

THE STANDARD BEARER

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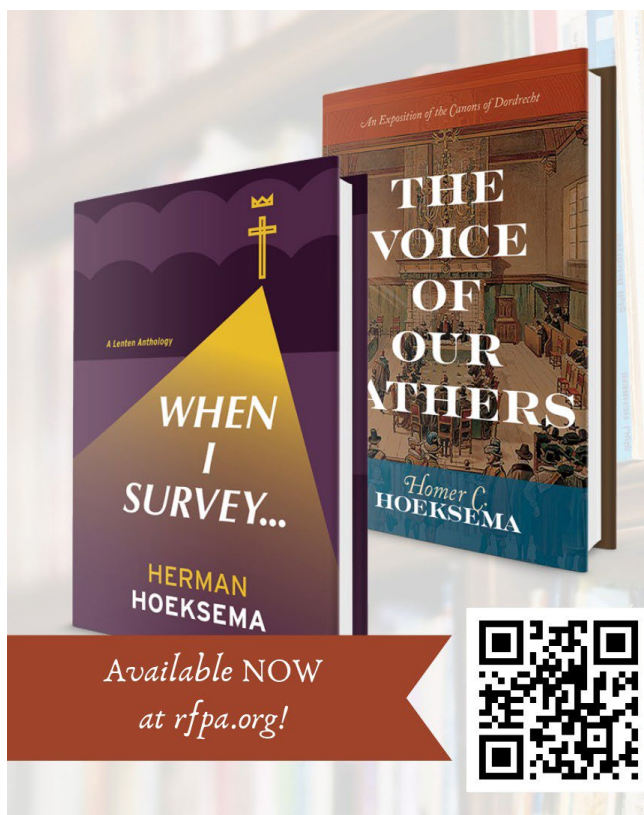
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WHO SHALL ASCEND?

REV. STEPHAN REGNERUS

pastor of Hull PRC in Hull, Iowa

PSALM 24

In my first few years in the ministry the Lord led me to serve in Lynden, WA. Lynden is settled on ground that is flat and lush—ideal land for berry and dairy farming. But surrounding the city there are mountains on nearly every side. So it is that a common form of recreation in the area is hiking and mountain climbing. Climb to the top of the hill or mountain, and your efforts are rewarded handsomely with a panoramic view of whitecapped peaks beneath the brilliant blue skies. But the climber must know his skill level. Should one try to summit a peak beyond his skill level, there could be serious consequences. Falling into a tree hole, starting a snow avalanche, losing one's footing on a cliffside, or slipping in an icy water crossing are just some of the potential dangers. Before venturing out the hiker must consider: am I qualified to attempt this summit? Is my body conditioned, do I have the necessary tools and equipment, and do I have the technical expertise that is required to attempt this climb? Do I have the right team of people accompanying me?

It was this matter of ascending a mountain that evidently was of concern to the psalmist David. David had on his mind a hill, and it was important to him that the ark of the covenant be taken up the hillside into the royal city. "Who shall ascend into the hill of the LORD? Or who shall stand within his holy place?"

Not just anyone would be able to ascend this hill, for it was unique. It was not Mt. Baker or Mt. Carmel that he was concerned about ascending; it was the hill of the Lord. An altogether unique hill. This was the hill where God dwelt in His holiness and in His glory. It was the sanctuary of the living God who founded the world upon the seas and established the earth upon the floods.

And further, this hill symbolizes heaven, the place where God covenants with His people.

Who is able to ascend? Who can stand so close to such a holy God? It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

And can there be found anyone who even desires to ascend this hill?

Man has many things that he is concerned about climbing. Earthly things, that is. The working man strives to ascend the corporate ladder, or he tries to climb out of debt, or he studies the steps to financial freedom. But who is concerned about climbing Mount Zion? Who desires to leave behind the things of this world and step toward those things that belong to God's kingdom? Whose heart covets, not the things found here below, but the things eternal and heavenly? Who can be found that cares more about God and His kingdom and righteousness than the things of this world?

The psalmist tells us who it is that is both willing and able to ascend. He must fulfill certain spiritual requirements. It is not physical fitness or mental toughness that enables one to ascend. Nor is it that he is popular and has a supportive team who will assist him in the ascent. The outstanding requirement is not natural ability but integrity of the heart: "He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart; who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity, nor sworn deceitfully."

