

THE STANDARD BEARER

July
2025
VOLUME 101, NUMBER 12

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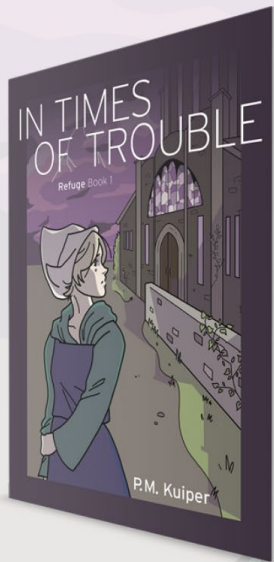
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The *Standard Bearer* (ISSN 0362-4692 [print], 2372-9813 [online]) is a monthly periodical with two special issues (Fall and Spring) published by the Reformed Free Publishing Association: 1894 Georgetown Center Dr., Jenison, MI 49428-7137.

Postmaster Send address changes to the *Standard Bearer*, 1894 Georgetown Center Dr., Jenison, MI 49428-7137.

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Annual subscription price

Print: \$32 USA / \$52 international
Digital: \$22 / free to print subscribers

The Reformed Free Publishing Association maintains the privacy and trust of its subscribers by not sharing with any person, organization, or church any information regarding *Standard Bearer* subscribers.

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*BLESSED BE HE WHO BLESSED US

HERMAN HOEKSEMA (1886-1965)

was the first editor of the *Standard Bearer* and pastor of First PRC, Grand Rapids, Michigan for 40 years

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ: according as he hath chosen us in him—Ephesians 1:3, 4

Blessed be He who blessed us!

It cannot escape our attention that the same word is used twice: God blesses us, we bless Him! Yet, there is a profound difference in meaning between the two uses of the word.

For, first of all, God's blessing us and our blessing God are not mere reciprocal acts, so that the latter is a remuneration of the former, a returning of favors received, a reward of blessing He bestowed on us. God is God! We are always creature! God is the Giver; we are always the receivers! God is the ever-overflowing Fountain of all good; we are always the thirsty ones that drink from that Fountain! This relation never ceases and can never be reversed. Never does the moment arrive when He receives from us anything that is not truly His. When we bless Him, we only express that we have tasted how good He is. Our blessing of Him is only the expression of our consciousness of having been blessed by Him.

His blessing, then, is first, always first, eternally first! Even as "herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us" (1 John 4:10), so "herein is blessing," not that we bless Him, but that He blesses us!

His blessing us is the eternally operating cause of our blessing Him. For, indeed, His blessing, never ours, is causal, efficacious, divinely powerful and effective.

To bless is "to-speak well." Such is the literal significance of the graphic word that is here twice used in the original. When God blesses us, He speaks well of us, concerning us, to us, over us; when we bless God, we speak well of Him, concerning Him, to Him. But His Word is a word of power. He speaks and it is done; He commands and it stands fast. His Word creates what it declares; it brings to pass what it expresses. But our word can only declare what already is, and what has become an object of our knowledge and experience.

His speaking precedes the thing; our speaking follows it. He speaks and what He speaks comes into being; we speak because we know that the thing is already.

He "speaks well" of us and to us, and as a result we are filled with all goodness.

We speak well of Him, because we taste that He is eternally good!

We speak because through His speech we know Him!

Blessed be He who blessed us!

Even so, Amen!

And how richly He blessed us!

In how marvelous a way He lavished His goodness upon us!

How fully and completely He filled us with His glorious benefits!

For, He blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ!

In Christ He blessed us. This indicates the wonderful way in which He manifested all His great goodness and made us recipients of it. Another way in which to reveal all His marvelous goodness to the highest possible degree there was not. For Christ is the

* Reprint of the meditation published in the July 1940 *SB* (vol. 16, no. 19). Also published in *All Glory to the Only Good God*, David J. Engelsma, ed. (Jenison: RFPA, 2013), 266-72.

Firstborn of every creature and the First Begotten of the dead; He is the image of the invisible God, and it was the Father's good pleasure that in Him all the fullness should dwell. And when we are told that He blessed us in Christ, it is plain that He blessed Christ first! He speaks well of Christ, to Christ, chiefly, centrally, as the Chief over His house, as the Son in whom He is well pleased, as the obedient Servant, as the Head of the body, the church. He speaks His Word of blessing in the amazing wonder of the incarnation, in the deep way of His suffering, in His awful descent into hell, in His sojourn in Sheol; He reveals His Word of blessing in His glorious resurrection, in His blessed exaltation in the highest heavens, in the exceeding greatness of His power and authority over every name that is named. And He finished His Word of blessing when this glorified Christ received the promise of the Spirit, that He might be the quickening Spirit, the life-giving Head of His church!

In Christ God hath blessed us!

And, therefore, these blessings with which He hath blessed us are all the spiritual blessings in heavenly places.

Spiritual these blessings are because they are all the fruits of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, and are wrought by Him. Spiritual they are, too, because they are not natural, they do not change the essence of things, the essence of our being and of our relation to the world, but by them our spiritual-ethical nature is reversed and our relation to God is made perfect. They change our darkness into light, our love of the lie into love of the truth, our folly into wisdom, our ignorance into the knowledge of God, our guilt into perfect righteousness, our corruption into holiness, our unrest into peace, our sorrow into joy, our death into eternal life! They do not feed us with the bread that perisheth, but with the Bread of life; they do not enrich us with treasures on earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, but with incorruptible treasures in heaven. They are blessings of grace and mercy, of righteousness and peace, of holiness and the love of God, of wisdom and knowledge, of meekness and patience, of joy and light, of justification in the midst of sin, of victory in the midst of apparently overwhelming enemies, of a blessed hope in the midst of despair, of unspeakable rejoicings in the midst of

suffering, of glorious life in the midst of devouring death!

Blessings in Christ, in heavenly places!

For these blessings are in Christ. From God, through Christ, in the Spirit they constantly flow toward us. And Christ is in heavenly places, and is, therefore, Himself heavenly, raised far above the level of mundane, earthly relations. And the blessings are like their source. In heavenly places they are, from heavenly places they descend, heavenly they are. They are not merely spiritual in distinction from things natural and carnal, but they are also heavenly in distinction from the mere earthy. They do not merely restore, but elevate; they do not repair what was broken and spoiled, but they raise to a higher level, the level of heavenly perfection. For as far as Christ is higher than the first Adam, the heavenly blessings we receive from Him are higher than all the things of the earth.

And to be born again is to be born from above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God, in heavenly places; and this rebirth is but the beginning of what will be perfected in the final resurrection and in the glory of the heavenly creation!

Blessed with all spiritual blessings!

In Christ!

For, in Him is the fullness of spiritual blessings. All the fullness of the Godhead dwelleth in Him bodily. No spiritual blessing is lacking. No blessing could be added. Over and above the spiritual blessings in Christ no blessing is conceivable. To be blessed in Christ is to be blessed fully, completely, perfectly.

And He hath blessed us in Him!

For He caused Him to merit eternal righteousness for us, by His death and resurrection. In Him we are justified. In Him we have the adoption unto children. In Him we are heirs, heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ. In Him we have a right to eternal life and to the eternal inheritance!

And God makes us partakers of these spiritual blessings!

For it is He who makes us one plant with Him, in the likeness of His death and His resurrection. It is He, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who gives us the lively faith, whereby we become partakers of Him and of all His benefits.

In the blessed Christ He hath blessed us!

Abundant mercy!

Blessed is He!

Yea, blessed be He alone!

For He is the Fount of all these glorious blessings, and there is none beside Him! He alone is the Author of this great salvation! To Him, to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, be glory and thanksgiving forever!

To God Triune, blessed forever, be all the praise!

He is the Father and God of our Lord Jesus Christ!

Indeed, this relation of our Lord Jesus Christ to God Triune has its deeper, its eternal cause in the holy Trinity itself. For, the First Person of the divine family is the Father of the Second. And the Son, God of God, co-equal with the Father and the Spirit, is the express image of the Father.

But He is this in the divine nature.

Never could it be said that the First Person of the Trinity is the God of the Second Person. Yet, thus our text expresses the relation between Christ and the Father. For, in spite of the fact, that some would connect the words “our Lord Jesus Christ” only with “Father,” so that they would read, “the God who is also the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,” we maintain that this is not the meaning, and that the text declares that the Father is also the God of Christ, our Lord. Besides, this is expressed more than once in Scripture. Christ Jesus our Lord, therefore, is not only the eternal Son, essentially divine, in relation to the First Person of the holy Trinity; He is also the Holy Child Jesus and the Servant of the Lord, and the Triune God is His God and Father.

He is this in His human nature.

The Triune God is the God and Father of the Son in human nature!

He it is who ordained Christ to be the Head of His church and the Head over all things. He ordained Him to be the Firstborn of every creature and the First begotten of the dead. His good pleasure it was that in Him all the fullness should dwell. And God made Him, and perfected Him as the captain of our salvation, in the incarnation, through His suffering and death, in the way of His resurrection and exaltation at the right hand of God in heavenly places, and by fulfilling unto Him the promise of the Spirit.

Blessed be He, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!

He it is who hath blessed us in Him!

And He did so freely, sovereignly, of His own good pleasure!

Even as He hath chosen us in Him before the foundation of the world!

Eternally He elected us! God’s election of His church does not fall in time, does not belong to time, is not determined and limited by time, but is an eternal act of the eternal God. That He chose us “before the foundations of the world” does not refer to a certain moment preceding creation, as if the eternal One had ever been without this divine act of election. In eternity there is no time. For an eternal act there are no moments. “Before the foundation of the world,” therefore, can only express a logical relation in God’s own mind, a relation of order between election and the creation of the world. Election is first, the foundation of the world follows; the church is end, the world is means. Even as Christ is first, the Firstborn of every creature, and all things are made through Him and unto Him, first even in relation to the church, so that the latter exists for Christ’s sake; so the church is first in relation to the “foundation of the world,” and all things exist for her sake, and are adapted to her realization and perfection.

Eternally He hath chosen us, before the foundation of the world!

And even as this election is an eternal act, so it is strictly sovereign.

God’s election is never a selection of the best. Thus, indeed, men who do not fully grasp the truth that God is GOD would explain. God chose the best according to His foreknowledge. He chose whom He foresaw as believers, as obedient to the gospel, as persevering to the end. But the election of God is even before the foundation of the world, and all things are adapted to it! It is causal. It ordains the elect. That they are elect is solely due to an act of His sovereign will, and in no wise to any foreseen or foreknown goodness or act on our part.

And God chose us in Him, in Christ Jesus our Lord!

He ordained Christ, as the chief among the brethren, as the Head of the church, in order that in Him all the fullness of the invisible God might dwell and be revealed. And in that Christ, in His sphere,

He elected His church, all His people, giving them to Christ, giving to each one of them his own place in Christ, so that the whole of them might show forth the fullness of the glorious virtues of the Godhead as it is in Christ, that God may be all in all!

He predestinated them to be made like unto the image of His Son, each in his own way and according to his own position “in Him,” that He might be the firstborn among many brethren!

And even as He chose us in Him, so He blesses us in Him!

Never without Christ!

In Him we are juridically. And He is delivered for our transgressions, and raised for our justification. And by faith we know that we are in Him, and we are justified and have peace with God.

Even as He hath chosen us!

In Him we are organically. And He lives in us and dwells in us, and we are delivered and glorified, begotten again unto a lively hope!

Even as He hath chosen us, so He hath blessed us!

In Him! Freely, eternally, sovereignly!

Blessed be He!

He hath blessed us!

Let us now bless Him, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!

For, such is His purpose!

He hath made all things for His own name’s sake: Christ, the church, the world, all things! Indeed, all things are yours; but ye are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s!

He hath blessed us, that we might bless Him!

Not, indeed, as if our blessing of Him could at all be like His blessing us. He is God. We are creature. He is the Fount. We drink from Him. Nor as if we could in any wise remunerate Him for the glorious blessings He hath bestowed upon us in eternal and sovereign love. The very thought that we can remunerate the all-and self-sufficient One is blasphemous! What shall I render unto the Lord for all His benefits bestowed on me? Nothing!

But I can take the cup of salvation from which I drink, and by which I taste that He is the blessed One!

