

THE STANDARD BEARER

**June
2025**
VOLUME 101, NUMBER 11

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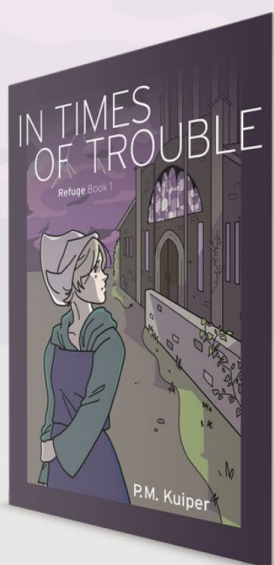
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The *Standard Bearer* (ISSN 0362-4692 [print], 2372-9813 [online]) is a monthly periodical with two special issues (Fall and Spring) published by the Reformed Free Publishing Association: 1894 Georgetown Center Dr., Jenison, MI 49428-7137.

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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THE SPIRIT OF PENTECOST

REV. JAMES SLOPSEMA

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And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance—Acts 2:1-4

The day of Pentecost was fully come. Pentecost was one of the three main Jewish feast days celebrated every year. Three very unusual events took place that day while the disciples of Jesus were gathered in a house in Jerusalem. There was the sound as of a mighty rushing wind that filled all the house where they were sitting. Then there appeared cloven tongues as of fire, which sat upon each one of the disciples. Finally, the disciples were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.

These events served as signs of the outpouring of the Spirit of Christ upon the church. This outpouring marks a highly significant event in the salvation of God's people. It is the culmination of Jesus' birth, atoning death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven.

A WONDERFUL FULFILLMENT

The disciples of Jesus were all with one accord in one place.

According to Acts 1:15 the number of the disciples in Jerusalem at this time was about 120. During Jesus' ministry on earth large multitudes had followed Him. But that number had dwindled down to about 500, to whom Jesus had appeared in Galilee after His resurrection. About 120 of these disciples were in Jerusalem at this time.

And they were all gathered in one place. From Acts 2:2 it becomes apparent that they were all gathered in a house in Jerusalem. We do not know whose house this was. But from what follows it is evident that this house was near to an open space to accommodate a large crowd.

And they were "with one accord," literally, "of one passion or desire." At His ascension into heaven ten days prior to this, Jesus promised the eleven apostles that soon they would be baptized with the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5). Using a different figure, the prophet Joel had spoken long before this of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon all flesh (2:28, 29). Both of these figures spoke of receiving the Holy Spirit in full measure. In the Old Testament era the church enjoyed the work of the Holy Spirit but in limited measure. This was because Christ had not yet come to offer the perfect sacrifice for sin. There was only the promise of what was to come. But now that the perfect sacrifice for sin had been made, the church was to receive the fullness of her salvation through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. With one accord the disciples gathered to wait for the promised Spirit.

While the disciples were gathered together, three very unusual events took place in fulfillment of this promise.

Suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where the disciples were sitting. Notice that there was no wind, but only the sound of wind. This noise came down from heaven and entered the house where the disciples were gathered, filling the whole house. It was this noise that evidently attracted the large crowds to which Peter preached that day and whose sermon is recorded in the rest of Acts 2.

Then there appeared unto the disciples cloven or split

tongues as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. There was not fire but merely cloven tongues as of fire. Evidently these tongues as of fire were all bunched together, for they are referred to here in the singular. These cloven tongues probably moved from disciple to disciple, appearing momentarily over each of the disciples.

Finally, the disciples were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. From verse 11 of this chapter, it is evident that they spoke of “the wonderful works of God.” They spoke this to the crowds that were amassed due to the sound of the mighty rushing wind.

A THREEFOLD SIGN

These three events all served as signs of the work of the Holy Spirit. Each of these three events was a miracle and therefore was a sign. The Bible identifies miracles as signs and wonders, indicating that every miracle is a sign or picture of the greater work of salvation. So also here, these three miracles serve as God-ordained signs pointing to the saving work of the Holy Spirit. Each sign points to a different aspect of the work of the Holy Spirit. They serve as signs of the coming, presence, and effect of the Spirit.

The sound as of a mighty rushing wind served as a sign of the *coming* of the Holy Spirit. The wind is an irresistible force that blows where it wants and none can resist it. So too is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit comes as an irresistible force from heaven. His work is not subject to the will of man. Irresistibly He enters the hearts of men to apply the blessings of salvation whenever and wherever He desires. In our sinful state we would always resist Him. But the Holy Spirit is an irresistible power that overcomes our evil hearts and changes us through a spiritual rebirth.

Then there were the cloven tongues as of fire. This served as a sign of the sanctifying *presence* of the Holy Spirit. Fire is that which purifies and cleanses. Think, for example, of purifying gold and silver with fire. In like manner the Holy Spirit purifies us from all our sins. When He enters our lives, He transforms us through His work of sanctification. The result is that we live holy lives in the service of the Lord, quite distinct from that of the world.

Finally, there was the speaking in many tongues of the wonderful works of God. This served as a sign of the

effect of the Holy Spirit. Those who have the life-altering presence of the Spirit will speak the wonderful praises of God. The fact that the disciples spoke in other tongues so that all gathered heard them in his own native tongue points to the glorious reality that the Holy Spirit will bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to all nations so that all nations will enjoy the salvation of God.

AN APPROPRIATE THANKSGIVING

The feast of Pentecost was a thanksgiving feast. The name *Pentecost* indicates that it was held 50 days after the Passover feast. The Passover was celebrated at the beginning of the small grain harvest. Pentecost came at the end of the small grain harvest and was a harvest feast. It was much like our Thanksgiving Day in that it was an opportunity for Israel to give thanks for the full harvest they enjoyed. Israel was required to bring to the Lord’s house the first fruits of the wheat harvest and present it to the Lord as a wave offering in the form of two loaves of bread. For that reason, this feast was also called the Feast of the First Fruits. Through this wave offering Israel acknowledged that the grain harvest had come from the Lord. It was also a promise to dedicate this harvest to the service of the Lord in gratitude.

The outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost is obviously connected to this. Since the earthly Canaan was a picture of the heavenly Canaan, the bounties of the land that God provided Israel at the time of harvest were a picture and promise of greater, spiritual blessings that God had for His people. This greater spiritual harvest had now come through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

All this is to be connected to the Passover feast, which was celebrated 50 days earlier, at the beginning of the harvest. At the Passover feast the Passover lamb, representing the coming Savior, was slain and eaten. The fact that this was done at the beginning of the harvest indicated that the spiritual blessings depicted in the harvest all depended on the coming of the Lamb of God.

And the Lamb of God has come and given His life an atonement for sin. Consequently, God has exalted Him and blessed Him with all the riches of salvation that were pictured by the small grain harvest in Canaan. And through the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost these great spiritual blessings are bestowed

on the church. The spiritual harvest of salvation has now come.

Let those of us who are recipients of this great spiritual harvest be filled with gratitude. Our entire life should be a thanksgiving feast as we enjoy the great

harvest of salvation through the Holy Spirit. Let us show that gratitude by walking in the purity of the Holy Spirit who is a refining fire. And let us never cease to speak of the wonderful works of God.

EDITORIAL



HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE WITH ALL THESE VACANCIES

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VACANCIES

It will be helpful to get a little historical perspective on the current state of the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) with all her vacancies, so, let's go back over 60 years to the year 1963. In 1963 there were so many vacancies in the PRC that Rev. Gerrit Vos (1894-1968) penned a special meditation for the May 15 issue of the *Standard Bearer* (SB). It was entitled, "Returned to the Lord," and it began with these words, "There is a grievous shortage of ministers in our churches. And, as I learn from various church papers, this shortage is universal."

Since the first page of a meditation served as the cover of the SB back in that era, the opening page of "Returned to the Lord" would have been prominently displayed on many coffee tables in many homes in the late spring of 1963. That meditation is probably not as well known as Vos' sermon, "Visited by Majesty on High," preached in Hudsonville PRC the Sunday after a devastating tornado ripped through Hudsonville, Michigan on April 3, 1956.¹ Nevertheless, I am sure some of our older readers will remember "Returned to the Lord," because it was as 'Vos-ian' as any of his punchy poetic writing. And, it was reprinted in the SB in 1997.

¹ For readers who may be unfamiliar with this sermon, a summary has been published as a meditation. See Gerrit Vos, *O Taste and See: Meditations from the Psalms* (Hudsonville PRC Men's Society, Hudsonville, MI, 1983), pp. 147-152. Or, see <https://www.prc.org/sermons/psalm46.8.10.11.html>.

Writing retrospectively, Professor David Engelsma, the editor of the SB in 1997, wrote a short introduction to the reprint of Vos. Engelsma provided some numbers and details of the "grievous shortage" in the PRC in 1963. Engelsma was well acquainted with the situation in the churches because he was the sole seminary graduate that year in a denomination of churches crying for ministers.

After this article you can read both Engelsma's introduction from 1997 and Vos' mediation from 1963. But, first, some statistics drawn from the *PRC Acts of Synod* and some commentary.

In 2025, the PRC consists of 32 churches. Seven are vacant. At the time of this writing, they are Cornerstone, Grace, Grandville, Hudsonville, and Southwest in Classis East, and Hope (Redlands) and Lynden in Classis West. Seven of 32 means that 22% of the churches are vacant. Looking at total membership from the 2024 *Acts* and applying those numbers to the churches currently vacant, about 26% of the people (2151 out of 8200) in the denomination are without a pastor.

Back in 1963, the PRC consisted of 19 churches. Seven were vacant. Seven of 19 means that 37% of the churches were vacant. Looking at total membership, about 16% of the people (448/2798) were without a pastor.

HAVING PERSPECTIVE

Knowledge of 1963 is helpful in giving us some

perspective in 2025. Perspective as a way of viewing something is very important in life. Before we ever get locked into a certain way of thinking and come to established conclusions, it is always beneficial to get another perspective, to stand at another vantage point, to hear other considerations. This is especially true in difficult times. Surely, every human being should acknowledge, “If I put my head down, become very introspective, reduce the whole world to *me*, and *my* life, *my* experiences, *my* thoughts, and *my* sufferings, and close my eyes and ears to everything around me, it will be impossible for me to come to any proper conclusions about my life or anything else.” We always need *perspective*; in fact, it is impossible to live a happy and God-glorifying life without a proper perspective. This is true for our consideration of our vacancies in 2025.

First, we always need the *Ultimate Perspective of God’s Love*. Everything in our lives must be framed and understood from the gospel perspective of the everlasting love of an Almighty Father who for Jesus’ sake sovereignly ordains and works together all things to serve our temporal and eternal good. Nothing that befalls us lies outside of that scope. Trials are always sent in love. Without this perspective Jacob once cried out in the day of adversity, “All these things are against me!” (Gen. 42:36). Job’s wife addressed the calamities of her home and husband by speaking foolishly and saying, “Curse God, and die!” (Job 2:9). On the other hand, if we are not doubting or unbelieving but take the perspective of a true and living faith in God’s love for us in Christ Jesus, we ought always to say, “All things are working together for my good!” (Rom. 8:28). This, too, is true of our vacancies.

Second, we always need a *Wide (Universal) Perspective of the Present*. When we broaden the lens through which we view reality, we always discover that there is a whole world of suffering saints out there, and many even have it worse than we do. But when we encounter difficulty and we do not have a wide perspective, we conclude that we are the only ones in adversity, and we feel sorry for ourselves. Without this broad perspective Elijah once concluded during a time of crisis that he was the only Israelite left in the land who had not bowed the knee to Baal (1 Kings 19:10). If we in 2025 do not read “the church papers” as Vos did in 1963, or by other means keep abreast of the situation

in Reformed and Presbyterian churches throughout the world, then we will think our situation in the PRC is unique. It is not. Many vacancies is not abnormal today, just ask or look around.

Third, we always need the *Historical Perspective of the Past*. The psalmist Asaph was once so full of grief and sorrow during a sleepless night that even the thought of God brought him no peace. He asked in fear and bitterness whether God had removed His love and grace. But that all changed when he looked to the past and began contemplating the mighty works and faithfulness of God for Israel in former generations (Psalm 77). Asaph needed the historical perspective to remember that God’s church and saints are always in a strait and God is always doing great things to deliver them and make them glad. The historical perspective of 1963 is especially helpful for 2025, because it shows us that seven vacancies is nothing new in the PRC.

