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PRCA CENTENNIAL



100 YEARS OF THE PRCA (1925–2025)

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HUMBLE CELEBRATION

REV. HEATH BLEYENBERG

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...for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted—Luke 18:14

According to the parable of the Pharisee and the publican in Luke 18, there were two celebrations taking place in the temple on one particular day. The Pharisee had a grand celebration of sorts. And the publican had a very different celebration. The one was a wicked and proud celebration. The other was a good and humble celebration.

Over the course of the next few weeks we commemorate God's faithfulness to us as we celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC). In this celebration we will gather together as friends and families. The bulk of that celebration will take place in the West Michigan area with all the planned speeches and activities. But that celebration will spill over into all the churches, as families and members come together. In our coming together we will remember and reminisce. We will listen to stories from our parents and grandparents. We will celebrate and rehearse one with another the goodness of God to us over the years.

The Word of God puts us in the proper mindset as we celebrate the 100th anniversary of the PRC. Although we will be happy and thankful, our celebrating will not be done in pride. Rather, it will be a humble celebration. The Word of God instructs, "...for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted" (Luke 18:14).

THE CELEBRATION OF THE PHARISEE

Standing in the temple that day, the Pharisee engaged in celebration. He was celebrating himself! This Pharisee

was a very proud man. Pride is high-minded thinking. The man who is proud lifts himself above others and looks down on them. He is superior, and all others are inferior. He is righteous, and all others are sinful. The Pharisee's pride manifests itself in especially two ways in his prayer.

First, he prayed with himself. "The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself..." (Luke 18:11). This shows his sinful, superior attitude toward God. Though he addressed God, yet he directed his prayer to himself, and did so for the purpose of stroking his own ego. He really enjoyed listening to himself. He flattered himself and praised his ability and his accomplishments: "I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess" (v. 12). The law required fasting during the Great Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:29-30; 23:27-31; Num. 29:7), but the Pharisee fasted twice every week. The law required tithing of what a man made. The Pharisee went above and beyond and tithed of all that he possessed. This Pharisee was filled with pride and a great sense of his own worth and his own accomplishments.

Second, this Pharisee compared himself with others and, not surprisingly, came out on top. "I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust adulterers, or even as this publican" (Luke 18:11). When this Pharisee looked out at others, all he could see were people who did not measure up. "This one is unjust, but not I. That one over there is an adulterer, but not I. And sitting over there is a miserable publican, but thankfully I'm not like he." The standard the Pharisee set up was the standard of his own righteousness, and everyone else fell short. What the Pharisee neglected was to compare himself to the standard of God and His righteousness. In this the Pharisees manifested his

pride. Pride exalts oneself as righteous while looking down on all others as sinful.

This Pharisee had a grand celebration in the temple that day. A celebration of pride. He was thankful for himself. Thankful that he was not a sinner. Thankful that he was not like others.

Pride can also manifest itself in a church or denomination. It becomes evident when that church thinks she is morally and doctrinally superior than others. Pride shows itself when a church is forever accusing and putting down the brother, all to the exclusion of setting forth the gospel. It is an endless, condescending accusation of others.

Is that true of us as Protestant Reformed Churches? If so, then our celebration will look like this: “God, we thank thee that we are not as other churches are; full of erroneous doctrine, adulterers, or even as that other denomination (insert the denomination of your choice). We go to church twice every Sunday. We pay the budget, and sometimes even put in more than what’s required!”

To be sure, we must oppose false doctrine. We are thankful when God keeps us pure and holy. We ought to be faithful in our church attendance. We ought to give willingly and liberally to the causes of the kingdom. But do we say these things and take these positions out of pride? Do we congratulate ourselves for a job well done? Do we look down on others?

God keep us from engaging in proud celebration.

THE CELEBRATION OF THE PUBLICAN

There was another celebration taking place in the temple that day—the celebration of the publican. His was a very humble celebration.

If pride is high-minded thinking, then humility is lowly-minded thinking. Humility is to have a modest opinion of oneself, free of condescension and haughtiness. Humility looks around in the congregation and says, “I’m the lowliest of all.” The apostle Paul is an example of such humility, and declares of himself in Ephesians 3:8 that he was “less than the least of all saints.” The publican’s humility is demonstrated in his posture, action, and prayer.

Regarding his posture, “the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven” (v. 13). He stood afar off. The Pharisee stood in a crowd of people and craved the attention of others. The

publican stood afar off knowing that he stood before God alone. He did not even dare lift up his eyes unto heaven. He knew something of the holiness of God and of his own sin and unworthiness. In lowly humility all he could do was cast his eyes to the ground.

Regarding his action, he “...smote upon his breast.” Smiting one’s breast is an expression of deep sorrow, grief, and anguish. After Jesus died on the cross, the centurion declared, “Certainly this was a righteous man.” The people round about the cross “smote their breasts” (Luke 23:48) and returned home. They smote their breasts knowing that the death of Jesus was a horrible injustice, should not have happened, and was grievously wrong. They smote their breasts and returned home with a grief and sorrow over what they had just witnessed. The publican in the temple smote his breast as a deep and profound expression of his inner grief and sorrow over his sins.

Regarding his prayer, he pleaded, “God be merciful to me a sinner.” This publican was overwhelmed with all his sins. While the Pharisee lauded his own accomplishments, the publican could only hang his head in shame for all his sins. Implied is that this publican confessed his sins and repented of them. And yet in the agony of his soul he could do nothing else but seek the forgiving mercy of God with the words, “God, be merciful to me a sinner.” The publican asked for propitiation. He asked for the wrath of God to be turned away.

Humility can also manifest itself in a church or denomination. It becomes evident when that church, in comparing herself to others, does not think of herself as morally or doctrinally superior. The church and the members will acknowledge their shortcomings and sins, confess them willingly, seeking remission in the blood of Jesus Christ. Further, the humble church, in addressing doctrinal differences with a firm conviction, will nonetheless do so with humility rather than haughty condescension.

Is that true of us as Protestant Reformed Churches? If so, then our celebration will look like this: “God, be merciful to us as churches and as individual members thereof. Open our eyes to the horror of sin that we may confess and turn from it. Make us teachable. Grant that we love Thee truly and love our neighbor as ourselves. We thank Thee for Thy abiding faithfulness and grace and mercy.”

God preserve us in that kind of humble celebration.

THE CELEBRATION AFTER

The Pharisee and the publican both departed from the temple and went home.

For the Pharisee, he enjoyed rehearsing in his mind the words that he spoke and receiving the consequent praise of the people. But most importantly, there was something he did not hear. He did not hear in his heart the commendation of God. He did not hear in his heart the declaration from God and the personal assurance that “your sins are forgiven.”

Therefore, the celebration of this proud Pharisee was empty and vain. Empty and vain because it left no room for the cross of Jesus Christ. The Pharisee was righteous in himself and had no need of the righteousness of another. God resisted this proud man (Jam. 4:6). When God “resists,” He stands as an opponent and adversary. And there is no celebrating when the Almighty God of heaven and earth stands to resist and oppose you.

For the publican, “this man went down to his house justified rather than the other” (Luke 18:14).

His celebration of God’s grace and mercy in the temple followed him to his home. And in his home he heard the Word of God, “I forgive your sins,” the blessed word of justification. God spoke in the heart of the publican and gave him the personal assurance, “There is propitiation. My wrath is turned away. Know my love. Experience my favor. Your sins are forgiven in the blood of Jesus Christ.”

For the humble publican, his celebration was full and rich. “For God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble” (Jam. 4:6). He was the object of God’s grace. At home, though the tears streamed down his face, yet there was a smile on his face and happiness in his heart. His sins were forgiven. He was right with God.

We have before us the 100th anniversary of the PRC. We may celebrate. We ought to celebrate. Let’s make sure we celebrate the proper object of God’s covenant faithfulness, and in the proper spirit of humility and thankfulness. And let’s remember in all our celebration, “every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted” (Luke 18:14).

EDITORIAL



THE 100TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE PRCA

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CENTENNIAL

This year marks the centennial of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America, a denomination made up of thirty-two congregations in the USA and Canada. A special anniversary event, PRCA100 (prca100.org), is being planned for next month with an invitation to sister churches and contacts throughout the world. This issue of the *Standard Bearer* is the magazine’s own contribution to the centennial.

A centennial is a 100th anniversary. 100 years is a long time on the earth. Scripture says man is like the grass that grows up in the morning and flourishes but

is cut down by evening. Even if a man is given great strength and lives eighty years, he soon flies away (Ps. 90:10). How many people do you know who have lived to see 100? How many of you own or are employed at businesses established over 100 years ago? How many of us live in houses built before 1925?

But now think about a congregation or even a denomination lasting 100 years. The issue is not merely one of external existence, because a church could apostatize all the while existing for 100 years on the same parcel of land, with the same building, the same name on the roadside sign, and some of the same

surnames in the membership directory. The issue is *faithfulness to God*. How many churches can faithfully preach the pure gospel of Jesus, faithfully catechize the youth in sound doctrine, faithfully maintain church discipline, faithfully exercise the sacraments, and all the while dwell together in genuine love and peace, humbly acknowledging that all their sufficiency is of God? Apart from Christ Jesus, none. Only by a wonder of divine grace can the church of Christ be preserved and her members live to see a centennial.

It takes almighty grace to bring a church to 100 years because the yearly and even monthly and weekly existence of the church is precarious in this spiritually hostile world. The church must contend with the Devil and evil spirits, who are so depraved as enemies of God and every good thing, that to the utmost of their power, as murderers, they watch to ruin the church and every member thereof, and by their wicked stratagems seek to destroy all (see Belgic Confession, Art. 12). Furthermore, residing in the flesh of every church member is the pride of life as the principle of ecclesiastical self-destruction. The greatest threat to the church lies within her walls, and it is the inclination to annual self-congratulations and self-praise. If we think more highly of ourselves than we ought, then under the just judgment of God, we church members will corrupt our holy doctrine, worship, and life, thus working our own destruction. Centennials in Christ's church are, therefore, not a testimony to our faithfulness, but to God's enduring mercy. We must not merely *say* that but *believe* it.

Two activities constitute a centennial: commemoration and celebration. While these two terms can be used synonymously, I distinguish them. To "commemorate" is to call to remembrance as by an event, speech, book, or monument something that happened one hundred years ago and continues to have enduring significance. Commemoration involves the memory in contemplation of the past. It is not merely the private exercise of one individual but includes a social element with a speech or event (or this issue of the *Standard Bearer*) occasioning a collective recollection of the past.

To "celebrate" is to acknowledge or honor something or someone with a festivity of joy and gratitude. A Christian celebration of religious significance in honor of God and His works is holy and maintains an element

of solemnity. Our celebrations do not take the form of wild parties with heavy drinking and dancing females like the celebrations of king Ahasuerus or Herod (see Esther 1; Matt. 14:6). Several times a year we enjoy what the Church Order calls "the *celebration* of the Lord's Supper" (Arts. 78, 81), and while our hearts and tongues are full of thanksgiving and praise, we celebrate *devoutly* in reverential humility before our glorious God.

The relation between commemoration and celebration is that a *celebration* flows out of and is the fruit of the heart that has been contemplating God's covenant faithfulness in the past (*commemoration*). These two elements are captured beautifully in Psalter 397, stanza 4:

Thy matchless goodness and Thy grace
Thy people shall commemorate,
And all Thy truth and righteousness
My joyful song shall celebrate.

The PRCA's centennial, therefore, is our *commemoration* of God's matchless goodness and grace with *celebrations* that climax in joyful singing. For those able to attend the PRCA100 celebration this summer, a special night of music is planned as the climactic conclusion. It will be held in downtown Grand Rapids at a venue only three miles northwest of the old First PRC. For the psalmist, and for us, commemoration and celebration appropriately climax in "joyful song" to the God who alone is worthy of praise and adoration.

