private Sins,” there certainly was a time when PRC officebearers, along with many of the same in other denominations, thought hiding cases of sexual abuse was the right thing to do. Generally speaking, in God’s mercy, and through His use of the

work of many, it appears the time when that was the case has passed in the PRC. Without denying that there is more to discuss and learn, the official evidence is abundant that the PRC as represented by her assemblies (I cannot determine the desire of every individual) sees that sexual abuse cases ought to be handled *publicly*. This for the sake of protecting the flock of God and for the hoped deliverance of the abuser from his or her eternal ruin.

PUBLIC SINS, NOT PRIVATE

The evidence that it is the PRC’s conviction that sexual abuse cases ought to be handled publicly is in the news report itself, although you have to listen (or read) carefully to find it. Though the impression is left that this news report has uncovered things currently held in darkness, the fact is that there is nothing reported by the investigator that the PRC has not either already directly exposed concerning herself, or indirectly hired others to expose concerning herself. Without the public results of the PRC’s own investigation of these

cases, the reporter would not have much of a news report.

Specifically, the investigator makes use of a report Southwest PRC produced and publicly distributed as the result of her own investigation into the mishandling of a case in her past. He also builds his newscast from a document produced by Crete PRC publicly exposing a former elder who sexually abused many. Finally, when the exposé says, “A recently released report obtained by Target 8 found dozens of cases of child sexual abuse within the Protestant Reformed Church,” that “recently released report” is the Guidepost report that the PRC herself commissioned and publicly released!

The investigative journalist did attend the 2024 public meeting of the PRCA Synod, which he has every right to do. However, he mistakenly stated regarding the Guidepost report the PRC commissioned at Synod 2023 that the PRC at Synod 2024 reversed course, “deciding in a close vote to denounce the report.” This is inaccurate. Synod 2024 did reverse course regarding its hiring of a *secular* organization to conduct an investigation, but it did not “denounce the report.” Instead, Synod made the decision, “to send one hard copy [of the report] to every consistory in the denomination and to instruct the consistories to make the report available to the members” (*PRCA Acts of Synod 2024*, p. 124, D.3.).

The newscast also did not mention the multitude of things the PRC has done to address the issue of sexual abuse in her midst and to grow in attempting to prevent sexual abuse cases as well as to handle them properly if they occur. This is not fair and thorough reporting. There is evidence of bias here. The PRCA may have more growing to do, but it is not the case that the PRC has learned nothing and is still calling these matters “Private Sins.”

FACING THE REALITY

Pointing out an inaccuracy in the report, a wrong impression, and the report’s omissions does not bankrupt the reporter’s further publicizing these cases and our failures with them. Neither should PRC members whisk away the news report because of them. The majority of it is factual. And regardless of the origin of the uncovering of many of the facts, the facts are just that, facts. Which means that for all that the news

report is, it is also terribly painful to watch or read. We have failed some of God’s sheep miserably, and that fact has been broadcast to the world. Many have been hurt in a way that the rest of us cannot comprehend. When I even attempt to comprehend the effect of this evil upon a person (especially when someone who has experienced this evil helps me), it calls to mind the state of the Levite’s concubine after being abused¹ by the base fellows of Gibeah in Judges 19: objectified, used, neglected, and cut up into pieces. As in her case, this evil is performed in the sphere of the covenant of God, making any shepherd of the sheep cry with Jeremiah, “Mine eye affecteth mine heart because of the daughters [and sons] of my city (Lam. 3:51).”²

And how can God’s people as a whole not react the same way Israel reacted when one of the twelve pieces of the Levite’s concubine appeared in the city center of each of the twelve tribes so that all Israel would know what happened: “And it was so, that all that saw it said, there was no such deed done nor seen from the day that the children of Israel came up out of the land of Egypt unto this day: consider of it, take advice, and speak your minds.” And who does not desire that the next step be taken as they took it, knowing that speaking was not enough, rallying to exercise church discipline upon those who “committed lewdness and folly” (v. 6), to “put away [the] evil from Israel (v. 13).”³

EXPOSURE

Jehovah God makes it His business to expose sin that ought not be covered up. Certainly, He will in the

1 The KJV rightly translates the Hebrew word *ālāl* as “abused” in Judges 19:25. The *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (R. Laird Harris, ed. Moody, 1980, vol. 2, p. 671) says, “This word speaks of relationships. It is used to indicate the exercise of power over another person, generally in a bad sense.... This word is used to depict the exploitation of one person by another.” Then it gives as an example, “The concubine of the Levite was sexually abused by the men of Gibeah (Judges 19:25).” Another Hebrew dictionary gives “(sexual) abuse” as one of the legitimate definitions of the word. Though it must be defined, this means, yes, “abuse” is a biblical term.

2 Where the Hebrew word for “affecteth” is the same word in Judges 19:25 translated “abused.” Obviously, a different connotation, but striking nonetheless.

3 In spite of the mixed motives, vengeance, and God’s dealings with them that follows, this was the desire.

end. First Corinthians 4:5 says, Jesus Himself will, “bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts.” Very often, though, the Lord Christ exposes it *now* in this life, and before the eyes of many. Numbers 32:23 says, “be sure your sin will find you out.” The thought that, like some kind of reverse game of hide and seek, we can hide our sin in a closet and it will not find us, is foolishness. It will come back to us and testify that we are its origin. Sometimes God in His providence will use others in the kingdom to expose our sins. God used Nathan to expose David’s sin of adultery, Paul to expose Peter’s sin of racism in the church, and Peter to expose Ananias and Saphira’s lies against the Holy Spirit. Other times He will use those outside the kingdom to expose sins in the church, as He did with Israel at the time of the captivity, exposing to all the world the idolatry that had long festered among His people.

How imperative, says Matthew Henry, that “*we* find our sins out, that we may repent of them and forsake them, lest our sins find us out to our ruin and confusion.”

EXPOSURE, A MERCY

God’s exposing work in this life is good.

In this instance, God may use the further exposure of these cases in the PRC to prevent others in the general public from being manipulated by the abusers—or the news report may even be used as one means among others to break the hard heart of an abuser. In addition, the further exposure may bring some sense of justice to one who has experienced abuse. And the exposure will (not “might”) be used of God to further humble you and me as we come to the cross on bended knee.

This is a mercy to a church body that has harbored unconfessed sin, even if unbeknownst to most. If it is true of the individual, that “He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh *them* shall have mercy” (Prov. 28:13), then it is true of the body corporately as well. Would anyone want these sins to remain hidden?! Just as there is a mercy in being able to vomit when one is sick, there is mercy in the opportunity to spew the sin out in acknowledgment and repentance and proper dealing with it that brings not only relief but healing. “O my God, incline thine ear, and hear; open thine eyes, and behold our

desolations, and the city which is called by thy name: for we do not present our supplications before thee for our righteousnesses, but for thy great mercies. O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive” (Dan. 9:18-19).

And then,

And now, Lord, what wait I for? my hope is in thee. Deliver me from all my transgressions: make me not the reproach of the foolish. I was dumb, I opened not my mouth; because thou didst it. Remove thy stroke away from me: I am consumed by the blow of thine hand. When thou with rebukes dost correct man for iniquity, thou makest his beauty to consume away like a moth: surely every man is vanity. Hear my prayer, O LORD, and give ear unto my cry; hold not thy peace at my tears: for I am a stranger with thee, and a sojourner, as all my fathers were. O spare me, that I may recover strength, before I go hence, and be no more (Ps. 39:7-13).

Exposure also allows the church to apologize to the hurting. I know this has happened in multiple cases and at various levels—school boards, consistories, even synod, in public and private apologies. This is a gift to be able sincerely to do this, whether or not the apology is always received well. Thus we take the opportunity here also to address those sexually abused by former leaders in our denomination; we are sorry. You experienced this on our watch and in our house. From a human point of view, it never should have happened. And when it did happen, we should have handled it very differently. We bear responsibility for failures in this regard, and we are sorry for the price you have paid for our failures. We know that apologies do not right the wrong, nor take away the pain and consequences of our failures, but they are sincere.

May it be that God’s exposure is a mercy also because it leads to what Bonhoeffer called, “the fellowship of sinners.” This is a fellowship found in knowledge of sin, confession, repentance, and the knowledge of a great and undeserved grace. Without this, says Bonhoeffer, there can tend to be a fellowship found in pretended righteousness. In exposure and repentance there can be fellowship in confession of one’s own unrighteousness and fervent gazing upon the sturdy righteousness of Another.

GATHER

In the end, that Other is the only place we can meet together. Whether abused, abusers who demonstrate genuine repentance, those who have failed in their

responsibilities, and all who are corporately responsible. There is too much pain, hurt, guilt, and shame to be able to meet anywhere else. Only in Him is help for all who rightly come, whatever they carry. Only in Him is the supernatural power of grace, the only power in all the universe that can heal the brokenhearted, deliver the captive, open the eyes of the blind, break the

petrified heart, and release the burden of sin or wounds. This is the Christ, who was torn in a way even more unfathomable, that the twelve tribes might be healed.

He is no excuse, beloved.

And He is no platitude.

He is hope.

SPECIAL NOTE FROM THE EDITOR



PRCA100

A ONCE-IN-A-LIFETIME EVENT

B. Huizinga

We are now only three months away from the centennial celebration of the PRCA to be held on the campus of Calvin University, June 2-6, in commemoration of God's covenant faithfulness. You have seen advertisements from the PRCA100 committee online and in print. Committee members continue to pour themselves into this anniversary celebration and have labored admirably in preparing to make this week as delightful as possible.

It is important to know, as the website details very clearly, you *must register* to participate. No registration is required to attend any of the three evening speeches or the Night of Music, but all other daily activities require registration so that the committee and host can make necessary preparations for food, supplies, staffing, and events like sectionals, games, and tours. At the 75th anniversary in 2000 you and your family could simply show up for the day and participate, but it will not work that way for the 100th. You must register online. The registration options include a "lodging package" for those who wish to stay on campus all week, or an "activities package" for those who only wish to participate in daily activities. Travel subsidies are available for anyone coming out of state or country.

There is still time to register, as the committee has extended the deadline to March 21!