And call upon His name!

And say that He is good!

The blessed One forever!

EDITORIAL



100 YEARS AND WORLDLINESS

PROF. BRIAN HUIZINGA

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

Would you not agree that the hypocrisy of any Protestant Reformed man, woman, or young person who *loves* and *lives* like the wicked world is a *double* hypocrisy? *All* professing Christians who love and live like the wicked world must be sharply admonished, “Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? Whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God” (Jam. 4:4). All must be exhorted, “Love not the world!” (1 John 2:15) and “Be not conformed to this

world!” (Rom. 12:2). The godless, worldly lifestyle of a professing Christian is a mockery of the cross to which Jesus was nailed to deliver His people from this present evil world. However, the hypocrisy of a *Protestant Reformed* member whose heart and lifestyle are worldly amounts to a *double* hypocrisy.

HISTORY AND DOCTRINE

For over 100 years now, we in the PRC have maintained a separate existence as a Reformed denomination that

opposes the doctrine of common grace as formulated by the CRC at Synod 1924 and as it is being developed today. One element of our ongoing polemic against this false doctrine is our contention that common grace destroys the antithesis. The antithesis is the spiritual separation and hostility between the church and the world (with all its unfruitful works of darkness). The doctrine of common grace not only obliterates the necessary enmity that God Himself puts between the church and the world (Gen. 3:15), but it also leads to the amalgamation of the church with the world. This stands to reason, for if the ungodly are truly the objects of God's grace and do what is good and pleasing in the sight of the Lord, then why would we not find common ground with the world, dwell together in sweet accord, and mutually endeavor for the advance of God's kingdom?

Our forefathers in the early years of the PRC regularly preached, wrote, and taught the doctrine of the antithesis and pressed upon God's people their calling to live antithetically as God's thankful friend-servants in a spiritually hostile world. When the supporters of common grace charged these PR preachers with being Anabaptist and promoting world-flight, our fathers would not relent but warned even more sharply that common grace would destroy the antithesis and cause a mighty flood of carnal waters to inundate the church.

The theologians in the CRC did not heed the Protestant Reformed warnings against common grace as a doctrinal threat with deadly practical implications, but they did agree that sharp warnings against worldliness were necessary. So great was and is the threat of the enticing world that the CRC felt constrained to issue a warning immediately after adopting common grace. In fact, in the very same article of the minutes (Art. 132), in which the Synod of 1924 set forth the infamous three points, the synod made various declarations about the teaching of the PRC ministers Danhof and Hoeksema, including this statement, "insofar as the ministers H. Danhof and H. Hoeksema warn against world conformity in their writing, there is reason for such a warning in view of the possible misrepresentation of the doctrine of common grace." Synod continued with warnings against "the spiritual currents of our present day" and said, "it certainly cannot be denied that the

danger of becoming conformed to this present world is much greater than fleeing from the world."¹

In response to the rising tide of worldliness, in a decade dubbed the "The Roaring Twenties," the CRC was not satisfied with a mere warning. Synod 1926 appointed a special committee to study several overtures addressing the problem of worldly amusements, particularly dancing, theater attendance, and card-playing (games of chance). Synod 1928 adopted the report of the committee as the official stand of the CRC. John Kromminga later summed up the report like this:

The report is primarily positive and general, mentioning only incidentally the three specific amusements on which the overture had concentrated. It defines the proper attitude of the Christian toward worldly amusements in view of four considerations: the honor of God, the welfare of man, the principle of spiritual separation from the world, and Christian liberty. It urges ministers and leaders to warn consistently against evils of the world, and asks that attention be paid to the attitude of the individual to worldly amusements when making appointments to boards or when examining those who wish to make confession of faith.²

If our common-grace-denying Protestant Reformed fathers *and* the denomination that officially adopted the doctrine of common grace were *both* so concerned about worldliness 100 years ago, how concerned ought the PRC be about world-conformity *today*? In light of our origin and our maintenance of the doctrine of the antithesis over against the doctrine of common grace, there can hardly be a denomination in the world with a calling to resist worldliness that is more serious than ours.

Do you not see, then, how the hypocrisy of the Protestant Reformed member who loves and lives like the world is a *double* hypocrisy? That Protestant Reformed member vowed before God at confession of faith that he/she believes "the doctrine...taught here in this Christian church to be the true and complete doctrine of salvation," which doctrine includes the doctrine of the antithesis and opposition to common

1 *Acts of Synod 1924 of the Christian Reformed Church*, trans. Henry DeMots, 147-148.

2 For the quotes and history outlined here, see John Kromminga, *The Christian Reformed Church: A Study in Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1949), 120-121.

grace. Furthermore, that member promised “to adhere to this doctrine, to reject all heresies repugnant thereto, and to lead a new, godly life.” World conformity among us is terribly hypocritical.

WORLDLINESS

We need consistent warnings against worldliness because the world presents so many enticements to our flesh. Only Jesus could live a perfect life *in* this world while not being *of* it. It is a mighty struggle for us to be in the world without imbibing its spirit, ways of thinking, and practices. Some of the dangers include the love of money and the idolatrous pursuit of material goods, career, and pleasures in an age of affluence; busyness with non-essentials threatening to erode and eliminate meaningful family worship and congregational life including Bible studies; pornography, the acceptance of remarriage after divorce, premarital sex, immodest clothing; online sports gambling; Sabbath desecration in forms more subtle than going to work or a ballgame; defiance of authority; seeking to have the power and preeminence over others even to the point of becoming abusive; the carnality of envy and strife; not having children because they are viewed as a hindrance to personal happiness; and worldly systems such as the raging confusion that is wokeism.

I want to focus, however, on two particular dangers. The first is old, very old, at least as old as Noah’s day: *drunkenness*. Alcohol is not the problem. Only a proud legalist would try to forbid all Christians from enjoying alcohol. Our Lord in His very first miracle turned water into wine and then ordained wine as one of the two earthly elements to signify to us His salvation in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. Having a drink in moderation is one thing, and it can be a good thing.

“Drinking” is another thing. Could we not all redouble our commitment to doing everything in our power to eliminate drinking parties? Drinking parties are completely worldly and roundly condemned in Scripture. Why would any true Christian plan, host, attend, or enable a drinking party or any social gathering with limitless alcohol so that what begins as Christian fellowship turns into a drinking party with intoxicated fools? No good thing has ever come out of a drinking party, though plenty of evils have. Drinking parties engender sinful desires, words, and actions, and

then bitter consequences, because God is not mocked. Do *you* have a reputation for drinking? Is *your home* known for its drinking parties?

To be in the world but not of the world demands our repudiation of drunkenness and drinking parties, which are completely worldly. Praise the Lord for church members today who not only keep their garments unspotted from the world of drinking parties but humbly and lovingly speak against them and try to persuade the foolish to amend their ways.

A second danger to highlight was the chief concern of the CRC in the 1920s: *worldly amusements*. Amusement (or entertainment, or leisure) is not the problem. Although most Christians through history simply did not have the time for entertainment that we do, entertainment as such is not wrong. There is a time to “laugh” and “dance” (Eccl. 3:4). Hundreds of young people and many adults look forward to the mixer games, team games, free-time activities, tournaments, and after-banquet activities planned for next month’s Young Peoples’ convention. God gave the soul a capacity for being amused, and it is good for believers to build relationships through playing and laughing together in wholesome ways.

Yet, amusement presents two significant problems. First, like wine, amusement in excess is terribly destructive to the Christian life. There is a great danger that we squander the time God gave us for work, service of His church, and spiritual exercises because we are amusing ourselves to death with entertainment of various forms. Do we *live* to serve our Friend-Sovereign in the covenant, or do we *live* to entertain ourselves? Is holding a job and going to work each day a way to serve the Lord or just a necessary evil to endure in anticipation of an evening and eventually a weekend of amusement?

Still more dangerous are *worldly amusements*. The CRC was not the only denomination concerned with the theater and movies. Looking back on the history of writing in the *Standard Bearer* and other literature in the PRC, our fathers were very concerned about the world’s movies. Today, no one needs to attend a theater to set a wicked thing before his eyes due to the prevalence of in-home, on-the-lap, and in-the-pocket theaters and streaming services that would probably make the men in both the CRC and the PRC of the

“Roaring Twenties” gasp in disbelief. Are we amusing ourselves with that which God detests?

What a shame and double hypocrisy if we love and live like the godless world while being confessing members of the Protestant Reformed Churches who preach the antithesis and deny common grace. May it not be so among us, for pure religion is keeping oneself unspotted from the world (Jam. 1:27).

THE COVENANT

What reinforces still more our calling to resist worldliness is our doctrine of the covenant. In regard to the high calling of Protestant Reformed members to live holily, it is so striking that Herman Hoeksema did not conceive of the covenant as conditional. Hoeksema and Klaas Schilder of the Netherlands developed a close friendship on account of their mutual rejection of common grace and their shared experiences of being cast out by ecclesiastical assemblies in their own mother denominations. Schilder was also very concerned about the influence of the godless world upon the churches in the Netherlands. Schilder espoused a conditional covenant in which the gracious promise of God is given to all the baptized children of believers (ironically, this makes the grace of the covenant ‘common’), and that promise is conditioned upon the child’s faith and obedience. Part of the rationale for such a covenantal conception for Schilder—and others with a similar covenant doctrine, including the men of the Federal Vision today—was that a conditional covenant would prevent the youth of the covenant from presuming upon the grace of God. Conditionality prevents the youth

from thinking, “It does not matter how I live! I can have fellowship with unrighteousness, and communion with darkness, and concord with Belial, and a portion with infidels, and agreement with idols because I belong to God’s covenant! I have His promises! His grace always covers me! I am eternally secure in the love of Christ!” After all, what was the real motivation to be holy if the covenant promise did not somehow hinge upon one’s own personal holiness?

Hoeksema shared Schilder’s concern about the influence of the world, but by God’s amazing grace Hoeksema rejected Schilder’s conditional covenant conception and insisted on an unconditional covenant with the elect alone. Hoeksema taught that the covenant is sovereignly and graciously maintained by God, and in that covenant holy living is not a condition on which the covenant depends, but the fruit of God’s grace in the lives of His friend-servants so that they gratefully separate themselves from the ungodly world and consecrate themselves to Him.

God be praised for our rich heritage in the doctrine of sovereign, particular grace in the covenant. Our doctrine of the antithesis over against common grace is inherently a covenantal concept. We do not live antithetically over against the world as an end in itself, but in devotion to our covenant God who redeems and sanctifies us by the blood of Jesus. We are God’s party in a wicked world, called to show forth His praises through holy, antithetical living by the power of the Spirit of Christ.

Let us do that then.

Love not the world!

EDITOR’S NOTES

In the past we have tried to include in the July issue of the *Standard Bearer* (SB) some follow-up from the annual meeting of the PRCA synod, including the pre-synodical sermon, an article written by an editor recapping the decisions of synod, pictures, and the graduation address in the event of a PRC Seminary student commencement. Look for this material next month in the *August* issue.

Moving forward, if we include material from synod, we would like to use the *August* issue. Our policy is that articles submitted to the SB are due

one month before the scheduled publishing date because many steps must be completed by the editors, typesetter, publisher, printing company, and mail service before the magazine can be delivered to you. For example, for synodical material to appear in the July 1 issue, everything should be submitted to the managing editor by June 1. However, synod does not even convene until the second Tuesday of June and then lasts a week or more. We are usually scrambling to put something together in mid/late June for the July issue, and then the magazine does not reach your

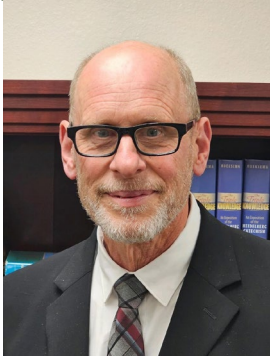
mailbox until mid-July. You can see, therefore, the benefit of covering synod in the *August* issue.

Also, you can look for coverage from the anniversary celebration, PRCA100, to be included in the September issue. Words and pictures will fail to capture what

Christ did through that one week to enlarge, encourage, and refresh the hearts of so many, young and old alike, but we will try.