COMMEMORATION

Since you can read elsewhere in this magazine about *celebration*, and particularly the *humility* that properly characterizes it, I want to focus on *commemoration*. Commemoration of God's works is enjoined upon us by the Scriptures. For example, Psalm 105:5, exhorts, "Remember his marvelous works that he hath done; his wonders, and the judgments of his mouth." Commemoration is urged upon us especially for the sake of the upcoming generation. In Psalter 213 (from Psalm 78) we sing in stanza 2,

Instructing our sons, we gladly record,
The praises, the works, the might of the Lord,
For He hath commanded that what He hath done,
Be passed in tradition from father to son.

The outstanding work of God's redeeming grace that Old Testament Israel was to commemorate through all its generations was the Passover. Exodus 12:42 states, "It is a night to be much observed unto the LORD for bringing them out from the land of Egypt: this is that night of the LORD to be observed of all the children of Israel in their generations." The Passover was to be *much* observed, of *all* the children of Israel, in their *generations*. As long as they lived, the Israelites were never to forget what God did with His mighty hand in delivering them from Egypt. In fact, God instituted an ordinance called the Passover so that they would always remember. Special focus was given to the instruction of children so that succeeding generations would always know the mighty acts of God in the past. Similarly, we and our children may never forget what God did for us in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. It was not our hand, but God's that delivered Jesus for us. One reason for the institution of the Lord's Supper is that we and our generations never forget ("This do ye in remembrance of me").

While the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, that glorious reality to which the Passover pointed, is the unsurpassed work of God in history, church history is *full* of God's wonderful works. We are called to commemorate *all* His works, including what He has done for our denomination as part of the church of all ages. In the PRCA we now have 100 years on which to reflect.

A real and present danger with every new generation (and this was always the case with Israel) is that we do not know the past (ignorance), or even worse, do not care to know the past (apathy). Then we lose our convictions. When ignorance or apathy regarding the history and doctrines of the denomination prevails among a new generation of officebearers, schoolteachers, parents, and young adults, then our reason for belonging to the PRCA probably becomes more of a matter of convenience than conviction. But when we know God's mighty works through history, including the past 100 years of *our* history, then with that spiritual knowledge of faith God gives conviction to hold fast, contend valiantly, and withstand pressure to compromise or jettison the precious heritage of God's most holy truth that our fathers passed down to us.

READING BOOKS

In addition to a week of presentations and historical tours in West Michigan during the anniversary celebration of June 2-6, God has given us books, many books, and books are good! There is no shortage of valuable books accessible to members of the PRCA to help us recall and tell our children our history and doctrinal heritage.

First, there are various books and booklets commemorating our 25th, 50th, and 75th anniversaries. If you do not have access to these, the PR seminary library has copies available for check-out, and even extra handout copies of some of these.

Second, the 100th Anniversary Committee is overseeing the publication of a large, hardcover, full-color book detailing 100 years of history in the PRCA. Look for the debut of this exciting work later this year. It will bring our history up to date.

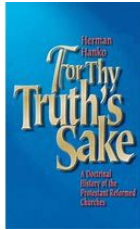
Third, the following six books are especially valuable for knowing our doctrinal history.

- *The Protestant Reformed Churches in America* (The "Red Book"): The account of Rev. Herman Hoeksema (H.H.) detailing the history of the common grace controversy in 1924-1925. A reprint is being advertised in this magazine (see last page).
- *Ready to Give An Answer: A Catechism of Reformed Distinctives*: A question-and-answer treatment of the doctrines involved in the controversy over common grace in 1924 (H.H.) and the conditional covenant in 1953 (H. Hanko).
- *The Rock Whence We Are Hewn*: A collection of pamphlets or booklets written by H.H. and Henry Danhof between 1919 and 1940. The editor of the book, Prof. David Engelsma, notes, "All the writings explain and defend the great doctrines of the Reformed faith that were fundamental to the founding of the Protestant Reformed Churches—covenant, predestination, particular grace, and antithesis."
- *Therefore Have I Spoken: A Biography of Herman Hoeksema*: Written by Gertrude Hoeksema, this book, in tracing the history of H.H., really traces the early history of the PRCA.
- *A Watered Garden*: Written by Gertrude

Hoeksema, this book gives what was an up-to-date history of the PRCA through the 1980s.

- *Battle for Sovereign Grace in the Covenant:* Prof. D. Engelsma's book on the Declaration of Principles, explaining both the history and doctrines involved in the schism within the PRCA in the 1950s.

Finally, one book rises above the others for the purpose of commemoration: *For Thy Truth's Sake: A Doctrinal History of the Protestant Reformed Churches*, by Prof. Herman Hanko. Synod 1997 commissioned Hanko "to write a book commemorating our 75th anniversary. This would be done along historical/theological lines showing the development of our churches in the truth" (*PRC Acts*, p. 39). *For Thy Truth's Sake* is the fruit of Hanko's two plus years of labor and it appeared for the anniversary celebration in June of 2000.



In his preface, Hanko wrote, "Those who hold membership in the PRC ought to be very clear on why the denomination insists on maintaining its own identity, and why membership in this denomination is important." To those who take the time to read it, this book is invaluable in helping articulate a substantial answer to questions such as, "Who are we as churches? What are our roots? What is our origin? What is the purpose of our existence? What is our doctrinal heritage? For what do we stand?" For this reason, consistories have often given this book to those who make confession of faith.

Would it not be wonderful if every confessing member of the PRCA made it his/her goal to read *For Thy Truth's Sake* this summer? It is intimidating to many, as it fills over 400 pages with theology and history. But find a partner or several, and read it together. As we embark on a new century, how beneficial such reading would be for strengthening our appreciation for and our commitment to the sovereignty and particularity of God's never-failing, saving grace in the crucified and risen Lord. Psalm 115:1, "Not unto us, O LORD, not unto us, but unto thy name give glory, for thy mercy, and for thy truth's sake."

I conclude with Hanko's reflections from twenty-five years ago, words even more apt at our centennial:

It is, when one stops to think about it, quite a remarkable blessing of God that the very same truths which were emphasized by our spiritual fathers in the heat of controversy are still taught from all the pulpits of Protestant Reformed churches and from the classroom podiums of the seminary. This fact alone ought to create in us a sense of humility and awe at God's great goodness over the decades. Faithfulness to the truth for such a long time has not happened often in history.

I must ask myself whether it lives in my soul as often and deeply as it should that I owe a debt of gratitude to God for doing what He is under no obligation to do. In His great goodness and by His everlasting Spirit He has preserved us as churches in the glad confession of His saving grace in His everlasting covenant of fellowship with us and our spiritual seed through our Head and Mediator Christ Jesus.



OUR DOCTRINAL HERITAGE

REV. RICHARD SMIT

pastor of Randolph PRC in Randolph, Wisconsin

In thankful commemoration of Jehovah's goodness and mercy to our Protestant Reformed Churches in America through the past century, this article takes a bird's-eye view of the living organism of our doctrinal

heritage that Jehovah graciously has preserved among us.

Since this article can only be an overview, a complete exposition of the Reformed doctrines that the PRCA

has sought to maintain as our living biblical confession can be found in the many writings of Protestant Reformed theologians. This exposition of Reformed doctrines may be found in their books published by the Reformed Free Publishing Association, articles in the *Standard Bearer*, and in the *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*, and in pamphlets published for local evangelism and missions.

From a bird's-eye perspective, the doctrinal heritage of the PRCA includes the ecumenical creeds of the Christian faith and the sixteenth and seventeenth-century Reformed confessions. Accordingly, the PRCA confess that the Christian must believe all things promised us in the holy gospel and which are set forth in the articles of our apostolic, catholic, undoubted Christian faith: the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed, the Belgic Confession of Faith, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dordrecht.

What constitutes the main features of our doctrinal heritage that form the reason for our separate existence as a federation of confessionally Reformed churches?

Regarding **revelation**, God is pleased to reveal His divinity, absolutely sovereign power, and righteousness through His creation and His providence over all things in the universe throughout history. This clear revelation of the one, true, living God is sufficient to leave mankind without excuse before Him in His judgments and condemnation upon fallen man. However, God reveals Himself more clearly and fully through our Lord Jesus Christ, not only in His divinity and power, but also in His sovereign and particular goodness.

Regarding the **special revelation** of God in holy Scripture, Scripture is God-breathed infallibly in the languages of the original manuscripts. Holy Scripture is infallible and all-sufficient for the revelation of the whole counsel of God concerning the salvation of His chosen church as well as for the true doctrine and life of His covenant friends. This inspiration of Holy Scripture shows that God is the sole Author of Scripture through its many writers. This conviction concerning the doctrine of divine, infallible inspiration of Scripture undergirds the commitment of the PRCA to the most faithful translations of the Word of God, including in the English language, the Authorized Version (KJV).

Regarding the **miracles** revealed in Scripture, the

PRCA maintain that such miracles, including the wonder of Scripture itself, are the works of God that He fulfilled by His providence for the revelation of His sovereign, particular grace in the salvation of His chosen people in Christ. Miracles are humanly incomprehensible, humanly impossible, and leave us in humble awe and praise of Jehovah. The miracles of Scripture serve the great wonder and revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, as the Wonderful One. However, such miracles of healing, special revelation, and speaking in tongues ceased with the passing of the apostles to glory.

Regarding the **covenant**, the PRCA maintain, over against the error that the covenant is a contract or bilateral agreement, that the essence of the covenant is a bond of living fellowship of holy friends: Jehovah, our Triune covenant God as Friend-Sovereign, and His people in Jesus Christ as friend-servants. Membership in Jehovah's everlasting covenant is governed by election in Christ, our covenant Head, secured by the atonement of Christ, and accomplished by His efficacious Spirit in the generations of believers and their seed. Membership therein is not conditioned on man's activity of believing and acceptance of an alleged well-meant offer of salvation. The blessed and miraculous entrance into the covenant is signified and sealed unto believers and their infant children by holy baptism. To the final fulfillment of the covenant at the end, Christ preserves His saints by His Word and Spirit and rules from God's right hand over all. Convinced of the covenant promise and its demands, believing parents to their utmost raise their covenant children in the fear of Jehovah by local, parentally governed, Christian schools.

Regarding the term **organic**, PRCA theologians have applied the terms "organic" and "organism" in different ways—to the original creation, to the relationship of Adam to the human race, to the development of mankind in sin since the fall of Adam, to Christ as the head of the church, to Scripture, to the organic development of the covenant of grace in history, to the doctrine of faith, and to the approach of parents towards their covenant children and their godly instruction. Although the idea, for example, in regard to the salvation of the church, was present in the thought of Augustine and suggested by the Synod of Dordt (1618-19) in the doctrine of predestination, PRCA theologians brought the concept and its application

into the forefront of the confession of the PRCA. It has served to sharpen a proper understanding of the wonder of Jehovah's establishment and preservation of His covenant with His people throughout history.

Regarding the **antithesis**, the PRCA desire not to amalgamate with the world, not to find common ground of cooperation with the world according to the error of common grace, nor to engage in the other extreme of an Anabaptist world-flight. Rather, being convinced of double predestination and God's holy covenant with believers and their seed, the PRCA uphold the spiritual separation between the redeemed, sanctified church of Jesus Christ and the totally depraved world of wicked men. Finding no spiritual good in the world of wicked men forms the basis for vigilance against the wickedness of the world in its religions, philosophy, goals, recreation, movies, music, and other carnal pleasures, and for diligence by a living faith within a new, godly life of friendship with the Lord and His saints.

Regarding **marriage**, the PRCA has developed and maintains its confession that marriage is a creation ordinance and a holy institution of God from the beginning. The essence of marriage is not a contract between two parties, but a life of fellowship that was intended as a reflection of God's everlasting covenant friendship with His people in Christ, and a reflection of the unbreakable marriage between Christ and His church. Accordingly, the earthly marriage bond of the husband and wife is unbreakable, except by God in death. Although divorce is permissible in the case of adultery, it does not dissolve the marriage bond and does not permit the remarriage of those divorced.