If you remain undecided about staying on site all week, I encourage you to go for the full experience. If you have ever attended a Young People's Convention, Young Adults' Retreat, British Reformed Fellowship Conference, or the like, then you know that often some of the best memories and connections are made during impromptu games, heart-to-heart discussions, and singalongs that happen outside of and even well after the day's regularly scheduled events. For some early risers, the best bonding happens over a cup of coffee or a workout or a walk before breakfast. Maybe it goes something like that at a Seniors' Retreat also, I do not know.

The 100th has the makings and anticipation of a huge YP Convention, with all the daily spiritual and recreational events we typically plan for our youth, only this event is for *all* ages from little ones to the elderly. And it promises to be far more enriching, since God works through our life experiences to bring us adults to a maturity far beyond what we possessed as teenage conventioners.

The occasion, however, is different. This is our *centennial*. Centennials are rare. A church or school centennial is always a celebration of the amazing grace of God, and it is no different for the PRCA. By the grace of God we are what we are.

Grace means that we are an unworthy object of God's blessings. Throughout our denomination, within each congregation in the USA and Canada, and in our own lives personally we have more blessings in Christ than we could ever number—covenant blessings we share with sister churches and contacts throughout the world. For 100 years now, Christ Jesus has been pleased to dwell among us generationally in the PRCA and work salvation in us.

We do not deserve this. No congregation, consistory, or individual is without sin. Most notably, in the last few years we all feel the heavy shame of God's exposing of the great evil of sexual abuse in our midst, and that some of God's dear children, when disclosing their plight, were not given the mercy, aid, and protection becoming of Christ and His gospel. We are by no means a spotless bride, and if we think we are, measuring ourselves by ourselves, we are not wise (2 Cor. 10:12). If we take the Scripture's teaching of sin seriously—and we do—then we must confess that we deserve nothing but the condemnation and destruction of God. All of us.

We are gathering—not as one man, or one house, or one congregation, but as a denomination with an invitation to friends around the world—to celebrate the grace of God. No true church, or Christian, is defined by all her unsightly blemishes, but by the redeeming

grace of God that makes her His bride. Though we are unfaithful, God is faithful to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. For Jesus' sake, He brings us to see our errors, confess them, and cry for mercy. For by *grace* do we stand, not of works, lest anyone of us should assemble on the campus of Calvin University, June 2-6, and boast.

Grace not only indicates an unworthy object, but grace is also power—amazing, transforming power. By God's grace we love our churches, are thankful for our churches, and want to stand united in Christ's cause of truth and righteousness. By God's grace we want to be humble under the mighty hand of God and learn from the past and our faults. By God's grace we want to come together to encourage each other in these last and evil days to cherish more deeply the blessed gospel of Christ, walk more carefully in the way of holiness, love one another more purely in all our relationships, and witness more cheerfully to those who do not know the God of our salvation.

God has been with us for 100 years! Let us therefore jointly praise His holy name with thanksgiving, and everyone say in his heart and with the mouth, "Bless the LORD, O my soul!"

If you have not done so already, I encourage you to register for this once-in-a-lifetime event—you will not regret it.

GUEST ARTICLE



AN INTERVIEW WITH PROF. BARRY GRITTERS, FORMER SB EDITOR (2)

PROF. BRIAN HUIZINGA

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

This is the second installment of a two-part interview with Prof. Gritters. For the first half and an introduction to the interview, see the February 2025 issue.

8. Since you belonged to the first three-man team of editors, what have you seen as advantages and/or disadvantages in this change from a single editor?

I have thought about this quite a bit. I am very thankful for the privilege of serving as one of three editors. As many know, the *Standard Bearer* had single editors for its first approximately 80 years, and three co-editors for a little more than the past 20. Thankful as I am for those editors willing to work alone, I see much profit with having multiple editors. For one, very

few men have the capacity to do justice to a full-time pastorate or professorship and edit the magazine at the same time. It is good to share the work. For another, where one of us lacks in balance or perspective, his fellow editors can be a remedy. Finally, editorials are intended to give leadership to the churches. It is good that the readers get to hear the opinions and perspectives of more than one man.

9. What were some of the joys (or, your greatest joy) in serving as editor?

When I found the Lord blessing His people through the magazine, it made the burden of the work not only less burdensome, but a great joy. What can be better than doing a work that helps believers? Then, to work with fellow editors and other writers who had similar goals, and with brother Terpstra who always had a positive outlook in the work...well, that's joy.

10. What were some of the challenges (or, your greatest challenge) in serving as editor?

The full story of our greatest challenge—I judge it to be during the PRC's most recent schism—may be able to be told some day; today is probably too soon. I must say, though, that I am very grateful for especially two things during those tumultuous years. First, the RFPA Society membership came out in large numbers at one crucial meeting when there was an effort to turn the *SB* in a different direction. The society's vote was a clear mandate and sign of support for the editorial staff. This interview would not be taking place, and the *SB* would not be what it is today, had that society meeting gone differently. Second, that sad history brings up another reason I am thankful that we had three editors. No one man had to make those hard decisions of what to publish and what to refuse. One editor calling all the shots may have made matters simpler, because calling scores of meetings with the three editors took time and sapped our strength. But as I look back on those very unpleasant years, I thank God that faithful and trusted colleagues could assemble and make decisions together, prayerfully.

11. What were some of the factors you regularly considered in determining what to write for your editorials?

I always kept a master list of subjects I believed were

important. I never had to worry about what to write on because my list was always there. Instead, I had to look at the list to decide what I believed was *most* important for God's people in that month and year. Probably that is the best answer to your question. I did usually confine myself to fields of study I knew best and to what was of real interest to me; but mainly I had the people of God in view: what is important for them now? I think the longer I was editor, the more this controlled my choice of topics. Early in my time as editor, I often wrote about things I was studying: missions, liturgical questions, matters of church polity, about preaching and teaching catechism and training elders—which are all subjects I teach at the seminary. Even then, I wanted to write what I believed God's people should know and really needed. But in the past 10 years, the editorials were determined more by what was going on in the churches. So I wrote about forgiveness, about proper polemics, about threats to proper church discipline, about misunderstandings of Matthew 18, about the importance of being clear when we speak and charitable when we listen, and about biblical attitudes toward wayward covenant children. In at least nine editorials I addressed our heart-breaking schism—doctrinally, church politically and practically—and called us to humble submission to God's heavy hand of chastisement. My love for the churches more and more drove me to write, as directly as I dared, about the churches' present needs. "The church He loveth well," we sing of God's attitude; the older I become, the more the Lord puts that sentiment in my soul. O God, bless the churches!

12. Are there any of your editorials or series of editorials that you view as particularly significant? If so, what ones, and why?

I wrote about 150 editorials, but if the Lord would allow just two or three series of them to endure, I think I would ask for the warnings I gave to students entering Christian colleges, and the series giving caution about how properly to do polemics...and maybe a third. The first—the (sharp) pastoral warnings to college students (2010)—is even more important now than it was then. The view in many Christian colleges that God will build His kingdom through politics and social work more than by gospel preaching is widespread in Christian universities and is spiritually deadly. If

that view infects our youth, it will be the end of us as faithful Reformed churches. In our recent seminary conference on the doctrine of common grace (Fall 2024), I revisited that subject and have only increased in my desire to caution our youth about world renewal and transformationalism.

A second set of editorials—on a proper view of doing polemics (2012)—I wrote to address a weakness I saw in the PRCA which, thankfully, I believe is improving. Polemics is battling error, and that warfare must be done properly. To illustrate the importance of doing spiritual warfare properly, I recently had correspondence with a brother who wanted me to read what he considered to be a good article about a current error among Christians. He was right—the article was spot on, as to *content*—and I told him so. But I also said that the article’s approach and tone would probably accomplish very little except two undesirable things: it would inflame those who disagreed, and create smug pride and even hostility in those who liked what he wrote. *How* we handle the truth is as important as the truth we handle.

Third, the editorials I spent the most time developing addressed what I believe it means to be a Reformed church and Reformed Christians. Forty years ago, when I was first asked to write for the *SB* in “The Strength of Youth,” I envisioned a series of articles for young people about “what it means to be Protestant Reformed.” I asked a number of colleagues what they would emphasize, and over the years kept their responses and gathered my thoughts. In the midpoint of being an editor, I put these thoughts together in a series of about 15 articles (2015-16). I still call my catechism class for the oldest young people, “What It Means To Be Reformed.” I pray God will use our work to develop mature, young, Reformed Christians, to be faithful members of His church.

13. What about the *SB* would make you want to encourage someone to subscribe?

I believe that the healthier we are as Christians, the more we will love God’s church, and the *SB* is all about the church—the congregations and the denomination. To paraphrase an ancient church father, ‘If God is my father, the church is my mother,’ and we love our mothers. I want to know everything I can about my mother, hear her speak, learn about her friends, and be warned about

her enemies. The *SB* is one of the more important ways I can do that, to put my finger on her pulse, as it were.

Then, the writers write to help readers grow. Your ministers (and others) who write want to bless you and your children. There is something in it for everyone—current events, meditations from Bible passages, articles by moms for moms, and deeper theological studies. Some are easier reading for when my mind may be tired; some will be ‘heavier lifting,’ which we need if we want to get stronger. The *SB* is great Sunday afternoon reading, a good source for conversation topics after church on Sunday or in the coffee shop. We have lots of sources for good reading in our churches: *Perspectives* magazine from the schools; *Beacon Lights* for the young people; *Ignited by the Word* for all ages of children; and all the good books the RFPA publishes. And these are just what the PRCA community produces. What marvelous ways the Lord gives us to grow in grace and the knowledge of our Lord Jesus!

14. What would be your charge to all who write for the *SB*?

I already mentioned our responsibility of putting a great deal of work into each article. One standard I tried to hold myself to was to learn as much as I could for each article I wrote, that is, to do good research. I never wanted merely to write what I already knew because I knew I would be bored, and I thought the reader would also. Most of us do not have the natural gifts to write well without doing new research. If a writer will do new exegesis of Scripture, study an old good book, analyze newly written theology, or trace a topic historically, he is going to be excited about it and so will the readers. I think it is like preaching: in an emergency, a man may be able quickly to sketch notes for a sermon in an easy chair with a Bible open by his side (as I heard a minister did on a Sunday afternoon many years ago), but the minister will not grow much and the people will not likely be very excited about the gospel. But it is spiritually exhilarating to dig deeply for the first time into a text and mine the riches of God’s Word. God’s people sense it when that happens. Writing is like preaching in that way.