B. Huizinga

SEARCH THE SCRIPTURES



NAHUM (10A, B) NINEVEH'S LION-LIKE COMPLACENCY AND BRUTALITY

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Previous article in this series: April 2025, p. 236.

Where is the dwelling of the lions, and the feedingplace of the young lions, where the lion, even the old lion, walked, and the lion's whelp, and none made them afraid? The lion did tear in pieces enough for his whelps, and strangled for his lionesses, and filled his holes with prey, and his dens with ravin—Nahum 2:11-12

In Nahum 2:11, 12 the lions are the Ninevites; the old lion, the king of Nineveh;¹ the lionesses, his queens; the young lions, the recent generations of Assyrians; the den, the city of Nineveh; the prey, the other nations conquered by the Assyrians; the ravin, the plunder with which Nineveh filled its “den.” The strangling and tearing in pieces are the cruelties Nineveh visited on the conquered nations.

The comparison of Nineveh and the Ninevites to lions in Nahum 1:11, 12 is very appropriate. Lions were a symbol of Nineveh and Assyria, something like the British lion or the American bald eagle. Lions, sometimes winged or with the head of man, are depicted on many reliefs and monuments excavated from Nineveh and other Assyrian cities. The enormous

winged-lion statues that stood by the gates of the palace in Nineveh, along with many of the reliefs, can be seen in the British Museum.² Lion-hunting was a favorite sport of the Assyrian kings (cf. Gen. 10:8-12) and they are said to have kept captive lions in the palace gardens.

The emphasis in these verses is on Assyria's lion-like character, its strength, pride, and dominance, but especially its brutality towards other nations. Anyone who has seen videos or documentaries of lions will understand Nahum's comparison and why the Assyrians revered the lion. Scenes of lions feeding on another beast even before it is dead are unforgettable and almost unwatchable. It is the God-created nature of a lion to be what it is, at least after the fall, but the Assyrians in their cruelty and brutality were even worse than the beasts they worshiped.

O. Palmer Robertson in his commentary on Nahum cites Ashurbanipal II, one of Assyria's kings, boasting of his brutal treatment of rebel captives:

I built a pillar over against his city-gate, and I flayed all the chief men who had revolted, and I covered the pillar with their skins; some I walled up within the pillar, and some upon the pillar on stakes I impaled, and others I fixed to stakes round about the pillar; many within the border of my own land I flayed,

¹ The reference is to one or all of the great kings of Nineveh, Shalmaneser III, Tiglath-pileser III, Sargon II, Sennacherib, Esarhaddon, and Ashurbanipal, all of whom are mentioned in the Bible. The last king of Assyria was very weak and certainly not the “old lion” of Nahum 2:11.

² These can be viewed on Google maps at the following link: <https://artsandculture.google.com/streetview/british-museum/>.

and I spread their skins upon the walls; and I cut off the limbs of the high officers, of the high royal officers who had rebelled. (lines 89ff.) Many captives from among them I burned with fire, and many I captured alive. From some I cut off their hands and their fingers, and from others I cut off their noses and their ears...and the eyes of many men I put out. I made one heap of the living, and another of the heads, and I bound their heads to vines round about the city. Their young men and maidens I burned in the fire (lines 116ff.).³

It was not just their cruelty to other nations and peoples for which God's judgment came on the Assyrians, but especially for their cruelty to God's people. They were the axe with which God hewed Israel, the saw and the rod and staff in His hand (Is. 10:15). Nevertheless, as is always the case when God uses wicked men and their evil-doing for His own purposes, the cruelty and wickedness of Assyria was not to be laid to His account, but to theirs. It is another case where they "meant it for evil, but God meant it for good" (Gen. 50:20), for the good of His people.

This is one of the great principles of Christian living, the foundation of patience and peace in the Christian's life. All too often our sinfulness is a reaction to what others have wickedly done to us. This writer has even found himself deliberately doing what is wrong to provoke and get back at those who have done him wrong. Bitterness, that sin which is like drinking poison and hoping the other person dies, is another sinful reaction to evil. Only the confidence that Joseph expressed in Genesis 50:20 will keep us from evil and bitterness when we have been mistreated, abused, and brutalized.

3 Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1990), 82.

The complacency of Assyria in the last days of its empire is also pictured by Nahum's words. Their kingdom secure for centuries, their dominance over the other nations of long-standing, they were without fear (v. 11), certain they could not be conquered. In their foolish pride they were like Edom in Obadiah 1:3 of whom God says, "The pride of thine heart hath deceived thee, thou that dwellest in the clefts of the rock, whose habitation is high; that saith in his heart, Who shall bring me down to the ground?"

Looking ahead to Nineveh's fall, Nahum asks (v. 11), "Where is the dwelling of the lions, and the feedingplace of the young lions, where the lion, even the old lion, walked, and the lion's whelp, and none made them afraid?" Nineveh would not only be conquered but her memory would all but vanish and her location would be forgotten until rediscovered and excavated in modern times. God had passed sentence on Nineveh and He would be her enemy and conqueror, and how then could Nineveh stand? That is the word of God in Nahum 2:13.

We should not forget that Satan is also described as a roaring lion (1 Pet. 5:8). He is the enemy of God's people in every age and the malevolent power behind the king of Assyria's war on Israel and Judah. The king of Assyria is but a son of "Belial" in chapter 1:11, and so God's word concerning the old lion of Nineveh concerns also the oldest lion of all, and prophesies his destruction. We should think of him and his end when we read Nahum 2:11, "Where is the dwelling of the lions, and the feedingplace of the young lions, where the lion, even the old lion, walked, and the lion's whelp, and none made them afraid?"

GOD'S SENTENCE ON NINEVEH

Behold, I am against thee, saith the LORD of hosts, and I will burn her chariots in the smoke, and the sword shall devour thy young lions: and I will cut off thy prey from the earth, and the voice of thy messengers shall no more be heard—Nahum 2:13

The last verse of chapter 2, like the last of chapter 1 is a transition to the next chapter where God makes it clear

that all the threats of destruction are made against Nineveh. Chapter 1 mentions Nineveh only in verse 1 and what God says there of His vengeance and fury is general. The closest He comes to speaking specifically of Nineveh is in the last verses of that chapter, but there He is addressing Himself to Judah. Now He names Nineveh as the object of His destroying fury and begins to address her directly.

In this last verse of chapter 2 and in chapter 3 God also tells Nineveh that, though her destruction will be by the coalition of Medes and Babylonians, it will be by His hand and enmity that Nineveh is destroyed. So He says in 2:13, “I am against thee.”

What a terrifying word of God! Romans 8:31 says that if God is for us, no one can be against us; but if God is against Nineveh, who can possibly help Nineveh or stand against the Almighty? Even the forces of hell and the Prince of darkness, Nineveh’s allies, are in His hands, and Nineveh herself is utterly beyond help and hope. God will burn her chariots with their frightening scythed wheels. God will send His sword against the lions of Nineveh, and if the lions could be hunted and killed by the Ninevites, who will help the lions when God Himself is against them? God will take the prey from Nineveh’s mouth, and who will give it back? God will still the voices of Nineveh’s messengers announcing another conquest and send His messengers (1:15) announcing that Nineveh is now the prey.

Thinking of Nineveh’s messengers reminds one of blasphemous Rabshakeh, the leader of the Assyrian assault on Jerusalem in the days of Hezekiah:

Hear ye the words of the great king, the king of Assyria. Thus saith the king, Let not Hezekiah deceive you: for he shall not be able to deliver you. Neither let Hezekiah make you trust in the LORD, saying, The LORD will surely deliver us: this city shall not be delivered into the hand of the king of Assyria. Harken not to Hezekiah: for thus saith the king of Assyria, Make an agreement with me by a present, and come out to me: and eat ye every one of his vine, and every one of his fig tree, and drink ye every one the waters of his own cistern; until I come and take you away to a land like your own land, a land of corn and wine, a land of bread and vineyards. Beware lest Hezekiah persuade you, saying, The LORD will deliver us. Hath any of the gods of the nations delivered his land out of the hand of the king of Assyria? Where are the gods of Hamath and Arphad? where are the gods of Sepharvaim? and have they delivered Samaria out of my hand? Who are they among all the gods of these lands, that have delivered their land out of my hand, that the LORD should deliver Jerusalem out of my hand? (Is. 36:13-20).

To Rabshakeh and his master, Sennacharib, God said, “The virgin, the daughter of Zion, hath despised thee, and laughed thee to scorn; the daughter of

Jerusalem hath shaken her head at thee. Whom hast thou reproached and blasphemed? and against whom hast thou exalted thy voice, and lifted up thine eyes on high? even against the Holy One of Israel” (Is. 37:22, 23). God then did as He said and put a hook in the nose of the old lion, Sennacharib, and a bridle on his mouth and led him back by the way he came, leaving his brood of lions behind, all dead men, all 185,000 of them.

God reveals Himself in the last verse of Nahum 2 as Jehovah of hosts, the sovereign Lord of all who is served by all creatures. Sun, moon and stars, all the powers of heaven and hell, nations and all the brute creation, Babylonian and Median armies march in His army and in obedience to His command, and therefore there is no one who can help Nineveh. Seas and storms, thunder and lightning, all the so-called powers of nature are His servants and nothing is left to come to Nineveh’s defense. Indeed, Nineveh’s river, the great River Tigris itself, was God’s servant and would be instrumental in Nineveh’s fall.

So it is always. When Israel fought the five kings of the Canaanites, the sun and moon stood still in their places on Israel’s behalf. When Deborah and Barak led Israel against Jabin king of Canaan, the stars in their courses, along with a woman and a nail, fought against Sisera. All things are for God’s people, but all things are against those who do not believe. In the case of Nineveh, however, the sun, moon and stars would not be needed. The Babylonians and Tigris, just a few of the battalions in God’s great army, would be sufficient.

What God did to Sennacharib and to Nineveh He will do to all the enemies of His people and to the great enemy himself. He is not only against Nineveh and her king but against all who are in rebellion against Him and His Christ and do evil to His people and His church. Thus, through judgment comes salvation. God uses these enemies to chastise and purify His church, and having used them, destroys them, and in destroying them gives His people everlasting peace and deliverance.

Nahum 2:13 is reminiscent of Revelation 18 and its description of the final fall of the kingdoms of this world: “How much she hath glorified herself, and lived deliciously, so much torment and sorrow give her: for she saith in her heart, I sit a queen, and am no widow, and shall see no sorrow. Therefore shall her plagues come in one day, death, and mourning, and famine;

and she shall be utterly burned with fire: for strong is the Lord God who judgeth her” (Rev. 18:7, 8).

When great Babylon falls, as did Nineveh, then will be “heard a great voice of much people in heaven, saying, Alleluia; Salvation, and glory, and honour, and power, unto the Lord our God: For true and righteous are his judgments: for he hath judged the great whore, which did corrupt the earth with her fornication, and hath avenged the blood of his servants at her hand. And again

they said, Alleluia.” Then too this word will be fulfilled: “And her smoke rose up for ever and ever” (Rev. 19:1-3).

Salvation comes through judgment first in the judgment that fell on our Savior at Calvary. It comes through the use God makes of the nations in chastising His people. It comes forever when the nations are destroyed for the everlasting deliverance of His people and to make room for them in the new heavens and the new earth. Nineveh’s fall pictures all this.

PILLAR AND GROUND OF THE TRUTH



THE PROPER METHOD OF BIBLE INTERPRETATION: THE GRAMMATICAL-HISTORICAL-SPIRITUAL METHOD (3)

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Previous article in this series: May 1, 2025, p. 274.

The Grammatical-Historical-Spiritual method of Bible interpretation is based on the orthodox view that Scripture is God’s inspired revelation to His church. The foundational principle of this method is that Scripture interprets Scripture. These points were made in the first article in this short series.

The second article explained the grammatical and historical aspects of this method of Bible interpretation. It explained why we must pay attention to a passage’s grammar and historical context, what general questions the Bible interpreter must ask of a passage, and what mistakes and dangers he or she must avoid.

This article will do the same with the spiritual aspect. It will conclude by reducing all the points noted in this and the previous article to several basic questions. The next article will explain why the Grammatical-Historical-Spiritual method is the only *proper* method of Bible interpretation.