Regarding the sovereign, almighty, and irresistible **grace** of God through Christ Jesus, the PRCA maintain that the goodness, grace, love, and mercy of God are particular in harmony with His will, righteousness, holiness, and wisdom. God is good only unto Israel and unto such who are of a clean heart (Ps. 73:1). For them and them alone Christ died and arose again as their covenant Head. Of them, whom the Father gave to Christ from eternity, He shall not lose one in His final appearing. By this truth, God is glorified and His saints in this life are enlivened and richly comforted.

Regarding **faith**, the PRCA maintain that faith in its essential nature is the bond by which the elect,

regenerated believer is engrafted by the Holy Spirit into Jesus Christ. Through this union, the regenerated child of God receives all of his new life out of Jesus Christ. By and because of the power of the risen Lord's life, the believer produces good fruit. This shows that faith is entirely the gift of God by His sovereign and efficacious grace. Those who receive this gift grow in understanding and assurance of their union to Jesus Christ and of all the blessings of salvation found in Him alone.

Regarding **justification**, the PRCA continue to maintain that justification is by faith alone through Jesus Christ alone. This justification is ordained by God in His eternal counsel, legally founded in the atonement of Christ, sealed in the resurrection of Christ, preached in the gospel, and embraced by the elect, called, regenerated child of God through saving faith alone. Although the believer brings forth good works, these are of no account to his righteousness before God. Necessarily, the justified believer is also sanctified by faith through the inner working of the Holy Spirit unto good works. As a result, the saint lives joyfully by faith out of Christ within holy and thankful friendship with his fellow saints and the Lord.

Regarding the **church**, the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ must be preached by the church, which is the local manifestation of the body of Christ. She administers the Word, the sacraments, Christian discipline, and benevolence through her special offices of pastor, elder, and deacon, into which offices Jesus ordains and qualifies only men to serve. Believers and their seed are bound to join and remain faithful members of those churches which maintain the three marks of the true church of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Regarding **missions**, the PRCA continue to labor in missions as the Lord provides the opportunity. Missions is, narrowly, the preaching the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ for the gathering of believers and their seed out of the darkness of unbelief and idolatry into the marvelous light and truth of our Lord Jesus Christ. The goal of missions is the establishment of local, indigenous congregations, faithful to Jesus Christ, the King of the church. Accordingly, the PRCA believe that the Reformed faith, including double predestination, does not inhibit faithful mission work. Rather, it supports and promotes it for the gathering of all those

whom God has ordained to eternal life in Jesus Christ. In obedience to Christ, the PRCA continue to send forth promiscuously the preaching of the particular promise of Jehovah to believers and their seed, while waiting upon the Lord for the twofold fruit upon the authoritative proclamation of the call of the gospel.

Finally, regarding **amillennialism**, the PRCA maintain that the millennium of Revelation 20 began at the ascension of Jesus Christ and is completed with the loosening of Satan for the rise of the great earthly kingdom of the antichrist. The final appearing of Jesus Christ comes quickly through all of the signs of His final appearing, including the great, worldwide tribulation against the saints by the coming antichrist and his

dominion. As a result, the PRCA do not seek to pursue an earthly kingdom of Jesus, but rather the kingdom that is secured in principle at the right hand of God and found in history in the gathering of believers and their seed in the local church. Our hope is focused on the glorious, final appearing of Christ, which will be the final, greatest example of the significant, Reformation saying, *post tenebras lux*—after darkness, light!

In conclusion, the PRCA are thankful for the very small part given to them from the Lord to be His witnesses of the blessed, living, and harmonious organism of His truth. May the Lord preserve the faithful witness of His truth until the end for His great glory.



HISTORY OF THE PROTESTANT REFORMED THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

PROF. DOUGLAS KUIPER

professor of Church History and New Testament in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary, and member of Trinity PRC in Hudsonville, Michigan

The Protestant Reformed Churches in America (PRCA) began on January 29, 1925, when the combined consistories of the Christian Reformed Churches of Eastern Ave., Hope, and First Kalamazoo held their first informal meeting. They considered their meeting of March 6, 1925 to be their first *official* meeting.

Which institutions connected to the PRCA are as old as the denomination? The three founding churches, of course, were older than the denomination. And, the Reformed Free Publishing Association and the *Standard Bearer* began in 1924.

Also observing their centennial in 2025 are the congregation of Hull, Iowa (March 1925) and the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary (previously known as the Theological School of the PRCA). The 100-year-old Theological Seminary is the subject of this article.

BEGINNINGS

Some men already attending Calvin Theological Seminary disagreed with the Christian Reformed

Churches' Synod of 1924 decision regarding common grace. Others who disagreed hoped to enter seminary soon. These men understood that they should no longer study at Calvin, but should be trained by ministers who defended sovereign, particular grace. In March and April 1925 the combined consistories discussed how to help these men.

The consistories approved a course of study, appointed the three ministers (Henry Danhof, Herman Hoeksema, and George Ophoff) as instructors, and admitted ten men to the school. Instruction began in June 1925. On Monday afternoons, Hoeksema taught all New Testament subjects, including Greek. Ophoff did the same with all Old Testament subjects, including Hebrew, on Wednesday afternoons. On Fridays, Danhof taught dogmatics and church history.

Within a year trouble was brewing. In 1926 two students were expelled for alleging that Hoeksema and Ophoff showed partiality to some students. These allegations were not demonstrated, and they were circulated slanderously rather than being reported to the

proper body. Investigation uncovered that Rev. Benjamin Danhof, nephew of the one seminary instructor against whom no allegations were made, masterminded this plan of opposition to Hoeksema and Ophoff. In August 1926 H. Danhof resigned as seminary instructor. Later that year he and his congregation left the PRCA.

A century later, the Danhof controversy remains one of the most notable in the seminary's history. Never again has an instructor suddenly resigned, leaving the seminary in the lurch.

INSTRUCTORS

After Danhof left, Hoeksema taught the dogmatics courses and Ophoff taught the church history courses. These two men were the main instructors from 1926-1959.

Their load was heavy. In addition to being seminary instructors, they were both pastors. Hoeksema pastored the largest church in the denomination until he retired in 1964. Ophoff pastored until Byron Center disbanded in 1944, when he became the only full-time seminary professor. Both preached, lectured, and wrote in almost every issue of the *Standard Bearer*.

Other ministers in West Michigan taught Dutch, English, Greek, Latin, and Bible history. Sometimes upper-class students taught foreign languages to the new students. And when Hoeksema had a stroke in 1947 and Ophoff in 1958, area ministers taught their subjects. Candidate Homer Hoeksema intended to do postgraduate studies at our seminary from 1947-1949. As a result of his father's stroke, teaching his father's classes suddenly became part of his studies. Yet, though others helped, Hoeksema and Ophoff were the primary instructors for the seminary's first thirty-four years.

When Ophoff retired in 1959, Rev. Homer Hoeksema became the third professor in seminary's history. Rev. Herman Hanko became the fourth in 1965, after Herman Hoeksema retired. Prof. Homer Hoeksema taught dogmatics and Old Testament and Prof. Hanko taught church history and New Testament; they shared the practical theology courses. When the seminary observed its fiftieth anniversary in 1975, Prof. Robert Decker had only recently begun his work. So four men did the bulk of the work during the seminary's first 50 years, while eight men have served during the second 50 years.

Prof. Decker was appointed in 1973 because the

denomination realized that teaching the full seminary curriculum well required more than two men. Synod also desired the seminary to provide some pre-seminary (college-level) courses. Synod had desired this earlier; in 1949 it called a third professor to teach pre-seminary courses. This attempt ended when Rev. L. Doezeema declined, as did his alternate, Rev. P. De Boer, and when the conditional covenant controversy developed in the PRC. In 1971 synod again worked to establish a third professorship, receiving six declines before Prof. Decker accepted. Now the seminary had one man devoted to the practical theology department, as well as teaching some Old and New Testament courses.

In 1985 synod decided to call a replacement for a professor when he reaches the age of 65. The newly-appointed professor is given time to get an academic degree in the area in which he will teach, and to begin developing his courses. When the retiring professor is 70, he must be declared emeritus. This practice explains some overlap among professors in the various departments.

Prof. David Engelsma (1988-2008) replaced Homer Hoeksema in the dogmatics and Old Testament departments. Prof. Ronald Cammenga (2005-2024) succeeded Prof. Engelsma, and has since been replaced by Prof. Brian Huizinga (2019-present).

Prof. Russell Dykstra succeeded H. Hanko in the church history and New Testament departments (1996-2022). With a view to Prof. Dykstra's emeritation, Prof. Douglas Kuiper was appointed in 2017.

And in the practical theology and New Testament department, Prof. Barrett Gritters (2003-2026) replaced R. Decker, and Prof. Cory Griess was called in 2021 as Prof. Gritters' successor.

STUDENTS

Synod 2024 approved the graduation of the 120th student. Of these, 104 have served or do serve in ministry in the PRCA, seven in sister churches, four in churches with which the PRCA has a corresponding relationship, and one in the United Reformed Churches (URC). Three never entered ministry, and one returned to the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) immediately after graduation, serving in ministry in the CRC and URC.

An estimate is that 250-300 men have studied in the seminary over the course of a century—some for

years, others for weeks. Some withdrew, realizing they were not called to the ministry; others left for other seminaries, from which they graduated. Numerous men and women have also audited seminary classes for their own personal growth.

CURRICULUM

The seminary curriculum has always been basic: it provides instruction in Old and New Testament, Reformed dogmatics and confessions, church history, and practical theology. New courses have been developed within these departments, but the seminary's focus has always been on providing a basic, well-rounded foundation for pastors.

In addition to these courses, students in the early years were taught Dutch, German, Latin, and English. In 1971 the pre-seminary department provided instruction in Latin, Dutch, psychology, philosophy, speech, logic, and world history.

The seminary was originally a three-year program for which a complete high-school education was not required. Cornelius Hanks was 22, and Herman Veldman 24, when they were ordained! A completed high-school education was required first in 1949. Various college courses became required before one could enter seminary, but not until 1989 was a student required to have a bachelor's degree before beginning seminary. This was a factor in establishing the pre-seminary program in 1971: a bachelor's degree was not needed, but some college-level education was desirable. A high-school graduate could enroll in the pre-seminary department, and within five years could graduate from the seminary and become a minister.

The 1981-1982 school year was the first in which the seminary curriculum was expanded to a four-year program. The goal, in part, was to enable the students to serve a six-month pastoral internship supervised by an experienced pastor. But it was not until 1990 that an internship program was officially adopted, and the first internships were in 1994, when seniors Allen Brummel went to Singapore to work under Rev. J. Kortering, and Douglas Kuiper went to Doon, IA to labor under Rev. R. Dykstra. Also in 1990, the pre-seminary program was dropped, although the seminary still teaches college-level Greek grammar and reading.

Into one area the curriculum was not expanded.

When several Protestant Reformed Christian schools began in the late 1940s, some teachers asked the seminary to provide a "normal course"—instruction for teachers. Synod decided that, while we desire teachers who are well trained in Reformed and biblical distinctives, the seminary's purpose was specifically to train ministers. Only one course, "Principles of Reformed Education," has since been taught for teachers.

In 2023, aware of our increasing shortage of ministers, synod decided that older men who do not have a bachelor degree may begin their seminary studies under a "Special Seminary Entrance Program (SSEP)."

LOCATIONS

In the past century the seminary met in four temporary locations and two permanent ones. Classes were first held in the basement of the Eastern Ave. CRC. This lasted about six months, until civil courts awarded the property to the minority of the congregation that continued with the CRC. Seminary then met for a short time in the Oakdale Christian School building.

The seminary's first permanent house was a basement room in First (Grand Rapids) PRC (see photo below). Classes began there in August 1926. When the De Wolf faction took control of this building in 1953, the seminary met one year in Fourth (now Southeast) PRC, and the next year in Adam's Street Christian School. In 1955 it returned to its permanent location in

*Some of the Young Men attending our Seminary
(found in the 25th Anniversary booklet, 1950)*



*J. Hofman, M. Koerner, G. Lanting, H. Hanks, J. Kok,
B. Woudenberg, H. Mensch*

First Church's basement.