From the historical perspective, one could make the argument that the situation in 2025 is more severe than in 1963 because there is a much higher percentage of members without a pastor (26% versus 16%). This is because many of the vacant churches in 1963 were very small, averaging 64 total souls per congregation. Today, however, nearly all the smaller churches have a pastor and the average size of a vacant church is 307 total souls. Additionally, the high number of vacancies today feels more severe because within the last eight years we have lost nine ministers in various painful ways that disturbed the peace of congregations in varying degrees. In the same time frame, three more ministers left the pastorate for the seminary to replace retiring professors, and an additional seven ministers retired. Seven vacancies is a “grievous shortage,” and it feels that way; although, when one looks at all the losses, it is shocking that there are only seven vacancies.²

However, one could also make the counterargument that the situation was more severe in 1963 because there were only 19 churches (over 1/3 of the churches were vacant). Additionally, 1963 was the middle of a five-year span in which there was only one seminary graduate, while today, we are amid what is potentially

2 All these losses have been countered somewhat by seminary graduates, and a retired seminary professor and four missionaries (from the Philippines and Limerick, Ireland) entering the pastorate in local congregations in the PRC.

a six-year span of seeing one new graduate per year. How bleak it looked in 1963!

In the end, there is no essential difference between 1963 and 2025 because the total number of vacancies is identical. The historical perspective teaches us to stay the course. Do not be rash or reactionary. If desperate times come, they might call for desperate measures, but never foolish measures fraught with unintended consequences. Stay the course and do not lose heart. This is not new.

KEEP HOPE

Keep hope because God will provide. He always does. In 1963 the members of the PRC were fervently praying that the Lord of the harvest would send forth laborers, and after reading the Vos meditation, surely many were stirred to take their parental responsibilities more seriously and to pray that future ministers would even come from their own wombs and homes. What did God do as the God who is pleased to execute His counsel through means? He gave. As always, His thoughts and ways are higher than ours. There would be at least four vacancies until 1973, and then an average of two vacancies for the following ten years. But exactly 20 years after 1963—one generation later—God provided so abundantly that there was a pastor in every one of the 21 congregations, three professors in the seminary, three missionaries, and two seminary graduates.³ God has been our help in ages past and He is our hope for years to come.

PRAY FOR OUR MINISTERS

We have ministers. Pray for them, that they remain faithful to the Lord who has called them. Great pressures come against ministers, and from all angles. The self-willed will thrust themselves off course and the people-pleasers will be drawn off course. We ministers are weak, but God is strong, so pray that God will make us faithful shepherds unswervingly devoted to the

high calling “to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood” (Acts 20:28). Pray also that wives of ministers will be endowed with wisdom so that they do not hurt but are a quiet help to their husbands and the ministry of the holy gospel.

NEW MINISTERS

Finally, and most importantly in this great shortage, we urgently need seminary students from our homes and families to be trained for the ministry. Please, continue to pray the Lord of the harvest for more diligent laborers. If we will have good ministers, we need spiritual homes with families that seek first the kingdom of God, because it is ordinarily from such homes that God is pleased to raise up men for the times. From here, I will let Rev. Vos make the appeal, and may God use it for good.

EDITOR’S NOTES FROM PROFESSOR DAVID ENGELSMA (1997)

The date of the original publication in the *Standard Bearer* of Gerrit Vos’ meditation brings back memories. The date was May 15, 1963. On that date, I was preparing for examination before synod as a graduate from the seminary of the Protestant Reformed Churches. I was the only graduate. For the first two years, I was the only student in seminary. This meant that there was no graduate in 1961 or in 1962. Only one had graduated in 1960.

After 1963, there would not be another graduate and candidate for the ministry in the PRC until 1965.

One graduate and one minister added to the churches between 1960 and 1965!

But in 1963 there were seven vacant churches. Seven of the nineteen churches in the denomination were without a minister of the gospel. More than one third.

The Theological School Committee was reporting that no new student had enrolled for the 1963/1964 school year.

This is what the Rev. Gerrit Vos had in mind when he began his devotional on Hannah’s gift of Samuel to the LORD as he did: “There is a grievous shortage of ministers in our churches.”

The situation at present is by no means this severe.

Nevertheless, there will be only three men in the seminary this fall who aspire to the ministry in the

3 It looked like a surplus of ministers with two new seminary graduates in 1983 (B. Gritters and K. Hanko). However, with the formation of two new congregations in Byron Center, MI and Grandville, MI, as well as the calling of two new missionaries (W. Bruinsma to Jamaica, and the newly ordained K. Hanko to Norristown, PA), there were immediately two vacancies again. Laborers are always needed (Matt. 9:37).

PRC. There will be no first-year student. When one begins work in the seminary, graduation resulting in a candidate for the ministry is four years off.

Vos' unique, memorable appeal to godly parents and God-fearing young men, therefore, is timely.

Read "Returned to the Lord."—DJE

RETURNED TO THE LORD

REV. GERRIT VOS (May 15, 1963)

For this child I prayed; and the LORD hath given me my petition which I asked of him: therefore also I have lent him to the LORD; as long as he liveth he shall be lent to the LORD. And he worshipped the LORD there.
1 Samuel 1:27-28

There is a grievous shortage of ministers in our churches. And, as I learn from various church papers, this shortage is universal.

This shortage is "grievous." That is correct. As long as I have lived, and that is sixty-eight years, it never was this way before. There were always plenty of ministers in the churches where I worshiped: in Holland, Germany, England, and here in the States. Sometimes it was even said, also in our own churches, that there were too many young men seeking the holy ministry.

But those days seem to be past.

There are plenty of young men in the church of Christ. There are plenty of young men with bright and clear heads. God also regenerates many young men, and gives conversion and faith, so that they confess the name of their Savior.

But no, they do not give themselves to the holy ministry.

Results? Many vacant churches. Reading services, sometimes weeks on end.

Is it not grievous?

I know, I know, there is an easy way out. I have heard it said many times. "God is not calling ministers today."

Do I deny that God must call a minister? Of course not. I would say that the man who becomes a minister without the divine call is the worst kind of wretch imaginable. When these wretches come before the great judgment seat in the day of judgment they will hear God say to them: "The prophets prophesy lies in my name: I sent them not, neither have I commanded them, neither spake unto them: they prophesy unto you a false

vision and divination, and a thing of nought, and the deceit of their heart" (Jer. 14:14).

And Jesus said: "Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity" (Matt. 7:22, 23).

Some of these wretches were even called by Jesus, and they also prophesied; but, nevertheless, they were cast out. Take, for example, Judas, and tremble. Jesus called him, knowing that he was a reprobate, to be an apostle of the Lord, in order to show to the whole world that when a reprobate comes very close to Jesus and the gospel, he reveals all the filth of his natural heart. Remember the sign, the devilish sign: Whom I shall kiss, He it is: take Him!

No, I certainly would not rule out the divine calling to the ministry.

But there is much more to the story of a prophet, of a minister of the Word. God works through means.

Listen again to Jesus: "The harvest truly is plenteous, but the laborers are few; pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that He will send forth laborers into his harvest" (Matt. 9:37, 38).

Did not Jesus know that a true minister of the Word must be called by God, both internally and externally? Of course He did. He knows everything. But Jesus knew that His God and Father works through means.

The general means is certainly that the whole church prays the Lord of the harvest that He will send forth laborers into His harvest.

Evidently this has not been done. And evidently this has not been done for a long time. For the call of God starts very early.

And that leads us to our text.

O, beloved reader, Samuel was a splendid example of what a prophet, a minister, should be.

His beginning, as far as the means are concerned, was his God-fearing mother, Hannah.

Here is Hannah: "For this child I prayed!"

It has been said that behind every great man stands a great woman. Looking at Hannah, I would almost believe it. For great she was and is.

When young girls marry, how many can say with Hannah: for this child I prayed? On good authority I have heard that there is sometime the very opposite: "We will not have any children until we pay for our furniture!" A far cry!

In Hannah you see how God works through the means He ordained. We are to pray for His blessings.

The Lord gave Hannah her petition: the child was born. And, publicly confessing her struggle, she named him Samuel. That name means: "Asked of God."

But that is not all. Listen to Hannah: "He shall be lent to the Lord," or, literally: "he whom I have obtained by petition shall be returned to the Lord."

That is the great thing about Hannah with respect to her petition and the gift of the child. He shall be returned to the Lord!

What does that mean? It means that he shall be dedicated to the service of God in the most intimate way possible: he shall stand in the house of God and serve Him in the Word of God!

Oh, it is a great thing to pray for children from the Lord. It is also a great thing if the Lord hears you and fills your hearts and arms with children. It is inexpressibly sweet when you hear your flesh and blood confess the name of God in His house. When and if they do, there is singing in your hearts.

But what is sweeter to the taste than to sit in church and hear your son preach the wondrous gospel of the promise?

How long shall Samuel stand in the house of his God? Listen again to the God-fearing Hannah. She will tell you: "as long as he liveth."

Yes, I know, that is a dogma of the church, of the true church. The calling of God is without repentance. Once a minister, always a minister. But the point is that this truth of all the ages lived in the heart of this mother.

It was not Samuel that said it; it was his mother. And it belonged to the means which God employed.

Can you imagine how Hannah educated little Samuel? I can. Oh, often, very often, she told him in childlike language how she had struggled with the Lord to obtain this son; and how she had vowed a vow unto the Almighty. Often she would tell him: I promised the Lord God of Israel that you would stand in the house of God all the days of your life!

Beloved mothers, Hannah prepared her son Samuel to live in Shiloh. You can tell. When he heard the call of the Lord time and again and did not know it, he listened obediently to the advice of Eli, and when God called again, he said: "Speak; for thy servant heareth!"

Now listen, beloved reader: That first speech to God Almighty became his whole life's program. How he listened to the speech of God! And Israel was blessed through this *Verbi Dei* minister.

And the mother was blessed. If you wish to know the extent of her blessedness, just read her song of praise in 1 Samuel 2:1-10.

This mother of one of the most glorious ministers of all time continues her singing in the Paradise of God.

And Samuel?

Well, the text says of him: "And he worshipped the LORD there." To worship is to enumerate all the beauties of the Lord God, to tell of His majesty, to sing of His wonders all the day long. It is to do so before the face of all Israel, so that they also may learn the praises of the Lord.

To worship is to begin our everlasting work in heaven here on earth.

Mothers! Daughters of Jerusalem! Are you not jealous of Hannah?

Elkanahs! Ye men of Israel! Do you look for such brides as Hannah? And when you have found her, do you join with her to approach the throne of grace together in order to petition our Father in heaven for a Samuel?

If and when you do, you shall be blessed in such a deed.

Only eternity shall reveal how many blessed

ministers were born from the struggles of a mother in Israel.

Always remember: God uses and blesses the means.

It is sad to say, but there are many mothers and fathers who are duly concerned about their offspring, but it is a concern about their carnal advancement. My boy or boys must have a good education, the best education.

In the meantime, while he is studying and struggling to become thoroughly prepared for his life's task, someone comes to the door and asks for a gift for God. Sure, sure, sure, here is a ten dollar bill. You can even have twenty dollars! The Chinese and the Africans must have missionaries and ministers. For the theological school? Oh, yes, indeed, here is my donation! Give the professors and the students my best regards! But my son? No, no, no! My son is going to be a bricklayer, a carpenter, an industrialist, a great business man. You can get my money, but not my son. It never entered my mind, or...my heart!

Yes, that is right. It never entered my heart. There is the trouble.

Are there any God-fearing young men who read this?

Yes, it is late on the calendar. It is very late. It should have begun with your mom. But how about the holy ministry in your church? Are you not concerned about the fact that we are woefully short of ministers?

Would it not be heaven for you to say: "Speak, for Thy servant heareth"?

And heaven, with its joyful angels, would say, Amen!

Correction: In the May 15, 2025 special issue, Rev. J. Laning in his article, "PRC Missions (2000-2025)," stated that Doon PRC was the calling church for the Sioux Falls, South Dakota mission (pp.308-09). But it was Edgerton (MN) PRC that was the calling church. We thank an alert reader for bringing this to our attention.