Another similarity between writing and preaching is that both require a good plan. In the press of the work, I have tried to write sermons before I laid out

a good plan, and it probably showed. Again, writing is like that. Finally, since writing in a theological magazine aims at building up readers spiritually, I want to pray much when I write, as I do preparing to preach. I think the readers and listeners can tell how much we have prayed over our work.

Oh, yes, one more: have your wife or someone else who will be frank with you read your article before you submit it to the editors.

15. What petitions could readers pray to God on behalf of the SB?

“Oh God of truth and right, our magazine has served our small denomination and others worldwide for many

years; allow it to continue to do so. It is a small magazine and serves a very small part of Thy church in the world, but we know not to despise the day of small things. The writers are all weak in themselves, but we believe that ‘weakest means fulfill thy will....’ And make the writers mighty by the Spirit of the mighty Lord Jesus. Raise up a strong band of writers who both love to write, love the churches throughout the world that the magazine serves, and are committed to bearing Christ’s standard. Lord Jesus, Word-become-flesh, create in us the desire to read good words, the ability to read discerningly, and the joy of growing in grace and knowledge. Bless Thy people, O God, through the SB!”

SEARCH THE SCRIPTURES



LUKE: JESUS THE SON OF MAN

REV. DANIEL KLEYN

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THE WRITER

The opening verses of this book, considered in connection with the opening verses of Acts, establish the fact that the Spirit used Luke to write this account of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. The two books of Luke and Acts are closely related. Both were addressed to the same man, Theophilus. Both manifest the same literary style. And the opening verses of Acts refer back directly to the opening verses of Luke. Since there is no question that Luke wrote the book of Acts, so it is beyond doubt that he also wrote the book of Luke. God used the same man to write both.

Luke was a medical doctor. In Colossians 4:14, Paul refers to him as “Luke, the beloved physician.” Luke’s understanding of medical matters is evident from some of the medical language he used. His descriptions of various sicknesses is more specific and precise than what is found in the other gospel accounts. He mentions, for example, a “great fever” (4:38), “palsy”

(5:18), “physicians” (8:43), an incurable disease (8:43), and the detail that “her issue of blood stanch’d” (8:44). He also includes such particulars as the age of one who died (8:42), and the length of time someone had been sick (13:11). And he records twenty of Jesus’ miracles of healing. Among other things, Luke’s medical knowledge demonstrates he was a well-educated man. This is also evident from his writing skills, as indicated both by his extensive vocabulary and his literary style.¹

It is believed that Luke was a Gentile convert. One indicator of this is that in Acts 1:19 he mentions what the field of blood in Jerusalem was called in “their” language (the language of the Jews), rather than in his own. Another possible indicator is that Paul mentions him separately from a list of those who were Jews (Col. 4:10-11, 14).

¹ Henry C. Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1954), 161.

As is evident from the passages in Acts where the pronoun “we” is used, Luke accompanied Paul on a number of his journeys. This began with Paul’s second missionary journey. Part way through that journey, Luke remained in Philippi. He joined Paul again when Paul returned to Philippi on his third missionary journey. Luke then accompanied Paul back to Jerusalem, and subsequently on Paul’s journey as a prisoner to Rome. He was with Paul during Paul’s first imprisonment. This was the case again during Paul’s second imprisonment, though this time he was the only one with him (2 Tim. 4:11). Luke was obviously a beloved friend and fellow laborer of the apostle Paul in the cause of the gospel.

THE OCCASION

The immediate occasion for the writing of this book was Luke’s desire to confirm Theophilus in the Christian faith. We do not know who Theophilus was, except that his name points to him being a Greek, and Luke’s address of him as “most excellent Theophilus” (1:3) points to him being a person of rank. Luke’s desire was that Theophilus might “know the certainty” of the things he had been taught (1:4). To that end, he wrote him “a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us” (1:1).

However, the book was not only intended for Theophilus; it “was simply addressed to him as the representative of a large circle of readers.”² Since Theophilus was a Greek, that circle of readers was most likely the same. It appears the book was written with a Greek audience in mind. This stands to reason if we also consider the fact that Luke accompanied Paul on his mission labors among the Gentiles. Luke’s account of the life and ministry of Christ was written, under the inspiration of the Spirit, especially for Greek converts, that they (with Theophilus) might be confirmed in the things they had been taught.

What strengthens this point is that many references are made throughout the book to the salvation of the Gentiles. This begins with the angel telling the shepherds of the good tidings of great joy that would be “to all people” (2:10). It is followed by

what Simeon said concerning the Christ child when he held Him in his arms and declared that He would be a “light to lighten the Gentiles” (2:32). We also note John the Baptist’s statement that “all flesh shall see the salvation of God” (3:6). A few other examples are the mention of various Gentiles who were saved during the Old Testament (4:25-27), the healing of the centurion’s servant (7:1-10), the healing and salvation of a Samaritan (17:11-19), and the record of the salvation of the centurion at the cross (23:47-48). Finally, there is the statement near the end of the book “that repentance and remission of sins should be preached...among all nations” (24:47).

SOME UNIQUE FEATURES

As regards some unique features in Luke, we note that Luke provides the most detailed account of Jesus’ birth and early life. He is also the only one who connects gospel events to contemporaneous events in world history (1:5, 2:1-3, 3:1-2). In distinction from Matthew who provides Jesus’ genealogy back to Abraham, Luke traces it all the way back to Adam. Luke refers many times to Jesus being in prayer (of 15 references in Scripture to Jesus praying, 11 are in Luke and 9 are unique to Luke). He records 23 parables, 18 of which are unique to Luke. He records 20 miracles, with 6 being unique to Luke.

Of special note (as we will see again shortly) is that the name “Son of Man” is prominent in Luke, occurring some 25 times. One gets the distinct impression from this that Jesus preferred to use this name in reference to Himself.

Perhaps most noteworthy is what the opening verses in Luke demonstrate concerning the doctrine of inspiration. Having mentioned that he had received knowledge of the things which Jesus did and taught from those who were eyewitnesses, Luke then points out that even though he was not himself an eyewitness, he had “perfect understanding of all things from the very first” (1:3).

This indicates that Luke wrote in the consciousness of being inspired. The Spirit had given him a “perfect understanding” of all things (literally an “understanding from above”). For this reason, those who would read his account of the life and ministry of Christ could be confident that what they read was

2 Louis Berkhof, *New Testament Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1915), 97.

true. The book could serve to confirm them in their faith exactly because he (Luke) was infallibly inspired to write what he did.

This highlights the wonder of inspiration. It does so for two reasons. First, because the Spirit used a man who was a Gentile convert. And secondly, because He used one who was not himself an eyewitness of Jesus Christ. This makes emphatic what was true of all whom God used in the writing of Scripture, namely, that they were holy men of God who, as regards every word they wrote, were moved by the Holy Spirit.

CANONICAL SIGNIFICANCE

A central truth in Luke is Jesus' humanity. The emphasis on this is immediately evident in the detailed account of His birth and early life. It is also evident from Jesus' genealogy being traced all the way back to Adam, showing that He was a son of Adam and thus fully human. But perhaps the most significant evidence is the prominence of the name *Son of Man*.

As Thiessen put it, "This is the gospel of the perfect humanity of Christ. Our Lord is seen as having the development, feelings, sympathies, and powers of a man."³

This truth, in connection with Luke's emphasis on the salvation of Gentiles, shows that the theme of Luke is as stated in chapter 19:10, namely, that "the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost." This theme is underscored and further developed by the three parables recorded in Luke 15, namely, the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost (prodigal) son.

Jesus Christ became a man with the purpose of seeking and saving the lost from all the nations of the world. He could do so by atoning for their sins as one who was both true God and true man. "The gospel of Luke presents to us Christ especially as one of the human race, the Seed of the woman, in his saving work not only for Israel, but also for the Gentiles."⁴

As regards that saving work of the Son of Man, the book of Luke records Jesus beginning this work: "all that Jesus began both to do and teach" (Acts 1:1), and the book of Acts records Jesus continuing this work. And He is still doing that work today. It is He who

seeks and finds the lost in the whole human race and gathers to Himself the church from all nations.

Luke's emphasis on Jesus as the Son of Man is also significant in another way for each believer personally. It means He is one of us. He is like us in all things, except sin. That He used this name (Son of Man) so frequently shows He identifies Himself with us. This serves our comfort. It shows that our Savior, having lived the earthly life we must live in a sin-cursed and fallen world, sympathizes with us in all our sufferings (Heb. 4:15).

OUTLINE OF CONTENT

The material in Luke is not organized chronologically. In many instances, it is arranged topically. This lack of chronological order is also evident from the number of indefinite expressions of time found throughout the book, such as: "And it came to pass, when he was in a certain city (5:12); "And it came to pass also on another sabbath" (6:6); "Now it came to pass on a certain day" (8:22); and, "Now it came to pass, as they went, that he entered into a certain village (10:38). For this reason, we can provide only a very general and brief outline of the contents of the book.⁵

- Luke 1:1 to 4:13—The Advent of the Son of Man.
- Luke 4:14 to 9:50—His Work mostly among Jews.
- Luke 9:51 to 18:30—His Work mostly among Gentiles.
- Luke 18:31 to 23:56—His Suffering and Death.
- Luke 24:1-53—His Resurrection and Exaltation.

3 *Introduction to the New Testament*, 160.

4 Berkhof, *New Testament Introduction*, 101.

5 For a more detailed outline of Luke, see Herman Hoeksema's *New Testament Introduction* (syllabus published by the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary), 8-9.