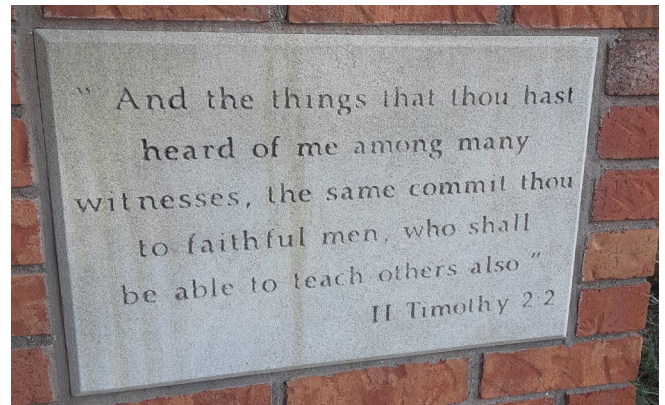
In early 1974 the seminary moved to its present location on Ivanrest Ave. in Wyoming. The new building contained four classrooms, a large all-purpose room, a library, and an office and workroom. It was spacious, compared to one room in First PRC's basement. In 1995 the building nearly doubled in size with the addition of four professor offices, a much larger library area, and a basement (for storage and where the RFPA was initially housed). A smaller addition in 2019 added two more offices and a larger, well-equipped archives room.

MOTTO

Inscribed on a concrete block near the building's entrance are the words of 2 Timothy 2:2: "And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also." This governs the seminary's *work* and *purpose*. Reformed churches need a *trained* ministry, trained by *experienced* pastors. That training must be

founded on God's Word.

The *goal* and *aim* of our work is God's glory in the preservation of His church through an educated, godly, Reformed ministry. The work is weighty. So we make the same request as did the apostle Paul: "Finally, brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may have free course, and be glorified, even as it is with you" (2 Thess. 3:1).



PRC MISSIONS (2000 TO 2025)

REV. JAMES LANING

home missionary in the Protestant Reformed Churches, and member of Zion PRC in Jenison, Michigan

It has been a joy and a privilege for us as churches to promote the preaching of the gospel in various nations around the world. In this article we look specifically at the work over the past twenty-five years. During these years the Protestant Reformed Churches have been busily engaged in mission work, both foreign and domestic.

I take a moment to explain what we mean by foreign and domestic, seeing as in mission work we use those terms in a way that differs from the norm. Synod 1993 divided the work of missions between the Foreign Mission Committee (FMC) and the Domestic Mission Committee (DMC) as follows:

DMC: United States, Canada, Europe (including Russia), Australia and New Zealand

FMC: Africa, South America, Asia, the Caribbean, Central America (including Mexico).

In this article, however, I will divide the work by country, ending with the United States.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Covenant Protestant Reformed Church in Northern Ireland (Covenant PRCNI) was organized in 1996, and is one of the sister churches of the PRCA. The church was organized while Rev. Ronald Hanko labored there as a PRC missionary, with his wife, Nancy, and

their children (1993-2001). Hudsonville PRC was the calling church. In 2001, the same year that Rev. Hanko departed, Rev. Angus Stewart, a son of that congregation, began serving as their pastor, a position he occupies still today.

The church maintains a well-known website, with a large assortment of sound, Reformed literature in a variety of languages, for the benefit of saints around the world. Many have found this site when searching on subjects concerning the Christian faith and life. Rev. Stewart's wife, Mary, is very involved with maintaining this website.

GHANA

In 1999, Hull PRC, the calling church, called their pastor, Richard Moore, to labor in Ghana along with his wife, Jan. He began his labors in the area of Accra, the capitol city of Ghana, laboring there until 2002. Rev. Wayne Bekkering served as a second missionary to Ghana, along with his wife Phyllis, starting in 2001. He continued until 2005, when he became emeritus. For a time Rev. Bekkering served in Ghana along with Rev. Rodney Miersma and his wife Sharon. The Miersmas labored there from 2003 to 2006, when the mission work in Ghana came to an end.

THE PHILIPPINES

Work in the Philippines started in the middle of the 1990s, when four men separately contacted some PRC evangelism committees seeking more information about our churches. A number of years later, Synod 2001 approved the FMC's proposal that a mission field be opened in the Philippines, with Doon PRC as the calling church. A year later, Rev. Audred Spriensma received and accepted the call to labor there along with his wife, Alva, and their daughter. In 2006, a church was organized, and a year later Rev. Spriensma returned to the United States.

Not long afterwards, two more missionaries were sent to assist the saints in the Philippines. Rev. Daniel Kleyn (2009–23) and Rev. Richard Smit (2009–15; 2017–23) accepted calls to the Philippines, accompanied by their wives Sharon and Trisha, and the Smit's children. Soon a third missionary, Rev. Daniel Holstege (2016–21) began laboring there, along with his wife, Leah, and their children. Though centered in

the Manila area, the missionaries labored in a number of areas, including an island to the southeast known as Southern Negros Occidental.

The Protestant Reformed Churches in the Philippines became a federation of churches in April 2014. Four years later, the PRCP became sister churches of the PRCA, and soon afterwards also with Covenant Evangelical Reformed Church in Singapore.

The labors of the missionaries concluded a couple of years ago, in 2023. Now that the PRCP and the PRCA have a sister-church relationship, the PRCP is looking to the PRCA to assist them with a minister-on-loan (MOL) through the PRCA's Contact Committee. Byron Center PRC is the calling church for this special labor.

The PRCP currently is comprised of two congregations. The first is the Berean PRC in Antipolo, Rizal, which has Rev. Vernon Ibe as their pastor. The second is the Provident PRC in Marikina, which currently is without a pastor.

MYANMAR

Rev. Jason Kortering began his labors in Singapore in 1992 as a minister-on-loan. While there, he gave instruction in what was then called the Asian Reformed Theological School (ARTS) of the Evangelical Reformed Churches of Singapore. Two of the men he trained are Rev. Titus and Pastor Paulraj, who are currently preaching in Myanmar and India, respectively. Rev. Titus received instruction also from Rev. Arie denHartog. Both Rev. Kortering and Rev. denHartog made repeated visits to Myanmar.

Synod 2007 approved Hope PRC taking on the work of assisting the saints in Myanmar, and over the years many delegations have travelled to that country. Rev. Titus's wife, Cer Te, has been a welcoming hostess. During a number of those visits there were conferences, with people attending from different parts of the country.

Over the years Rev. Titus has been busy preaching the gospel and teaching catechism classes in Hope Protestant Reformed Church in Yangon. He has also taught a Reformed doctrines class. He has conducted seminars in Yangon and other areas, traveling to the northern region of Myanmar once or twice a year. In addition, he has translated into Burmese the King James Version of the Bible, Reformed confessions, as well as

some RFPA books, *Standard Bearer* articles, and PRC catechism materials.

Now that the military has taken over the government in Myanmar, it is very difficult for our brothers and sisters there. We are thankful to God that the saints whom we know are still safe. May we continue to remember them and all other brothers and sisters in Myanmar in our prayers.

INDIA

Pastor Paulraj and his wife, Kasturi, have been laboring in Vellore, India, for nearly twenty years. Their work, which began in their home, involved both the preaching of the gospel and the caring for orphans. Gradually a Tamil-speaking congregation was gathered. In 2007, Georgetown PRC took on the role of assisting this work.

Currently there are two congregations shepherded by Pastor Paulraj; one is Tamil-speaking and the other is English-speaking. The Tamil-speaking church is called the Protestant Reformed Church of Vellore (PRCV), and consists currently of about thirty families, many of which are young couples with their children. Most of the members of the English-speaking church, called the Reformed Church of Vellore (RCV), are medical professionals or medical students, many of whom expect to move to other cities.

Pastor Paulraj is involved in teaching men for the ministry in the PRCV. He also teaches area pastors through what is called the Sola Gratia Program (SGA), with the instruction being given not only in Vellore, but also in other cities.

As in Myanmar, so also in India, the current government is opposed to Christianity. The saints at times experience threats and intimidations on account of their faith. May we continue to remember also these brothers and sisters in our prayers.

MEXICO

Through a man named Doner Bartolon we have recently come into contact with a number of God's people in Mexico. First PRC in Grand Rapids has taken on the work of assisting these saints.

One group, called the Independent Presbyterian Churches (IPC), has a seminary called *Universidad Juan Calvino* (John Calvin Seminary) in Mexico City. One of our PRC ministers, Rev. John Marcus, grew

up in this area as a son of a missionary. During some recent trips, he delivered speeches to the people in Spanish. Some of the people remembered when he and his family had lived there.

Another group with whom delegations have had warm fellowship is the Independent Reformed Orthodox Presbyterian Church (IROP), located in Tabasco in the southern part of Mexico. Pastor Roman De la Rosa, and his wife Angela and their family have developed close friendships with those who have visited them. While in Mexico, delegations have also met with some members of the National Presbyterian Church (NPC), Tabasco Synod, and have given speeches for them.

Recently the Foreign Mission Committee sent a couple of delegations to Mexico. They preached there and enjoyed visiting with a man named Pastor Sergio, who labors in a church in Axtla, north of Mexico City.

UNITED STATES

In the 1990s, Lynden PRC (Lynden, WA) received a request for help from a small church in Spokane called Sovereign Grace Reformed Church. This was an independent church that was seeking a denomination. Soon Rev. Thomas Miersma began laboring there as a domestic missionary with his wife, Janice, and their children. Loveland PRC served as the calling church for this work.

The congregation later disbanded and the missionary for a time was withdrawn. He was sent back not long afterwards (2003) to renew the work. About six years later, in 2009, the group organized and took the name Covenant of Grace PRC.

Moving from west to east we consider the mission work in Pittsburgh. Synod 1998 approved calling a missionary to labor in Pittsburgh, with Southwest PRC as the calling church. Soon afterwards, Rev. Jai Mahtani labored there until 2005, with his wife, Esther, and their children. In 2006, Rev. Wilbur Bruinsma accepted the call to continue the work there, along with his wife, Mary. In 2016, the church was organized as Pittsburgh PRC, and called Rev. Bruinsma to serve as their pastor. He continued as pastor of the congregation until 2023, when he became emeritus. The current pastor is Rev. Jonathan Mahtani, a son of our first missionary there.

Rev. Allen Brummel served as a domestic missionary to Sioux Falls, South Dakota, from 2007

until 2010, with Doon PRC being the calling church. In 2010 the group organized as Heritage PRC and called Rev. Brummel to continue his work there, now as their pastor.

Rev. Spriensma accepted the call to be a missionary for a second time in 2017. This time he was called as a domestic missionary, with Byron Center PRC as the calling church. He continued this work until 2021, when he accepted a call to be pastor of Cornerstone PRC in Dyer, Indiana.

Currently my wife, Margaret, and I are laboring in Fort Worth, Texas, among some saints here. We are also scheduled to make a trip to visit some brothers and sisters in Hungary and France during the first two weeks of May. While in Hungary I am scheduled to give some speeches along with Rev. Stewart at a conference hosted by the Hungarian Reformed Church in Pécel, which is east of Budapest. Afterwards I have an opportunity to preach to a group in Sarcelles, France, not far from Paris.

My wife and I are thankful to God for the brothers

and sisters whom we have come to know. We are thankful also for the DMC and the saints at Zion PRC, the calling church. The love and support our churches have shown us is much appreciated.

We as churches are grateful for the dedicated, faithful labors of those who have served as our missionaries. What a privilege it is to send men to preach the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ, the good news of salvation by God's sovereign, efficacious grace for sinners such as we are.

We also express our thanks to the wives and families of our missionaries. Uprooted and often living far from family and friends, their love, encouragement, and assistance to God's people is much appreciated by us, and by the believers among whom they labored.