THE SPIRITUAL ASPECT

If the Bible were merely a literary document, we could observe its grammar and historical context and do no more. But the Bible is not merely a literary document; it is God’s Word to His church, inspired by the Holy

Spirit. When reading the Bible, the main question that we must ask is, “What is God telling us? What does the Holy Spirit mean by this?”

Answering this question requires us to study the passage’s grammar and historical context. Do not think that the inspired writer (Moses, Luke, Paul) meant one thing by the passage, but the Holy Spirit has a very different meaning. The method of interpretation that many church fathers used in the early and medieval eras of church history—allegory—moves in this direction. Rather, to know the Holy Spirit’s meaning requires one to know the grammar and history, but not to *stop* with that. Other related questions must be asked.

One related question is what essential point of doctrine the passage conveys; restated, what is the abiding word of God to His church in every age? The answer to this question can fall into one of two categories. On the one hand, the passage might be revealing a truth about God and His saving work that we need to know in order to praise Him and live before Him. So one investigates which branch of theology the passage treats (theology and anthropology, for example), and then what specific topic within that branch. In the branch of theology, it might refer to God’s attributes;

of God's attributes it might refer specifically to His mercy; and more particularly, the passage might teach the everlasting and particular character of His mercy (Ps. 103:17). Or, the passage might teach us about the last times (eschatology); more particularly, about the signs of Christ's coming; even more, about the coming of antichrist; and most specifically, regarding his wickedness (2 Thess. 2:3-9). We must understand to what specific doctrine the passage refers.

On the other hand, to ask what is God's abiding word to His church in a passage is to note the passage's purpose—whether to comfort, rebuke, encourage, set forth the why and how of a godly life, or something else. This too is its doctrine.

A second related question is how the passage reveals Christ in the fullness of His person, natures, mediatorial office, and saving work. After all, Christ is the unity of all Scripture. He told the Jews "Search the Scriptures...they are they which testify of me" (John 5:39) and to the travelers to Emmaus "he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:27). Christ is the unity of all Scripture because Scripture reveals God's saving work in Jesus Christ. So how does the passage bring me to Christ and His saving grace; how does it build me up in faith?

To understand a passage in regard to its spiritual aspect requires the interpreter to do the following.

Determine which passage of Scripture we are studying, and about which we are asking these questions.

In a historical passage, take the entire incident as a whole; in an epistle, take a sentence or even part of a sentence that contains an idea on its own. In sermon making, we would say, "pick your text." We are not looking to find spiritual meaning merely in individual words, individual phrases of sentences, or even one sentence in a historical passage.

Understand the main point that the Holy Spirit is teaching in the entire book in which the passage is found. What is the main theme of the book of Proverbs, or Romans? What unique role does this book play in Scripture? (In seminary, we call this unique role its "canonical significance.") Then, having divided the book into sections, find how the book's main theme is developed in the various sections. This will enable us to take the next step.

Find the one main point that God is teaching His church in the passage. Do this by first noting the text in light of its grammar and history, then ask how the passage reveals Christ and God's saving grace. The one main point in the passage will be a narrower application of the main point of the book as a whole.

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Understand the main concepts of the text in light of Scripture. What does all Scripture say about mercy, or antichrist, or the church, or fornication, or stewardship? The text we are studying is not the only one to use these concepts. How do other texts help us define what this term means? What do they say about this concept, that the text itself does not say? What does the text add to what other texts say?

Understand the passage's main doctrine in light of the ecumenical creeds and Reformed confessions. Not every doctrine in a text is treated in these creeds and confessions, but when they are, let the Reformed confessions

guide us in understanding them.

Recognize that Scripture is God's Word, progressively revealed over several thousand years. The doctrine common to Genesis 22 (in light of Heb. 11:19), Job 19:25-27, Psalm 16, Matthew 22:32, 1 Corinthians 15, and other passages is the resurrection of the body, and the enjoyment of life with God after death. But take into account how

God progressively taught His covenant people about this doctrine throughout history. Abraham and David did not understand the resurrection as fully as Paul. If we are studying an Old Testament passage that treats the doctrine, think of what God's people understood about that doctrine when it was told them. Israel in the Old Testament was as a child in her understanding of God, in comparison to the church after Pentecost having the more mature understanding of an adult.

Explain difficult passages in light of easier ones and in light of what is clear. For instance, what is clear is that the Holy Spirit's saving work in the hearts of God's people is sovereign and irresistible work. When the Holy Spirit Himself tells us not to quench Him ("Quench not the Spirit," 1 Thess. 5:19), this cannot possibly mean that we can resist Him. And the passage that speaks of Israel resisting Him (Acts 7:51) must be referring to a work of the Holy Spirit other than His saving and sanctifying work.

When studying an Old Testament passage, look for allusions in earlier Old Testament passages (Hos. 11:1 is a clear allusion to Israel's exodus). When studying a New Testament passage, look for quotations of and allusions to Old Testament passages. When we find such, work to understand the passage in the Old Testament, then its use in the New Testament, and ask how the New Testament makes use of the Old Testament passage. For instance, does the New Testament bring in the Old Testament as the direct fulfillment of prophecy, indirect fulfillment of prophecy, or as restating the prophecy because it is not yet fulfilled? Does the New Testament passage refer to an Old Testament passage as stating a proverbial truth (1 Pet. 1:24-25)? Or does the New Testament writer use the rhetoric of an Old Testament passage to make a similar, but not identical, point (Rom. 10:6-8)?¹

Addressing all these individual matters that make up the spiritual aspect of exegesis is a daunting task. Each of the individual matters deserves further explanation and illustration, which I will not take the time to give.

From all this, two conclusions follow. First, sermon preparation involves much more than quickly looking at some Hebrew or Greek words, finding a sermon

theme, and making an outline. Respect the time that your pastor needs to make a sermon, and pray for him during the week that he do it well!

Second, while the believing child of God does not have many hours to spend in studying an individual passage, all can benefit from three things: knowing which questions to ask of a passage, making a beginning at giving the answer, and doing this consistently and regularly in our Bible study. We then will grow in both our ability to study the Bible well, and in our understanding of the depths of God's revelation to us.

REDUCING ALL THE STEPS TO THE MOST BASIC

Believers are not trained in the technical aspects of hermeneutics (principles of Bible interpretation) and exegesis (applying these principles to individual texts). This article and the previous article in this series are my attempt to state what is required in Bible study.

The professor in me might think that I have made the matter simple. After all, I reduced the content of several hours of seminary classroom instruction to two magazine articles! But the reader might well be overwhelmed yet. The two articles set forth so many steps to the study of Scripture!

This article ends, then, with boiling it all down to the most basic and essential points of Bible study.

1. Pray for understanding (Ps. 119:18).
2. Read the passage slowly and carefully. We need not necessarily read an entire chapter; but we ought to be sure that the verses we read are a unit of thought.
3. Ask what the passage means in light of its words, grammar, and historical context.
4. Ask what main doctrine the passage teaches.
5. Ask how the passage reveals Jesus Christ in His saving work.
6. Ask how the passage applies to God's people in every age and place, and therefore also to us today.
7. Thank God for His Word, and seek grace to live according to it.

1 This list is adapted from G. K. Beale, *Handbook on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament: Exegesis and Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 55-93. The list is not exhaustive.



IMPUTATION

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In this and following articles in the rubric “Taking Heed to the Doctrine,” I plan to spend an article or two explaining a number of different theological terms. These are terms that are used to explain important doctrines of Holy Scripture. Often these words are used in our Reformed confessions, in systematic theologies, and even in upper level catechism books like the “Essentials of Reformed Doctrine,” by Herman Hoeksema, which is used by high school students in the Protestant Reformed Churches. These terms are of crucial importance for a correct understanding of the truth of God’s Word. Sometimes these terms are not found in Scripture, but have been developed by the church to summarize the Bible’s teaching. One example of this is the word “trinity.” But most are taken directly from the Bible.

I want to begin our survey of theological terms with a word that has been of crucial importance in the history of the church. It was a term that was decisive in the days of the Reformation in connection with the pivotal doctrine of justification by faith alone. The term is *imputation*. There is no doctrine of justification by faith alone apart from the closely related truth of imputation. Christ’s righteousness becomes ours by imputation.

THE MEANING OF IMPUTATION

The word “impute” is similar in meaning to “reckon,” “credit,” “count,” or “ascribe.” To impute something to someone is to ascribe it to them, to reckon it to their account, to count it as theirs.

Let us imagine that someone in your congregation takes note of a large family with many school-age children and an obviously high Christian school tuition bill. In love for them, he sends a check to the school

instructing the treasurer to credit the amount of his check to the tuition obligation of this family. That is an illustration of imputation. The money for the tuition is not that of the father of the large family; it is the money of his benefactor. The money of his benefactor is applied to his tuition account as though it were his and he had paid the tuition bill. It is his by imputation.

The Bible gives us an example of imputation. The example is found in Paul’s epistle to Philemon. At the time that he wrote this brief epistle, Paul was a prisoner in Rome. While he was imprisoned, Paul received an unexpected visit from Onesimus, the runaway slave of Philemon. Philemon was a believer, likely converted through the apostle Paul’s preaching. That seems to be indicated when Paul writes that Philemon “owest unto me even thine own self besides” (v. 19b). During his visits to Paul, Onesimus was converted. To Philemon he writes, “I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds” (v. 10).

Although Onesimus was a great encouragement to Paul, he insisted that the runaway slave return to his master Philemon. Along with him, Paul sent his epistle to Philemon. In his letter, Paul included these instructions: “If he [Onesimus] hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on my account; I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it” (vv. 18-19a). Literally, when Paul writes, “put that on mine account,” he says, “impute that to me.” Although Paul had not personally wronged Philemon by taking any of his goods or owing any lost earnings, he instructed him to put any loss to his account. He would take responsibility for anything that Onesimus owed. Philemon must reckon that to Paul as though Paul himself had wronged him.

The term imputation, now, is used by Scripture

to describe our righteousness in Jesus Christ. The teaching of the gospel is that our righteousness before God is an imputed righteousness. We are not righteous in ourselves. Rather, the righteousness of Christ is reckoned to our account.

DOUBLE IMPUTATION

Reformed and Presbyterian theologians have traditionally spoken of “double imputation.” Double imputation refers to the imputation of the sins of the elect to our Lord Jesus Christ and the imputation of Christ’s perfect righteousness to believers. Both our original sin and all our actual sins are reckoned to Christ. He died enduring God’s wrath against our sins. And the fruit of His atoning death is that Christ’s righteousness is reckoned to believers.

In reality, we can speak of triple imputation. For before our sins were imputed to Christ and Christ’s righteousness to us, Adam’s transgression was imputed to the entire human race. The sin of the first Adam was imputed to all those of whom he was the head, just as the righteousness of the second Adam is imputed to all those of whom He is the Head.

The doctrine of imputation is closely related to the doctrine of headship. It was only because Adam was the head of the human race that his sin could be imputed to all his posterity. It is only because Christ is our Head, that His perfect obedience and lifelong suffering can be imputed to us. Headship carries with it very serious responsibilities—fathers take note.

Especially two errors stand opposed to the truth that Christ’s righteousness is imputed to us. Those two errors are the teachings that either righteousness is inherent in us or that we are able to acquire righteousness.

Inherent righteousness was the teaching of Pelagius. Pelagius taught that human beings are born into this world essentially good. Infants are born into the world sinless and blameless. Because they are essentially good, human beings are able to manufacture their own righteousness. The main opponent of Pelagius was Augustine, who taught the truth of original sin and total depravity.

The teaching of acquired righteousness is the teaching of both semi-Pelagianism and Arminianism. Fundamental to both errors is the heresy of the free will of the fallen sinner. By the exercise of his free will,

the sinner is able to contribute to his righteousness before God and actually do works that are pleasing to God.

Scripture rejects both the teaching of inherent righteousness and acquired righteousness. On the contrary, it teaches that the fallen sinner neither has nor can contribute to his righteousness before God. All his righteousness is that of another, the righteousness of Christ imputed by faith. As Luther taught, the sinner’s righteousness is an “alien righteousness.” By that expression, Luther did not mean that our righteousness is the righteousness of a creature from another planet. But what he meant was that our righteousness is foreign to us and is the righteousness of someone else that is attributed to us. That alien righteousness is the righteousness of Jesus Christ that is not ours naturally but is imputed to us.