SYNOD PREVIEW



PREVIEW OF SYNOD 2025 OF THE PRCA

REV. JOSHUA ENGELSMA
pastor of Crete PRC in Crete, Illinois

The Synod of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America (PRCA) is scheduled to convene this year on Tuesday, June 10, in the facilities of Faith PRC (Jenison, MI). As is customary, a worship service will be held on the evening before synod convenes in order to ask God for His blessing prior to taking up the work.

What struck me in going through the agenda is how many matters there are for prayer, including both prayers of thanksgiving to God for His goodness and faithfulness and prayers for wisdom. Perhaps you can consider keeping this issue of the *SB* at hand for the next few weeks and praying through the various items mentioned below in your personal or family devotions.

PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING

The agenda for synod, per usual, includes the reports from the standing and special committees that labor in the interim between meetings as servants of synod. In these reports are many matters that give us reason to express gratitude to God for His goodness and faithfulness.

Certainly we have reason to give thanks to God for preserving us for 100 years as a denomination. The theme of the celebration ("Grace: The PRCA at 100") conveys that our existence as churches is God's doing in His grace. The 100th Anniversary Committee and its various sub-committees have been very busy over the last months making final preparations for the

celebration, which is scheduled to be held at Calvin University from June 2-6, the week before synod convenes (and about when this issue of the *SB* arrives in your mailbox). The Committee reports that over 2,000 people are registered to attend the celebration!

Another reason for thanks to God is the presence of many covenant children in our churches and the means to catechize them. The Catechism Book Committee (CBC) is responsible for overseeing the material used in catechizing the children and young people of the denomination. The committee recommends that synod make some minor modifications to the questions and answers used to teach the Seniors Bible History classes (grades 6-7), hopefully aiding in the students' ability to memorize, understand, and retain. The stated clerk also reports that updated and newly-designed Bible History catechism books are ready to print and use for the upcoming season. Be on the lookout for those come August/September.

Reading through the report of the Contact Committee (CC) and their interactions with sister churches and other contacts in the world gives further reason for thanksgiving. Not that the work is without difficulties; certainly there are struggles that our contacts face. But there are many joys. Our relationships with our sister churches are strong. The church with whom we have recently established a corresponding relation (the Bekennende Evangelisch-Reformierte Gemeinde [Confessing Protestant-Reformed Congregation] of Giessen, Germany) has recently joined with another congregation to form a new, Reformed denomination in Germany. Many contacts from around the world are making plans to join in our centennial celebration.

There are many joys in the report of the Domestic Mission Committee (DMC) as well. We have been gifted with a capable, enthusiastic home missionary and wife (Rev. James and Margaret Laning). Rev. Laning continues to live in the Dallas/Fort Worth, TX area and also maintains regular contact with a group of individuals in Budapest, Hungary. The DMC presents a "church planting manual" as a possible way of developing a concrete field of labor for our missionary. The DMC also reports on the hiring of a new web manager and the expected launch of our new denominational website (prca.org) sometime in June.

While the Foreign Mission Committee (FMC) no

longer is overseeing a concrete field of labor, they remain diligent in laboring on behalf of the denomination. They report on the ongoing work of Hope PRC in Myanmar and the ongoing work of Georgetown PRC in India. They also report on continued contact with individuals in Mexico and Malawi. They also present to synod an evaluation of our mission work in the Philippines, and also a set of guidelines regarding giving financial assistance in foreign lands.

Another cause for tremendous gratitude to God is found in the report of the Theological School Committee (TSC). The TSC recommends that our fourth-year seminarian, Mr. Aaron Van Dyke, a son of Faith PRC, sit for a candidacy examination. Mr. Van Dyke's examination will likely stretch over parts of Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday (June 10-12), and his graduation is scheduled for Thursday evening, June 12. Thanks be to God for providing another potential candidate for the gospel ministry in our churches! The TSC also reports on the faithful labors of the professors, support staff, and students in the past year. With the conclusion of this past school year, Prof. C. Griess has finished four years of the five-year transition to replace Prof. B. Gritters as professor of Practical Theology and New Testament Studies. The TSC enthusiastically recommends that Prof. Griess be reappointed to his post, having demonstrated in the last four years all the gifts necessary to take on this important work. Thanks be to God for providing us with faithful professors!

PRAYERS FOR WISDOM

In addition to being the occasion for expressing thanks to God, the agenda also includes a number of weighty matters about which we ought to be praying fervently to God to give wisdom to the delegates. This includes the work of several special committees of synod.

Since being appointed by Synod 2023, the Abuse Guidelines Committee has been busy trying to fulfill its mandate to "produce a concise manual outlining key biblical, confessional, and theological principles to guide consistories in understanding and addressing abuse." The Committee presents a second draft of its work, a document of about forty pages, and asks that synod approve of the general direction and content of this draft and provide feedback and constructive criticism as they refine it into its final form.

Another special committee that has been laboring since last year's synod is the Guidepost Report Evaluation Committee. In 2023, synod approved hiring Guidepost Solutions to perform an independent, third-party investigation into her handling of sexual abuse, and also appointed an Ad Hoc Committee to be the liaison between the denomination and Guidepost Solutions. In response to the report of the Ad Hoc Committee, Synod 2024 appointed a new committee (the Guidepost Report Evaluation Committee) to: 1) review the minutes and supplements of the Ad Hoc Committee, and 2) evaluate Guidepost's final assessment report as well as its methodology. The Committee reports that it was able to accomplish several aspects of its mandate, but that it was not able to complete the work of analyzing Guidepost's recommendations for what to do as a denomination going forward with respect to sexual abuse. The Committee is recommending that a new committee be appointed by Synod 2025 to do this work. It is also recommending that synod contract with a non-secular third-party to "carry out the remaining mandate of Synod 2023 to 'investigate sexual abuse in the PRCA.'"

Wisdom will also be needed in dealing with a number of protests and overtures related to the subject of sexual abuse.

The agenda includes four protests against decisions of Synod 2024 in connection with the hiring of Guidepost Solutions. Synod 2024 upheld protests against the 2023 decision to hire Guidepost Solutions and declared that it erred in "authorizing a secular organization to assist Christ's church in an ecclesiastical work (investigating sin) that belongs exclusively to the church." Now four parties protest that decision of Synod 2024 and argue that it was not improper to hire Guidepost Solutions.

There are also three overtures being presented to synod to initiate some new action in the churches related to sexual abuse. First, there is an overture from a consistory asking synod to approve the designation of \$500,000 for consistories to use for education and training and for investigating specific cases of sexual abuse. This overture comes with the approval of Classis East.

Second, there is an overture originating from the same consistory asking synod to approve the hiring of "Fact-Finding Ministry" to conduct a denomination-

wide investigation into specific cases of sexual abuse. This overture also comes to synod with the approval of Classis East.

Third, there is an overture from a different consistory in which they ask synod to append decisions under Articles 72 and 75 of our Church Order that give specific instruction to consistories regarding the handling of sexual abuse cases. Having examined the overture, Classis East did not approve it. However, as is its right, the consistory has decided still to present the overture to synod for its consideration.

The agenda includes a fourth overture, unrelated to the subject of abuse. This overture asks that synod make changes to its Rules of Order so that it is made clear that protestants and appellants have the right to speak when the *legality* of their protests/appeals is being treated, not just when the *substance* of those protests/appeals is being treated. This overture also comes with the approval of Classis East.

Synod's agenda also contains three protests against decisions of Synod 2024 related to a case of doctrinal error. Synod 2024 evaluated a case where a consistory had judged that its minister had erred in three written statements. Synod upheld the consistory on the first two points, agreeing with the consistory that the two statements in question were erroneous. Synod did not uphold the consistory on the third point, arguing that the third statement was not erroneous. Two parties protest against synod's decisions on the first two statements, believing that synod should not have declared those statements to be in error. A third protestant protests against synod's decision on the third statement, believing that synod should have declared that statement also to be in error.

There are many more matters that Synod 2025 will have to discuss, matters that are perhaps not as notable but are still important in carrying out the work of Christ's church on earth. With respect to all these matters, big and small, wisdom is needed to make good decisions, decisions that honor our God and build up His church. So, brothers and sisters, "pray for us" (1 Thess. 5:25).



THE CURIOUS CASE OF THE CRC; AI'S IGNORANCE; WRITING ON WRITING

REV. DAVID NOORMAN

pastor of Georgetown PRC in Hudsonville, Michigan

“THE CURIOUS CASE OF THE CRC”

For several years now, the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) has been enduring internal controversy regarding its position on homosexuality. If you have lost track of these developments and want to get caught up, I recommend reading Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra’s article in the March 15 issue of *Christian Renewal*.¹ Zylstra examines the CRC’s surprising turn—from rushing into liberalism to resting on a historical confessional position of the Heidelberg Catechism.

Here is the curious case of the CRC in a nutshell:

“How many denominations have gone this far down the road toward theological liberalism and then put on the brakes in a significant way? [Iowa pastor Kurt] Monroe asked.

None.

Once a vote on sexuality comes up, “every other denomination has gone affirming,” said Collin Hansen, executive director of The Keller Center for Cultural Apologetics. “No other denomination has pulled back from that precipice.”²

Zylstra explains from a broad point of view how this change came to pass, how it fits (and does not fit) with the trajectory of the CRC, and what is next for the denomination. She begins with a brief survey of the CRC’s origins, initial growth, and the subsequent decline in membership occasioned by allowance of women in office. Then she describes the influence of liberal leadership in their support of affirming LGBT.

In the context of a liberal trajectory and a liberal public face, the official study committee of the CRC

was developing its report in the opposite direction, and synod approved it. Hence, the surprise.

The result, according to Zylstra, was confusion: “Between the leadership and the synod votes, it was hard to tell what exactly the CRC was. Evangelical or mainline? Progressive or conservative? Affirming or orthodox?”³ Synod 2024 helped move toward an answer when it demanded that officebearers and congregations fall in line with the position of the report.

According to *Christian Renewal*, “at least 29 local congregations are in the process of or have already left the Christian Reformed denomination over its Synod 2024 decision to uphold its confessional stance on matters of human sexuality.”⁴ Also, 33 ministers left the CRC to join the Reformed Church in America (RCA) in a group ordination ceremony.⁵

Another battleground for the CRC is its relationship to academic institutions like Calvin University. Some argue that Calvin University should “divorce” the CRC, while others argue that academic institutions like Calvin need a relationship to the church.⁶ The

3 Zylstra, 16-17.

4 “Some CRC congregations in the process of disaffiliation,” *Christian Renewal* (March 15, 2025), 20.

5 Yonat Shimron, “33 Christian Reformed ministers take oath...,” *Religion News*, <https://religionnews.com/2025/02/19/33-christian-reformed-ministers-take-oath-to-a-rival-denomination-as-church-split-deepens/>.

6 For an example of the opposing arguments regarding Calvin University’s relationship with the CRC, interested readers can look up Calvin Prof. James K.A. Smith’s article in the *Chimes*, <https://calvinchimes.org/2025/04/07/christian-reformed-or-reformed-christian-should-calvin-remain-a-denominational-university/>, and CRC Pastor Aaron Vriesman’s response, <https://juicyecumenism.com/2025/04/21/should-calvin-university-divorce-its-denomination/>.

1 Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra, “The Curious Case of the Christian Reformed Church,” *Christian Renewal* (March 15, 2025), 14-19.

2 Zylstra, 19.

arguments themselves highlight the distance between the two sides and the intensity of this disagreement in the denomination and school. It also provides a sobering warning for Reformed believers to maintain and to cherish our “ownership” of our good Christian schools.

AI’S IGNORANCE

Developments in artificial intelligence (AI) continue to spark debates and discussions concerning its potential, cost, ethics, and more. The April issue of *First Things* includes an in-depth article calling attention to AI’s limitations at a fundamental level.⁷

The author, Thomas Fowler, refers to several popular theories and fears about AI’s potential in the future—that it will take over the world, that machine learning will surpass human learning, or that it will alter the fabric of societies and economies in an irreparable way. These fears have always accompanied advances in technology, but the technology itself has never come close to replicating or competing with the human intellect.