May our God who has made His everlasting covenant with us, and who has sent His Son in fulfillment of His promise, continue to guide our churches in the work of missions. May He continue to strengthen and direct us as we go forth preaching His gospel to the honor and glory of His name.



ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF BROADER ASSEMBLIES

PROF. RONALD CAMMENGA

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CELEBRATING SYNOD

The year was 1940. The date was Wednesday, May 22. Very few took notice of the momentous event that took place in Grand Rapids, Michigan that day. It was not the lead story on the evening news. It did not capture the headlines of the local newspapers. The few who did take notice were members of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America. After fifteen years of existence as a separate denomination, they had grown sufficiently to be able to convene their first synodical gathering. Article 2 of the 1940 *Acts* notes that "this synodical meeting was the first gathering in Synod of the Protestant Reformed Churches." A red-letter day in the history of the PRCA!

Article 1 of the 1940 *Acts* records that "on Tuesday

evening, May 21, a divine [worship] service was held, at which Rev. Herman Hoeksema preached a very appropriate sermon on the words: 'For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us,' Acts 15:28a." At the time, the denomination was comprised of two classes, Classis East and Classis West. Each classis sent eight delegates to the synod, four ministers and four elders. After being duly constituted, the assembly elected Rev. Gerrit Vos, pastor of Hope PRC in Redlands, California, to serve as president of the first PRCA synod. At the time, Rev. Vos was one of the veteran pastors in the denomination.

As we celebrate God's goodness to our denomination over the course of one hundred years, we would be remiss to overlook our broader assemblies. In so many



*1st PRC Synod at First PRC, Grand Rapids
(found in 25th Anniversary booklet, 1950)*

ways, the broader assemblies of the denomination have been a means for good in the life of the churches. Over and over again, the churches have found safety in the multitude of counselors (Prov. 11:14; 24:6). The broader assemblies have been instrumental, under the blessing of God, in preserving the churches in sound doctrine—the doctrines of grace—and unity of worship.

Even though synods had not met prior to 1940, from the beginning of her existence as a separate denomination of churches, the PRCA did meet as combined consistories, which led to classical meetings. From the outset, the PRCA rejected independentism. They saw the obligation to federate with like-minded congregations of believers. There was no question about this. Their reaction to the hierarchy and heavy-handed treatment (mistreatment) by the assemblies of the Christian Reformed Church did not lead the founding fathers of the PRCA to reject Reformed church structure—“throwing the baby out with the bath water.” Those who had the blood of the Synod of Dordt coursing through their veins never questioned the need for local congregations to express the unity of the church by federating classically and synodically. They saw that there was not only great benefit in doing so, but that there was a biblical and confessional obligation. They had also taken to heart the witness of church history that independentism (congregationalism) is spiritual and ecclesiastical suicide.

AN IMPORTANT WITNESS

The existence of the broader assemblies of the PRCA is an important witness of the churches of the denomination.

One important aspect of that witness is to gainsay the slanderous charge that the PRCA are a sect. Since their origin, that charge had been leveled against them: Hoeksemites, the Hoeksema churches. In a sect, one person calls the shots. Ordinarily, that is the founder of the sect, a person invariably with a dominant personality. Life in the sect is ruled from the top down. The government is invariably hierarchical and heavy-handed. When we think of recent sects, the names of Jim Jones and David Koresh come to mind. They were evil men who used their followers to advance their own perverted ends.

The fact that the PRCA established broader assemblies from the beginning of their existence gives the lie to the charge that they are sectarian. Not one man, but a group of men govern the church at the local level. Beyond the local congregation, not one man decrees, but an assembly of men deliberate. Not one man decides, but the decision of the majority of men carries the day.

Delegates to the broader assemblies are made up of an equal number of ministers and elders. The clergy do not dominate. The professors of theology do not even serve as delegates, but only as advisors. The elders come from all walks of life: farmers, factory workers, builders, painters, truck drivers, cement men, doctors, butchers, landscape professionals, realtors, insurance agents, Christian school teachers, firefighters, and more. Some have received higher education, while others have only graduated from high school. Some are older and some are younger. But all are specially imbued with the Holy Spirit and exercise the same authority.

It is worth emphasizing that although the PRCA regard the decisions of the broader assemblies to be binding on the member churches, they do not regard assembly decisions as infallible. The broader assemblies have erred. For that reason, classical and synodical decisions are subject to protest and appeal. That has happened repeatedly in the one-hundred-year history of the PRCA. In some instances, decisions have been maintained and reaffirmed. In other instances, decisions have been corrected or reversed.

Another aspect of the important witness of our broader assemblies is that they demonstrate that the churches are self-governing. They are not governed by the state or by any other entity than the church herself. The history of the New Testament church verifies the constant encroachment of the state over the church. Time and again the attempt has been made to bring the church under the jurisdiction of a department of religion. In many instances, as in Nazi Germany, the government attempted to make the church part of its propaganda ministry, feeding the populace with the deceptions of the government made more palatable because they were being mouthed by the leaders of the church.

The meetings of the classes and synod made plain that the church assemblies were concerned with the affairs of the church. They were not consumed with social or political affairs: world peace, nuclear war, world hunger, or illiteracy. But they were preoccupied with the care of the churches. Their focus was on the work of the churches: preaching the gospel, dispensing the sacraments, and exercising Christian discipline. A perusal of the *Index to the Acts of Synods of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America* bears this out. The reader is encouraged to take the time to do this. Many have this *Index* or it can be found in your church's library. Glance through this *Index* and take note of the matters that have preoccupied our synods.

THE CHURCHES IN COMMON

The main work of the broader assemblies, especially the annual synod, is oversight of the work of the churches in common. Such things as the training of men for the ministry, conducting mission work, and providing for the care of emeritus ministers fall into this category. For the most part, the work of the churches in common is carried out by synodical committees, which meet regularly between the yearly meetings of synod and report to the annual synod. These committees include the Domestic and Foreign Mission Committees, the Theological School Committee, the Student Aid Committee, the Emeritus Committee, the Committee for Contact with Other Churches, the Catechism Book Committee, Board of

Trustees, and the Finance Committee.¹ Like classis and synod, these committees are generally made up of an equal number of ministers and elders, in order to prevent ministerial domination.

By banding together, the churches are able to do collectively what they could not do individually. It would be nearly impossible for a single congregation to take on all the expenses involved in a missionary's salary and the costs associated with his work in the field; therefore, the churches band together to do what no single congregation can do. The same is true in connection with the training of men for the ministry. The salaries of several theological professors serving as the seminary faculty, the costs associated with constructing and maintaining a seminary building and its grounds, the salaries of a support staff, the cost of building a sizable reference library, would overburden one or a few congregations. Add to that the support needed by students studying in the seminary, especially those with families, and the need for denominational support is heightened.

By laboring together, sharing the responsibility and cost of the work of the churches in common, the churches are able to do together what would be difficult if not impossible on their own. Many shoulders make the burden light. In this respect, too, the unity of the church comes to concrete manifestation.

Besides conducting and overseeing the work of the churches in common, 100 years of broader assemblies has meant 100 years of vindicating sound doctrine, identifying false doctrine, settling controversies, delivering oppressed saints of God, righting ecclesiastical wrongs, adjudicating protests, appeals, and overtures, and organizing such events as the 100th anniversary celebration of the churches.

The synods have met through tumultuous times. They conducted their business during the stormy

1 These are the current names of the denominational committees. Several of the committees have undergone changes of name. The Committee for Foreign Correspondence became the Committee for Contact with Other Churches; the Curatorium became the Theological School Committee; and the E.B.P. became the Student Aid Committee. What, you ask, does E.B.P. stand for? You need to know your Latin. It is the abbreviation for *ex bonis publicis*, the English translation of which is "out of the public good."

years of World War II. They met during the upheavals of the schism of 1953 and the conditional covenant controversy. They convened during the recent turbulent years of the COVID pandemic, despite certain restrictions.

Over the years, there have been many joyous sessions of synod: declarations of candidates for the ministry, reception of new congregations into the denomination, establishment of sister-church relationships, new students granted admission into the seminary, and mission fields opened. But there have also been very sad sessions: deposition of ministers, resignation of pastors, closing of mission fields,

disbanding of congregations, and reports of sexual abuse by officebearers.

There will undoubtedly come a day when our broader assemblies will no longer be permitted to meet. Until that day comes, may the Lord be pleased to use our assemblies for the preservation in our churches of the gospel of sovereign, particular grace, as well as the holy life that is the Christian's Spirit-worked response to grace. And may we share the confidence expressed by the apostles at the conclusion to the meeting of the Jerusalem Council, in Acts 15:28, "For so it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us" to decide.



100 YEARS OF "GOING TO THE SERMON"

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GOING TO THE SERMON

During the Reformation period, if a Roman Catholic person was on his way to church and someone asked him where he was going, he would say, "I am on my way to *the mass*." If the same question was put to a Reformed person, however, it was widely known that he would respond, "I am on my way to *the sermon*." The preached word was central to the worship services of the Reformed even as the idolatrous mass was central to the worship services of the Roman Catholic Church. The Roman Catholic person went to church to see "Christ" re-sacrificed for him. The Reformed person went to church to hear God speak to him in His Word.

This confession of the Reformed concerning the central importance of preaching has also been the heritage of the PRC for 100 years, and I believe that by God's grace it remains her current conviction. Only now, she and others must hold this conviction not only surrounded by the false worship of the Rome, but even more the false worship of much of evangelicalism. How many in evangelicalism (and sadly, how many in Reformed and Presbyterian churches influenced by

evangelicalism) when asked where they are going on a Sunday morning, would respond, "I am going to hear *the band*." The sermon becomes shorter and the content shallower even as the decibels go up. Over the last 100 years, this danger has only progressed in power and influence, crowding out the sermon, removing it from its place at the heart of worship. Understood in such a way that we do not diminish the other elements of worship, how important that we maintain the conviction that on the Lord's Day we go to hear the sermon!

PREACHING, THE HEART AND POWER OF WORSHIP

In the Reformed conception, the entirety of worship depends upon the unified and logical explanation and application of Scripture. All the other elements of worship depend upon faithful preaching! How can we sing and pray to a God we do not know? He must reveal Himself to us in His Word, which revelation is declared to us through preaching. What help is the law read to us in the service, if we do not know the God who gives it and why He gives it? To whom would we be giving our

offerings? Even the call to worship and the salutation and benediction would be meaningless were it not for the faithful reading and preaching of Scripture. Who would care that he is being called to worship if that one does not know the God who is calling him? What comfort would it be that God calls us "beloved," if we do not know what that means from His Word and who exactly is declaring it? Without preaching, there is no meaning to any of it. But when He speaks to us in His Word week after week, then we can respond with song and prayer from the heart.

Besides, faithful preaching enables all worship by working faith and conversion, without which it is impossible for anyone to truly worship God. Conversion is a turning away from sin and to God. Christ trumpets His Word through the sermon, and hearing, we turn away from sin and to Him, and seeing Him in His glory we fall humbled and worshipful before Him (Rev. 1:10-17). Nothing can do this except the Spirit-infused preaching of the Word (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 65).

NOT JUST ANY SERMON

What kind of sermon justifies the conviction that the Word preached is the heart of the worship services on the Lord's Day? The Reformed "Form for the Ordination of Ministers of God's Word" gives the basic and traditional definition of a sermon: to "faithfully explain to [the] flock the Word of the Lord, revealed by the writings of the prophets and the apostles; and apply the same as well in general as in particular to the edification of the hearers." Here, the Form houses the basic Reformed understanding that a sermon is a faithful explanation (*explicatio*) and application (*et applicatio*) of the Word of God (*verbi dei*). No sermon may be called a sermon if it is not a faithful explanation and application of a portion of the Word of God.