That which is imputed to us is *righteousness*. Faith is not imputed to us; righteousness is imputed to us. Faith is not imputed to us, but Christ’s righteousness is imputed to us *by* or *through* faith. Faith is the means or instrument by which God imputes Christ’s righteousness to our account. The effect of that imputation is that Christ’s righteousness becomes our righteousness so that we are as righteous as Christ is righteous. Luther said, “Therefore a man can with confidence boast in Christ and say: ‘Mine are Christ’s living, doing, speaking, his suffering and dying, mine as much as if I had lived, done, spoken, suffered, and died as he did.’”¹

SCRIPTURE AND THE CONFESSIONS

The doctrine of imputation is set forth clearly both in Scripture and in the Reformed confessions. No one is Reformed who denies the doctrine of imputation.

The sacrificial system of the Old Testament gave witness to the truth of imputation. This was especially true on the annual Great Day of Atonement when the sins of the people were imputed to the scapegoat. The ceremony of imputation is described in Leviticus 16:21-22: “And Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions in

1 William R. Russell (author), Timothy F. Lull (editor), *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 155.

all their sins, putting them upon the head of the goat, and shall send him away by the hand of a fit man into the wilderness: and the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities unto a land not inhabited: and he shall let go the goat in the wilderness.” By way of type, the scapegoat represented our Lord Jesus Christ to whom our sins were imputed.

Second Corinthians 5:21 teaches double imputation: “For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.” Christ was not sinful in Himself, but He was “made to be sin” by God. And through Him and because of Him, we are “made the righteousness of God.”

The outstanding chapter in Scripture on imputation is Romans 4. In this chapter Paul teaches the doctrine of imputation by appealing to the Old Testament. He is not teaching a new doctrine but a doctrine taught clearly in the Old Testament. He appeals, first, to the teaching of David in Psalm 32, and then to the establishment of the covenant with Abraham as recorded in Genesis 15 and 17. Several times throughout Romans 4, Paul speaks of righteousness counted, reckoned, and imputed by faith. “Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness” (v. 3). “But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness” (v. 5). “Even as David also describeth the blessedness of the man, unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works.” After several other references to imputation in the chapter, the apostle concludes the chapter in verses 23 and 24, “Now it was not written for his sake alone, that it was imputed to him; but for us also, to whom it shall be imputed, if we believe on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead.”

The Reformed confessions defend the doctrine of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to believers. Q&A 60 of the Heidelberg Catechism highlights the doctrine of imputation:

Q. 60. How art thou righteous before God?

A. Only by a true faith in Jesus Christ; so that, though my conscience accuse me that I have grossly transgressed all the commandments of God, and kept none of them, and am still inclined to all evil; notwithstanding, God, without any merit of mine, but only of mere grace, *grants and imputes to me*

the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ...[emphasis added].

And what is the result of this divine imputation?

...even so, as if I never had had nor committed any sin: yea, as if I had fully accomplished all that obedience which Christ has accomplished for me; inasmuch as I embrace such benefit with a believing heart.

Article 25 of the Belgic Confession of Faith is entitled, “Faith in Jesus Christ.” The article affirms that faith itself does not justify us, but it is the instrument or means by which we embrace Christ our righteousness. The article goes on: “But Jesus Christ, *imputing* to us all His merits and so many holy works which He has done for us and in our stead, is our righteousness.” Significant reference is made in this statement to Christ’s lifelong obedience, what is sometimes referred to as His active obedience, as well as His work of dying on the cross, what is sometimes referred to as Christ’s passive obedience. Both are aspects of Christ’s perfect obedience to God that is imputed to us by faith.

Q&A 70-72 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism clearly set forth the truth that our righteousness before God is an imputed righteousness.

Q. 70. What is justification?

A. Justification is an act of God’s free grace unto sinners, in which he pardoneth all their sins, accepteth and accounteth their persons righteous in his sight; not for any thing wrought in them, or done by them, but only for the perfect obedience and full satisfaction of Christ, by God *imputed to them*, and received by faith alone [emphasis added].

Throughout his writings, the great Reformer John Calvin emphasized the truth of imputation. Writing in the *Institutes*, Calvin says,

From this it is also evident that we are justified before God solely by the intercession of Christ’s righteousness. This is equivalent to saying that man is not righteous in himself but because the righteousness of Christ is communicated to him *by imputation*—something worth carefully noting (3.11.23, 1:753) [emphasis added].

And in another place, Calvin speaks of the “wonderful exchange,” which is the exchange of our sins for Christ’s everlasting righteousness.

This is the wonderful exchange which, out of his measureless benevolence, he has made with us; that,

becoming Son of man with us, he has made us sons of God with him; that, by his descent to earth, he has prepared an ascent to heaven for us; that, by taking on our mortality, he has conferred his immortality upon us; that, accepting our weakness, he has strengthened us by his power; that, by receiving our poverty unto himself, he has transferred his wealth to us; that, taking the weight of our iniquity upon himself (which oppressed us), he has clothed us with his righteousness (4.17.2, 2:1362, Battles ed.).

Since our righteousness and salvation is by imputation, since the One who stands in our place and

endures the wrath of God that we deserve has been sent by God, accomplishes the will of God, and reconciles us to God, God and God alone must receive the glory for our salvation. If we do not manufacture our own righteousness and if we do not perform any works that contribute to produce our righteousness, but our righteousness is the gift of God imputed to us by faith, God must be glorified for our salvation. The doctrine of imputation stands in the service of the glory of God.



THE WITHHOLDING OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

FROM A BRIEF EXPLANATION OF THE CHURCH ORDER BY JOHANNES JANSEN*

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Article 76: "Such as obstinately reject the admonition of the consistory, and likewise those who have committed a public or otherwise gross sin, shall be suspended from the Lord's Supper. And if he, having been suspended, after repeated admonitions, shows no signs of repentance, the consistory shall at last proceed to the extreme remedy, namely, excommunication, agreeably to the form adopted for that purpose according to the Word of God. But no one shall be excommunicated except with advice of the classis."

The withholding of the Lord's Supper was immediately instituted in the Reformation by [John] Calvin himself in Geneva. In the Church Order of Geneva it was therefore ordained that all who walked not as a Christian and refused to heed the admonition should be banned from the Lord's Supper and, by perseverance and impenitence, should be cut off. His example was followed almost everywhere in the Reformed churches; [Johannes] á Lasco took it up as a disciplinary measure in the refugee church in London; the French churches

in the articles of the Synod of Paris in 1565; and the Reformed churches in the Netherlands at the first synod, namely in Emden (1571) in Article 30: "Everyone who stubbornly rejects the admonitions of the consistory shall be kept from the fellowship of the Lord's Supper, and, having once been barred, should he after many admonitions show no sign of penitence, steps shall be taken leading to excommunication."¹ This article has been expanded by the Synods of Middelburg (1581)²

* The following is a translation of Johannes Jansen, *Korte Verklaring van de Kerkenordening* [A Brief Explanation of the Church Order] (Amsterdam: J. H. Kok, 1923).

1 Quoted in Richard De Ridder, ed., *The Church Orders of the Sixteenth Century Reformed Churches of the Netherlands Together with Their Social, Political, and Ecclesiastical Context* (Grand Rapids: Calvin Theological Seminary, 1987), 118.

2 Article 62 of this synod reads: "One who obstinately rejects the admonition of the consistory or who has committed a public or otherwise gross sin shall be barred from the Lord's Supper. If he, having been barred, after several admonitions

and of The Hague (1586)³ but has essentially been retained until now. The main issues are the following:

1. *In which cases the Lord's Supper will be withheld.* The Synod of Emden (1571) mentioned only one case: "Everyone who stubbornly rejects the admonitions of the consistory." But the Synod of Middelburg (1581) added a second case: "or who has committed a public or otherwise gross sin."⁴ So in two cases, which have remained unchanged since.

The first case refers to a secret sin, whereby first the brotherly [exhortation] and, after it proved fruitless, also the ecclesiastical exhortation proved to be in vain. If first the brotherly exhortation in a first and then also in a second instance, according to Matthew 18:15, 16, has failed, and when communication of this failure has been made to the consistory, they must not immediately begin withholding the Lord's Supper! The consistory must first investigate whether the charge is justified; and if so, admonish the accused, not once, but repeatedly, to confess his guilt. If the admonition of the consistory is successful, then ecclesiastical discipline is prevented and the sinner according to Matthew 18:17 is won. But in case he "obstinately reject[s] the admonition of the consistory," he will be turned away from the Lord's Supper. It is only with stubbornness, that is, with persistent impenitence and lack of conversion, that the first act of discipline enters into an actual and narrow sense, namely the disciplinary withholding of the Lord's Supper. This stubbornness can be a more negative resistance if he does not contradict but continues tacitly,

shows no sign of repentance, the extreme remedy, namely excommunication, shall finally be applied, following the form accepted by the congregation. But no one shall be excommunicated except with the previous advice of classis." Cf. De Ridder, *Church Orders*, 282.

3 Article 69 of this synod reads: "One who obstinately rejects the admonition of the consistory or who has committed a public or otherwise gross sin shall be barred from the Lord's Supper; and if he, having been barred, after several admonitions shows no sign of repentance, the remedy, namely excommunication, shall finally be taken, following the form prepared for this conformable to the Word of God. No one shall be excommunicated except without the advice of classis." Cf. De Ridder, *Church Orders*, 360.

4 The quotation is from Article 62 of this synod. Cf. De Ridder, *Church Orders*, 281.

or a more positive resistance if he shows himself to be unrepentant in word and deed, but that stubbornness is what counts here. Whoever confesses and forsakes his transgression will receive mercy. For the most serious sin there is forgiveness, provided there is sincere repentance. A sinner is lost not on account of his sin, but on account of his unbelief, his impenitence, his stubbornness. That is why he is suspended from the Lord's Supper.

The second case is that someone has committed a public or otherwise gross sin. If this is established after an investigation before the consistory, they immediately place the sinner under censure. There were even those who wanted to go further and immediately apply the ban [excommunication] to such gross sinners. But the ecclesiastical assemblies would hear nothing of it. Such gross sinners were to be immediately kept away from the Lord's Supper, but not excommunicated. In particularly difficult cases, a consistory may, if necessary, ask the classis for advice.

The question has sometimes been asked whether the Lord's Supper may be postponed for a while because of a turmoil in the congregation. A consistory does not proceed quickly, but it can still happen that a congregation is so upset about some matter that it is advisable to move or postpone the Lord's Supper. It was argued, which also holds true against the Roman interdict, that the innocent are then punished with the guilty. But this is not true, for such a postponement of the Lord's Supper is in a strict sense not discipline, but a precaution, to watch that the Lord's table is not profaned and God's name is not blasphemed.

2. *What character this withholding bears.* This withholding from the Lord's Supper is the first act of discipline in a narrow sense. It is also called the provisional excommunication or "little ban." The second act of discipline in a strict sense is then the definitive excommunication or the "great ban," namely the absolute exclusion from the congregation. The withholding of the Lord's Supper here therefore has a disciplinary (chastening) character.

There is also a withholding of the Lord's Supper, which is not really a means of discipline and yet often occurs, e.g., in the case of someone who committed a public, offensive sin, but sincerely repents, yet to take

away the offense the Lord's Supper is withheld one or more times; or when a serious and complicated disciplinary case did in principle come to a resolution, but being so close to the Lord's Supper that it could not be completed; or when a serious disciplinary case arises just before the Lord's Supper and an initial conviction of guilt is established but conclusive evidence is not yet available; then in such cases also the Lord's Supper must be withheld. This is then a "simple or temporary withholding," which is not of a disciplinary nature. Someone may abstain from the Lord's Supper of their own accord. But it may also be necessary for the consistory seriously to discourage such a person from taking the Lord's Supper, leaving the decision to the individual; yes, even that the consistory definitely denies or forbids the use of the Lord's Supper so that the person concerned then has to submit. The legal basis then does not lie in the stubbornness of the sinner, but in the calling to watch for the holiness of the table and the name of the Lord.