Fowler uses examples from the “unenviable track record” of Chat GPT and similar AI programs to demonstrate: “The chatbots show once again that it is easy to pretend to knowledge, harder to engage reality and truly know something about it.”⁸ He then develops his argument using the philosophical theories of David Hume, which can take some work to follow, but his conclusion is helpful:

“Generative AI scans large collections of works that employ key words and phrases, takes the results, and assembles them on the basis of frequency into a report, following rules of grammar and knowledge of word-order frequencies, *without knowledge of the abstract entities and ideas involved*. In other words, it engages in a highly superficial form of reading. The problem—and it is a problem that vitiates the entire approach—is that most important texts cannot be read in this way. Only in some cases, such as scientific and most historical writing, is the literal meaning of a text its principle meaning. For many works, especially works of literature and philosophy, the message of the theme requires a

holistic understanding of the text.”⁹

My personal experience using AI is consistent with Fowler’s thesis. Among other things, AI can be very helpful surveying and summarizing massive amounts of information. But when pressed beyond the surface of words on a page, AI falls short and sometimes fails badly. This is AI’s ignorance or incapacity for *true knowledge*. As Fowler puts it, “Humans are distinguished by our ability to perceive reality.”¹⁰ That’s the other side of “AI doesn’t know what it is doing.” None of this rules out that AI can be used effectively, but knowing this weakness actually equips us to use it effectively.

Once we recognize AI’s ignorance, we ought to marvel at the unsearchable understanding of our God and the wonder of the human mind that God has created and renewed in His people. And when we have seen the cracks in the façade of what AI presents as “knowledge,” we ought to have a greater appreciation of the nature, purpose, and gracious possibility of knowing reality, truth, and even God Himself.

WRITING ON WRITING

The March/April issue of *Reformed Perspective* (RP) includes two brief and helpful articles aimed at encouraging God’s people to write.

The first of these articles seeks to answer the question: *Why Write?*¹¹ The author, Sharon L. Bratcher, offers a few different reasons to consider writing, and shares her personal experience from two decades of writing. Bratcher places writing alongside several other God-given creative skills that can be used to benefit others. I heartily agree, but I would also go further. Writing is not just a gift in and of itself, but it is a vehicle for using and sharing all kinds of God-given gifts. Why write? The answer to that question will be different for every one of us, but the assumption (that we do write, or should write) is a good one.

The second article, written by Jon Dykstra, consists of his best advice to writers and aspiring writers:

⁹ Fowler, 34.

¹⁰ Fowler, 35.

¹¹ Sharon L. Bratcher, “Why Write?...” *Reformed Perspective*, March-April 2025 (vol. 44, No. 2), 56-57. Available at <https://reformedperspective.ca/mar-april-2025-issue/>.

⁷ Thomas Fowler, “AI Doesn’t Know What Its Doing,” *First Things* (April 2025), 31-37.

⁸ Fowler, 33.

How to Write.¹² As editor of *RP*, Dykstra aims to encourage his readers to write for his magazine, but his applications are broad. Anyone who writes anything (that is everyone!) can benefit from Dykstra's advice, which he conveys using the acronym "SMELLS." The acronym may be suspect (which Dykstra humbly acknowledges), but the instruction is sound. Teachers, this article would be a good resource to help your high

12 Jon Dykstra, "How to Write...for *Reformed Perspective*," *Reformed Perspective*, March-April 2025 (vol. 44, no. 2), 58-60. Available at <https://reformedperspective.ca/mar-april-2025-issue/>

school and college students develop their writing and communication skills.

These articles prompted me to face the questions myself: Why write? And how? I am sure *SB* readers would be stimulated by these articles as well. Perhaps some will be encouraged to become (better) writers in their respective vocations, but reading, writing, and communicating are essential skills for all God's people, regardless of vocation. They are integral aspects of communion with God and with one another and, when believers grow in these abilities, it will benefit the whole body of Christ.

SEARCH THE SCRIPTURES



JOHN: CHRIST THE ETERNAL SON OF GOD

REV. DANIEL KLEYN

pastor of Doon PRC in Doon, Iowa

THE WRITER

The inspired writer of this book was one of Jesus' disciples. He and James were the sons of Zebedee and Salome (Matt. 27:56; Mark 15:40). Prior to becoming a disciple of Christ, John and his brother James worked with Peter and Andrew in fishing. Initially, John was a follower of John the Baptist, but the latter directed him to follow Christ instead, which he did (John 1:35-36). This in itself did not make him Christ's disciple; that occurred later when Christ specifically called him to be a full-time disciple (Luke 5:10-11).

John was one of the three disciples (the others being James and Peter) who were closest to the Lord. On several occasions, Christ took only these three with Him. John was therefore one of the few who witnessed Christ's transfiguration (Matt. 17:1-2). He was also near Christ in the garden of Gethsemane when He prayed in agony just prior to the cross (Matt. 26:36ff.). Two more indications of John's closeness to the Lord are that he reclined directly beside Christ during the last supper (John 13:23), and that Christ, from the cross, directed

him to care for His earthly mother, Mary (John 19:26-27).

John refers to himself throughout the book as the disciple whom Jesus loved. This cannot mean that Jesus did not also love the other disciples (except for Judas Iscariot), but it at least suggests once again that John occupied a special place among the disciples. More significant, however, is that this shows that John, knowing himself to be a great sinner, knew and often gave expression to how great the love of His Savior was for him. This is certainly something we do well to emulate.

John occupied a prominent place in the early New Testament church. He often labored alongside Peter in the preaching and spread of the gospel after Pentecost (Acts 3:1; 4:19). He was also part of the Jerusalem Council that addressed and settled the matter of circumcision (Acts 15; Gal. 2:9).

John was banished for a time by the Roman emperor Domitian to the island of Patmos, off the west coast of Asia Minor (Rev. 1:9). While there, he received visions

concerning the things that “must shortly come to pass” and “which must be hereafter” (Rev. 1:1; 4:1), all of which were written by him in the book of Revelation. Thus, in total John wrote five New Testament books: the gospel narrative, 1, 2 and 3 John, and Revelation.

John was the most perceptive of the disciples. He understood clearly the truths that are at the heart of the gospel, as evident from the emphasis in this book on the divinity of Christ. He realized how vital this truth is for salvation. John also shows in his gospel account a thorough understanding of the truth that salvation is by sovereign grace alone. He was also quicker to believe the resurrection of Christ than were the other disciples, doing so simply from the testimony of the grave clothes in the tomb.

As far as the occasion for the writing of his gospel account is concerned, various ideas have been presented.¹ We believe, however, that it is impossible to determine a specific historical occasion. More significant is what John himself gives as the reason for writing (see John 20:30-31). John was led by the Spirit to write with a twofold purpose: first to demonstrate that Jesus is the Christ, the only begotten Son of God and, secondly, to direct believers to the blessedness of eternal life through faith in Him.

UNIQUE FEATURES

In a comparison to the other gospel accounts, the book of John manifests the following unique features.

No mention is made of Jesus’ birth, early life, baptism, and temptations. Instead, John begins with the doctrine of the divine Logos (that Christ is the eternal Word of God).

Jesus’ ministry in Judea, particularly at Jerusalem, is prominent, taking up the greater part of the book. The other gospel accounts, however, say very little about this and emphasize instead His Galilean ministry.

John mentions only about 20 days of Jesus’ earthly ministry. It is striking, too, that seven whole chapters (almost 1/3 of the book) are devoted to just one day of Christ’s life and ministry.²

None of Jesus’ parables is mentioned. John does,

however, set forth many metaphors, including the numerous “I am” sayings of Christ, such as: “I am the light of the world (John 8:12), “I am the door” (John 10:9), “I am the good shepherd” (John 10:11), and “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6).

John provides the most information about the Jewish feasts. He mentions three (possibly four) Passover feasts (John 22:13; 5:1; 6:4; 13:1), thus indicating that Christ’s earthly ministry was around 3½ years in length. He also refers to two other feasts that took place: the feast of Tabernacles (John 7:2) and the feast of the Dedication (John 10:22).

Among the gospel accounts, John probably refers the most to the Old Testament. However, while the other writers usually quote specific passages, John refers to the Old Testament mostly by implication. An immediate example is that the book begins with language and subject material that is the same as found in Genesis 1 (cp. John 1:1-3 with Gen. 1:1-3). Another example is when John the Baptist referred to Christ as the Lamb of God (John 1:29). While no explicit Old Testament verse is quoted, John nevertheless alludes to a number of passages (Ex. 12:3 and Is. 53:7, to name a few). Yet another example is when Christ cries out, “If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink” (John 7:37). An implied reference is made here to such passages as Exodus 17:6 and Isaiah 55:1. There is also the incident recorded in John 8, where Jesus, in dealing with the self-righteous Pharisees who brought a woman caught in adultery, wrote with His finger in the ground. This account most likely alludes to what is stated in Jeremiah 17:13.

One needs to keep the above point in mind when studying and exegeting the book of John. Admittedly it is often challenging to determine which Old Testament passage is being referred to, but discovering that passage is vital to a proper understanding of John and will greatly enrich one’s understanding of this book.

John records nine miracles, with seven of them being unique to his gospel account.³ The miracles are most often recorded in connection with significant

1 Louis Berkhof, *New Testament Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1915), 112.

2 John 13-19.

3 The seven miracles unique to John are the following: the water changed into wine, the healing of the nobleman’s son, the healing of the impotent man at the pool of Bethesda, the healing of the man born blind, raising Lazarus from the dead, causing the mob to fall backwards in the garden of Gethsemane, and the miraculous catch of many fish.

discourses of Christ concerning His person and work. In this way the miracles served to introduce important instruction, especially concerning His divinity.

John is the only gospel account that includes the lengthy discourse Jesus gave to the disciples in the upper room on the night in which He was betrayed. The theme of this discourse is the Spirit of Truth whom Christ would send and through whom He Himself would be present in the church to comfort her. Significant in this connection is that after His resurrection Christ “breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost” (John 20:22).

John gives only a brief description of the events at the cross. The explanation for this is that John, for the most part, included only those things which he himself had seen and heard (John 1:14; 19:35; 1 John 1:1-3). During the crucifixion, John was mostly absent. The reason for his absence is that after Christ instructed him to care for His earthly mother (John 19:26-27), John immediately took her away to his own home. Apparently, he returned to the cross after the three hours of darkness and only moments before Jesus died.

CANONICAL SIGNIFICANCE

The theme of this book and thus its canonical significance is the truth that Jesus is the eternal and divine Son of God. As Berkhof puts it, “The great significance of this Gospel in Holy Writ is that it places prominently before us the Son of Man as the Son of God, as the eternal Word that became flesh.”⁴ Jesus Christ came into our flesh to save His own, and He could do so exactly and only because of who He was as the eternal and divine Son of God.

This theme is immediately set forth in John 1:1-5, where Jesus is introduced as the eternal Word, who not only was with God, but who also was God. In the same chapter His divinity is confessed by John the Baptist (John 1:15) and then by Nathaniel (John 1:49). And in contrast to the other gospel accounts that mostly emphasize Jesus’ humanity, John emphasizes throughout His divinity.

The book records Jesus Himself teaching that He was the eternal and divine Son of God. He did so, for example, by means of His numerous “I am” statements, by His striking confession, “before Abraham was, I am”

(John 8:58), and by explicitly stating, “I and my Father are one” (John 10:30). And as He Himself pointed out, His many miracles also proved His divinity (see John 5:36; 10:25; 14:11).

That this is the theme of John is also evident from a significant subtheme developed throughout the book, namely, that salvation is a work of sovereign grace. The book very clearly sets forth and even emphasizes this truth, including references to double predestination (John 10, 12), the irresistible call (John 6), the preservation of the saints (John 10), the particularity of the atonement (John 10), and the gift of a true, saving faith (John 10, 15). The gospel account establishes beyond doubt that God is the sovereign and sole Author of salvation, which can only be true if Jesus is the eternal and divine Son of God.

A final confirmation that this is the theme and canonical significance of the book of John is what John wrote, under the inspiration of the Spirit, concerning the purpose of the book. He stated that the book was written “that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing, ye might have life in his name” (John 20:31). By the power of His grace, the child of God responds by faith as Thomas did, making the personal confession, “My Lord and my God” (John 20:28).