This is the person who shall ascend: the one who controls the desires of his heart and the longings of his soul; the one who is careful with his hands and the use of his tongue. He is no brawler; he does not use his hands to smite or strike in anger. From his tongue proceed righteous words spoken in love. He knows the power of the word; though the tongue is a little member, yet it is capable of working so great an evil.

He does not lift up his soul unto vain aspirations. That is, he does not lust after earthly possessions, which are temporary and soon fly away.

In short, the one worthy of ascending is perfect in all his ways. He is not corrupted with a fallen nature, passed down from our first father, Adam. He is holy as God is holy, and he is righteous in all his ways. No accusation lodged against him sticks. He will ascend alone; no team of people will stand by to teach him how he must go up.

Who is this perfect One? He is the King of glory! The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle! The King is going to climb this holy hill. He is an active King, who takes seriously the responsibility to guide and lead His people. He is no indolent king who sits back and dictates commands to others, waiting for the hard work to be done before he rides the trolley up the hill. But this King will do the hard work Himself of opening the way up the hill.

The King alone is holy enough to enter God's sanctuary. His upright character became evident to family and friends during His earthly pilgrimage. His hands were clean, and His heart was pure. His hands were busy ministering, performing miracles of healing, and gathering the children of the kingdom unto Himself. Not once did He use His hands to strike in anger, or to shake His fists in angry defiance against the will of the Father who sent Him. He never lifted His soul unto vanity—even when the Devil promised Him all the nations of the earth at the price of a bow.

This King alone has the strength to climb such a hill. All things belong to Him: "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof." He is the Word incarnate, who was with God in the beginning and by whom the heavens and earth were made.

The King has come in! This is what we in the New Testament commemorate on Ascension Day. No longer do we wait; He has completed His work on this earth and gone up.

Now, who will observe this King who has ascended? Not all will, for He who ascends had first descended. And in His descent, His glory was hidden from view. Man looked upon Him, and they considered Him weak and feeble. "Is not this the son of the carpenter?" they asked. In fulfillment of the word of the prophet, He was as a lowly sheep, dumb before her shearers. He lacked

form and comeliness; and when man saw Him, there was no beauty that they should desire Him. And now this lowly Son of the carpenter will lead the way in the glorious ascent? Hardly a worthy candidate it would seem! The Jews of His hometown gave no honor to the Prophet from their Nazareth. Instead of exalting Him, they tried to push Him over the edge of the cliff.

And it was not just the Jews of old who disputed the fact that Jesus would be the strong and mighty One to lead this glorious ascent. We do too. By reason of the weakness of our faith, and because of our fallen nature, we are given to doubt His strength and His might. How many cares and concerns do we not have, because we call into question His ability to care for us? On how many sleepless nights do we not wrestle with dark and troubling thoughts? "How can I trust Him when it seems all things are against me? How can I believe that He is mighty to deliver when it is my lot in life to suffer day after day?"

God knows the weakness of our faith, so He directs us to look up.

"Lift up your heads O ye gates; and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in." Yes, there were the physical gates and doors that surrounded the city of Jerusalem, and they had to be opened so that the ark of the covenant could enter the royal city.

But these gates and doors are symbolic and picture for us a spiritual reality. They represent the calling we have to lift up our hearts and souls and look by faith upon the ascent and exaltation of our Savior. Jesus did not ascend under the cover of darkness. While on the cross, during three hours of unspeakable anguish, God hid His Son from view with a blanket of darkness. But the royal ascent would be different. Jesus took His disciples to the mount of Olives, and while they beheld, He was taken up. "Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth" (Col. 3:2).

Do you behold this King? There is that righteous generation of Israel who "seek him," (v. 6). They seek not this world and the things it affords, but they seek the light of His countenance, even as Noah looked up and found grace in the eyes of the Lord.

Does that describe you? Looking and hastening unto the day of Christ's return?

Lift up your heads, people of God! Look beyond the horizon of this earth, with all its troubles and hardships. Look beyond this volatile and everchanging

economy; look past the needs of home and body, and behold Jesus! For the King of glory has come in. Behold Him as the all-powerful King who holds the nations of this earth in His hands. Behold Him as the Savior of His people, who has received blessing from the Lord.

Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? You will. Redeemed by God's grace, washed with the blood of the King, there comes the day that you will ascend. The Lord

mighty in battle will reach with His everlasting arms and remove you from the battlefield of this earth. The gates and doors will open up, and you who are the people of God will join Jesus Christ in that heavenly mansion.