FIRE AND SNOW: CHARACTERS IN GOD'S BOOK(S)

REV. DAVID NOORMAN

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We know Him by two means: first, by the creation, preservation and government of the universe; which is before our eyes as a most elegant book, wherein all creatures, great and small, are as so many characters leading us to contemplate the invisible things of God, namely, His eternal power and divinity, as the apostle Paul saith (Rom. 1:20). All which things are sufficient to convince men, and leave them without excuse. Secondly, He makes Himself more clearly and fully known to us by His holy and divine Word, that is to say, as far as is necessary for us to know in this life, to His glory and our salvation—Belgic Confession, Article 2

God is known by means of two books: “the most elegant book” of His creation, and the book of His special revelation that we know as the Bible. These two books have one Author, and when rightly understood, they present one unified testimony for God’s glory and our edification. Early this year, in different parts of our country, God has made His power and divinity known to all (so that all are without excuse) through two very different creatures: fire and snow. For those illuminated by the Spirit, these works not only confirm what we know of our Almighty God, but they also remind us of some precious truths of the gospel.

WILDFIRES IN CALIFORNIA

“Fueled by powerful winds and dry conditions, a series of ferocious wildfires erupted on Jan. 7 and roared across the Los Angeles area, killing at least 29 people, including some who died trying to prevent the fires from engulfing their homes, and destroying thousands of structures.... A city official in Los Angeles described the night of January 7 as ‘one of the most devastating and terrifying’ that she had seen in her corner of the city.”¹

¹ <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/california-wildfires-what-we-know-palisades-eaton-los-angeles-rcna188239>.

As of January 29, several fires are still burning, though they are reported to be nearly contained. Evacuation orders have been lifted, and residents are now able to return to their homes and communities, or whatever is left of them.

The largest of these fires was the Palisades Fire, which covered 37 square miles and destroyed over 6,000 structures in one of the wealthiest areas in the country. Others, like the Eaton Fire² brought similar destruction, burning over 21 square miles and over 9,000 structures.³

Even more startling than the statistics are the images that spread as fast as the fires. Palm trees became fountains of embers. Residents were paralyzed by wind-driven flames. Anyone who saw the helicopters and planes dumping water and fire retardant has to acknowledge our vulnerability before such a massive blaze. Even more so when we have seen the neighborhoods that were reduced to ash and rubble.

These destructive fires occasion fear, sorrow, loss, and helplessness for many in the world. May God graciously lead us as believers to take notice of these fires through the spectacles of Scripture.

Fires like these reveal God’s wrath and anger, and inasmuch as they come upon the wicked, they are just temporal judgments. Terrible judgments! Yet these are just a shadow of the judgment that is to come, “in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up” (2 Pet. 3:10). “A fire goeth before him, and burneth up his enemies round about” (Ps. 97:3). “Let the wicked

[what-we-know-palisades-eaton-los-angeles-rcna188239](https://www.latimes.com/wildfires-map).

² <https://www.latimes.com/wildfires-map>.

³ <https://www.latimes.com/california/live/la-fire-updates-floods-mud-rain-closures-laguna-eaton-palisades>.

forsake his way...and let him return unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him..." (Is. 55:6-7).

The same earthly fires that He sends to judge the wicked also come upon His beloved redeemed people. But these brothers and sisters of ours have peace and comfort in the midst of pain, loss, and even death, because the Lord Jesus is with them and us, and He is a refuge from the fires of God's punishing wrath. "When thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee" (Is. 43:2). And when our God does come for His fiery judgment, "Zion heard, and was glad; and the daughters of Judah rejoiced because of thy judgments, O LORD" (Ps. 97:8).

The intense affliction brought by these fires remind us that the persecution of Christians is likened to enduring fire. "Beloved think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you" (1 Pet. 4:12). In our country, we are largely ignorant of the pain and pressure of persecution—so let us take notice—it shall be *fiery*. May God have mercy, strengthen us! May He preserve those who are being persecuted now, and prepare us for our own trials to come!

Rather than fearing creatures (like fire, or persecutors) that have power to kill the body, let us fear God, who has made the fires, and who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell (Matt. 10:28). He is a consuming fire! (Heb. 12:29). "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" (Nah. 1:6).

SNOW IN MICHIGAN...AND FLORIDA!

At the end of January in West Michigan, God sent His swift commandment, gave snow like wool, and cast forth His ice like morsels (Ps. 147:15-17). The snow kept falling and falling. Just when the end was in sight, another nine inches blanketed the area. The schools were canceled for four consecutive days, and all were given an opportunity to consider the "treasures of the snow" (Job 38:22). Even some Floridians were given the opportunity on the Gulf Coast! God made the white sand beaches even whiter, if only for a little while.

The cold temperatures were a marvel as well. I am sure our Michigan temperatures did not dive quite as low as some readers experienced in Iowa, Minnesota,

or Wisconsin. But still, who could stand before God's cold? (Not my kids, and not I.)

God created these creatures, and continues to uphold and govern them so that we are led to contemplate the invisible things of God. We should not miss the amazing power that God displays in sending these creatures. And whatever inconvenience or discomfort is brought with the snow and cold, we should not miss what is beautiful and edifying about these creatures.

Scripture references the whiteness of snow in a few ways. Miriam and Naaman, two lepers in the Old Testament, are both described as "white as snow" while still afflicted with leprosy. In these cases, the whiteness of snow is a deathly whiteness, emphasizing the severity of the corruption of the human flesh.

Daniel beheld the Ancient of Days wearing a garment that was "white as snow" (Dan. 7:9), and on the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus' "raiment became shining, exceeding white as snow; so as no fuller on earth can white them" (Mark 9:3). The snow that falls from heaven and sparkles under the sun is indeed a treasure, for it is a beautiful, earthly reflection of the holiness and glory of our Lord!

Finally, there is that most comforting characteristic of snow: its undefiled, unblemished, unstained purity. Snow is not only pure white on the surface, but in its very substance. Isaiah likens our sins to scarlet and crimson, but declares the Lord's promise that they shall be "white as snow." David understood his own spiritual defilement, even asking to be purged with hyssop (prescribed, among other things, for the cleansing of lepers). But, even as he asked for a divine washing, he was confident of God's merciful response: "Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow" (Ps. 51:7). What could be whiter than snow? That is an earthly impossibility. But, by the grace of God and through the blood and Spirit of Christ, we shall be granted a purity that is beyond our earthly experience and comprehension.

Perhaps we (in the Midwest) will be graced with some March (or April) snowstorms this year. Or maybe you will have an opportunity to go up to the mountains for some spring (or summer) snow. If so, do not neglect to consider snow's creaturely glory and purity, and give thanks for eyes to see how it reflects the treasures of God's grace.



IF MY BROTHER SIN...THE POTENT MEDICINE OF MATTHEW 18 (5)

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

The Lord has not blessed your first efforts to bring your brother to repentance. You went alone. You took witnesses. But no repentance. So now Jesus calls you to bring the matter to the church. That is, your calling is to report the impenitent sinner to the elders so that they can rescue him.

But before studying what Jesus means by “telling the church” (the next article) there are three matters that need explanation (in this article). Those three are:

- There are *exceptions* to the rule of Matthew 18. That is, not all sins ought to be treated with the specific procedure Jesus outlines in verses 15-18.
- For all *other* sins, Jesus *requires* us to walk according to this rule. That is, much as we may not *feel* like approaching our brother, Jesus commands it.
- When the Lord blesses our efforts, His striking explanation is: “You have *won* him.”

THERE ARE ‘EXCEPTIONS’ TO MATTHEW 18

Matthew 18’s call and process applies to most sins, but not to all of them. (It should be understood that we are speaking of sins that cannot be “covered by love,” but must be *confronted* by love.) Some sins do not allow

us to treat them as Jesus explains here but require a different treatment. So, by referring to *exceptions*, I do not mean that Matthew 18 may be put aside when we do not want to follow it, but that certain cases clearly *may* not be treated with the strict process of Matthew 18.

These cases fall into three categories: gross sins of officebearers; what might be called “dangerous” sins; and sins that require treatment by the magistrate.

Our Church Order (Art. 80) lists the gross sins that make an officebearer worthy of deposition, a deposition required even if he is penitent. The simplest sin that will illustrate this—although it is not the only sin—is adultery. If you know that an elder has committed adultery, you may not keep it to yourself and tell no one else, even if he is penitent. Perhaps there may be circumstances in which it would be wise and safe for you personally to call him to repentance; but whether you do or not, you are not allowed merely to hear his confession and be finished with it, leaving him in office. The sin requires that he be removed from eldership.

Second, the early Reformation churches judged that even common sense shows that one is required to report “very grievous and dangerous sins.” They decided, for example, that “someone who secretly...disseminates strange teachings shall be reported to the consistory” (1568), and that sins “such as treason or the seducing of souls shall be reported” (1571). One Church Order commentary explains that “sins that are not generally known shall not be revealed *unless the nature of the transgression should require such.*”

The third category of sin that does not allow the straightforward process of Matthew 18 in all its steps is a *criminal* offence. If you know that your brother is planning murder, for example, or has committed sexual

assault, or has robbed a bank, you are not permitted privately to confront him, hear his confession, and be finished. He must be reported to the authorities. It ought to be clear that Matthew 18's process does not apply to these criminal offenses. (I explained this at more length in my editorial of September 15, 2022, entitled "The Fatal Misuse of Matthew 18.")

MATTHEW 18 IS A REQUIREMENT

Matthew 18 is more than good advice; it is a requirement. Saying this seems to be stating the obvious. It sounds like saying that "Honor your parents" is a command and "Remember the sabbath day" is a command. But unlike these commands that we hear repeated every Sunday and that we would not dare dismiss, we might be tempted to relegate Matthew 18's command to the "nice-idea-but-not-demanded" category of Christian conduct. And we are tempted to put the command there, not because we think it is advice of mediocre importance, but because it is so painfully hard to carry out.

It is discipline after all, and no discipline for the moment is joyful, but painful. Since following Matthew 18 is exercising *discipline*, what the church has said about discipline's difficulty applies to our experience here. Discipline is a "*disagreeable* necessity." Its end is an "*extreme* remedy." The Form for Excommunication has the consistory admit to the congregation, "We cannot conceal from you the great sorrow we have...." This is how Paul described his own experience carrying out discipline: "much affliction...anguish of heart...many tears." Engaging in discipline, from beginning to end, is so odious and painful that we would rather do anything else.