OUTLINE OF CONTENT

The following brief outline demonstrates how the central truth of the divinity of Christ is taught throughout the book.⁵

- John 1:1-5—The Essential Glory of the Son of God
- John 1:6-18—The Incarnation and General Reception of the Son of God
- John 1:19-12:50—The Revelation of the Son of God to Israel
- John 13-17—The Revelation of the Son of God to the Disciples
- John 18-19—The Glorification of the Son of God in His Passion
- John 20-21—The Manifestation of the Son of God in Resurrection Power and Glory

For an outline that provides more specific and more detailed information concerning the content of this

4 Berkhof, *New Testament Introduction*, 116.

5 Henry C. Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 175.

book, please refer to H. Hoeksema's *New Testament Introduction*.⁶

6 Herman Hoeksema, *New Testament Introduction* (syllabus

published by the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary), 10-11.

A WORD FITLY SPOKEN



WORSHIP

REV. JUSTIN SMIDSTRA

pastor of First PRC in Holland, Michigan

“O come, let us worship and bow down: let us kneel before the LORD our Maker” (Ps. 95:6) We often hear these words calling us together on the Lord’s Day. A joyful summons to the highest activity of the Christian life, the most exalted expression of covenant relationship, the soul-satisfying fulfillment of the purpose for which we were created and redeemed: *worship of the one true God*.

To worship is our privilege and duty; to be worshiped is God’s exclusive right and due. For He is the Lord *our Maker*, and “He is *our God*,” we are the “people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand” (Ps. 95:7). As such, the Lord is great, greatly to be praised, and to be feared above all gods (Ps. 96:4), both for His almighty power and grace. Every other so-called god is an impostor, a usurper of that name that belongs to the living God alone, the I AM THAT I AM. The gods of the nations are idols, but the Lord made the heavens (Ps. 96:5). “To whom then will ye liken me, or shall I be equal? saith the Holy One” (Is. 40:25). To ask the question is to answer it.

Worship is the activity of glorifying the God who is without peer. “Give unto the LORD the glory due unto his name; worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness” (Ps. 29:2). Our worship does not add to His glory. God’s glory is the radiance of His infinite perfections, the splendor of the holy beauty of His divine being, the effulgence of His adorable attributes. To give God the glory due unto His name is to acknowledge, with

awe and profound reverence, *who God is as God*, to apprehend the unsurpassable worth of His divine being and works, and thus to adore Him and extol His worth with praise. Worship is lifting on high His most excellent name and hallowing it with praise (Ps. 61:8). No surprise, then, that the main biblical words in both the New Testament and the Old have the root meaning “to bow down to the ground, or to prostrate oneself.” The true worshiper feels the vast chasm that exists between him as a creature and the Creator God. Moreover, as a sinful people, we are touched with a profound sense of our own unworthiness. We worship, therefore, in deep humility and with appropriate trembling, as the psalmist says, “in thy fear will I worship toward thy holy temple” (Ps. 5:7).

Yet this fear is not a servile terror, but a childlike fear, a reverential fear paired with deep love and trust. For we worship our Maker who is also our Father through the work of Jesus Christ our Savior. In worship we enter the presence of the Holy One. As we adore Him, we commune with Him. Although our sins would bar us, Jesus has satisfied for our sins by His death on the cross, and through His obedience in our stead, has obtained everlasting righteousness for us, with which he clothes us. Jesus is the new and living way consecrated for us through the veil into the Most Holy Place. Therefore, we have boldness in worship! Boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus and bring to the Lord the sacrifice of praise (Heb. 10:19-20). Jesus

our Savior *saves us unto worship*. His work restores us as *true worshipers*. Through Christ we worship and our worship is acceptable to God. By His Spirit we worship our God in spirit and in truth (John 4:24). A duty, yes, but one that the redeemed in Christ regard as the most joyful privilege. The believing heart does not have to be coerced, it erupts: “Bless the LORD, O my soul: and all that is within me, bless his holy name” (Ps. 103:1). In pouring out our hearts in adoration of our God, our hearts are filled with the richest sense of His grace and lovingkindness, which is better than life itself (Ps. 63:3). Glorifying God, we enjoy Him. Here is the bliss of covenant life. The richest fruit, the fullest manifestation, of salvation by grace, is doxology!

So shall it be for the ages to come. As the ascended Christ gathers His sheep by means of His gospel, He is assembling the one catholic congregation that shall live with Him and worship for eternity: “...and men shall worship him, every one from his place, even all the isles of the heathen” (Zeph. 2:11). Now we worship at His footstool (Ps. 99:5), then shall we worship around His throne. In the beauty of holiness—perfect holiness. True, eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man to conceive, the glory that God’s people shall enjoy in the age to come. Yet, Scripture

gives us glimpses. The most radiant glimpse is *worship*, that is, *doxology*. Look through Revelation’s window, and see heaven, hear the songs of the redeemed:

Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing. And every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, heard I saying, Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever (Rev. 5:11-13).

That is life everlasting. *That* is the covenant made perfect. So shall we ever be with the Lord, and worship the Lord!

Christian brothers and sisters, nothing is more important, or more blessed, than the worship of our God. Let us not neglect the assembling of ourselves together for worship. Every time we hear the call “O come, let us worship and bow down: let us kneel before the LORD our maker” (Ps. 95:6), let us joyfully heed the call. Let us bend the knees of our hearts. Let our heartfelt commitment ever be: “I will sing unto the LORD as long as I live: I will sing praise to my God while I have my being” (Ps. 104:33). For our Triune God is worthy—altogether worthy—of our worship, now and forever, world without end.

TAKING HEED TO THE DOCTRINE



ISSUES IN COVENANT THEOLOGY: INTRODUCTION

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“Do you hold to covenant theology?” If someone asked you that question, how would you respond? To answer the question, there must be a common understanding as to what covenant theology actually is.

With this article we turn to a discussion of a number of issues in what is called covenant theology, and how these issues have a bearing on our understanding of the church institute and the sacraments. My most recent articles in this rubric have been on the church of Christ:

- The Church as the Kingdom of Christ
- The Church as God’s Chosen People
- Our Calling regarding the Church Institute
- The Marks by which the True Church Is Known
- The Means of Grace by which the Spirit works and confirms faith

My intention now is to bring in the subject of current issues in covenant theology, and how they affect one’s view of the church institute and the sacraments.

WHAT IS COVENANT THEOLOGY?

Some would say that a covenant theologian is one who maintains that God's covenant (or covenants) are the structure of something. O. Palmer Robertson says: "God's initiatives in the establishment of covenantal relationships structure redemptive history."¹ Sinclair Ferguson refers to the covenant as the "governing theme" and the "framework within which God sets the scene for the coming of Christ and for the bringing in of his kingdom."² So God's covenant is said to be the structure of redemptive history.

Many would say this structure has to do with three covenants:

1. The covenant within the Trinity
2. The covenant that God made with Adam before the fall
3. The covenant that God has made with people today

Yet many who hold to what is called "covenant theology" view these covenants to be agreements. Someone as well known as R. C. Sproul, for example, refers to God's covenant this way: "The basic structure or framework for the unfolding of the plan of redemption in Scripture is expressed through covenant. Basically, a covenant is an agreement between two or more parties based principally on a promise."³

As many do, Sproul refers to faith in Christ as the condition of the new covenant.⁴

Harrison Perkins, who wrote a recently published book entitled *Reformed Covenant Theology: A Systematic Introduction*, says that we meet God in covenants.⁵ Regarding covenants, he says that they

"have analogies to the agreements we sign to buy a home, lease a car, or accept a new job."⁶ He refers to a covenant within God as "a pact among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in which each person participates in executing the plan of salvation...."⁷

If the covenant is viewed to be the structure, and if the covenant is thought to be analogous to an agreement, clearly this erroneous position on the covenant is going to have a broad effect throughout what many refer to as covenant theology.

So two persons may say they hold to covenant theology and yet have very different views. One might maintain that God's covenant is a conditional agreement, and another might confess it to be an unconditional relationship of friendship. Both of them might be referred to as holding to covenant theology. Yet their views would be quite different from one another.

REFORMED OR BAPTIST?

In the past, people distinguished the Reformed view of God's covenant from that of the Baptists. Yet today many who call themselves Reformed are Baptists, some referring to themselves as Reformed Baptists.

Also, there are members in some Presbyterian churches who are not having their children baptized. Today in a number of Presbyterian churches it is considered to be optional whether the members baptize their children or not. Clearly there has been a movement away from the position set forth in our Reformed confessions that the children of believers "*ought* to be baptized."⁸

Some would view this to be a positive trend.⁹ They

1 O. Palmer Robertson, *Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1980), 201.

2 Sinclair Ferguson, in the Foreword to Cornelis P. Venema's *Christ and Covenant Theology: Essays on Election, Republication, and the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017), x.

3 R. C. Sproul, *Everyone's a Theologian: An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Orlando, FL: Reformation Trust, 2014), 121.

4 R. C. Sproul, *What is Reformed Theology?: Understanding the Basics*, repackaged ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2016), 132.

5 Harrison Perkins, *Reformed Covenant Theology: A Systematic Introduction* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2024), 15.

6 Perkins, *Reformed Covenant Theology*, 1.

7 Perkins, 5.

8 Confessed in Article 34 of the Belgic Confession (emphasis mine). The same phrase is found in our Baptism Form, at the end of the first question that is put to the parents of the child to be baptized. The parents are to answer affirmatively to this question: "First. Whether you acknowledge that although our children are conceived and born in sin, and therefore are subject to all miseries, yea to condemnation itself, yet that they are sanctified in Christ, and therefore, as members of His church, ought to be baptized?"

9 In Texas not that long ago we met with a couple and talked about this subject. The husband brought it up and referred to it as a positive development.

would perhaps argue that we should focus more on “bigger” issues, such as the spread of Islam, or of the abounding lawlessness and prevalent apathy to God’s Word that we see today. Though obviously we must and certainly we do speak against these, that does not mean that the place of children in God’s covenant is to be viewed as a minor matter.

Yet there is another reason why it is not surprising to hear of those in Presbyterian churches who side with the Baptists on the question as to whether children of believers ought to be baptized. As was mentioned, some in Presbyterian churches hold that God’s covenant is a conditional agreement between God and man. If the covenant really is a conditional agreement, and if faith in Jesus really is a condition, then one could see how some would argue that baptism should be administered only to those who have shown evidence that they have fulfilled that condition.

This extremely prevalent conditional covenant view definitely has an effect on whether the children of believers are viewed to be included in the covenant or not. Even among those in Reformed and Presbyterian churches who baptize their children, many would base this on what they would call God’s conditional covenant with the children of believers. So they will baptize their children, but give a wrong explanation as to why the children of believers ought to be baptized.

When witnessing to Baptists, it is important to give a proper explanation as to why the children of believers ought to be baptized. It is quite important that we distinguish the biblical position from that which many are giving today in Reformed and Presbyterian circles.

THE COVENANT AND THE CHURCH INSTITUTE

As I mentioned in a previous article, there is widespread thinking today that church membership is not important. In fact, recently I talked with a man who appeared to deny that there really is any significance to the church institute as a manifestation or picture of the universal body of Christ. “We are in the time of the fulfillment,” he said, which I took to mean that since God’s promise concerning the coming of the Messiah is fulfilled and the days of types and shadows are past, there are now no longer any pictures for God’s people living today. Yet there still are some pictures, though not nearly as many. Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and

the church institute, for example, visibly illustrate for us principles that our Lord has taught us.

There is much instruction in Scripture about the church institute. We have valuable instruction on this also in our Reformed confessions. Article 28 of the Belgic Confession, for example, lists three reasons why we must join the church institute, and also, when able, gather with the members for worship:

1. We are called to maintain the unity of the church.
2. We must submit ourselves to the doctrine and discipline of church, submitting to Jesus Christ who speaks to us and governs us through her.
3. We are called to use our gifts for the advantage of the other members.

As we talk about the subject of God’s covenant, I plan to make repeated references to what bearing these doctrines have on our understanding of the church institute and the sacraments.

SOME KEY QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Another point regarding what is called covenant theology has to do with the history of the Old Testament. Reformed covenant theology not only explains what is meant by God’s covenant, but also goes through the Old Testament and explains the covenant with Noah, with Abraham, and others, and sets forth how they are related to one another.