Behold your home. The hill of the Lord, Mount Zion!

Behold your God. The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle!

EDITORIAL



AND BY DEGREES IS BROUGHT TO RUIN

PROF. BRIAN HUIZINGA

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

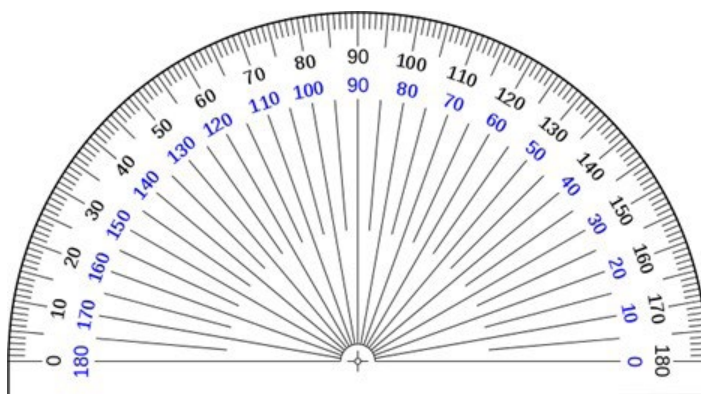
THE FORM OF EXCOMMUNICATION

The Form of Excommunication, found in the back of the Psalter, and sanctioned for use in Reformed churches according to Article 76 of the Church Order, contains a wealth of valuable instruction on sin and the proper response to it. One important principle contained in it is that sinners who come to ruin do not come suddenly, but by *degrees*. When the Form is read on the occasion of excommunication, the congregation is taught that God has just given everyone an object lesson: "You have seen, beloved brethren and sisters, in what manner this our excommunicated brother has begun to fall, and by degrees is come to ruin...." The excommunicated sinner is an illustration of ruin *by degrees*. He began to fall, continued falling by degrees, and then came to ruin. There is still hope in God, and that is why the Form calls excommunication the "extreme *remedy*," and why there is a Form for *Readmittance*, but the recovery of the ruined brother will not come but by an extraordinary work of God's mercy.

When we reflect on the sin of one cut off from the church of Christ, or any grievous sin into which a Christian can fall, we must think in terms of *degrees*. We all need repeated exhortations to vigilance in laying aside the least beginning of evil in our own lives, for it is by *degrees* that a man is brought to ruin.

THE POSITIONS OF 0 AND 180

This principle of *ruin by degrees* can be illustrated using a protractor, that flat and transparent semicircle marked by degrees along a curved edge and used for measuring angles. Moving left to right, there are 180 little tick marks from the bottom left-hand corner marked "0 degrees," up and around the arc to the top marked "90 degrees," and back down to the bottom right-hand corner marked "180 degrees." For



the illustration, let's say that the "0 degree" mark represents the strong Christian or the one who by all outward appearances was regarded a strong Christian. The "180 degree" mark on the opposite side represents the excommunicated sinner brought to ruin or the Christian who has suffered a lamentable fall. How does an individual go from 0 to 180? By *degrees*.

At the “0 degree” mark is the strong Christian. He (or she) is not sinless, for in this life even the holiest men of God have only a small beginning of new obedience. Every day, sins of infirmity spring from his sinful flesh and spots adhere to his best works. However, he lives by the power of faith each day. He humbles himself before God and flees for refuge to Christ crucified. He fights against temptation and mortifies his flesh by the Spirit of prayer and other holy exercises of piety. He walks in the light of God’s countenance, lives in the joy of his salvation, and seeks to remain patient in suffering. He strives to be faithful in all his relationships, loving and doing good to his neighbor for God’s sake. He presses toward the perfection that has been proposed to him in the life to come, living by the hope of reigning one day with the Lamb in heaven. Every week he gathers for public worship on the Lord’s Day and sits under the chief means of grace. This man is strong in the Lord.

At the “180 degree” mark is the defiant sinner who has been excommunicated for impenitently persisting in sin and rejecting the admonition of Christ through the consistory and congregation. Or, being under church discipline, but refusing to submit to Christ, he terminates the formal process of discipline by pulling his membership papers and leaving Christ’s church. He is a threat to the congregation as he embodies the pollution of the world. He is presently in ruin, enslaved by Satan in some sin (probably many sins), and apart from the outstretched arm of a merciful God rescuing him, he is heading straight for hell. How did this happen? Only a few years before his excommunication he faithfully walked unto the house of God with the saints and appeared to be an upright believer, devoted to the church and his family.