Even before it actually becomes painful, we imagine the pain. What will be the consequences if I confront her for her drinking? Will our friendship be destroyed if I call my boyhood friend to turn from mistreating his wife? What will it do to our family if I talk to Dad about his sinful excuses for missing church? Or, what damage will she do to me when I inform her that I need to report her impenitence to the elders?

Maybe we *do* start well but just do not finish. We haltingly went alone but the meeting was so unexpectedly dreadful that we abort the process before taking witnesses. Maybe in a great exertion of effort we do take a witness but after another bad experience

conclude that we just cannot go to the elders. Or, very differently, we write an anonymous letter, imagining that this wicked means will be better than nothing at all.

But the worst alternative to obedience to Matthew 18 may be that we engage in private discipline—we cut him off by ourselves, counting him a heathen and publican on our own. That, too, is evil, because we have made ourselves the judge and jury without using any of the safeguards Jesus puts in place to keep this 'private discipline' from taking place: the check and balance of witnesses and the supervision of the elders. I am guessing that there is more improper 'private discipline' that takes place in the church than the proper discipline by elders. The precious body of Jesus is divided and the covenant of God is profaned because two unreconciled brothers sit together at holy communion as though all is well.

The end of this sad disobedience will be that the brother continues his drunken ways and perishes, or the sister's marriage ends to the ruin of her children, or dad's church attendance drops off completely and the family relations come to an end anyway. The church is corrupted, and God is displeased. Oh, is God displeased! Paul warns about God's displeasure in 1 Corinthians 11:30. If we knowingly allow the impenitent to the Lord's table, God judges with weakness, sickness, and even death. It is that serious. The prophet Ezekiel's warning to watchmen applies not only to elders, but to all of us: failure to warn brings the blood of those who perish on those who were silent. Which is why Calvin says that Leviticus 20 warns "connivers," that is, those who "hide their eyes from the man [who sinned]...and kill him not." God will indeed punish the sinner, but He will also "implicate all those who might have been aware of it in the same condemnation."

The marks of the true church are at issue here. When we examine ourselves to see whether our church displays the marks of the true church in *discipline*, we should look not only at the elders, but at ourselves. It is too easy to be complacent in our church life because we see that the elders are doing discipline. Jesus requires you and me to be active.

MATTHEW 18 SAYS "YOU HAVE GAINED" YOUR BROTHER

That warning was very negative, but this—you have

gained him—is very positive. When we walk the way of Matthew 18, we may well “gain” or “win” the sinner. The Bible describes it as “saving” him. That is as striking and hopeful as can be.

At our rebuke, the sinner comes to repentance: he confesses his sin, flees from it, and runs into the arms of the Lord. He is saved!

This language should not be surprising, because it is found in both Old Testament and New. “He that winneth souls is wise” (Prov. 11:30). The concluding words of James’ epistle are: “Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him; let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death” (5:19-20). Believers win souls, convert sinners, save souls from death. Theological care may incline us to avoid the Bible’s language here, and say, “Only God converts sinners, saves souls, and wins people to His son.” But God is so pleased to use us as tools in His hands that He uses language that ascribes to *us* what really is His own work. He even promises the woman, married to an unbelieving husband that her godly walk (“conversation”) may win her husband (1 Pet. 3:1).

So Calvin explains Jesus’ words in Matthew 18:

“It is also worthy of notice, that the Lord, in order to render us more zealous in performing our duty, ascribes to us that honor which is his own; for to him alone, and to no other, does it belong to convert a man; and yet he bestows on us this applause, though we did not deserve it, that we gain a brother who was lost.”

This should motivate us to do what we otherwise might avoid because of the pain. Jesus’ instruction in Matthew 18 is certainly a command. But often with commands Jesus promises blessing, and this blessing is marvelous! The brother may be won!

A popular bumper sticker around our town a few years ago simply said: “Love wins.” It was popularized by a heretical book of the same name. If the expression had not gotten such a bad name by the heresy behind the book, it would be a good aphorism to live by: The love of God, expressed through believers who care about their brothers who are falling, wins them.

Dad repents of his sabbath breaking; your sister turns from her drinking; my friend finds help for his mistreatment of his wife. They turn to the Lord and find in Him their hope and strength. Now we properly sit at the Lord’s table together, and the covenant of God is honored.

MINISTERING TO THE SAINTS



MEN, BE SOBER!

REV. DANIEL HOLSTEGE

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We pastors must speak “the things which become sound doctrine” to men and women of all ages in the church (Tit. 2:1-10). The things that become sound doctrine are the Christian virtues which ought to bloom in the hearts and lives of us who know the doctrine that Jesus Christ “gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works” (v. 14). The sound doctrine of

“the grace of God that bringeth salvation” teaches us that we ought to deny “ungodliness and worldly lusts” and “live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world” (vv. 11-12). In this article, I exhort Christian men to “live soberly.”

God calls Titus, me, and all pastors to teach, among other things, that “the aged men be sober, grave, and temperate” and that the younger men “be sober minded”

(vv. 2, 6). Who are we talking about here? The “aged men” are all of us men for whom the days of youth are now in the past. When we hear the word “aged,” we assume that must refer to the oldest category of men in the church who are over seventy, eighty, or ninety years old, who have wrinkled and trembling hands and hair that has turned white like the blossoming almond tree (Eccl. 12:3-5). Not true. The “aged men” include all of us who are able to say, “When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things” (1 Cor. 13:11). We are the full-grown men of the church in our thirties, forties, and up.

Brothers, are you sober? I assume you are sober at this particular moment since you are able to read this article. But are you always sober? What does it mean to be sober? You are a sober man if you do not get “drunk with wine, wherein is excess” but you are “filled with the Spirit” (Eph. 5:18). You are sober if you are, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the master of your cravings, able to restrain your desires, particularly for alcohol and other addictive substances. If you drink too much wine, beer, or liquor at once, you get drunk. If you do so as a habit in your life, you are a drunkard.

Do you enjoy drinking wine, beer, or liquor? There is nothing wrong with that, for “every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving” (1 Tim. 4:4). But how often do you desire and have a drink? How many drinks do you have in one night? Is one enough to satisfy you? What about two...three...four? Do you let yourself get a little drunk once in a while, say, on holidays, birthdays, weddings, anniversaries, or whenever you feel stressed, anxious, depressed, angry? Do you consider yourself sober nonetheless because most of the time you are not drunk?

As adult Christian men who are no longer boys or young men, I exhort you to be sober, grave, and temperate. You have been taught the sound doctrine that Christ loved you and gave Himself for you. You confess that you know and believe the grace of God that has brought salvation. You should not “need” to drink or smoke or use recreational drugs to cope with life or medicate the pain in your life. You should find the sweet grace of God in Christ sufficient to satisfy the hunger of your heart and to quench the thirst of your soul. You

should never get drunk or high, no matter what the occasion is. That kind of behavior does not become the sound and glorious doctrine that you say you believe. “All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any” (1 Cor. 6:12).

Are you temperate? Temperance is very similar to sobriety. You are temperate if you are—by the power of the Spirit of Christ—in control of your faculties, able to curb the desires of your flesh. If you cannot say no to the promptings of your stomach whenever you feel the desire to eat or drink, you lack temperance in that area of your life. You need to fight against the besetting sin of gluttony, serving the idol of food, whether you are overweight or not. There is nothing wrong with enjoying good food, for God causes “the grass to grow for the cattle, and herb for the service of man: that he may bring forth food out of the earth, and wine that maketh glad the heart of man” (Ps. 104:14-15). But “put a knife to thy throat, if thou be a man given to appetite” (Prov. 23:2). How much and how often do we really need to eat?

As mature Christian men who know the wholesome and nourishing doctrine of salvation in the cross of Christ, I exhort you to be temperate in how much and how often you eat. We do not need to stuff ourselves to the max every time we sit at the table. We do not need to eat whatever our watering mouths crave, as often as they crave it, and as much of it as they crave. We need to pray for our daily bread, receive it with thanksgiving, and eat a healthy amount of good food each day for the proper nourishment of our bodies. In our day of prosperity in the West, notwithstanding recent high food prices, most of us have an endless variety of food options and can afford to buy most of what we want. Therefore, it is imperative that we learn self-control and practice self-discipline. For it does not become the sound doctrine we confess for us older Christian men to be gluttons whose god is our belly (Phil. 3:19). All things in *moderation*.

Are you temperate in regard to sexual desire? If you cannot say no to the sexual urges of your body, you lack temperance in that area of your life. If you lust after other women day after day, secretly watch pornographic videos on your phone, and periodically act out on your lust, you are unchaste and intemperate.

The Heidelberg Catechism teaches us that we must live “chastely and temperately, whether in holy wedlock or in single life” (Lord’s Day 41). If you keep your eyes on your wife, but your sexual appetite is insatiable, and you use her as a means of satisfying it, you are not only failing to love your wife as Christ loves the church, but you are also serving another god—the god of carnal pleasure—in the place of Jehovah.

We older men of the church must be temperate, controlling our sexual desires, because that is our reasonable service. We are men who know the sound doctrine of Christ who gave Himself for us to redeem us from all our sins and to purify us unto Himself as a peculiar people, zealous of good works. There is nothing wrong with having sexual desire and fulfilling that desire with our wife. In fact, God gives us sexual desire precisely so that we will become one flesh with our wife as an expression of intimate love and as a means of bringing forth children. “Let thy fountain be blessed: and rejoice with the wife of thy youth” (Prov. 5:18). “It is good for a man not to touch a woman. Nevertheless, to avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband” (1 Cor. 7:1-2). “Marriage is honorable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge” (Heb. 13:4).

Therefore, brothers, if any is convicted in his heart that he is not living soberly and temperately but is stuck in a cycle of addiction, let him cast himself down at the cross of Calvary and beseech the Lord of mercy to forgive his sins for the sake of Christ’s death. Then let him get up, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, with his eyes on Jesus, let him do whatever it takes to break out of the cycle. “And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell. And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell” (Matt. 5:29-30).