But the withholding of the Lord's Supper according to Article 76 has a *disciplinary* (chastening) character and is also called the *excommunicatio minor*, that is, the lesser excommunication or minor ban. It is a *lesser* excommunication for two reasons: 1. Because it only denies the *use*, not the *right* to and *possession* of membership. A censured person does not lose *possession* (κτησις), but only the *use* (υρησις) of membership. 2. Because it does deprive the *use* of the *main* rights of membership, e.g., to participate in the Lord's Supper, and the passive and active ecclesiastical vote, i.e., they may not be elected to the office of elder or deacon, nor participate in voting; yet not the use and enjoyment of *all* rights, e.g., the right to stay in an almshouse, or a seat in the church. Exceptions have sometimes been made with regard to the right to vote for ecclesiastical administration and they were then allowed to vote to appoint ecclesiastical administrators.⁵ But that is

wrong. A censured person loses the use of the Lord's Supper and of the participation in the government of the church, namely of the passive and active right to vote. It is done by the consistory alone, without notifying the congregation, and is therefore called the "silent censure." Indeed, it precedes the "three stages" of which the next article refers.

3. *What must be done in case of impenitence after the withholding:* "And if he, having been suspended, after repeated admonitions, shows no signs of repentance, the consistory shall at last proceed to the extreme remedy, namely, excommunication, agreeably to the form adopted for that purpose according to the Word of God. But no one shall be excommunicated except with advice of the classis." This article discusses only the case where the barred person remains impenitent. It may also be the case that the person censured by the withholding and the accompanying admonitions does come to repentance and shows satisfactory signs of penance. Then he must, following Article 75, "become reconciled with the congregation," as they used to say; whether by public reconciliation before the whole congregation, or by secret reconciliation before the consistory or before a committee of the consistory, with communication from the pulpit. But here there is only the negative consequence, namely that he does not prove penitent.

After the withholding, therefore, admonitions must take place again. The act of withholding is carried out and surrounded by admonitions. It must be preceded by admonitions, it must be accompanied by admonitions, and, if humiliation does not take place soon, admonitions must follow. How many admonitions still have to follow is not stated. The Synod of Emden (1571) said: "many admonitions."⁶ It says here: "repeated admonitions." A general expression. The application in each specific case is left to the consistory. But it does mean that it will be difficult to have too many exhortations. The sinner must be admonished to the utmost. It has to do with the salvation of the sinner.

However, if all these admonitions are of no avail, "[the consistory] shall at last proceed to the extreme remedy." "At last," that is, after all these admonitions have been

⁵ The language of "ecclesiastical administration" and "administrators" is not familiar to us today, but refers to an administrative board under the oversight of the church council that took care of financial matters (today, for example, a bookkeeper), the facility (today, for example, a janitor and building committee), and archives (today, for example, an archivist). My thanks to Profs. B. Gritters and B. Huizinga for their insight on this matter.

⁶ The quotation is from Article 30 of this synod. Cf. De Ridder, *Church Orders*, 118.

fruitless. The “extreme remedy,” that is, the last means to bring him to repentance, is the *excommunicatio major* or the greater excommunication, namely, not merely a shutting out *ex communione coenae* (exclusion from the Lord’s Supper only), but more a shutting out *ex communione ecclesiae* (a shutting out of the communion of the church itself),⁷ also called “the ban.”

The excommunication must take place “agreeably to the form adopted for that purpose according to the Word of God,” thus according to the Form for Excommunication. Initially there was no form for excommunication. It was left to the minister. Only the Synod of Emden (1571), at the end of Article 31, determined that the minister should explain broadly the use and purpose of the ban and admonish the faithful not to have overly familiar and unnecessary conversation with the exiled one to humble him.⁸ The Synod of Middelburg (1581) drew up a short one-page form, which was not made compulsory but could serve as a model. But the next synod, at The Hague

7 Jansen distinguishes here between two Latin phrases that literally mean “out of the communion of the supper” and “out of the communion of the church.”

8 Article 31 of this church order reads: “The minister shall fully explain the use and the purpose of the ban and shall admonish the believers not to have any overly familiar or unnecessary conversation and company with the banned person, but to shun his company mainly to the end that the banned or excluded one, being ashamed, may earnestly consider conversion.” Cf. De Ridder, *Church Orders*, 119.

(1586), has introduced the present form. It defines the ban thus: “...that for the aforesaid reasons we have excommunicated, and by these do excommunicate N. from the church of God, and from fellowship with Christ, and the holy sacraments, and from all the spiritual blessings and benefits which God promiseth to and bestows upon His church, so long as he obstinately and impenitently persists in his sins....”

Finally, it says: “But no one shall be excommunicated except with advice of the classis.” Here is already stated the *principle* that advice must be sought before cutting off. In Article 77 there is added *when* this advice is to be requested. Every local church has the formal right to cut off anyone without advice from the classis. But, out of caution, they mutually agreed to supervise each other. It could happen that a consistory would damage the discipline through exaggeration and haste. And now they limit their power and freedom in advance, and set themselves the duty to ask the advice of the classis before cutting off. Not as if, as in a case of appeal, [the classis] has to hear the person himself and investigate the matter themselves in order to make a decision! Asking for this advice is not an appeal, but serves to check and control the action of the consistory, so that it may have more certainty that the disciplinary action is on the right track. The classis therefore does not bind itself in case of appeal. The advice is not a pre-judgment on the appeal. If an appeal is made, the classis can thoroughly investigate the case and issue a final judgment.

STRENGTH OF YOUTH



REMEMBER YOUR BAPTISM

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The strength of youth is Jesus Christ. He is our strength and song, and He is become our salvation (Ex. 15:2; Is. 12:2). And into Him we have been baptized (Rom. 6:3).

This article is about remembering our baptism, which Jesus has appointed for our strengthening in Him. When is the last time you remembered yours?

The story is told:

[Martin Luther] had hours during which he was confused about everything—about the Reformation, about his faith, even about the work of Jesus Christ Himself—hours when he knew of nothing else to help him (and help him it did) save the writing in chalk on his table of the two words: *Baptizatus sum* [I have been baptized]!¹

Article 34 of the Belgic Confession says: “Neither doth this baptism avail us only at the time when the water is poured upon us and received by us, but also through the whole course of our life.” If these things are so, surely we ought to remember our baptism (and the preaching ought to call it to our mind too, not only when the sacrament is administered). But we do not remember it as much as we should. Perhaps one reason is we tend to have too low a view of the sacrament.

There are misconceptions about baptism and the power of it, or a supposed lack thereof, that do not help. One figures the water itself does the work of saving. This is practically the view of anyone (regardless of denomination, be it Roman Catholic or Reformed) who trusts in the water itself for his salvation without faith in Jesus Christ. There were many in Jesus’ day who boasted of their circumcision but would not repent and believe in the Messiah standing before them. The problem with remembering your baptism with this misconception is you end up remembering the water but not Christ—but apart from Christ baptism is nothing.

Another figures baptism is nothing more than a ceremony that happened a long time ago and it doesn’t really matter now. Public confession of faith is what really matters (but which one is a sacrament?) and your baptism is practically left on the shelf to collect dust. This misconception does not tend to remembering your baptism, because if baptism is nothing more than a ceremony of the past and does not avail anything in the present, what is the point of remembering it?

Far more is baptism—it is a sacrament. It was appointed by Jesus Christ Himself: the church did not come up with it; Jesus gave it to the church and told the church to administer it. Ordinary water, from the Jordan River or the sink in the church kitchen, is consecrated by the word of institution, making baptism a sacrament

and unlike any other washing with water. This is holy water, not because the water itself is anything more or less than water, but because it has been set apart by the Word for a holy use and a holy end. The sacrament is not just water: it is water plus the Word, a washing to which the promise is attached. As a sacrament, baptism is a holy, visible sign and seal. It is a real means of grace whereby the Lord not only presents to our senses Christ and all His benefits but confirms us in the salvation we have in Him. As the Belgic Confession says in Article 33: “For [the sacraments] are visible signs and seals of an inward and invisible thing, by means whereof God works in us by the power of the Holy Ghost.”

Holy baptism is a sign and seal of God’s covenant of grace with believers and their seed, His promise to be your God in all three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a promise you can bank on. It is a sign and seal of Jesus Christ in all His benefits not only for others but for you, baptized child of God, personally: the complete forgiveness of all your sins in His blood, perfect righteousness in His obedience, adoption by the Father for Jesus’ sake, union with Christ in His death to sin and resurrection to new life, sanctification by the Spirit, the hope of glory. The main thing is not you or me doing anything, but what God has done for us through His Son and what has happened to us in Christ. We do not baptize ourselves, we *are* baptized (passive voice). What follows, as our part in the covenant, is the new obedience to which we are through baptism sweetly obliged as members of Christ and children of the Father.

Remembering your baptism means, for one, remembering that the waters of baptism ran over your face, and it was your name, personally, that was spoken. How old you were when you were baptized does not matter (“How can I remember my baptism if I was baptized when an infant?”). It did not make a difference to God when He told Abraham to circumcise babies that were only eight days out of the womb—to give them the token of His covenant, the sign and seal of the righteousness of faith. If you were baptized, you were baptized. You were brought to share in the waters, and these waters never dry. When you were baptized, your name, personally, was spoken: “[Read your name here], I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.” As much as if Jesus Christ Himself applied

1 Karl Barth, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism* (London: SCM Press, 1963), 61-62.

the waters to you and spoke your name. The minister is only that, a minister, ordained by the church to administer this sacrament that Jesus appointed. When the minister speaks the word, whether at baptism or at the Lord's Supper, it is the word of Christ. Remember your baptism.

Remember your baptism in faith, recognizing in your baptism, in the water and the Word added to it, the promise of God, Jesus Christ in all His benefits, not only for others but for you too. Baptism is nothing without Him but, because of Him, it means everything. And if when you hear "in faith" you say, "But here is my problem: the weakness of my faith, the unbelief that I feel in me—Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief!"—remember your baptism anyway, because Jesus, knowing our need full well, has given us this sacrament as a means of assuring us who are of little faith. He does not break the bruised reed or quench the smoking flax.

The glory of baptism is that it witnesses and seals to us something objective, something that does not depend on me, something that remains sure in spite of me. It witnesses and seals to us a promise that will never put us to shame. The truth and substance of baptism is not me, my feelings, or my performance (for I am fickle and unstable) but Jesus Christ, what God has done for me through Him, my union with Him, what has happened to me in Him, all as surely as I was washed in these waters. And nothing can take that away from you. No one can unbaptize you. You have been washed. Remember your baptism.

Great is the comfort this sacrament affords us, and we young people and young adults need it. Trial, temptation, suffering, and affliction reach us too. I think of the brother or sister trapped in anxiety or the darkness and emptiness of depression. Of the high schooler being sorely tempted to go to that party he knows he ought not attend. Of the Christian college student bombarded by unbelief, up against the world, feeling doubt creeping in, scared and unsure. Of the child of God devastated by a broken home. Of the young person crippled by the evil done to him by another human being. Of the young adult with her face in her hands, her conscience accusing her because of what she has done. Of the prodigal son running away from the Father.

My brother, my sister, you have been baptized! And there is no time or situation in which your baptism does not have a word for you. It calls the prodigal to come home. Where have you come from and where are you going? Return to the Father, for He will receive you with open arms in a mercy greater than you ever imagined. There is a word for the Christian who has fallen into sin: "And if we sometimes through weakness fall into sin, we must not therefore despair of God's mercy, nor continue in sin, since baptism is a seal and undoubted testimony that we have an eternal covenant of grace with God" (Baptism Form). Child of God (yes, you!), displeased with yourself because of your sins, longing for mercy ("God, be merciful to me, a sinner!")—you have been baptized; you are forgiven. You can stop trying to atone for sin yourself; you can stop with the penance; you are free to lift your face from your hands, for you have been washed in the blood of Christ and His blood covers it all. All this Christian life—in the valleys, in the struggle against sin, in the throes of mortification—our baptism remains, and by it we are assured that forgiveness, righteousness, and eternal life remain ours in Jesus Christ into whom we have been baptized.