We could also think of the man at the “180 degree” mark as a believer who had a lamentable fall like David or Peter (see Canons of Dordt V.4-7). He fell into an enormous sin, very highly offended God, incurred a deadly guilt, grieved the Holy Spirit, interrupted the exercise of faith, very grievously wounded his conscience, and lost the sense of God’s favor. Until being renewed by God so that he returns into the right way of repentance, he is in the way of ruin. How did this happen? This brother not only *appeared* to be spiritually strong, but like David and Peter *was* strong in the service of the Lord.

THE PATH FROM 0 TO 180

It simply does not happen that a man is strong in the Lord (or apparently so) one day and in ruin the next. Manasseh did not go from the activities of Hezekiah’s pure religion to child-sacrifices and a personal Babylonian captivity *suddenly*. The generation whose carcasses fell in the wilderness did not depart from the living God and become hardened in the deceitfulness of sin *in the three days* it took to travel from the Red Sea to Marah. David did not go from panting after God to panting after Bathsheba *in one day*. Peter did not go from fervently praying with Jesus to adamantly denying Jesus *in one night*. The online sports betting or pornography addict who is presently drowning in the destruction of foolish and hurtful lusts, and pierced through with many sorrows, did not become a sin-slave *in one month*. Neither does the pure worship of a church of true believers become damnable and its holy doctrine heretical *in one year*. There is only one way from 0 to 180, and it is *by degrees*.

The path is not identical for every sinner and regarding every sin, but generally it goes something like this. First, as the sinner begins moving away from “0” there is a diminishing of holy activities, which is why Jesus warns, “Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation” (Matt. 26:41). Prayer becomes less frequent and fervent, and Bible reading cold and mechanical. Sunday is less God’s holy day and more the sinner’s personal day. Worship is more and more formalism. But everything looks good externally.

Second, the sinner begins entertaining sinful thoughts. James describes the whole process from 0 to 180 as temptation, lust (sinful desires), sin (actual sin), and death: “But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death” (Jam. 1:14-15). Some object or opportunity presents itself to the sinner and instead of resisting the temptation, he considers it. Then he desires it, without any intent to act on the desire. At first, he is startled and shook by the desire, knowing it is wrong. But then he is enticed, again, and again. Temptation appeals to his pride, and he reasons within himself that his desire really is not that bad. Over the course of time, the thoughts linger, returning ever stronger. He is willing to compromise much.

Communion with God means little because his sinful appetites and passions are being stirred, ever stronger. This all happens within the heart, and it would still be difficult for family or friends to detect it.

Then, third, there is the sin itself, the deed. The sinner complies with the lusts of his flesh in open, actual sin. At first it feels heinous. His soul squirms at the thought of displeasing God and disappointing ones he loves and respects. His conscience hurts. The admonitions of God's Word give him pause. But only temporarily. The pleasure derived from the sin is too great. With repetition sin becomes easy. Now he is living in sin. It is habitual. He sins and sins and sins, with no turning. His sin is all consuming. He is absent-minded at work. He comes to church with a hollow soul. Pointed admonitions from Christ in the gospel hit his calloused heart like an arrow striking a boulder. His religion is a show, but not a good show because there are discernible signs that he is not right. The wise and observant are on to him, though he labors to keep them at bay with deception. He has reached 90 degrees. He is the slave and sin his master.

The figure of a protractor is so fitting for our purposes because the path from 0 degrees to 90 requires an *upward* climb along an arc, implying a struggle for the sinner against his conscience and admonitions. However, the movement from 90 degrees to 180 is *downward* in direction—essentially a freefall.

It does not take long to go from 90 degrees to the place of ruin at 180. Whereas in the days, weeks, months, and perhaps even years gone by the sinner was so careful to cover his tracks lest he be found out, his sin is now so all-consuming that he throws caution to the wind and becomes bold and shameless. He is now in a freefall. His sin will find him out. God will not have his wickedness and hypocrisy. "God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap" (Gal. 6:7). God tempts no man, but in jealousy of His own name and law, He can harden obstinate sinners who reject admonition, and He can lead them into temptation, heinous sins, and a ruinous fall. The just and sovereign God does that. He gives the proud sinner over to Satan and Satan brings the sinner into the ruin of broken relationships, squandered positions and privileges, and separation from God (like the wretched prodigal in the swineherd).