That might mean, for some, that you enter a process of detoxification and purification that may take several years; you disclose your struggle to a trusted pastor, elder, or friend who has experience in overcoming or helping others overcome sinful habits

like the one you are in; you make yourself accountable and transparent and you submit to restrictions on your behavior.

The church today and in all ages needs sober men, temperate men. When the men of the church are ensnared in addictions, they are severely hindered if not incapacitated in their ability to be good and faithful servants in the kingdom of God. Satan knows this. He has been working for centuries. He knows that if he can knock a young man off the straight and narrow path during the stage of youthful lusts, if he can lure the young man into an addictive and destructive pattern of life, he might be able to put his hooks in his soul and drag him along for many decades.

As a pastor, I am called to exhort the young men too, those in their teens and twenties, that they be sober minded (Tit. 2:6). You young men who are reading this are at a point in your life when you are experiencing many highly stimulating things, partly because you are experiencing many things for the first time: driving a car, drinking a beer, the freedom to have your own cell phone, dating, marriage, buying your first home, having children. At this stage of life, you make decisions and establish habits that will either make it easier by the grace of God or much harder to be sober for the rest of your life. Therefore, I exhort you to be sober minded.

We older men must lead the younger men by example. When we set an example of sobriety and temperance, we set a worthy example for them to follow. The younger men in the church look up to us older men. They look for good role models whose lives they can emulate. God purifies one generation of men to be examples to the next generation.

As the popular song says it, “May all who come behind us find us faithful.” May God whose mercy is “from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear him” and whose righteousness is “unto children’s children” (Ps. 103:17) so work in us and use us to lead the next generation in the way they should go.



REDEEMING THE TIME AS GRANDPARENTS

MR. TOM CAMMENGA

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Early in my first term as an elder, it was my privilege to visit an elderly widow in the hospital who was very near the end of her earthly pilgrimage. It was a beautiful Saturday morning, and I enjoyed the drive to the hospital, although I was a bit unsure what I would find when I arrived. When I walked into her room, the first thought I had was that it seemed small, but I cannot say now whether that was indeed the case or whether it was simply my impression. She lay in bed with an oxygen mask on and other than her rhythmic, somewhat labored breathing, she was unresponsive. I stood by the edge of her bed and while holding her hand in mine, I read various Scripture passages to her. At one point, when I read Revelation 21, I felt quite sure that her grip on my hand tightened, if only ever so slightly. After praying with her, I took my leave, quietly exiting the room, knowing that her eternal home was very close to ready, and that I would not see her here on this earth again. To say the least, this was a sobering thought and it stayed on my mind as I exited the hospital and made my way back home. As I drove, I began to think of my own mortality, and I was struck by how fragile life is and how quickly it passes away. I was reminded of Psalm 103:14-16: “For he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust. As for man, his days are as grass: as a flower of the field, so he flourisheth. For the wind passeth over it, and it is gone; and the place thereof shall know it no more.”

At that time, my wife and I were eagerly anticipating the birth of our first grandchild and I began to think of all the things that I wanted to pass on to her, all the things I wanted to say to her, and all the things I wanted to be to her, all the while realizing, admittedly with some sadness, that I might not ever have the opportunity to do so, if God’s will was to take me home

before I was able. Later, when I shared these thoughts with my wife, we determined that so long as we were able, we would write a letter to each grandchild that God is pleased to give us that expresses our love for them and gives instruction that we wish to pass on to them. This we have done for the four grandchildren God has given us. We have composed a letter for each, placed it in an envelope, sealed it with wax, and given it to his/her parents with the instructions that they keep it safe, along with the stipulation that they give it to that grandchild only when they have decided the time was right. Our intention is to continue this practice, so long as we are able.

Although knowledge of our own mortality is part of the reason for doing this, the other and far more important reason is that we believe it is the clear calling of Scripture that not only parents, but also grandparents, and even great-grandparents, be involved in the raising of the covenant seed, as much as is possible, even if it is only a simple letter of encouragement that the grandchild can open at some point in his/her lifetime. We see this calling plainly in Deuteronomy 4:9: “Only take heed to thyself, and keep thy soul diligently, lest thou forget the things which thine eyes have seen, and lest they depart from thy heart all the days of thy life: but teach them thy sons, and thy sons’ sons.” We see this also in Psalm 78:4-7:

For he established a testimony in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers, that they should make them known to their children: that the generation to come might know them, even the children which should be born; who should arise and declare them to their children: that they might set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments.

The calling of grandparents and great-grandparents

is to be involved in the upbringing of the covenant seed. However, clearly, this involvement will depend on many different factors such as age, location in relation to our grandchildren, and so on. These certainly, to a large degree, influenced the relationship that I had with my grandparents. More accurately, I should say the lack of a relationship that I had with them. I grew up in Holland, Michigan whereas my grandparents lived in Grand Rapids. Today that does not seem like much of a distance; however in the 1970's that was quite a trip, and not one my parents were able to make very often. I was also one of the youngest grandchildren, so my grandparents were quite advanced in age by the time I was old enough to maintain a relationship with them. My grandpa Cammenga passed away before I was born, and although my grandmother remarried some years later, I only have a vague recollection of my grandpa VanTuinen. In addition, my grandpa Bylsma passed away when I was in the 3rd grade. So, as far as my grandmothers are concerned, I knew them and visited them, but I never really knew them on a personal level. I cannot help but feel as though I missed out, and yet, God had a purpose, as He always does. I believe that, in part, that purpose was to instill in me the desire that this not be the case with my wife and me and our grandchildren. I have often wondered what a letter from them, had they written one, would have said, and what an encouragement that would have been to me. And yet, even without the letter and without a close relationship with them, I recognize that by God's grace they have passed down to me in their godly example and their love for God, a treasure that is priceless.

The great tragedy in the world and even in the church is those grandparents who simply do not care to have a relationship with their grandchildren and therefore make no work of establishing or maintaining a relationship. Not only does this deprive the children of very important instruction and example, but it deprives the grandparents of much of what is the real joy of being grandparents and from the many times that we as grandparents have the opportunity to learn from our grandchildren. Though serious and sad that this would be the feeling of some, even those in the church, the most important thing is that it is contrary to the command of God. The mentality that we have "put in our time" and now it is our opportunity to

kick back and relax and watch our children raise our grandchildren without any involvement or help on our part, is nothing less than the Devil's subtle attempt to destroy the Christian family. As we have already seen in previous articles, that is the first step in his plan to destroy the church.

Equally tragic is the case when parents fail to include their own parents and grandparents in the raising of their children or when they fail to heed or even simply to acknowledge the often-wise instruction of their parents and grandparents. Certainly, there must also be a desire on the part of parents to include grandparents in their family life. There is something wonderful and beautiful about the Christian family when it is made up of many generations, communing and fellowshiping with one another. In addition, so often it seems to be the case that the instruction that comes from grandparents is taken more seriously and held in higher regard than the instruction—sometimes the very same instruction—that comes from parents. In this too we can support and reinforce the instruction given by our grandchildren's parents.

That interaction need not be constant or every day, nor is that even possible in most cases. Although quantity of time is certainly an important element, the more important factor is *quality*. When we as grandparents are given the opportunity—and really it is more than that, it is a calling—to spend time with our grandchildren, we must capitalize on that time, and yes, redeem that time. This means that in all that we do and say, we must show them that we not only love the Lord but that we also have genuine excitement for the things of His kingdom. We must be willing to teach them and encourage them and show them the great faithfulness of the God we serve. Just think for a moment of the many personal examples you can give them of this truth. Think too of the many things we have learned, often the hard way, that we can use to instruct them in applying them to their own lives. As I have mentioned in previous articles, my wife and I—and I am sure this is the case for every believing couple—look back with sadness on all the many times we failed as parents. The times when we lost our temper or said things that tore down rather than built up. The lost opportunities to teach our children different aspects of the Word of God or to apply the truths of the gospel to the different aspects of life. As grandparents, we have

now been given by God the wonderful opportunity to revisit these failures with our grandchildren; to take the mistakes that we have made with our own children and turn those into teachable moments for our children and grandchildren.

It all comes down to the covenant—that beautiful truth we as Reformed believers hold so dear. The very thought that the righteous and holy God, perfectly complete in Himself, who enjoys the most perfect and beautiful relationship within the Godhead and has no need of another, would desire to share that relationship with us, those who by nature are dead in sins and trespasses and who by that same nature know and desire only hatred toward God. And yet, in His boundless grace and mercy, it is His divine determination to establish with us, *and with our children, in their generations*, that relationship of intimate friendship and fellowship that is the covenant. This is God’s grace for His people! Grace because it is not up to us to keep this covenant nor have we established it with God, but He has chosen us and imparts to us all the blessings of the covenant. However, God has also chosen to use means to maintain that covenant; parents who raise their children in the fear of the Lord, Christian school teachers who stand in the place of parents, pastors and elders who strive to impart to the lambs of God the wonders of His love, Sunday school teachers, and

yes, grandparents. What a high calling then is ours as we seek to follow the will of God in passing on the truths of God’s precious covenant to our children and grandchildren—a calling that we must take seriously and pursue diligently, with all humility.

May God graciously forbid that it be said of our children and grandchildren when we are gone what was said of the generation that followed Joshua and his generation as we find it in Judges 2:10, “And also all that generation were gathered unto their fathers: and there arose another generation after them, which knew not the Lord, nor yet the works which he had done for Israel.”

Let us, then, first take heed to our own lives and the zeal with which we serve our God, and then by His grace, may we seek in all things to pass along to those who follow us, the mighty works of God in our lives and the hope that is ours and theirs in Jesus Christ. Our prayer then is that God also give to our children and grandchildren the grace to be willing to hear us and our instruction and that we may, with all humility, be prepared to hear and learn from them too. May God graciously grant us the strength and the desire to feed and care for the lambs that He gives in His covenant faithfulness, and may our joyous confession be that of Psalm 103:17: “But the mercy of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear him, and his righteousness unto children’s children.”

STRENGTH OF YOUTH



ARE WE OPEN ABOUT OUR FAITH?

REV. RYAN BARNHILL

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Have you ever experienced the following?