Our baptism testifies to us that the God who made us is become our Father in Jesus Christ. A Father who loved you freely before you were born: you do not have to work for it or be good enough for it (Eph. 1:4, 5). A Father who spared not His own Son for you (Rom. 8:32). A Father into whose bosom you may cast your burden, for He cares for you, and will never leave you nor forsake you (1 Pet. 5:7). A Father who is with you when you must pass through the waters (Is. 43:2). A Father who bears you in His arms the whole way (Is. 46:3, 4), holding you close to His heart, bringing you to the home He has opened up for us through Jesus Christ who is not ashamed to call us brethren (Heb. 2:11).

And through baptism we are admonished and obliged unto a new obedience. For "Christ bore our sins in His own body on the tree," not for us to continue in sin, but "that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness" (1 Pet. 2:24). We have been raised with Christ, that we should walk in newness of life (Rom. 6:3-4). Things have changed. Things are become new (2 Cor. 5:17). Now it is a life of daily repentance, the putting off of the old and the putting on of the new.

What are you looking at on your iPhone? What would I find in your search history? Remember your baptism. Is that what the baptized-into-Christ ought to set before their eyes? Flee fornication, and offer yourselves and your members to God, for you have been baptized: you with your body are not yours but the Lord's who bought you at a price (1 Cor. 6:20).

How about our behavior online and on social media? Act, speak, text, share, post according to who you are in Christ, for you have been washed. It is according to our baptism now that we must walk in submission to our Lord who has united us to Himself. Love God and

serve your neighbor, for this baptism marks us out as kings and priests in Christ unto God upon the earth, in whatever station and calling God has placed you. "Therefore let all Christians regard their baptism as the daily garment that they are to wear all the time. Every day they should be found in faith and with its fruits, suppressing the old creature and growing up in the new."²

2 Martin Luther, *Large Catechism*, in *The Book of Concord*, R. Kolb and T. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000).

CHURCH AND STATE



THE SUPREME COURT CONSIDERS LGBTQ CURRICULUM

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In recent years, the United States Supreme Court under Chief Justice John Roberts has issued a substantial number of opinions interpreting the freedoms guaranteed by the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution.¹ For many years, the Supreme Court issued relatively few rulings on this area. The Court maintained a position that the government could impose on the exercise of religion as long as it was for a legitimate purpose and the law was of general applicability.²

The Court had ruled against prayer in public schools in 1962,³ and most cases sought to balance the rights protected in the Free Exercise Clause with the protections of the Establishment Clause. The

Establishment Clause prohibits the government from endorsing or establishing one religion over another. The general focus of jurisprudence in this area seemed to be ensuring that the tenets of the traditional Christian religion practiced by the majority was not imposed on others. The Courts did not allow teaching of creation or even intelligent design in public schools, but freely allowed the teaching of evolution.⁴ The Courts never seemed to consider that allowing a teaching such as evolution is effectively allowing for establishment of a counter-Christian religion.

The Roberts Court has seemed to take a different approach in recent years. On the one hand, the Court has upset religious conservatives with rulings such as those recognizing gay rights to marriage,⁵ and finding that discrimination based on sexual orientation⁶ or

1 The First Amendment provides "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

2 *Employment Division v. Smith*, 494 U.S. 872 (1990).

3 *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962).

4 *Edwards v. Aguillard*, 482 U.S. 578 (1987).

5 *Obergefell v. Hodges*, 576 U.S. 644 (2015).

6 *Bostock v. Clayton County*, 590 U.S. 644 (2020).

transgenderism⁷ was prohibited by Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. However, at the same time, the Court has expanded protections for Christians and other religions. For example, the Court has ruled that states cannot force Christians to perform work celebrating gay marriages.⁸ The Court has even found that corporations have free exercise protections, and cannot be forced to provide abortive contraceptives to their employees.⁹

It has been some time since the court issued a ruling dealing with the First Amendment's Free Exercise and Establishment Clauses. In one of the last of such cases, which was discussed previously in this rubric, the Court found that a high school coach had a right openly to pray at football games, after he had been fired for doing so.¹⁰ The Court has recently agreed to hear arguments in a couple of cases that bear watching to see how far the Roberts Court will go in protecting religious freedom.

The case that we will focus on in this article involves students at a public school in Maryland. Although this case comes in the context of a public school, the question at hand is really the extent to which the government can impose ideologies on citizens. In particular, the case questions whether the government can mandate providing information to children without parental knowledge or consent.

The appellants in the case are parents of children in the Montgomery County Public Schools in Maryland. In the fall of 2022, the school board made certain ideological books mandatory reading for children. The books were on sexuality and gender transitioning and were required reading for children beginning in pre-kindergarten. These books are referred to as the "Pride Storybooks." The book for pre-K four year olds is about Pride parades and encourages the children to search for things such as an "intersex flag," a "[drag] queen," and an image of an LGBTQ activist. The book for fifth graders teaches that sex and gender do not

need to make sense and that doctors only "guess about our gender" at birth. The books say that its "hurtful" to say that a child is born either a boy or a girl. While the school board initially indicated that parents would be notified when these books were read and that they could opt their children out of reading these books, the board soon reversed its position and stated that no further notice would be provided and that no opt-outs would be tolerated.

The parents of the children objected to this policy. The parents argue that Maryland has an opt-out policy and claim that the Pride Storybooks are the only part of the curriculum for which opt-outs are not allowed. The parents include Muslims, Ukranian Orthodox, and Catholics who object for religious reasons, stating that the teaching in the books is contrary to the religious instruction they give their children. Even the elementary schools' principals protested that the books were not age appropriate and seek to "shame students who disagree." The parents claim that the board responded to their concerns by accusing them of "promoting hate," and compared them to "white supremacists" and "xenophobes."

Seeking relief from this policy, the parents filed a petition with the district court. The district court denied the requested injunction, finding that parents did not demonstrate that the board's policy burdened their religious exercise. The district court reasoned that parents could counter the instruction afterwards, send their kids to private school, or homeschool.

The parents then appealed to the federal 4th Circuit Court of Appeals, and argued that the board's policy violates their right to Free Exercise of religion. The parents presented arguments based on four lines of Supreme Court cases to argue that the board's actions call for strict scrutiny under the law. Strict scrutiny is a term used to refer to the highest level of judicial review to determine the constitutionality of laws or government actions. The courts will normally defer to the government, but if a government action burdens a fundamental right such as the freedom of religion, then the burden shifts to the government to show that the action is 1) justified to further a compelling government interest, 2) narrowly tailored to achieve that interest, and 3) the least restrictive means to achieve that interest.

The 4th Circuit noted that the Free Exercise Clause

7 *R.G. & G.R. Harris Funeral Homes Inc. v. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission*, 590 U.S. ____ (2020).

8 *Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission*, 584 U.S. 617 (2018).

9 *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores Inc.* 573 U.S. 682 (2014).

10 Nathan Vis, "May Coach K Pray" *Standard Bearer*, vol. 100, no. 10 (Feb. 15, 2024), 261.

prohibits not only direct coercion by the government, but also “indirect coercion or penalties on the free exercise of religion.”¹¹ The court noted that, in the case of the football coach who was fired for praying, the government action clearly burdened the coach’s religious practice of praying. However, the court found that in this case, the parents did not meet the burden of showing that the school board’s actions “compels the Parents or their children to *change* their religious beliefs or conduct, either at school or elsewhere.” Based

11 *Mahmoud v. McKnight*, 4th Circuit Ct. of Appeals ruling, at 20, citing *Lying v. Nw. Indian Cemetery Protective Ass’n*, 485 U.S. 439, 450 (1988).

on this, the 4th Circuit also denied the parents’ request for an injunction.

The parents filed a petition for certiorari with the United States Supreme Court, which has been granted. We will watch this case with interest, because it will give a good indication about how far the Roberts Court will go to protect the religious liberty of individuals from infringement by the government. This case is particularly interesting because the underlying conflict is whether the government can require us to abandon our beliefs in exchange for participation in government programs or services offered by the government. Lord willing, we will review the outcome of this case in a future installment.

REMEMBERING THE DAYS OF OLD



PIPE FAMILY STORY

MR. JAMES HOLSTEGE

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

We express a sincere thank you to those of you who have submitted your family histories for publication in The Standard Bearer under the rubric “Remembering The Days of Old.” Your efforts involved much research and collaboration among your own relatives, for which we are grateful. Some of you were sought out by me, some of you sought me out. We encourage any interested family to contact us. We want to hear from you and give you the opportunity to tell of God’s unfolding grace.

Submitted by Mr. Tim Pipe, Sr., a member of Southeast PRC in Wyoming, Michigan.

By most accounts, this story is fairly normal. It starts with two parents, Gerrit and Mary Agnes, born in the early 1900s, raising three boys in an ordinary house in a quiet neighborhood in the southeast part of Grand Rapids, Michigan. Gerrit was a charter member of First Protestant Reformed Church (PRC),

was an employee at Steelcase and worked many years for the Reformed Free Publishing Association serving as business manager. Gerrit Pipe’s grandparents were John Pyp or Pijp (there have been several variations on the spelling of *Pipe*), and Henriette Hanko. They came to the United States in 1895. John was a tailor by trade. The family lived in a brick yard on Visser Ct. and attended Dennis Ave. Christian Reformed Church (CRC). Gerrit’s parents were Frederick William Pipe and Elizabeth Nousen. Frederick was born February 18, 1878 in Appingedam, Groningen, the Netherlands. Gerrit’s mother, Elizabeth, was born in 1886 in Lakkerland, Zuid Holland, Netherlands. Four children including Gerrit were born in this marriage. Elizabeth died at a young age of 25 from complications during childbirth. Frederick was remarried to Grace VanDam, also born in the Netherlands, and they had four children. A son Thomas died at 11 years. The family attended a Christian Reformed church. The children were educated at Baxter Christian School, the family



Gerrit and Mary Agnes Pipe

remained in the Grand Rapids area and were charter members of First PRC.

What makes this story unique is the fact that Mary Agnes Kelly was Irish Roman Catholic and the courtship with Gerrit took seven years. Her parents were Joseph Henry Kelly and Isobel Grace McCrorey. The McCrorey's were from Cork, County Cork, in the Republic of Ireland. Joseph's father was Patrick Kelly, born in 1847 in Dundalk, Northern Ireland. All were Roman Catholic. Patrick left for America in 1862 during the potato famine, settled in Kalamazoo and married Mary Anne Cudahy. They raised a family of five girls and one boy, and followed a Catholic practice, with all the girls' first name being Mary. Mary Agnes Kelly was of this family. Both her father and grandfather were long-time employees of the Pere Marquette railroad.

The relationship between Gerrit and Agnes began with a hospital visit that Gerrit made to see his brother Thomas. Thomas had been hospitalized with a ruptured appendix. Thomas died from this incident. Records indicate that Agnes, after becoming a registered nurse, was also the first county health nurse in Kent County. She was one of the nurses providing care for Thomas. Gerrit and Agnes became friends and the relationship developed in spite of difficulties. Agnes's family was strictly Roman Catholic and did not approve of the relationship nor the resulting marriage. Through this difficult time, God worked a love in Agnes's heart for the Reformed faith. She was catechized by Rev. Herman Hoeksema in his study. Her training was at First PRC because Gerrit was a member of First PRC. This

instruction continued through several years with the result that Agnes joined First PRC. The couple married March 31, 1945 in a small ceremony conducted by Rev. H. DeWolf and held in Hoeksema's study.

Agnes's family shunned her because of the marriage. It took several years before the relationship reached an amicable level. The couple was blessed with the birth of three boys, twins Ted and Tim, and Bill. An almost tragic event occurred with the young twins. While playing in the basement, the twins took a container of gasoline from a cabinet and began to pour it into another container. It was done near a hot water heater and the pilot light ignited the fumes. There was an explosion. The twins were severely burned and required months of hospitalization. Their condition must have been critical. One evening, early in the hospitalization, an attending Catholic priest, observing the twins, performed last rites. The boys recovered, required rehabilitation, and led normal lives.