If the sermon is going to be an *explanation* of the Word of God, it must exegetical. That is, it must deal with the actual words and phrases of the Scripture text, the concepts that arise out of those words, the inspired writer's train of thought, and the relationships between the various parts of the text. The sermon will draw out of the words of the text the message of the risen Christ to His church. That message will be doctrinal. Preaching that explains Scripture will teach God's people all the aspects of the system of truth found in

the Bible. Whatever vein of the Bible's doctrinal gold a particular text touches upon, the sermon will teach that truth. Because the sermon is drawn from the text and teaches the doctrine of the text, the sermon will also be antithetical. It will teach what is true and show that what is false is a denial of what is true and deceives people to their ruin.

The sermon must also *apply* what has been explained. The sermon must show how this portion of the Word is a lamp to lighten the pathway upon which our feet must tread. In addition, the sermon must urge us along that pathway moving the heart and soul toward God and away from the threefold enemy. The sermon does this chiefly by expounding powerfully the law for conviction, the gospel for exoneration, and the law again for guidance in holiness. Antithetical in its application, the sermon also calls sinners to the light of Christ, and warns those who do not turn away from sin of the judgment that befalls them except they repent (LD 31).

In addition, for the explanation and application to be of benefit to God's people, it must be both *logical* and *unified*. If the people of God are like bolts that need turning, the logical explanation of the text puts the socket on to the bolt. In the application the sermon cranks on that socket turning the bolt the right way. But in order for the socket to be put on rightly so that it grabs ahold of us, we have to be convinced by the truth being preached. Our minds are engaged and "held on to" by the authority of the Word logically set forth. That careful logical explanation, then naturally develops into a main application. Though there ought to be other minor applications, the one main word of the text should be the one main application of the text. Without this the sermon is not unified, it holds together like loose sand. Try to throw a handful of sand to a waiting batter, by the time it gets to him there will be nothing to hit. If the message explains the Word of God, and applies the Word of God, but does so in such a way that the sermon moves from this point to that point and then back to the first point and then to a third and fourth and fifth, and back to the second, with no logic and flow and development and unity, the sermon will not do for God's people what it must do. The sermon must hold together as one unit. Then it can be thrown (delivered) to the heart via the mind. One main thrust, one main spiritual goal, with all in the sermon serving that one purpose.

GOOD SERMON FORM

What form should a sermon take as vehicle for such preaching? For 100 years now the PRC have been teaching a sermon form called the *Art Homily*. The Art Homily is a sermon form that is designed to allow the preacher to preach sermons that have the qualities described above. The Art Homily requires that the preacher find the main point of a text, which is then put into a theme. This sermon form then calls the preacher to take all the content of the text and explain that theme in a logical way, (usually) under three points, explaining the theme in such a way that piece by piece, the text is thoroughly unfolded. This kind of sermon is called an Art Homily because it explains the text (Homily) but does so in a way that requires some skill and work to keep the sermon unified (Art).

This sermon form came to the PRC through the CRC, as it was taught to Herman Hoeksema (1886-1965) by his homiletics professor at Calvin Seminary, William Heyns (1856-1947). The CRC inherited the Art Homily from the Afscheiding tradition in the Netherlands, particularly from the Secession father, Simon VanVelzen (1809-1896). For 37 years VanVelzen was the homiletics professor of the future pastors of the Secession churches. For all 37 years he taught that the *best* sermon form was the Art Homily. VanVelzen taught this method to his student William Heyns, who then immigrated to the United States, teaching it to *his* students, one of whom was Hoeksema.

VanVelzen knew this sermon method because he was the benefactor of a major shift in sermon making that had blazed through Europe from the mid-1700s to the mid-1800s. This shift in sermon form bequeathed to the church a method that combined the good of various methods that had gone before. In the history of the church, sermons were often formed in a simple way, with the preacher simply marching through the text word by word and phrase by phrase, from the beginning to the end of the text. This kind of sermon form was very good at explaining the passage, but it did not give the sermon any unity. As a result, the people did not come away with a central message, but rather went home really having heard three or four "mini sermons," each with little connection to the other. This made it hard for God's people to remember what was

preached, and hard for them to take home a key point of application to their lives.

As a result, sermon-making shifted to a form that allowed unity in the sermon. However, very quickly this adjustment turned sour. Sermons certainly had unity, but they became disconnected from the text. The text gave the preacher the topic, but then he developed the sermon topic in a way that removed the subject from the text. The people went home with a central point, but one that lacked power and authority as they did not see it arising out of the Scripture text.

Beginning in the mid-1700s, preachers (and teachers of preachers) began to *combine* the approach that stuck close to the text and the approach that kept unity in the sermon. The result was what they called the "combined method." This combined method eventually received the name, *Art Homily*. This was the method that was blazing through Europe from the mid-1700s to the mid-1800s, and that was bequeathed to Van Velzen in the Netherlands. Since the Art Homily had a unified theme that the sermon logically developed by explaining the different parts of the text, this sermon form allowed for all the necessary elements of a sermon: careful explanation of the text, doctrine, polemics, logic, unity, and stirring application. Throughout Europe and America there was rejoicing that the best method of sermon-making had been discovered.

CONCLUSION

Though there are other methods that can achieve the goal to varying degrees, faithful sermons formed after the method of the Art Homily will certainly justify the Reformed believer's conviction that when he goes to worship on the Lord's Day, he is "going to the sermon." Such a sermon will be the very heart and power of the worship service.

If someone asks *you* where *you* are going on the Lord's Day, it is still a good answer to say, "To the sermon." Understand what you mean by that—that you go to the sermon to the end of worshiping God. Then give thanks to the Lord that He has preserved for the last 100 years in our midst faithful preaching, with a good form, that is the power and heart of worship—requesting also, that God graciously preserve such preaching among us until Christ comes again.



HOW GOD'S CHASTENING AFFECTS OUR CELEBRATION

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A lot has happened in the Protestant Reformed Churches since the last major anniversary celebration in the year 2000. I was a teenager attending the Protestant Reformed Young People's Convention at Calvin College, just down the road from where I grew up, when the 75th anniversary was celebrated at the same time on the same campus. As a young person at that time, I believed that the PRC were the purest manifestation of the true church in this world and other churches were apostatizing. I thought our ministers were strong defenders of the truth, our elders properly disciplined evildoers, and we had unity and peace.

But as I passed through the decade of my twenties, as one generation of denominational leaders gave way to another, I began to hear critical voices that revealed tensions under the surface of things, escalating feelings of discontentment about what some perceived to be a departure from the old paths. There were controversies. We voiced our opinions and got heated at times. But things eventually settled down and returned to "normal," from my perspective. In those years, I observed an increase of tensions and a struggle for control of the direction of the PRC that culminated in the great upheaval of the last ten years or so.

In the last ten years, the PRC has passed through the greatest upheaval of my lifetime thus far. First, there was the doctrinal controversy that began around the year 2016, intensified in the years 2018-2020, and climaxed in the split of 2021. When a highly esteemed pastor resorted to unruly means and abrasive language to wage war against what he and others considered an invasion of the heresy of works-righteousness, he was deposed for public schism. He and a number of other officebearers led hundreds of people out of the PRC or their sister churches throughout the United States,

Canada, Singapore, and the Philippines. They slapped the label "false churches" on the PRC and called us to come out of the whore of Babylon lest we be "partakers of her sins" and receive "of her plagues" (Rev. 18:4). The *Standard Bearer* endeavored to guide us through those years with many articles on the doctrinal and practical issues involved in the split.

But before the dust of the schism settled, a swelling tide of sexual-abuse allegations arose against a popular pastor. When the allegations were found to be credible, he too was deposed. What followed was a devastating chapter in the history of the PRC. Shameful acts of sexual abuse committed over decades by elders, teachers, and others against lambs of God in the PRC suddenly came to light. Ever since the year 2021, the churches have been wrestling with what it means to "do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God" (Mic. 6:8) when these "unfruitful works of darkness" are exposed by the light, for "it is a shame even to speak of those things which are done of them in secret" (Eph. 5:11-13). The *Standard Bearer* devoted a special issue to this topic in May 2022, entitled "Sexual Abuse: Grievous Sin in the Church."

The question now faces us: How can we celebrate the 100th anniversary of the PRC after what has just happened? I know many do not feel like celebrating at all. I am not referring to those who have left the PRC in wrath, who hurl stones and curses at the PRC as Shimei did to David (2 Sam. 16:5-8). But I have in mind those who have been deeply hurt in the PRC and those who are deeply grieved by the sins they see in the PRC. Do we feel like those who said, "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion. We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof.... How shall we sing the LORD's song in

a strange land?” (Ps. 137:1-4). Or are we able to rejoice like those who said, “When the LORD turned again the captivity of Zion, we were like them that dream. Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing.... The LORD hath done great things for us; whereof we are glad” (Ps. 126:1-3).

We all process things at different rates and with different reactions. Some feel like those who sat by the rivers of Babylon and wept, their harps hanging silently on the weeping willows, their hearts filled with grief over the sins of the church and the chastening hand of God. Others feel like people who have been chastened and restored, deeply humbled and still learning, but now more deeply thankful, and they see good reason to celebrate with fellow church members. Wherever we are on that spectrum, if God has given us the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ in and through the PRC, do we not have good reason to celebrate the anniversary of the churches? God does not specifically command us in His Word to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the churches of which we are members. But when He preserves the preaching of the gospel in those churches for a period of 100 years, it is a good thing to give thanks unto the Lord for that and to sing praises unto the name of the Most High (Ps. 92:1).

God speaks in a still small voice to His people who feel depressed and exhausted like Elijah under the juniper tree, who feel like running away into the wilderness, who feel that they might be the only ones left who are very jealous for the Lord of hosts. He says, What doest thou here, Elijah? I still have seven thousand in Israel who have not bowed the knee to Baal and whose lips have not kissed his image (1 Kings 19:4-18). He says to us today, I still have an elect remnant in the church world, also in the PRC (Rom. 11:5). I have never abandoned you in those churches, even in your darkest hours. I have sent a famine of the Word into many unfaithful churches (Amos 8:11). But I have continued to give preaching to you that feeds your soul with the true heavenly Bread, Christ Jesus, that exhorts, instructs, and corrects you from My holy Word. It is a good thing to give thanks unto the Lord for the PRC, for it pleased God by the preaching in those churches to save us who believe (1 Cor. 1:21).

But the severe chastening God has laid upon us in recent years must have an effect on the way we celebrate.

In the first place, the chastening of the Lord must yield a *humble* celebration. Imagine how we might have celebrated the 100th if God had not troubled us so deeply in recent years. It is possible to give lip service to thanking God for His faithfulness while allowing wicked pride to thrive in our heart. It is possible to say we are thankful to our gracious covenant God and yet to think that we are always right and every other church is always wrong; that we are the purest manifestation of the church and every other church is wicked and apostatizing. God has not allowed us to celebrate the 100th in that way. He has crushed us in order to raise us up with a more humble spirit. He has smitten us in order that we might not think more highly of ourselves than we ought to think. He has exposed scandalous sins that happened right under our noses in order to make us think more about our own faults than those of others. *Through pain and trouble Thou hast led, and humbled all our pride....* “Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time: casting all your care upon him, for he careth for you” (1 Pet. 5:6-7).

Secondly, the chastening of the Lord ought to result in a *careful* celebration. When a child of God falls into a grievous sin and God chastens him and restores him to the right way of repentance, his renewed confidence of persevering in the faith renders him “much more careful and solicitous to continue in the ways of the Lord” (Canons of Dordt, 5.13). Will we who have been chastened so severely in recent years be more *careful* to avoid pride as we celebrate the 100th? God forbid that we whose collective pride swelled to so great a size that God had to burn it out of us with a hot iron should turn around and carelessly indulge in a boastful celebration. Let us be more careful in how we think about ourselves as a denomination in relation to other denominations. Let us be careful as we thank God for what He has given to us in the PRC, remembering that God has given much to His people in other denominations too. We can celebrate what God has done for us in the PRC if we remember that we are not the only ones who have good reason to celebrate, but others do too.