Situation #1: You are sitting elbow to elbow with your peers at another Young People’s Society meeting. The leader has prepared a sheet of questions on a section of verses. A couple of young people diligently prepared for the discussion, but most in the group neglected even

to look at the questions prior to the meeting. The leader asks the first question, looking for discussion. Crickets. You look around the table: everyone is either awkwardly looking down at their paper, or nervously shifting their gaze around the room searching for *someone* to say *something*. Finally, the leader asks the same question

again with different words, and someone gives a brief answer, with no follow-up from anyone else. Another painful Young People's Society discussion.

Situation #2: It's Sunday morning—time for church. You take your place in the pew and go through the elements of worship. At the heart of the service is the preaching of the Word, bringing instruction, admonition, comfort, and encouragement to the congregation. The minister brings the gospel in its power and glory. Church finishes, so you shuffle up the aisle with everyone else, making small talk as you go along. Upon entering the narthex, you immediately locate your friends and join their conversation. No one mentions the sermon. In fact, when you think about it, your chats in the back of church *rarely* involve the sermon, except when the minister accidentally twists his words or has an illustration that makes you chuckle. Instead, the narthex talk revolves around what everyone is doing after church, the upcoming test in school, the college basketball game, or the latest drama.

The question posed in the title of this article is, “Are we open about our faith?” “Faith” is what we believe: all the doctrine of Scripture, and centrally, the gospel. Being “open” about our faith means that we frankly and unreservedly speak to others about what we believe. We could spend a whole article on being open about our faith to those *outside* the body of believers; however, our focus in this article is on being open about our faith *within* the body of believers.

Are we open about our faith to our brothers and sisters in Christ? The fact that the question is asked suggests there may be need among us for improvement.

Very quickly I want to say: if young people's conventions, school programs, and other such events are an indication, God has blessed us with spiritually-minded young people. There is much that encourages me about the young people I have come to know through the years.

But can we *grow* in being open about our faith? If the scenarios at the beginning of the article sound familiar, then, yes: we can grow. Being a young person myself not so long ago, I can testify to my own struggles with being transparent about what I believed; it's reasonable to assume that this may be something challenging for some of you, too. Let's dig a little deeper into this by asking three more questions.

DOES THE BIBLE TEACH US TO BE OPEN ABOUT OUR FAITH?

Answer: it certainly does. Various Bible passages refer to witnessing about what we believe. In Psalm 66:16, the psalmist cries out, “Come and hear, all ye that fear God, and I will declare what he hath done for my soul.” Consider the account of the Gadarene demoniac out of whom Jesus cast an unclean spirit. Jesus instructed the man, “Go home to thy friends, and tell them how great things the Lord hath done for thee, and hath had compassion on thee” (Mark 5:19). Then, we read about how that man “departed, and began to publish in Decapolis how great things Jesus had done for him: and all men did marvel” (v. 20). Plainly, the application to us is, publish abroad how great things Jesus has done for *you*, and how He has had compassion on *you*!

The Heidelberg Catechism faithfully summarizes such Scripture passages when it refers in Article 32 to confessing Christ's name. The question is asked, “But why art thou called a Christian?” The answer is, “Because I am a member of Christ by faith, and thus am partaker of His anointing; that so I may *confess His name*” (emphasis added). In the office of believer, we are prophets who confess Christ's name with the mouth and from the heart. Reader, you are a Christian, and Christians *confess* Christ.

Additionally, the word “gospel” itself teaches that we must be open about our faith to others. In the New Testament, the Greek word for “gospel” means “good news.” Good news is meant to be *told*. If your dad comes home after his last chemotherapy treatment and informs you that he is cancer-free, will you not tell as many people as you can? It's *good news*. If you are accepted to study at the university of your choice, will you not let others know? It's *good news*. How strange, in these sorts of situations, if we remain silent! However exciting freedom from cancer and acceptance to a university may be, these pale in comparison to the good news of *salvation from sin*! This good news is meant to be declared.

WHY DO WE STRUGGLE WITH BEING OPEN ABOUT OUR FAITH?

Since the good news is so good, why is it hard to communicate it among our family and friends? Let me pose a non-exhaustive list of possibilities.

First, personality could have something to do with it. For example, some people are of the more introverted type, finding some environments taxing and preferring quieter, calmer settings. Perhaps the things of Christ gladden their hearts, but they struggle to talk about them in certain contexts.

Second, it might simply be that we struggle to initiate spiritual conversations. Perhaps you are thinking, “I love the doctrines I’ve been taught growing up. I am so thankful that I belong to Jesus. The things of His kingdom are precious to me. But my friends, whom I believe are sincere Christians, don’t talk on a spiritual level very often. Who’s going to get the ball rolling? I feel awkward being the one to begin something, and I’m not even sure *how* to begin it.”

Third, it might be that we are ho-hum about doctrine. Is it the case with us that the good news has become old news? Or, consider the doctrine of the covenant. The covenant is a warm, beautiful relationship of friendship that the Triune God has established with us in Christ. Has this become to us more a thing to memorize in Essentials catechism or to “get right” in a doctrinal discussion, rather than a truth that sets our hearts ablaze? Do the doctrines of grace, which ought to make us wide-eyed with joy, make us sleepy more than anything? And if Scripture’s teachings are ho-hum to us, why is that? Is it because many of us have grown up with this glorious heritage and take it for granted? Is it because some of us (not all) live in an environment where most people share the same doctrinal convictions, and we’re rarely or never compelled to defend what we believe? Is it because some of us go to schools where we all believe the same thing, and therefore we think it’s strange to engage like-minded students in conversations about the gospel? Is it a combination of all three?

HOW CAN WE BECOME MORE OPEN ABOUT OUR FAITH?

How then can we become more open about our faith to fellow saints? Let me suggest a few ways, and you can think of more on your own.

First, let’s be praying for this openness. If you find that your mouth too often stays closed when it should proclaim the wonderful works of God, then *ask* God to give you a greater love for His truth, an increased joy in His salvation, and a more ardent zeal to publish

it abroad. Make supplication for boldness. As our Heidelberg Catechism says in Q&A 116, “God will give His grace and Holy Spirit to those only who with sincere desires continually ask them of Him, and are thankful for them.” Pray for this, understanding that *God* must give you what is needed to open your mouth with His praises.

Second, remember the importance of reading God’s Word, doing so also in personal devotions. In the Scriptures you read of your guilt and depravity, but also of salvation in Jesus Christ. You learn of your misery and God’s mercy. You come to understand in a deeper way the damnation you deserve and the divine deliverance you have been granted. Having seen by faith the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, how can you hold your tongue? You will “bubble over,” and say, “Come, hear, all ye that fear the Lord, while I with grateful heart record what God has done for me” (Psalter 175, stanza 3).

Third, look for natural opportunities to talk about spiritual things. Such opportunities arise most frequently during difficult times. It is my conviction that we far too often put on a face in front of each other as if everything is fine. But that’s just not reality. We are sinners. We don’t always deal with temptation the right way. We experience disappointment and heartbreak. Relationships fall apart. Our lives can be messy. In the proper setting and with the right people, it’s legitimate, even healthy, to talk about our struggles. When we open up, other people will realize they’re not alone. It’s exactly those sorts of subjects that lead directly to rich conversations about our joy and hope in Christ.

In this connection, when is the last time you devoted a half hour to sitting with your friends, writing down each other’s needs, and praying with and for each other? Imagine what kind of wholesome exchanges *that* might spark! But the point is, be on the lookout for such opportunities to bring up your faith; finding such natural openings will help overcome at least some of the difficulties we outlined earlier.

But maybe, an open door to talk about the faith can be as simple as asking your friends some evening, “Are we open about our faith?” Who knows where such a question could lead! Try it sometime.



THE GRIESS FAMILY: GOD'S COVENANT FAITHFULNESS (3) LOVELAND, COLORADO

MR. JAMES HOLSTEGE

member of Southeast PRC in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and administrator at Eastside Christian School in Grand Rapids, Michigan

Previous article in this series: February 2025, p. 192.

Submitted by Carmen Griess, member of Loveland PRC in Loveland, Colorado.

Recall in our last article how standing for the truth of God's Word had resulted in removal of Henry Schwarz and his family from the Free German Reformed Salem Church. They suffered persecution by neighbors and family for the truth's sake. In God's providence and despite Henry's death in January 1943, this family would continue to seek faithful preaching, as we will see in this last article.

God leading the family to Loveland, CO was likely through Henry's brother, Wilhelm (Bill) Schwarz, who had moved to Loveland in 1906. He was a member of a German Reformed church there, where the German language was still used. For some time in the 1930s and 1940s, sons of Henry had traveled to Loveland in spring and fall to help with sugar beets. Son-in-law Gilbert Griess and daughter Luella had lived there for a year before Gilbert was drafted into the army for World War II. Luella had then returned home (Sutton) to wait out the war. So, with that knowledge of the area and weary of the strife in Sutton, Henry's wife Leona moved to Loveland in December 1943 with several of her children, married and single. This included Luella returning, now with baby daughter Ileen.

CHURCH IN LOVELAND

As recorded by Tom DeVries, Henry's family joined the German Reformed Hope Church in Loveland. A nearby Lutheran church shared their minister with them, Rev. Max Schoenhaar. He could preach in English or German, and either as a Reformed minister or a Lutheran. The church was not sure what he truly believed. Elders Gus Huber and Albert Griess asked him to resign so that they might have their own Reformed minister. The family still yearned for the pure preaching of the Word of God.

While Rev. Schoenhaar initially agreed, the other elders talked him out of it. Some of these elders were from the town churches in Sutton, NE and were opposed to those who were from Hofer's church. The dissension found in the Sutton churches had followed them to Loveland!

In 1954, Elder George Kitzman attended a German Reformed Church in Isabel, SD, learning of a Rev. Herman Mensch. In the summer of 1954, Rev. Mensch met with the elders of the Loveland church and preached twice. Wm. A. Griess, consistory clerk, recorded that history for us in a 1960 *Standard Bearer*.¹ Two of the five consistory members did not appreciate the Reformed teaching and did not want a new pastor. Providentially, Rev. Mensch knew Rev. G. Lubbers and advised the others to contact the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC). After a Sunday sermon by Rev. Lubbers in 1955, the consistory again met. Those opposed to this Reformed preaching asked the others to resign from their office, as they wanted to keep their minister. Refusing, those in favor of the PRC's teachings were later informed that the locks on the doors of the church had been changed. They were not welcome there. The whole family again found themselves without a church home!