It should be noted that Agnes's faith continued to develop. She loved the Reformed doctrines and became quite knowledgeable. The couple transferred their membership, in 1945, to Fourth Protestant Reformed Church now known as Southeast Protestant Reformed Church (SEPRC) and they were both active in Bible studies, often in leadership roles. Agnes was an active member of Adams Christian School Mothers' Club. Gerrit served often as an elder, a delegate to PRC synods, on Adams school board, and was a member of the Reformed Free Publishing Association (board, *Standard Bearer* mail clerk, and business manager). Serving the 1953 Synod in a special way, he was assigned as a delegate of Classis East to a synodical committee that worked on the "Declaration of Principles." This significant document sets forth the PRC's understanding of and convictions concerning what the Reformed creeds and church order teach about grace, the preaching, the covenant, and church government. The document was intended to be used "only by the Mission Committee and the missionaries for the organization of prospective churches...." This work was preceded by the threat of the conditional covenant. This doctrine was advocated by the post-war (WWII) immigrants, many having joined the PRC. The tragic split of 1953 soon followed. In 1962, Gerrit was also involved with a protest against a decision of the Southeast PRC elders concerning how families who had left the denomination in 1953 could

rejoin. The resulting decisions of classis/synod established the new procedure.¹ The splits of 1953 and 1962 were heart-breaking for Gerrit and Agnes, having lost several close friends.

The couple were longtime members of SEPRC until they were taken to glory, Gerrit in 1987 and Agnes in 1988. It should also be noted that the Gerrit Pipe's personal ancestry almost went silent around 1945... single and no children. But then Gerrit, who was 41 years old, married Agnes. The three boys, Ted, Tim, and Bill are members of SEPRC, having also served many terms as elder, deacon, and school board member. The boys have married and have many children and grandchildren, some who still attend SEPRC. Ted married Jane Brummel, Tim married Lois Engelsma, and Bill married Karen Hoekstra. Jane and Karen were from the Hull, Iowa area.

1 For more on this history and Gerrit's involvement, see David J. Engelsma's *Battle for Sovereign Grace in the Covenant* (Jenison: RFP, 2013), pp. 91ff.

The unconditional covenant defines how God deals with His children. God is sovereign and gracious in His appointment of families to the covenant (see the improbable story of Gerrit and Agnes) and He is faithful in maintaining the covenant in the line of families. This covenant teaches that God, and God alone, establishes, and maintains His covenant of grace with His elect people in Jesus Christ. *All that God's people are and can do they are and do as the fruit of His grace* (1 Cor. 15:10). Moses' instruction to the Israelites serves as a good reminder.

And these words which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart. And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and thou shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes. And thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates (Deut. 6: 6-9).

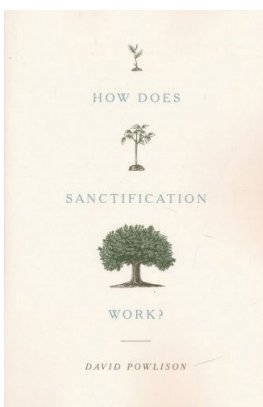
BRING THE BOOKS...



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 Rev. Ryan Barnhill, pastor of Heritage PRC in Sioux Falls, South Dakota.



How Does Sanctification Work?, by David Powlison. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017. Pp. 123.

Author David Powlison does the church of Christ a service in this brief work on God's work of sanctification. This is a down-to-earth, easy-to-understand treatment of a topic that in Reformed and Presbyterian circles has been studied and

discussed for many years.

If you are looking for a dogmatics-like treatment of sanctification, this is not your book. If you are in the

search for a thorough examination of sanctification, a detailed spelling out of its relation to other doctrines (including justification), and an in-depth historical study of the church's understanding of it in the past centuries, then you will be disappointed by this book. But, in fairness to the author, he never intended his work to be this kind of treatment.

Instead, the book approaches the doctrine of sanctification from a more day-to-day or practical viewpoint, which is the value of the book. It aims at what the author himself calls "street-level" living. Early on, Powlison emphasizes that terms like sanctification, saint, holy, and holiness "frequently conjure up a variety of odd, hyper-spiritual images" (14). The author continues:

Becoming more holy does not mean that you become ethereal, ghostly, and detached from the storms of life. It means you are becoming a wiser human being. You are learning how to deal well with your money, your sexuality, your job. You are becoming a better friend and family member. When you talk, your words communicate more good sense, more gravitas, more joy, more reality. You are learning to pray honestly, bringing who God really is to the reality of human need (14).

Powlison's instruction is practical, but does not slide into the ditch of moralism; his teaching is concrete and real to life situations, and is not the mere "be a good person and do good things" drivel that fills so many books and pulpits today.

Powlison distinguishes sanctification in three ways. First, "[i]n the past tense, your sanctification has already happened. You are a saint...God decisively acted by making you his very own in Christ. You have been saved" (13). Second, "[i]n the present tense, your sanctification is now being worked out. God is working throughout your life—on a scale of days, years, and decades—to remake you into the likeness of Jesus. You are being progressively sanctified. You are being saved"

(p. 13). Third, "[i]n the future tense, your sanctification will be perfected.... You will see God's face when he decisively acts to complete his work of conforming you to the image of Jesus.... You will be saved" (13-14). Powlison then goes on to state that his book deals with sanctification in the "present tense."

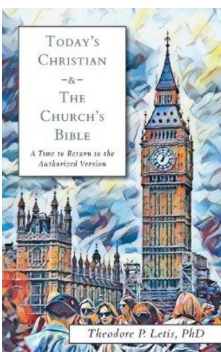
Regarding the present tense of sanctification, Powlison frequently points out that God uses many truths in His Word and experiences in this life for the sanctification of His people. To many points he makes you will likely give a hearty "amen"; to some points, a less hearty "amen"; and with a few points, you might disagree. But these chapters will give the reader some fresh insights into sanctification.

Four chapters toward the end of the book are testimonies to the power of God's grace in the life of the author, as well as two other individuals. These stories are somewhat helpful and serve in some ways to illustrate the author's teaching on sanctification in previous chapters.

How Does Sanctification Work? can be read in one or two sittings. The book will drive you to deeper thought on God's marvelous work of making us holy.



The following book is reviewed by Prof. David Engelsma, former editor of the *Standard Bearer*, professor emeritus of Dogmatics and Old Testament in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary, and member of Trinity PRC in Hudsonville, Michigan



Today's Christian & the Church's Bible: A Time to Return to the Authorized Version, by Theodore P. Letis. Winter Springs, FL: the Greater Heritage, 2023. Pp. 73. \$13.99 soft.

In the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC), the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible, or Authorized Version (AV), not only has pride of place, but also is exclusively the version of the Bible that is used. It is the version used by the churches at worship and in the classes of Bible study. It is the version used in the seminary, when the original languages are not in

use. It is the version found and read in the devotions of the homes. It is the version used by the Christian schools established and maintained by the members of the PRC. Nor is there a campaign to replace the AV with a modern translation.

There is still a danger. The danger is that this devotion to the AV may be only a matter of tradition: this version of the Bible is the version that has always been the preference in the PR fellowship. Unknown to the people is that there are reasons of weighty principle for the use of the AV and for the rejection of the modern translations.

This danger can be overcome by the reading of a recent little book of only some 70, small-sized pages:

really a booklet. Although written by a scholar who was thoroughly versed in all the issues involved in Bible translation, the booklet is addressed to the layman. It ought to be read by every member of Reformed and Presbyterian churches. It will silence the claim of ministers to their congregations that nothing significant is at stake in the churches' use of the modern translations. It will also refute the charge that the AV is hard to understand. The booklet ought also to be read by the teachers in the Christian schools. Boards of the schools ought to purchase a copy for the teachers. It is also required reading for ministers in the PRC, reinforcing instruction in the matter they received in seminary. The booklet serves well as the subject of discussion in the after-recess programs of the various societies of the churches.

The reasons for retaining the AV and rejecting the modern English translations include the following. First, foremost, and fundamental is that the AV is based on the best Greek manuscripts of the New Testament. These are the authentic copies of the copies of the originals. Almost all the modern translations are based on un-authentic, defective Greek manuscripts. Contrary to the argument that there are no substantial differences between the Greek manuscripts translated by the AV and those used by the modern versions, the truth is that there are almost 5,000 omissions in those used by the modern versions of words and phrases found in the AV. Some of these omissions or other differences are serious. For example, in I Timothy 3:16, where the AV, correctly, has "God was manifest in the flesh," the modern versions have "Who was manifest in the flesh." The issue in the translation of the modern versions is

nothing less than the deity of the incarnate Jesus Christ. In Colossians 1:14, the modern versions omit the words, "through his blood."

Second, there is the serious matter of the unbelief concerning the verbal inspiration of Scripture on the part of most of those who have translated the modern versions. This unbelief underlies the popular theory of translation

known as "dynamic equivalence." According to this dangerous theory of translating, the translator is not bound to the very words of the text. He has the freedom to translate what he considers to be the thought of the text into what he considers to be its equivalent in contemporary English. This explains the omission of "through his blood" in Colossians 1:14. Modern man has no sense of, or love for, blood theology. This theory of translation, of course, affects the English of the Old Testament as well as that of the New.

Third, the book takes issue with the popular, and largely unchallenged, fallacious opinion that the language of the AV is seventeenth century English, off-putting and hard for twenty-first century believers to understand.

Letis summarizes: "the *Authorised Version* should be retained by the churches, as well as in Bible study and in the classroom, because of the superior consensus represented by its Greek text, its translation technique, and its English usage, and because it... provides the Christian with a link to his Protestant heritage."

The booklet is available at The Greater Heritage, 1170 Tree Swallow Dr., Suite 309, Winter Springs, FL 32708, or by e-mail at:

info@thegreaterheritage.com. It is also available at the Reformed Book Outlet in Hudsonville, MI.

The reasons for retaining the AV and rejecting the modern English translations include the following. First, foremost, and fundamental is that the AV is based on the best Greek manuscripts of the New Testament. These are the authentic copies of the copies of the originals. Almost all the modern translations are based on un-authentic, defective Greek manuscripts.

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ANNOUNCEMENTS

RESOLUTION OF SYMPATHY:

The Council and congregation of Loveland PRC, in the death of **Margaret Hollema** on May 24, 2025, express their heartfelt Christian sympathy to the David and Esther Hollema family. Margaret has been set free from this earth to join our Lord and Savior. We pray for comfort for the family and our congregation and remember the words of Isaiah 51:11: "Therefore the redeemed of the LORD shall return, and come with singing unto Zion; and everlasting joy shall be upon their head: they shall obtain gladness and joy; and sorrow and mourning shall flee away."

Mr. Jordan Kamps, Vice-President

Mr. Joel Moore, Clerk

RESOLUTION OF SYMPATHY:

The Council and congregation of Loveland PRC express their heartfelt sympathy in the death of **Robert Van Uffelen** on June 9, 2025. Robert Van Uffelen was taken to glory unexpectedly and is now praising his Lord face to face. We remember the family left behind, praying for their comfort. This includes his wife Tammy, son Derek and Jen Van Uffelen and family, Mike and Stephanie Uittenbogaard and family, and Dolan and Ashley Boonstra. May the words of Psalm 116:7-9 give them hope and comfort: "Return unto thy rest, O my soul; for the LORD hath dealt bountifully with thee. For thou hast delivered my soul from death, mine eyes from tears, and my feet from falling. I will walk before the Lord in the land of the living."

Mr. Jordan Kamps Vice-president

Mr. Joel Moore, Clerk

CLASSIS EAST

Classis East of the Protestant Reformed Churches will meet in First PRC of Grand Rapids on Wednesday, September 10, 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 August 11 (30 days before classis convenes).

Rev. Clayton Spronk, Stated Clerk

CLASSIS WEST

Classis West of the Protestant Reformed Churches will meet in Crete PRC on Wednesday, September 24, 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 August 25 (30 days before classis convenes). All delegates in need of lodging or transportation from the airport should notify the clerk of Crete's consistory.

Rev. J. Engelsma, Stated Clerk



REV. CARL HAAK

- 7/6 Prayer From a Fish's Belly, Jonah 2
- 7/13 The Conversion of Pagan Sailors, Jonah 1:14-16
- 7/20 The Second Time, Jonah 3:1-4
- 7/27 The Repentant Ninevites, Jonah 3:5-9