Thirdly, the troubles of recent times ought to produce a *spiritual* celebration. Who does not love to celebrate special occasions with good food, fun games, and stimulating conversation? The 100th anniversary celebration at Calvin University this summer will

include all of that. “To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven.... A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance” (Eccl. 3:1, 4). But whether “ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31). Hopefully, the chastening of God has focused our hearts on Christ. Hopefully, it has loosened the stranglehold that earthly pleasures and treasures have over our souls in times of prosperity. Hopefully, it has reminded us that our true treasure is Jehovah, who established His covenant of grace with us, and Christ is our only hope in life and death. God forbid that we should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ! May God grant that His chastening hand brings us again to the cross that we may cling to Him who gave His life for us. May God grant us a deep sense of gratitude, not *first* of all for Protestant Reformed institutions, schools, and theologians, but for Christ who loved His Bride the church and shed His blood to save us from everlasting damnation. May God then *also* grant us an attitude of thankfulness for the Protestant Reformed institutions, schools, and theologians through which He has brought Christ to many of us and many of us to Christ.

Finally, recent struggles teach us to have a *hopeful* celebration. “When I remember these things, I pour out my soul in me: for I had gone with the multitude, I went with them to the house of God, with the voice of joy and praise, with a multitude that kept holyday. Why art thou cast down, O my soul? And why art thou disquieted in me? Hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise him for the help of his countenance” (Ps. 42:4-5). Whatever may be God’s plan for the PRC in the future, we may celebrate with hope and optimism. The PRC are not perfect churches; they never were; they never will be in this life. But God exposes our sins, failures, and faults so we will put our hope not in the PRC but in the Christ whom ministers in the PRC preach. God also shows us our sins so that we will endeavor all the more to root them out and to conform to the image of Christ, “till we arrive at the perfection proposed to us in a life to come” (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 44). As we celebrate God’s grace to us in the past, may He grant us hope for the perfection of the church in the future, on that great day when the whole church will come down from God out of heaven, prepared like a bride for her husband (Rev. 21:2).



HEARTFELT THANKS TO MOTHER (THE PROTESTANT REFORMED CHURCHES—PRC) ON HER HUNDREDTH ANNIVERSARY

PROF. DAVID AND RUTH ENGELSMA

former editor of the *Standard Bearer*, professor emeritus of Dogmatics and Old Testament in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary and his wife, members of Trinity PRC in Hudsonville, Michigan

For those to whom he is Father the church may also be Mother—John Calvin, *Institutes* 4.1.1

This article is a heartfelt expression of gratitude to the PRC as our faithful and dear spiritual mother. To her as a body of true churches of Christ, we owe much, and we here publicly express our thanks.

There is the danger that we neglect to express our thanks to our earthly mother. When she is gone, we

remember all she did for us and how much, therefore, we owe to her. We regret that we had not made our gratitude known to her, expressly. It is too late. In the case of our spiritual mother, we ourselves are swiftly gone, having failed publicly to express our thanks for the much more important spiritual care and blessing of us by mother church. On this anniversary of the PRC, we appreciate the opportunity to express our thanks to the PRC for her spiritual mothering of us.

We guard against two serious misunderstandings at the outset. First, we do not speak for ourselves alone, perhaps as one privileged to hold special office in the PRC and as the wife of one holding office. Rather, we speak simply as those who hold the office of believer, representing thousands of other members of the PRC, who are likewise grateful to mother PRC and who say amen to this article of thankfulness on her hundredth anniversary.

Second, in all we attribute to the churches, we recognize that our mother was dependent upon, and “only” an instrument of, her Husband, Jesus Christ. But it pleases Jesus Christ to bless His people by means of His wife, the church. Let no one, therefore, dismiss these expressions of gratitude to the churches as the theological error of attributing to the church blessings that are the gift and work of Jesus Christ by His Spirit. As a believing husband carries out his oversight and rearing of his family through the work of his godly wife, so also does Christ Jesus bless His people by means of the motherly work of His bride, the church. Just as no earthly husband begrudges recognition of his wife in the rearing of the children, so also does Christ not begrudge recognition of His wife, the church, as the active, self-sacrificing mother of His children.

The work of the church on our behalf began with one of the PRC’s baptizing us into Jesus Christ and into the fellowship of the PRC. Thus began our spiritual life and thus the PRC took us into their care and keeping. In fact, your beneficial motherhood of us and the others of your family began some fifteen or twenty years earlier, in 1924, when Christ formed and wed you, the PRC, as His beautiful bride, by His establishment of you as a denomination of churches confessing the gospel of salvation by sovereign, particular grace, that is, the gospel of salvation founded upon eternal election—Christ’s eternal, gracious choice of His bride. That wedding with its vow on your part to be faithful to your husband by confessing the gospel of grace made you a good, godly mother to us and to the many other covenant children who would be born of you and nourished in your bosom.

Having given birth to us as members of Christ, your Husband, you reared us to a strong, healthy maturity, as is the calling of a mother regarding her children. In our youngest years, all unconscious as far as we

remember, we grew up in the atmosphere of covenant homes, permeated with the Word and the Holy Spirit. Then, about the age of five, we began to feed on the solid, nourishing food of catechism instruction. This continued until we were sixteen or seventeen years of age. The last few years, we learned and believed all the fundamental doctrines of the Reformed, Christian faith, from those of creation and the fall to those of predestination and the last things. We became a fully developed Christian man and woman, knowing God; worshiping Him rightly; living holy, thankful lives; and enabled to resist the age-old foes of God and His children in a wicked world.

All by the rearing of our good and faithful mother! We are grateful!

By no means do we overlook or slight the gratitude we owe our mother in that you saw to it that there were good Christian schools in which we were instructed according to the demands of the covenant (Church Order of Dordt, Art. 21). Powerful lies that might have harmed or destroyed us were excluded from the instruction, for example, evolution and sodomy. Positively, all of creation and history was subjected to the lordship of the risen Jesus Christ, and we were taught that we were called to live for the glory of God, whether in the ministry or as a wife and mother in the home. In addition, we formed friendships in the schools—good friendships, lasting friendships, edifying friendships. We took for granted then, but take for granted no longer, that the good, PR, Christian schools educated—really instructed in all the subjects that equip for human life in the world as Reformed Christians are called by God to live it.

Important as they were, and still are, the schools are extensions of the home. The Christian home is the main thing for children and young people. By the PRC teaching of marriage and the home in light of the covenant of God with His people, we were raised in homes that honored marriage and that ordered family life according to the Word of God. Divorce was a curse-word; remarriage upon divorce was unheard of. Our debt to the PRC for the instruction that gave us a Christian life in the home is incalculable.

All the while we were growing up, the weekly preaching assured us of our salvation; comforted us in our sorrows in this vale of tears; kept us from temptations; called us to repentance for our many sins;

made our calling as Reformed Christians clear and effectual; and thus developed us into mature Christians. Under your tutelage, mother, both of us made confession of our faith in Jesus Christ, than which there is no other act that is more honorable and more rewarding. In this way, you opened the way to us to the intimate union with Christ of the sacrament of the Supper of Christ Jesus.

Nor did our need of your blessing of us cease when we reached maturity. Still today, in our old age, we need the Word that you preach and teach, with the sacraments that you administer. We are grateful that the doctrine we hear on your hundredth anniversary is the same gospel of grace and the same law of gratitude for salvation that were heard by our grandparents in 1924.

To your care and oversight of us belongs your discipline of us. In the grace of God there has not been the need of formal discipline, the barring of us from the sacraments. But even in this regard, it has been a joy to us to know that in case we strayed, we had a spiritual mother who would not have simply turned her back on us and allowed us to perish. The PR congregation of which we were members would have worked with us with formal discipline to bring us to repentance, and recover us. The good earthly mother disciplines her children. The “Formula of Excommunication” aside, you have disciplined us often. The preaching does not only comfort; it also exposes our sins, condemns them in the name of God, warns us against continuing in them, and calls us to repentance. This too is discipline. More than one sermon has given us a good spanking. For this discipline also, we are grateful.

Always in our minds, for the past many years unto the present moment, is that it was in your fellowship that we met each other as husband and wife, married in the Lord, and had and raised our own Christian family of children. For this too, we are thankful to the PRC.

Christ’s blessing of us by means of you, the PRC, extends to our children and grandchildren. Your covenant motherhood very much includes that you are the instrument of salvation in the line of generations. Many children and grandchildren of our family now worship with us in your gatherings; confess the name of Jesus Christ; adorn their confession with a godly life; and thus fulfill the highest calling of humans: glorifying

God. You are to us a mother of our own generations. As the two of us are now aged at and beyond the years of the strong, it is a special joy to us that we can leave our children and grandchildren in your membership, as in the care of true churches of Jesus Christ. We do adjure you, continue faithfully in the gospel of the “Three Forms of Unity” as these creeds are (rightly) understood by the PRC! Depart neither to the right nor to the left!

It is not that you, the PRC, are without weaknesses and shortcomings, any more than our earthly mothers had no flaws. Christ does not in this life have a perfect wife; He has a true one. We hasten to add that the reason why we acknowledge the possibility of the shortcomings of the PRC, including the possibility of individual ministers who are deficient in one way or another, is not that we see certain weaknesses and are itching to publicize them on the pages of the *Standard Bearer*. Such were the overwhelming virtues of our earthly mothers and such is our love for these mothers that it is difficult for us to notice their weaknesses, much less publish them abroad. If we saw weaknesses, we would be inclined to hide them from view as much as possible.

But we mention the truth that you have weaknesses because of late there are some of your sons and daughters who have convinced themselves that the PRC do have weaknesses and who are in a frenzy to spread these alleged weaknesses far and wide, and thus publicly defame their mother. This is sinful! This is unnatural! I say “sinful,” because the fifth commandment of the law requires that the confessing Christian “honor your... mother.” I say “unnatural,” because such is the natural recognition by children of the loving relation of mother and child and such is the natural love of children for their mother that even the depraved and ignorant world has its (perverted) Dutch proverb expressing the natural love of children even for a bad mother: “Mijn moeder is een hoer, maar zij is mijn moeder” (“my mother is a whore, but she is my mother”).

That there are children of the PRC who revolt against their mother does not surprise us. It grieves us, but it does not surprise us. God Himself has such children: “Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth: for the LORD hath spoken, I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me” (Is. 1:2).

Ingrates!

Since the honorable, spiritual motherhood of the PRC with regard to her children consists of the churches' confession and proclamation of the gospel of grace, dear mother, continue to be faithful to the gospel. God has preserved you for one hundred years. Indeed, in a controversy over the covenant, whether conditional or unconditional, in the early 1950s, God tried you and found you faithful. For one hundred years, yours has been a clear and splendid confession of the gospel as expressed in the Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons.

When a Reformed denomination contradicts and corrupts the truth of these creeds, that denomination becomes whorish, unfaithful to her Husband, and no longer the good, spiritual mother of believers and their

children. Then the attitude of the sound members of the church is expressed in this change of the Dutch proverb: "my mother is a whore, she is no longer my mother." Then, in the remnant, Christ forms the church anew.

PRC, we are grateful that hitherto God has kept you (us).

Your hundredth anniversary is reason for joyous celebration.

Let the Reformed church-world join in the celebration.

PRC, persevere!

"Hold the traditions!"

This expression of congratulations, from thousands of your grateful children.



PLANTING APPLE TREES

PROF. BARRETT GRITTERS

former editor of the *Standard Bearer*, professor of Practical Theology in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary, and member of Hudsonville PRC

Luther reportedly once said that if he were told the world would end tomorrow, he would still plant an apple tree today. Some have taken from this Luther's love of gardening, or of his care for the environment, but if Luther indeed said this, I take him to be teaching that Christians ought to be faithful today, planning for the future, even if they believe Christ will return tomorrow. The Protestant Reformed Churches (and the whole church of Christ) are living near the end of the age, but we must still 'plant trees.'