Some questions that come up in this regard and that we, Lord willing, will consider are these:

1. Was Adam in a covenant of works, and was it possible for him to merit the everlasting heavenly life that we now have in Jesus Christ?
2. Was the covenant made with Noah before the flood the same as the covenant made with him after the flood?
3. Was the covenant made with Noah after the flood the same covenant as the covenant made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob?
4. Was the covenant made with Israel the same as the covenant made with the church today? Are there covenant promises to Israel that are not promises to the church of Jesus Christ today?

Lord willing, these are a few questions that we want to consider. The plan is to set forth concisely how some contemporary authors in Baptist, Presbyterian

and Reformed churches are answering questions such as these, and examining those answers in the light of Scripture. One of the goals here is for us to understand the views of others that we might be better prepared to witness to them regarding God's covenant.

STARTING WITH THE OLD/NEW COVENANT DISTINCTION

I plan to begin with the distinction between the old covenant and the new covenant. I begin there for a number of reasons.

First, the distinction between the old covenant and the new covenant is explicitly referred to in Scripture. If

we say there is one covenant made with God's people in both the old dispensation and the new, it is important that we also explain what the distinction is between the old covenant and the new.

Secondly, many go wrong when explaining this distinction, and end up teaching that there are two covenant peoples of God. If these are two distinct covenants with two distinct peoples, then there is more than one people of God. Such is a common Baptist position, which is apparently also making inroads into other churches as well. So next time, Lord willing, we will begin with the old/new covenant distinction.

FOR THE CHURCH



IF MY BROTHER SIN...THE POTENT MEDICINE OF MATTHEW 18 (7)—CONCLUDED

PROF. BARRETT GRITTERS

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Previous article in this series: May 1, 2025, p. 279.

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

A HEATHEN AND PUBLICAN

We now come to the last part of Jesus' requirements for the church in Matthew 18: "Let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican."

The Lord did not use your exhortations to work repentance. He did not use your witnesses. He did not use the elders' warnings. The extreme remedy is at hand. The church must declare the impenitent brother outside

the kingdom, unless he repents. And now Jesus calls all the members to regard and treat him as a heathen and publican.

One of the most painful aspects of discipline may be the final cutting off of the member. If the whole process is painful, it is especially so when members are to *live out* the excommunication in their personal lives, especially when they are family.

To be clear, *implied* in Jesus' words "let him be unto thee as an heathen man..." is the whole duty of the elders to admonish, warn, and rebuke, both privately and publicly, and then lead the congregation in a formal act of cutting off. The church will "bind" the sinner by the cords of sin's curse (v. 19: "whatsoever ye *bind* on earth") and deliver the sinner into the realm of Satan (outside the church; 1 Cor. 5:5).

But the *explicit* teaching of these last words of verse 17 ("let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a

publican”) is the church’s calling to view and treat him differently. In other words, the individual members of the church are to *ratify* by their *life* what the church as a body declared in excommunication: “You are outside of the kingdom.” Jesus’ emphasis in Matthew 18 has been on the calling of the individual. The pronouns are in the singular: “*thy* brother” and “let him be unto *thee*....” Jesus is explaining how individuals are to relate to the impenitent and excommunicated sinner. It is a real *living out* of the act of excommunication. The extreme remedy is not only an official declaration by Christ’s church, but it is also a new relationship that is lived day by day, or else the medicine’s potency will be diminished. If the church’s excommunication is only a declaration and not a new relationship, it is disobedience to Jesus, who says, “Let him *be* unto you as an heathen and a publican.”

WHAT JESUS IS NOT TEACHING

Let us be very careful to understand Jesus properly here. There are simplistic views of what Jesus means that misrepresent the church’s calling so badly as to turn excommunication into poison rather than medicine.

First, Jesus is not teaching us to view and treat the cut off member as one *without hope*. He himself may *feel* hopeless, and we pray that this will be the case. But we do not view him as without hope. The church has declared, and God in heaven confirms, that only *as long as he remains impenitent* he is outside the kingdom. But as long as he lives, the possibility remains that the church “loose” him from these bonds. So we do not give up hope, which hopelessness would lead to complete abandonment of him. This may never be.

Second, Jesus is not teaching us to *shun* the excommunicated one, in the sense that we refuse to look at or speak to the excommunicated one; in the sense that, if we would see him walking toward us, we should quickly cross to the other side to avoid the possibility of contact. Calvin rightly reminds us that “excommunication is to be distinguished from anathema,” and that the sinner “should not be utterly cast away.”

Third, Jesus is not teaching that we ought to *become hostile* to the brother cut off as we might be toward an enemy. We do not shun or become hostile to publicans. We do not consider the pagans as hopeless. Nor do we the excommunicated.

Misunderstanding of Jesus’ calling here (that we give up hope, shun, or express hostility) may be one reason some ignore what is their clear calling: count him as a heathen man and publican. We envision shunning, despising, and being hostile toward the excommunicated. And because we sense that this is not Christianity, we live in disobedience to Jesus’ teaching here. So it is important to see what Jesus does not mean, and could not mean, and why Calvin also warns against misunderstandings here: “Gentleness and mildness are necessary that those who are reprov’d may know that they are nevertheless loved.”

WHAT JESUS IS TEACHING

At the same time, we need to do justice to what Jesus plainly does teach. *Something* must change in our viewing of and treatment of the impenitent. What formerly was a close, open, and joyful relationship becomes one of distance and sad memories of former days. Jesus’ disciples understood this because He put it in terms children could understand. They did not want and did not have close and happy relationships with tax collectors and uncircumcised pagans. Believers, then, must not *want* and may not *have* close and joyful relationships with the excommunicated. It is very simple to understand that, but it is difficult to practice it, especially when the excommunicated was close—a family member, a life-long friend.

When Jesus’ apostles were confirming and developing Jesus’ teaching in their epistles, they all explained it this way. “Avoid” those who cause division and give offence (Rom. 16:17). “Do not keep company with” one called a brother who lives in sin (1 Cor. 5:9). Do not “eat with them” (1 Cor. 5:11). “Withdraw yourselves from” them (2 Thess. 3:6). Do not bid “godspeed” to one who embraces false doctrine, nor “receive him into your house” (2 John 10). Following these passages, the Form of Excommunication exhorts the members to “keep no company with him.” At the Form’s end we ask God for strength to “avoid...those who are cut off....” The Form of Readmitting confirms this calling when it rejoices that the penitent is *no longer* to be “counted as a stranger.” While excommunicated, he is to us a “stranger.”

On the other hand, Jesus’ apostles warn not to be extreme: do not view him as an enemy. Indeed,

“have no company with him...yet count him not as an enemy” (2 Thess. 3:14, 15). There is a difference between a tax collector and an enemy. I refuse contact with an enemy. I go to the other side of the street when I see him approaching. But not the publican, not the heathen, and not the excommunicated. The Form of Excommunication does not express a “No Contact” law of Christ, but a law of “Limited Contact.” The old Church Orders and Calvin warn of *overly* familiar contact.¹

Instead of no contact, I *seek out* contact with him so that I may admonish him as I would a brother (2 Thess. 3:15).² Healthy contact is so important that the Form of Excommunication has us pray that God would “kindle in our hearts a pious zeal, that we may labor, with good Christian admonitions and examples, to bring again this excommunicated person on the right way....” Zeal! Labor! Admonitions! Examples! Which cannot take place if we shun him.

If the change of relationship is difficult (from close and joyful to distant and sad), this is even more difficult. From one point of view, it is relatively easy to limit contact. It is massively difficult to work out my life in such a way that the excommunicated brother sees me, hears me, and senses in me a passionate love for him—a desire for his repentance, restoration, and renewed joy in God. I must seek out opportunities for contact so that he may see in me and hear from me that I carry in my heart a burden for his soul.

I am reminded of a story of an excommunicated alcoholic who was pursued in Christian love by members of his church for months and even years. Finally, he returned and was restored, testifying that it was the Christian love of these persistent church members who made it their business never to lose contact with him that God used to bring him to repentance. They did not abandon him.

Third, we pray. If not *every* member of the church can visit and admonish, every one of them is able to

pray. Congregational prayers need to include prayers for those cut off. Fathers can lead their families in prayers for the wayward, so that children learn that this is a normal part of Christian love. If we never pray for them, how could we ever read the Form of Readmitting honestly: “We cannot conceal from you (the elders announce to the congregation) that he, by the above-mentioned remedy as also by the means of good admonitions *and your Christian prayers*, is come so far....”?

“THAT HE MAY BE ASHAMED”

The purpose of distancing and admonishing is that the impenitent sinner may be ashamed and repent. Paul teaches this in 2 Thessalonians 3. Why have no company? That he may be ashamed! What is your goal when your relationship changes to distant and your contacts are admonitions? That he be ashamed. That is, when he thinks about himself, he is so far from being happy that he is utterly confounded. “What am I? What have I done!? How foolish and stubborn have I been!”

There are *other* purposes in putting a wicked person away from us—keeping the leaven from spreading, preserving the church from disgrace, inducing others to fear, and upholding the honor and name of God—but in 2 Thessalonians 3 Paul focuses on one: that the sinner may be ashamed.

His shame, we pray, will be the bitter fruit God produces in his soul by our treatment of him. “For shame,” Calvin explains, “like sorrow, is a useful preparation for hatred of sin.”

This fits with other Scripture. First Corinthians 5 has discipline’s purpose as “the destruction of his flesh,” his earthly life. We *pray* that his separation from God’s people will bring his earthly life to shambles. We pray that his life does not go well—and not because we delight in ruin. Instead, it may be that he “comes to himself” and says, as the prodigal son, “What has my folly brought me to?!” The parable teaches that God often brings a man to repentance by bringing him to the end of himself.

Do I resist this calling to count him as an heathen man and publican? Would I rather make his life comfortable? Then I am trying to short-circuit God’s way. He must be made uncomfortable.

Do I have to make a difficult judgment regarding

1 Emden 1571: “overly familiar or unnecessary conversation and company.” Dordt 1578: “no unnecessary fellowship.” Middelburg 1581: “refrain from common and unnecessary conversation.”

2 The Form of Excommunication adds the words, “I would,” meaning that I no longer *consider* him a brother, but *treat* him as I would treat a brother.

what is “too familiar” contact? This can be a test for myself: does my conduct help him think good of himself (*unashamed*) or does my treatment make him displeased and full of shame? If my treatment helps him to live his life relaxed and at ease, I may be living contrary to Jesus’ will.

God intends discipline to be painful. For both the impenitent sinner and for you who love him. Love must be tough.

In Matthew 18, Jesus has taught us to be concerned about impenitent sin, about how to care for the souls of our neighbor, and the importance of confession and fleeing to Christ to be “loosed” from the bonds of sin.

So let us administer Jesus’ potent medicine according to His will. And let us not doubt that, if the sinner is one of His, Jesus will use it to heal him.

O Lord, kindle in our hearts a pious zeal, that we may labor, with good Christian admonitions and examples, to bring again excommunicated persons on the right way. Father of mercy, use our efforts so that some day soon, one who has been cut off may pray to be readmitted into the communion of the church. May we then be able to loose and absolve him from the bonds of excommunication, count him no longer a stranger, but a fellow-citizen with the saints, and of the household of God. We humble ourselves, implore Thy mercy, for us and for them.

ALL THY WORKS SHALL PRAISE THEE



LESSONS FROM THE GARDEN (1) REAPING WHAT YOU SOW

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This is the time of year when many of us are busy in our gardens or tending to something we are trying to grow. Gardening is a very beneficial activity. Besides the value of being outside, being active in God’s creation, and enjoying the growth and development of the plants you are cultivating, a garden affords us, as Christians, the opportunity to be reminded of many spiritual truths.

Whether in sowing, reaping, watering, fertilizing, weeding, pruning, or otherwise, we can be led to contemplate important spiritual truths when we view these activities in the light of Scripture. In this series of articles, we would like to examine some of these spiritual truths, beginning with the truth of the connection between sowing and reaping.