The group rented a school building and organized as the Reformed Church of Loveland (cf. photo). Rev. Lubbers and Rev. C. Hanko were sent as missionaries by the PRC. Rev. Lubbers spent three years with them, and they loved this very personable, outgoing man. One member still remembers a visit from Rev. Lubbers on their farm. The neighbor's bull had gotten in with their cows. Rev. Lubbers had an idea. They put the bull in the barn and tied tin cans full of rocks to his tail. When they herded him out of the barn, the bull was

¹ For further reading on this history, see "History of the Protestant Reformed Church" by Wm. A. Griess in the *Standard Bearer*, vol. 36, no. 11 (March 1, 1960), 256-57. <https://sb.rfpa.org/history-of-the-protestant-reformed-church>



Loveland PRC: The church met in this old school house before building their own church about a mile away.

exceedingly frightened at the objects banging into his legs. He high-tailed it back to his farm, bulldozing his way through several barbed wire fences. Needless to say, the neighbor was not too happy with his bleeding bull...but it never returned!

More importantly, Rev. Lubbers presented the faithful Word of God each sabbath day. At last they had found the Reformed truth they had been seeking. God had provided! They were taught that worship services are a response of gratitude and devotion, not a habit or a tradition. Rev. Lubbers showed them proper sabbath observance and he and the first pastors patiently and biblically taught the life-long union of marriage. What a blessing that God used the two-edged sword of His Word to guide these saints to know the three things necessary to enjoy our only comfort in life and death: “first, how great my sins and miseries are; the second, how I may be delivered from all my sins and miseries; the third, how I shall express my gratitude to God for such deliverance” (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 2). The family is exceedingly thankful for the mercy God granted them!

ESTABLISHED AS LOVELAND PROTESTANT REFORMED CHURCH

After about three years of missionary labors and much fruit and spiritual growth, it was time to move forward. Fritz Schwarz, Gus Huber, Albert Griess, and

Hugo Schwarz, along with Rev. Lubbers, presented a request to join the Protestant Reformed Churches at Classis West in Doon, Iowa on March 19, 1958. Synod approved the request that June! Many of the Griess and Ochsner family descendants have faithfully served in the consistory of this church still to this day. To quote from a current charter member, “I do not think it can be stressed enough to point out that the excommunication of Henry Schwarz from the Sutton Church, although it was what seemed like a bad thing, was a blessing from the Lord which ultimately led us to the truth of God’s Word.”

After a decline by Rev. H. Veldman, God led Rev. H. H. Kuiper to accept the call and become the first pastor of Loveland PRC, serving the seventeen charter families. Through Rev. Kuiper’s encouragement, Gilbert Griess was instrumental in starting a school society. Thankful for God’s provision, a school was established in 1961 with a very humble beginning of just seven students. Rev. Kuiper was able to see the fruit of his labors, but went to his heavenly home in November 1961. Times were difficult financially, so it was with great monetary sacrifice that they started and maintained the school. One blessing was that Gilbert donated the land for the school, church, and a parsonage adjacent to church.

As of summer 2024, 66 years after its start, five confessing charter members (all are Henry’s *grandchildren* and/or their *spouses*) remain in Loveland PRC: Talitha Dotson, Virginia Moore, Larry and Tillie Nelson, and Mary Schwarz. Most have been taken home to their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. It is worth mentioning ten others who were children in the original congregation and now are confessing members of Loveland PRC:

- Grandchildren Don Schwarz, Phyllis Brands, and all six sons of Gilbert Griess: Ivan, Leon, Glen, David, Dennis, and Tim (my husband, who was but 4 months old at the time!)
- Great grandchildren Rick Campbell and Loren Griess.

So interrelated are the Griess and Ochsner families that these fifteen original congregants are on both family trees. The Ochsner name disappeared through marriages but is thoroughly part of the lineage of this family.

Going through our Loveland PRC 2024 church directory, I counted 144 descendants of German-Russian immigrants Johann Henrich Gries and Johann Nicolaus Ochsner, or 40% of the Loveland congregation. (That was not counting the spouses, which would increase that number by 42.) Seven of these descendants are tenth generation! What a blessed demonstration of God's covenant promise in Genesis 17:7, "And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee." And that

also in Acts 2:39, "For the promise is unto you and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call." What encouragement to continue to be faithful in our homes and schools in the instruction of our covenant seed!

Allowing the Griess family to have the final word, we find these words at the end of Wm. A. Griess's report in the 1960 *Standard Bearer*: "And now...we look to the future in the confidence of faith. May the Lord supply faithfulness to continue in the way of His truth that all praise and glory may be to the name of our wonderful covenant God."²

2 "History of the Protestant Reformed Church."

BRING THE BOOKS...



MR. CHARLES TERPSTRA

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

The following book is reviewed by Curt, Landon, and Blake Gritters, members of Hudsonville PRC in Hudsonville, Michigan



The Story of Martin Luther: The Monk Who Changed the World, Jared Kennedy. *The Story of Katie Luther: The Nun Who Escaped to True Freedom*, Gretchen Ronnevik (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2024).



History and biographies can be boring for many kids, but these were page-turners: did you know that Luther likely *glued* the 95 theses on the church door, not *nailed* them? Heeding regular calls from the Reformed Free Publishing Association and the "3 R's Blog" to "Read!," Landon (12), Blake (10), and I picked up copies of *The Story of Martin Luther: The Monk Who Changed the World* and *The Story of Katie Luther: The Nun Who Escaped to True Freedom*, both by Crossway, December 2024.

Crossway did a fantastic job of signaling "accessible" to middle schoolers who might otherwise be intimidated by a monk and nun from the early 1500s. These books are 5x8" paperbacks, less than a half inch thick, with

large font, generous spacing, short chapters, great illustrations, and plenty of interesting side bars.

Drawn in with dramatic stories (an intense thunderstorm and high-stakes escape, respectively), one found that the pages almost turned themselves until the end two hours later.

We learned how the near absence of loving families and being taught salvation by works were the circumstances God sovereignly designed to make Martin and Katie the opposite: champions of grace and generous in hospitality.

We liked how the authors digested complex topics. For example, referencing monks and nuns in *Martin*, the author reflects, "It can be good to serve God without the distraction of having a spouse or family, but this choice does not earn God's grace." In *Katie*, the author described "her identity and righteousness were secure in Christ's death and resurrection," not caused by perfect obedience to monastery rules.

We greatly enjoyed the side bars too. One was called "Famous Meetings with Strange Names" and described

how the Diet of Worms was not a disgusting meal. Another chart helpfully summarized several different views on the Lord's Supper.

Both books are intended for ages 8-13. *Katie* lands close. In our judgment, *Martin* somewhat misses on the high side. It uses idioms ("couldn't argue his way out of the storm"), vocabulary ("pledge my whole life"), complex details, and sentence structures that are better suited for ages 11-15. A parent or older sibling, however, could easily read it to younger kids with some live editing.

Martin and Katie considered salvation, grace, and faith worthy of their study and sacrifice 500 years ago. Others did 100 years ago. If you share our perspective that this doctrinal history is still relevant and worthy of our children's and grandchildren's study today, we recommend these books for your home, church, and school. Paperbacks are currently on Amazon in the U.S. for \$11.99 each.

"Hey Dad, I just read a chapter without you asking!" Nailed it.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

RESOLUTION OF SYMPATHY

The Council and congregation of Loveland PRC, in the death of Pam Kooienga on February 1, 2025, express their heartfelt Christian sympathy to father, Mr. Ray Ezinga; brother, Mr. Steve Ezinga and family; sister, Mrs. Tammy VanUffelen and family; and son, Jack Kooienga and family. Pam has been delivered from her pain and suffering to join our Lord and Savior. We pray for comfort for the family and our congregation and remember Matthew 5:4: "Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted."

Joel Moore, Clerk

RESOLUTION OF SYMPATHY

The Men's Bible Society of Hope PRC, Walker, MI expresses Christian sympathy to Elaine Rau and children, Joel and Larissa Rau, Caleb and Leah Potjer, and Stefan Rau, and to Mr. Alvin Rau in the death of their husband, father, and son, Mr. Mike Rau. Job 19:25, 26 were some of the last verses Mike studied with us, "For I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God:"

Ron Koole, Pres.

Jeff Kalsbeek, Sec'y.

CLASSIS EAST

Classis East of the Protestant Reformed Churches will meet in Grace PRC on Wednesday, May 14, 2025, at 8:30 A.M. the Lord willing. All material for the agenda is to be in the hands of the stated clerk by April 14 (30 days before classis convenes).

Rev. Clayton Spronk,
Stated Clerk

PRC SYNOD 2025

All standing and special committees of the synod of the Protestant Reformed Churches, as well as individuals who wish to address Synod 2025, are hereby notified that all material for this year's synod should be in the hands of the stated clerk no later than April 15. Please send material to:

Doug Mingerink Sr., (dougim@mingerink.com),
or mail to the same at: 4949 Ivanrest Ave., SW, Wyoming, MI 49418

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- Stand united in the gospel of Christ
- Humble ourselves under God's mighty hand
- Learn to love and support one another

Read Prof. Huizinga's article in this issue to understand the value of attending.

LOCAL ATTENDEES

Registration is required for daily activities and meals. Not sure what days you can attend? That's okay! Registration covers the full week, so you can come to any or all of the activities.

TRAVELING ATTENDEES

There is a generous subsidy program available for those traveling from outside Michigan. Visit prca100.org/register and view the FAQ to see the max subsidy available for your location.

QUESTIONS?

Email registration@prca100.org

**REFORMED
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REV. CARL HAAK

- 3/2 Not Weary in Well-doing, Gal. 6:9
- 3/9 The True Christian Life. 2 Tim. 4:7, 8
- 3/16 Spiritual Lethargy, S of S 5:1-8
- 3/23 Grace for Today, Matt. 6:34
- 3/30 Freedom, Rom. 8:2



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