As we press on in 2025, confidently expecting our Lord's soon return, there are five things I pray the PRC community emphasize and practice in the years to come.

FAITHFULNESS

Faithfulness to what God has given us is first. The rich tradition that Reformed churches have must be treasured and defended. In the Reformed faith

and in the Protestant Reformed Churches we have inestimable treasures. For certain: we must detest pride, recognize our own weaknesses, and be very thankful for believers in other communities (for all these, see below); but we also highly value what God has given our own denomination. It often takes children way too long before they begin to appreciate what their Christian parents were to them—at least it did me—and I think it is like that in the church. So, as we mature in our PR church family, let's reflect more deeply on the gifts God bestowed on us, and prize them as we ought.

God's Word, our creeds, the doctrines of grace, our reverent liturgy, the good (church) order of Dordt, our doctrine of the covenant, faithful officebearers, good Christian schools and teachers, militancy for Christ's sake, biblical sabbath observance, the sanctity of lifelong marriage—all these and so many more are old

treasures that will increase in value if we look at them properly.

Let's hold fast what we have (Rev. 3:11), embrace the traditions we were taught (2 Thess. 2:15), grasp with a firm hand the apostolic pattern of sound words (2 Tim. 1:13), and seek the old paths (Jer. 6:16). Let's pray for strong pastors who bring us meaty sermons twice each Lord's Day, conserve solid catechism instruction for 25 or 30 weeks each year, maintain good theological education for our ministers, continue (and grow in!) sending the gospel to the ends of the earth, maintain (or restore) good home life and regular family worship, and live together in the communion of God's saints.

Our ever-faithful Father in heaven, make us faithful! Thy faithfulness to us cost Thee everything in Thy Son. May we and our children be faithful to Thee and be willing to give everything. Enable us with our mouths to make known Thy faithfulness to all generations (Ps. 89:1).

HUMILITY

But faithfulness without humility will not only be fruitless, it will also result in the heavy judgments of God. If being Protestant Reformed should mean anything, it should mean deepest humility, even though we with shame admit that it has not always (again, read to the end). If the PRC wish to be known for anything, it is for our defense of and love for sovereign *grace*—that God is good to undeserving sinners. Thus, the choice of that subject for our 100th anniversary. The greatest contradiction that could exist in the PRC, therefore, would be to teach grace without living humbly.

As we teach our children in the years to come—should the Lord tarry very long—let's instill in them the kind of humility that is becoming of a denomination whose origin is a battle over the *doctrine* of grace, and whose continued existence is explained by the *reality* of grace. Anything other than this will be pride that precedes a fall and probably warrants destruction.

The Psalms we treasure must be the *genuine* confession of every Protestant Reformed member: "All that I am, I owe to Thee...." May it come from our *hearts* when we sing, "I am prone to halt and stumble, grief and sorrow dwell within, shame and guilt my spirit humble, I am sorry for my sin." And let's not forget our confession that God humbles pride. "The proud

he knoweth afar off" (Ps. 138:6). "Through pain and trouble Thou hast led, and humbled all our pride; but, in the end, to liberty and wealth Thy hand did guide."

From Thy throne of grace, O our good God, bestow upon us grace to live humbly. Keep us from unseemly pride, so unbecoming of a Christian, especially Reformed Christians. May we be good to the unworthy, even as we have experienced from Thee.

GRACIOUS CHARITY

If one side of this coin is humility, the other side is charity. For genuine humility (properly assessing *ourselves*) will certainly produce gracious charity (proper assessment and treatment of *others*).

We hope that charity with those in our own church family is a given. But God's bride is universal and for them charity takes more thought and effort—that is, grace. Charity with others in different church families does not mean ignoring errors or minimizing differences. If we make light of errors and play down differences, we will lose the reason for existence as a denomination. *Any* denomination—not just ours—that brushes off differences and downplays the errors of other churches betrays a disregard of history and insufficient respect for God's truth and the honor of His name (God's *truth* and God's *name* being synonyms). Charity does *not* ignore important differences. We will warn our children and grandchildren of these errors and admonish them not to embrace them.

At the same time, charity is a willing recognition of godly believers in other denominations, an acknowledgement that there is more than one true church in the world (even in a particular community), and a glad confession that these churches do the work of the Lord, albeit with what we regard as serious weaknesses and inconsistencies. We pray others judge us so.

At the same time, charity calls these other denominations to see their errors (both in faith and life) and join with us in confessing truth and living godly. This is love. We hope they will treat us the same. If Jesus calls us to love our enemies (and these others are not our enemies), we certainly love these other Christians: seek their good, pray for their well-being, and bless them. And "we are in no wise to conduct ourselves towards them with haughtiness, as if we had made ourselves to differ" (Canons, 3/4.15).

God of love to the undeserving, grant us charity! The graces we covet are many, but the greatest is charity. Work in us and the generations to come to bless our neighbors, show Christ to them, invite them to worship with us, and in every way to live as Father's sons and daughters (Matt. 5:45).

BALANCE

As I reflect on our history and pray forward-looking petitions, I include in these petitions a prayer that we may be balanced: that we not be extreme, engage in hyperbole, or be reactionary. Hyperbole has hurt the PRC. Instead of making a point sharper, hyperbole often inclines listeners either to imagine that the exaggeration is proper, or simply to dismiss as an extremist the man who exaggerates. God's truth does not need the help of overstatement. The Christian life will not be protected by exaggeration.

Balance also includes being able to see the big picture of theology and practice. A balanced people see errors in all directions. Wise churches build their walls of defense on all four sides. They know how to repel frontal attacks, be alert to the Trojan Horse, and wise to imagine how special forces might assail them in some unusual way. They are prepared for the Arminian and Antinomian, for the malaise of presumption and the disease of worldliness. They warn of errors in faith as well as in life, are able to see dangers without but do not forget the threats from within.

God of all truth, make the PRCA strong so that she may be balanced, leaning neither to the left nor to the right!

PROGRESS AND GROWTH

Preserving truth and the traditions does not mean that the PRC cannot change for good. Just as in the Christian personal life, so in the church, if we are healthy, there will always be growth and development and correction.

The seven (true) churches of Revelation represent us. In these churches, and in us, therefore, there are strengths and there are weaknesses. For some things, Christ offers high commendation. For others, He warns sharply. He may say, "I have somewhat against you." Or, "remember, repent, and do." Five of the seven churches He calls to repent. Or, "Be watchful; strengthen what remains; be zealous."

It would be a good exercise in consistory devotions to meditate on one of these churches each month and ask how their weaknesses or strengths are found in us. Early in my ministry, the Council made a decision to have a special meeting once each year, devoting an entire Saturday morning to it, to examine ourselves as a congregation. What can we be thankful for? What should we correct? Where can we grow? This was healthy.

By God's grace, we are able, without compromise, to correct ourselves, add what we have missed, and mature in our knowledge of the Christian faith and life. (It would be a good exercise also for heads of homes to engage in the same exercise. What are our family's strengths, weaknesses, areas we need correction or growth?)

We believe that we are a true church and are eager to maintain her marks. We believe that we preach truth—the first mark (according to the Belgic Confession). We may also ask whether we preach *sufficiently*. Preaching truth once per Sunday might make us suspect. Preaching truth twice on Sunday but not teaching catechism students would be a great weakness in this first mark. As well, preaching and teaching sufficiently to the congregation is good; but if a church had no mission work, you would question whether they manifest this mark.

Similarly, we may look at the other two marks of the true church and be careful that we do not see them too narrowly and thus miss important aspects of ecclesiastical self-examination. The sacraments' proper administration, the second mark of the true church, is an aspect of proper worship. Is our *worship* pleasing to God? Proper Christian discipline is the third mark of the true church. But discipline is only one dimension of a very important characteristic of a faithful church—proper church government. We may always be examining ourselves whether we are faithful to the kingly office of our Lord Jesus.

Lord of life and health, we are Reformed and need always to be reforming. Make us fruitful and strong, producing fruit thirty-fold this generation, perhaps sixty-fold next!

How thankful we may be that the Lord has preserved

us as true churches. Under His blessing we have served Him, even though with much weakness, for 100 years. Under His chastisement we have grown in the last decade—in virtue. I have delightedly taught catechism to hundreds of the church’s youth in the past decades, and see serious-minded, godly young people (the future of God’s church) embracing truth and committed to the new life in Christ. Should He tarry only ten more years, may He find the Protestant Reformed Churches, and all

her members, still ‘planting trees’ for the well-being of the generation to come.

Lord God of grace, preserve us as a true church until the Lord returns! We deserve to be brought to ruin. Show us the grace that our pulpits have proclaimed for 100 years. Humble us. Make us faithful, charitable, balanced, willing to be corrected, and eager to grow in our service to Thy cause. Come, Lord Jesus, quickly!

SPECIAL NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

We conclude this special issue commemorating God’s faithfulness to the PRCA by giving thanks for the official relationships that we enjoy with international churches. This includes the two churches with whom we have a corresponding relationship: The Evangelical Presbyterian Churches of Australia since June 2009, and the Bekennende Evangelisch-Reformierte Gemeinde (Confessing Protestant-Reformed Congregation in Giessen, Germany) since June 2024. We make special mention of the three churches with whom we share a full sister-church relationship. What we did not have for much of our existence, we do not now fail to count as one of our greatest blessings on our 100th anniversary: real organic union with international churches for the manifestation of the true unity and catholicity of Christ’s church on earth.

First, we thank the Lord for the **Covenant Protestant Reformed Church of Ballymena, Northern Ireland**, our sister since June 2007.

Second, we thank the Lord for the **Covenant Evangelical Reformed Church in Singapore**, our sister since June 2012.

Third, we thank the Lord for the **Protestant Reformed Churches in the Philippines (Berean and Provident congregations)**, our sister denomination since June 2018.

To all who belong to these congregations, thanks for “your fellowship in the gospel” (Phil. 1:5) as God has given us opportunities to enjoy it. Thanks for standing with us in the cause of Christ and through times pleasant and tumultuous. We love, pray for, care about, and “commend you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified” (Acts 20:32).

“Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering (for he is faithful that promised)” (Heb. 10:23).

B. Huizinga

THE STANDARD BEARER

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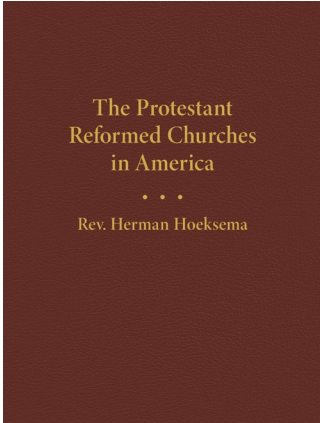
ANNOUNCEMENTS

Our *SB* readers (especially older ones!) may be familiar with the original work of H. Hoeksema, *The Protestant Reformed Churches in America: Their Origins, Early History, and Doctrine* (first edition, 1936). The second edition of the book (1947) was affectionately nicknamed “The Red Book” in reference to its bright red cover.

Just over one hundred years have passed since the events related in this deeply personal history. Yet, *The Protestant Reformed Churches in America* remains the single most comprehensive published history of the synods, classes, and events that resulted in the formation of the PRCA.

To preserve the history contained therein, the RFPA has endeavored to make this book available to the public once again. This third edition reprint will be released in

the last week of **May 2025**, with the retail price of \$39.95. Copies may be ordered online or purchased (at a **special discount of \$34.95!**) at the RFPA book table at the PRCA 100th celebration (June 2-6 at Calvin University). With this book, the RFPA reiterates the author’s wish that this work “may, under God’s blessing, continue to instruct our own people, as well as others, in the history and specific doctrinal basis of the Protestant Reformed Churches.”



The Protestant
Reformed Churches
in America

• • •
Rev. Herman Hoeksema

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



ADMINISTRATOR NEEDED

Adams Christian School is seeking applications for our next administrator. If you are interested or have any questions, please contact the Education Committee chairman, Dr. Jared Langerak, at jaredwmlangerak@gmail.com.