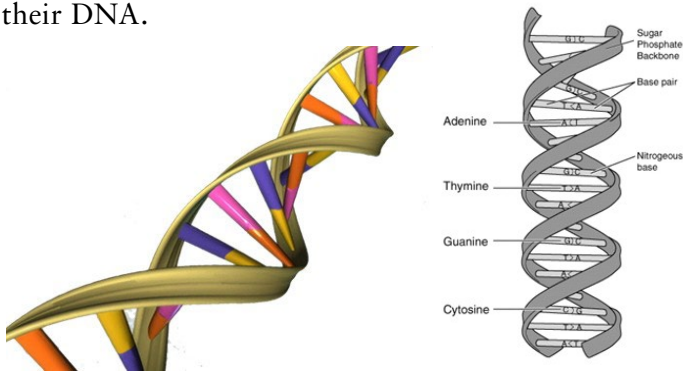
CONNECTION BETWEEN SEED AND PLANT

“And God said, Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb yielding seed, and the fruit tree yielding fruit

after his kind, whose seed is in itself, upon the earth: and it was so” (Gen. 1:11). God’s word to the plants is to produce offspring after their kind. He wisely ordained that within each seed is the entire organism of the plant, in principle. A tiny acorn, for example, contains all that is needed to form a mighty oak tree. And so it is with each flower and vegetable seed sown within our gardens. This is because God gives to each seed the specific genetic information to develop into its corresponding mature plant.

This genetic information is embedded in an organism’s DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid). To understand DNA, a complex molecule (macromolecule), let us picture a ladder with two side rails connected with rungs and shaped like a spiral staircase. DNA consists of two long strands of sugar molecules and phosphate groups—the side rails of the ladder—which are linked together by a combination of other molecules that

act like the rungs of the ladder connecting the two strands. There are four linking molecules—Adenine (A), Thymine (T), Cytosine (C), and Guanine (G). These linking molecules are called base pairs. The A and T molecules combine to form one type of rung between the two side DNA strands while the C and G molecules form another type of rung. Using combinations of only these four molecules (A, T, C, G), the genetic code for all organisms is written in their DNA.



As ladders vary in the number of rungs depending on their length, so DNA strands vary in the number of base pairs from organism to organism. The DNA strands in a single human cell contains approximately 3 billion base pairs. In comparison, the seed of a tomato has around 950 million base pairs, an acorn of a white oak tree approximately 794 million pairs, and a cell of a fruit fly about 165 million.

Scientists have not only discovered how many base pairs are found in the genetic information of many organisms, but also their *specific sequence*, that is, the order in which the base pairs are found. The genetic sequence is important because the order of the base pairs is the code to make the necessary proteins that the organism needs to form its various parts. Think of the base pairs like the English alphabet. Varying combinations of English letters form the code for various words, such as SAW or WAS. Likewise, varying combinations of base pairs form the code for different proteins. As different words are spelled depending on the arrangement of the letters, so different proteins, needed for the development of the organism, are formed depending on the specific sequence of the base pairs. From a biological perspective, the specific genetic code within each seed is the information that forms the various plant structures. And that specific code will produce *only* that specific organism. If you want tulips,

you must plant a tulip bulb. This is true because the God-ordained genetic code (found in the arrangement of base pairs) is specifically designed for that which God intended.

What an almighty God we serve who created innumerable organisms each with its own unique DNA. Using just the four molecular “rungs” (base pairs: A, T, C, G), and arranging their specific order, God gives to each creature its unique characteristics. It is an absolutely astounding design. Praise God for His mighty works!

REAPING WHAT YOU SOW

Many truths can be considered in connection with plants and seeds. Think for example of a mustard seed (Luke 13:19); the development of sin (Jam. 1:15); the burying of our loved ones (like a seed when they die) in the hope of the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:35-49); or the good tree that brings forth good fruit (Matt. 7:17-18). In this article we particularly focus on the *connection* between what is sown and what is reaped.

To understand this connection we must first understand the idea of spiritual sowing and reaping. Rev. M. DeVries, in an article in the *Standard Bearer* several years ago, does an excellent job of explaining this when he writes,

We are constantly sowing seed, whether it be into the soil of the flesh or into the soil of the Spirit.... To follow after sin and the carnal desires of the flesh is to drop seeds into the soil of the flesh.... To say that you can walk in ways of sin and reap a good harvest is sheer folly! It will never happen.... [One] who sows in the Spirit...takes the seeds of the fruit of the Spirit which have grown in his life, and he sows them again.... The seeds planted by grace in the soil of the Spirit will bear their fruit! That unfailing promise of God is an incentive to spur us on to faithfulness.¹

The connection between what is sown and what is reaped is not arbitrary, for God does not work in a haphazard manner. As the God-ordained genetic code found in each seed specifically develops into that which God intended, so God has ordained a connection between what is spiritually sown and what is spiritually reaped. Yet what we take for granted when we sow in

1 Rev. M. DeVries. “Spiritual sowing and reaping.” *Standard Bearer*, vol. 94, No. 1 (October 1, 2017), 3-5.

our gardens, we often forget in the spiritual realm. Out of our sinful nature, we sow weeds in our lives and yet expect to harvest good fruit. By nature we are inclined to suppress the scriptural principle of sowing and reaping, as did Old Testament Israel, who filled “Jerusalem with iniquity” and said “Is not the LORD among us? none evil can come upon us” (Mic. 3:11). Therefore, we must heed the warning: “Be not deceived; God is not mocked; for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption” (Gal. 6:7-8a).

What does sowing to the flesh (and its grievous fruit) look like in our lives? When we sow discord and division in our congregation, be not surprised when God visits that sinful behavior with discord and division to a greater degree in our families and congregations—perhaps fourfold or more (Prov. 26:27; Ps. 7:15-16; Job 4:8; 2 Sam. 12:6, 10, 12). Sow an indifference to the Word of God, perhaps by a lack of instruction and discipline of our children, and we will reap a generation who knows not the Lord (Jud. 2:10; Jud. 21:25; 1 Sam. 3:13-14). Sow a profaning of God’s covenant and of spiritual things, including despising the preaching and God’s servants, and be not surprised to reap a famine of the Word (Amos 8:11; 1 Sam. 3:1; Mal. 1:1-14). Sow harsh or unjust judgment upon others—you will reap similar judgment upon yourself (Matt. 7:1-2). Refuse to forgive one, who after sinning against you has repented, be not surprised that you feel bitter, lacking peace in your soul, as God teaches that as you forgive your neighbor, so will you experience God’s forgiveness (Matt. 6:14-15; 18:23-25; Jam. 2:13). Sow seeds of spiritual neglect in watchfulness and prayer and we open ourselves to grievous sin (Canons of Dordt, 5.4 and 5.5).

“But he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting” (Gal. 6:8b). It is a great privilege to sow to the Spirit, for only those who are redeemed in the blood of Jesus Christ and are connected to Christ by faith can sow to the Spirit. And as we sow to the Spirit, so shall we reap. As we walk by faith as pilgrims and strangers in this world we face many hardships and difficulties. But we are encouraged that as we sow to the Spirit, of the Spirit we reap. As we sow to the Spirit, striving to honor God in a holy life (throughout the storms of life) with the eye of faith fixed firmly on Christ, we will grow spiritually. (Note: the reprobate

experience hardships in life too, but they do not grow spiritually, because they do not have faith and cannot sow to the Spirit). For us who are in Christ, as our minds are stayed on God, God keeps us in perfect peace (Is. 26:3). Sow to the Spirit by communing with God faithfully as you use the means of grace, and as you come to Him in prayer and read His Word, and you will reap of the Spirit a *continuing* delight and joy in that communion with your covenant God (1 John 1:7). This is the gracious way God deals with us as His children—renewing in us a desire to seek after Him by teaching us that sowing to the Spirit is good and pleasant. God directs us to commune with Him, and as we fellowship with Him we further grow in our desire to commune with Him. This is God’s wise and orderly way.

No one, planting a tomato seed, ought to be so foolish as to say, “Now I deserve a prosperous tomato plant; I earned it, after all, by planting this seed in such a wise manner!” No, not deserved. But, if planted in accord with the God-ordained way for the growth of all living things, one can confidently expect a tomato plant with tomatoes (should God be pleased to so prosper the planting), rather than pumpkins. This we can confidently expect because God is a God of order, faithful and true to His Word. In the same manner, from a spiritual perspective, we ought not foolishly think to have earned or merited with God by our God-given spiritual activity. But, because God is a God of order and faithful to His Word, we can confidently expect to grow in spiritual maturity as we live a life of faith that seeks God in reading and meditating on His Word.

As this new season of earthly growth is upon us, let us meditate on the truth that we reap what we sow. God clearly teaches such in His Word; let us then be warned against sowing to the flesh and be encouraged to sow to the Spirit. For sowing to the Spirit is a gracious blessing of God in and of itself, and God is pleased to even further prosper this work of His.

Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. But his delight is in the law of the LORD; and in his law doth he meditate day and night. And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper (Ps. 1:1-3).



STEWARDING OUR TIME OF *REST*

MRS. SHERRY KOOLE

wife, mother, and grandmother in Hope PRC in Walker, Michigan

June—that long-awaited, eagerly-anticipated month, which can give rise to an abundance of personal freedom for many—is here! For those of us living in the United States, the 2024-25 school year has drawn to its close. And along with the conclusion of another year of instruction and learning comes the possibility of seeing in our children and young people an attitude of entitlement. Some may even give expression to this sentiment with a cheerful, “Woohoo! Yippee! We made it! Summer vacation is finally here! No more homework. No more books. All school-related responsibilities can be put to *rest*. We earned this! After nine months of hard work and studies, we deserve this time of summer’s *rest*!”

And our children are not the only ones who look forward to this time of *rest* and relaxation. We teachers and parents can be just as excited at times. We, too, look forward to a reprieve from school-related responsibilities—instructors in preparing for and teaching various lessons, and parents with the preparing of daily lunches, chauffeuring to and from school events, and monitoring and helping with nightly homework assignments. Added to this time of *rest* and relaxation is the fact that another year of catechism and society life within the churches has also drawn to a close. The time of summer’s *rest* and relaxation has arrived and the reality of having fewer regulated and supervised responsibilities is embraced by many. School is out! The *freedom* to do as one pleases, so to speak, is finally here!

So-called freedom, yes. Yet there is also the likelihood that some students may pursue the possibility of summertime jobs. They and others may be planning vacations with family and friends as well (one of which I hope this year might include attending the 100th anniversary celebration of the PRCA.) Both of these can be good and profitable things to do over the summer.

Part-time employment along with a family vacation or a day outing here or there may even give some balance to the summertime months. I for one would very much like to believe this to be true.

Do not get me wrong. Times of refreshing *rest* and relaxation are good. There are times when we need to put away our schoolbooks, homework, catechism and society studies; close our laptops and computers; set down our video games and phones, and just simply relax. Maybe do something we have not done in a while. Like reading a book for the pure enjoyment of reading or treating ourselves to a day at the beach. Yet, three months is a long time and more than what I believe to be needed for a refreshing *rest*. Especially for students! Their time of summer *rest* is equivalent to one-fourth of the time they spend in their year of studies and work at school. I believe that for most students—even for those finding summertime jobs—three months will allow for more free time than is necessary for a revitalizing summer break. I fear that some may even battle with boredom during their months of summertime *rest*. So I wish to seize this opportunity to encourage our children (especially our young people)—and I hope those who are parents will encourage them along with me—not to waste this time of summer’s *rest*. Treasure it for the gift that it is. Be thankful for it. And be good stewards of this time of *rest* you are given. For God calls us to be good stewards of *all* that He has given. And, like it or not, this *also includes* the free time we often like to regard as our own and feel entitled to do with as we please.

Our children might contend that *rest* is just that, *rest*. They may cite as proof for their contention the following definitions: Oxford maintains that *rest* means “to cease work or movement in order to relax,

sleep, or recover strength” and Webster’s definition reiterates that with “cessation of motion or action of any kind...resting or reposing especially in sleep or death.” And they may argue that after nine months of study and work in school they deserve a much-needed *rest*. I confess that I, too, as a parent looked forward to my children’s summer vacation as much as they did at times. But I was also one of those parents who was more than ready for school to start again in the fall. We all take a needed nap or two now and then when we feel it necessary, or a week or two of family vacation if desired or need be. But I think most would agree that a single break of three months is a rather long time for needed rejuvenation. So as a concerned parent and grandparent who also contends that for the child of God the connotation of *rest* means more than just what the definitions above suggest, I once again encourage our children not to waste their time of summer *rest*. And with a loving concern for their spiritual well-being, I humbly submit the following suggestions.

REST IN GOD

I feel it best to begin with Scripture. The Bible speaks of *rest* in many places, and I choose to cite a few of them here. Already in the opening verses of Genesis chapter 2 we read that God ended His work of creating “and he *rested* on the seventh day from all his work which he had made” (v. 2). We all know that after six days of creating, our God did not *rest* because He was in need of a much deserved break. The work of creation did not exhaust Him. We know better than that. God does not grow weary, or tired, or fatigued, or worn out, or sleepy. In fact, our God neither slumbers nor sleeps (Ps. 121:4). Rather, His work of creating was finished, and He “saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good” (Gen. 1:31). God rested from His work, saw all that He had made, declared it good, and as the Triune God delighted in His creation. Thus, He “blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it: because that in it he had *rested* from all his work” (Gen. 2:3).

God commands us to view the Sabbath as a day of *rest* and cease from our earthly labors as well. We as His people are called to follow in His ways and keep the Sabbath day holy. Read the fourth commandment as found in Deuteronomy 5:12-15. We are to labor for six days and then we are called to *rest*. For “the seventh

day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, nor thy manservant, nor thy maidservant,...that thy manservant and thy maidservant may *rest* as well as thou” (v. 14). Christ also calls us from our labors in Matthew 11:28 saying, “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you *rest*.” The *rest* we are being called to in both these passages is more than just a mere physical rest. If we continue reading in Matthew 11, verse 29 ends by saying, “and ye shall find rest unto your souls.”

This *rest* is far more than just mere physical rejuvenation. The Sabbath is to be a day devoted to the Lord. A day of honoring, worshiping, and praising our God. The whole of Matthew 11:29 reads, “Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.” We learn of Him through His teachings (Sabbath day preaching) and by the example of who He is and what characterized His life here on earth (*meek and lowly in heart*)—characteristics of obedience, humility, compassion, charity, patience, and willingness to forgive. *Resting* in God may involve our ceasing from earthly labors. But we do remain active. We pray. We praise. We worship. Our children need to be taught that true *rest* for the child of God is more than just ceasing from earthly labors and school studies. It is the peaceful *rest* that the child of God experiences as he places his trust in the supreme sovereignty and loving care of his heavenly Father. It is the peaceful *rest* that produces thankful worship and living...at all times (even during times of summer break). What delight then to enjoy the blessedness of *resting* in Him each Sabbath day...and *every day*!

I encourage you, dear reader, to continually *rest* in God. Even during this time of summer break. Although the responsibilities of school, catechism, and society life have been set aside for a time, and your calendar may fill up with all kinds of activities on your so-called bucket list of things you would like to do, I encourage, earnestly ask, and even plead with you not to set aside or diminish in any way the time you have committed for personal devotions. Rather, dedicate some of the spare and leisure time you are given to delving deeper into God’s Word. Read. Read godly edifying, encouraging, and instructive material. What a great blessing is ours to have at our disposal

the gift of spiritually Reformed periodicals for all ages: *Ignited by the Word* for our young children, the *Beacon Lights* for our young people, and the *Standard Bearer* and *Theological School Journal* that speak to the interests of all ages. Allocate some quality time to dutifully read these age appropriate gifts of Reformed reading material.

Take time to be holy. Speak oft with your Lord. Whether that be in personal study of His Word, or enjoying time spent outdoors. As you bask and rejoice in the beauty of the Lord's creation, search the Scriptures for correlating passages that, when making application, give enrichment and meaning to the beauty you are enjoying at the time—whether it be plant life (trees, flowers, crops, for example), animal life (both great and small), the splendor of the heavens, or any other part of our God's creation. So much application can be made if you are only willing to search and to read. I cannot help but think of the words to a familiar children's hymn, "He gave us eyes to see them, and lips that we might tell how great is God Almighty who has made all things well" (*All Things Bright and Beautiful*, written by Cecil Frances Alexander).

Do not view your time of summer's *rest*, or any leisure time you may acquire, as something you have earned or have coming to you. But rather view it as a gift. View each day for what it is, a day that the Lord has made. Rejoice and be glad in it. See and enjoy the breathtaking beauty of the Lord's creation. Marvel at His majesty and greatness. And fill each day with thankful living to the God of your salvation.

SHARE YOUR REST WITH OTHERS

Devoting time for one's self can be a good and even needed thing to do at times. Over the course of the summer months doing things alone may be very appealing for some. Hours can be spent alone doing arts and crafts, puzzles, or just reading for pleasure. For those who are more energetic, outdoor gardening, swimming laps in a pool, hiking, biking, and walking or running for miles and miles may be the more enjoyable things to do. But, even though time spent alone can be a good thing, I highly encourage you to also have times where you invite others to share with you in your summertime *rest*.

Take a break from your video games and screen time.

Go for coffee with a friend. Take Grandma and Grandpa (or another saint no longer able to drive) out for a ride and an enjoyable lunch. Young people, help your busy mother by devoting some of your time and energy entertaining your so-called 'bothersome' younger siblings. Share with siblings and others the things you have learned in your own personal devotions and study. In addition to reading alone for pleasure, establish a book club with friends, reading and discussing a meaningful book together. Set up a weekly game night or hymn sing around a fire with friends and/or cousins. You will discover much joy can be found in singing Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with others. Start a Bible study with friends of all ages, studying a portion of Scripture, a Reformed book, or a timely topic that can find its basis for discussion in the Word of God. I think you will be surprised by how much you can learn from others—young and old alike—if you are only willing to invite them to share with you in your study of God's Word.

Do not shy away from these types of summer relationships. Rather, pursue them. Enjoy the gift of communing with others of like faith. I believe you will not regret it at all. But rather, as you grow together in your faith and knowledge of God, I believe you will grow in grace and love for your brothers and sisters in Christ as well.

PRIORITIZE

Summer is just beginning. Keep your focus on what is important and manage your time accordingly. For the child of God, whose desire in life is to become more and more Christ-like, spending time alone with his or her Lord and fellowshiping with fellow believers should head the list of priorities in life. Even during times of *rest*. Bearing the image of Christ is a lifelong calling. One from which the child of God takes no break. But he does *rest*. Continually *rests* in God—and with others. Our *rest* may call for a ceasing from physical labor for a time, but never should it involve a ceasing from all activity. For even in times of *resting*, all that we say and do must give witness to the certainty of who we are and to whom we belong.

Summer has arrived. Let us view it as the gift that it is and steward it as we ought. Whether we enjoy spending time alone or with others, may our times of physical *rest* and relaxation and spiritual *rest* and

rejuvenation be pleasing to our God. May our lives here on earth—both in working and in *resting*—be characterized by thankful living and joyful worship as

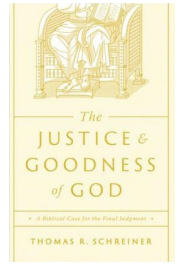
we earnestly await with anticipation and longing the eternal *rest* that is yet to come. *Heavenly rest*. What a day—glorious day—that will be!

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 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



The Justice & Goodness of God: A Biblical Case for the Final Judgment, by Thomas R. Schreiner. Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2024. Pp xiv + 145. \$13.49 soft.

The book promises much, but delivers little. The opening line asks the promising question, “Why would anyone want to write on the final judgment?” (ix).

One expects a concentrated, thorough, systematic exposition of the awesome truth of the final judgment, or at the very least, explicit treatment of the main aspects of the judgment: its reality; its nature, including the place of works in the judgment; the judge; the standard of the judgment and its verdict, including the works both of those judged and of Christ on behalf of some; how the standard of works does not contradict grace in the case of those who are justified; and the outcome of the judgment. Especially would one expect from a prominent evangelical scholar, which the author is, a careful explanation—in a full chapter devoted to the topic—of the determinative role of God’s predestination with regard to the final judgment.

This expectation is dashed. Rather than a clear, focused, systematic explanation of the final judgment in its fundamental aspects (which is still possible in a work that is intended to concentrate on an exposition of the biblical basis of the final judgment), the book is a hit-and-miss exegesis of a multitude of passages of Scripture that mention or allude to the idea of judgment. The truth, or doctrine, of judgment itself is lost in a welter of words explaining references in the Bible to judgment. Instead of an explanation of the final judgment by virtue of strategic exegesis, the book is exegesis in which can be found, here and there, allusions to, and comments (many of which are sound) on, the judgment.

In the end, one comes away with the conviction that there will be a final judgment and that this judgment will include eternal punishment for those who die outside of Christ. This conviction is something; it is not a significant, instructive “writing on the final judgment.”

The book is also heresy. It is the author’s contention that the judgment will be just, because, in spite of God’s will to save all without exception, some reject God’s loving and would-be saving will. Not the least of the book’s faults is its repeated, strong insistence that the final judgment will be the ultimate defeat of God the Judge. For, according to Schreiner, God wills the salvation of all, and history is the effort of God to save all. “[God’s] desire is for all people to repent and to avoid judgment” (60). “God truly wants all to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Tim. 2:4; cf. Ezek18:32), and yet he hasn’t decreed that all will do so. Human choices make a difference.... God patiently waits for the wicked to repent and longs for them to repent, while at the same time he has ordained whatever comes to pass” (123).

Using the dubious description, “fixed,” to further his denial of “pre-destination” (*pre-destination*, not *post-destination*), Schreiner tips his Arminian hand: “the destiny of human beings isn’t fixed” (42). Evidently, Matthew 25:31–46 has not entered into the author’s exegetical purview. The final judgment begins—*begins*, not *ends*—with the seating of the elect sheep on the judge’s right hand and the seating of the reprobate goats on His left hand.

The biblical and Christian doctrine of the final judgment, based on carefully chosen and sharply explained passages of Scripture, still waits to be written.

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ANNOUNCEMENTS

WEDDING ANNIVERSARY

It is with joy in our hearts and gratitude to God that we celebrate the 50th wedding anniversary of our parents and grandparents, **Richard and Marcia Flikkema**, on June 20, 2025, the Lord willing. We are thankful to the Lord for blessing us with God-fearing parents, who raised us in the fear and love of His name. As they have walked through this life, the Lord, in His perfect plan, has led them through many hills and valleys. Through the blessings and the trials, we have witnessed their faith in God, their trust in His ways, and their confession of God's goodness. We are incredibly thankful for the love they have given us and for the sacrifices that they have made for us. It is our earnest prayer that God will continue to bless our parents in the years to come, as He has so faithfully done in the years past. May the words of their wedding text live in our hearts and be shown in our walk. "Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee: because he trusteth in thee. Trust ye in the LORD for ever: for in the LORD Jehovah is everlasting strength" (Isaiah 26:3, 4).

Dan and Tammy McHugh

Sean, Colin

Mike and Tricia Brummel

Drew, Gerrit, Sydney, Lewis

Joe and Heidi Kleyn

Makayla, Caleb, Hannah, Levi, Will

Kyle Richard Flikkema (in glory)

Jenison, Michigan

CALL TO SYNOD 2025

Synod 2024 appointed Faith Protestant Reformed Church, Jenison, MI the calling church for the 2025 Synod.

The Consistory hereby notifies our churches that the 2025 Synod of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America will convene, the Lord willing, on Tuesday, June 10, 2025 at 8:00 A.M., in the Faith Protestant Reformed Church, Jenison, MI.

The pre-synodical service will be held on Monday evening, June 9, at 7:00 P.M. Rev. W. Langerak, president of the 2024 Synod, will preach the sermon. Synodical delegates are requested to meet with the Consistory before the service.

Delegates in need of lodging should contact Mr. Tom Cammenga, tomcam@att.net. Phone: (616) 516-8912.

Consistory of Faith PRC

Tom Cammenga, Clerk



REV. CARL HAAK

- 6/1 Blessed Art the Merciful, Matt. 5:7
- 6/8 Blessed Are the Pure in Heart, Matt. 5:8
- 6/15 Arise, Go, and Cry Against It, Jonah 1:1, 2
- 6/22 The Prophet Who Ran Away, Jonah 1:3
- 6/29 The God Who Would Not Let Go, Jonah 1:4-15