SOME REFLECTIONS

First, be warned of your adversary, the Devil. After teaching us the reality of degrees, the Form continues, "observe therefore how subtle Satan is, to bring man to destruction, and to withdraw him from all salutary means of salvation." Satan wants you. He wants to bring each of us to ruin outside the church and away from the means of grace. But observe how subtle he is in taking so much time to try to lead us, one small step at time, 0, 1, 2, 3...all the way to ruin at 180. Some miserable sinners are even locked up in prison right now, being punished by the state for their sin. How did they get there? It all goes back to a very small beginning years ago. Sin is so deceitful, Satan so subtle.

Second, say something now and not later to the brother or sister about whom you have serious concerns. When we sense something is amiss, our instincts are usually correct. When with sadness a consistory gets to the point of excommunication or erasure, the elders usually reflect and ask, "Were there not signs early on, before this matter ever came to us? Indications of trouble so that something could have been said or done before this sinner became hardened?" Let us take heed to one another in a spirit of meekness and so fulfill the law of Christ.

Third, if there will be repentance for one who persisted in sin and came to ruin, that repentance must be sufficiently manifested. We are naïve to think that one confession upon an initial confrontation sufficiently demonstrates genuine repentance. It took a long time to get to 180, and though God can transform the heart in a moment, the sinner must be brought to understand how deeply rooted his sin was in his heart and how radically different a 180-degree turn of heart and life really is after all those deeply entrenched habits of sin.

Fourth, to any who have fallen into ruin—temporary, not everlasting ruin—there is hope in Jesus. Forsake your wicked way and turn to our God in true faith, knowing that He is merciful and pardons abundantly. Degrees applies to more than sin. It also applies to the humiliation of our Savior from His incarnation to crucifixion. God brought Him into suffering *by degrees*, until He fully satisfied His justice. And God exalts Him *by degrees* so that He is now in heaven as an Advocate. Look up, and fly for refuge to Christ!

Finally, and most importantly, beware all and each

of you! You are probably thinking about how applicable this sad reality of degree is *for others*. But the main point of the Form concerns you and me. Where is *your* heart today? Are *you* pressing toward the mark or sliding away, almost imperceptibly? How were *your* devotions this morning? Hear the always timely exhortation of the Form:

Guard then, against the least beginnings of evil, and 'laying aside,' according to the exhortation of the

apostle, 'every weight and the sin which does so easily beset us, let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith. Be sober, watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. Today, if you will hear the voice of the Lord, harden not your hearts, but work out your own salvation with fear and trembling;' and every one repent of his sins, lest our God humble us again and that we be obliged to bewail some one of you; but that you may with one accord, living in all godliness, be our crown and joy in the Lord.

LETTERS

Dear Professor Gritters,

I am writing in response to your article in the February 2025 [SB] issue, entitled: "If My Brother Sin... The Potent Medicine of Matthew 18 (4)." Under the heading of "Who are the 'Witnesses?'" you wrote, "In 1 Timothy 5:19 Paul uses one of these when he warns not to receive an *accusation* against an elder without two or three witnesses. These are witnesses of the elder's sin." You then went on to explain that Matthew 18, on the other hand, does not require witnesses to the offender's sin, but only to establish the words and facts of the rebuke and attempt to reconcile.

When I read this, I took your meaning to be that no accusation against an elder may be received unless two or three individuals witnessed the elder's sin but an accusation against another member may be received with only one witness to the sin, so long as the steps of Matthew 18 are followed. In other words, the lay member is held to a higher standard (that is, more easily accused) than an elder in the face of charges of sin. If this interpretation is correct, an elder is effectively free to commit gross sins that would disqualify him from office with impunity so long as it is never observed by more than one other person. In a situation like that of Deuteronomy 22:25-27, the damsel would not be believed because she was the only witness.

I would interpret the "but before" of 1 Timothy 5:19 as "except in the presence of," with the purpose of the witnesses being exactly what you described in the section entitled "The Task of the Witnesses," to ensure that the matter was handled properly. Then if they are found guilty, they must be rebuked publicly (v. 20) to do justice to the honor God has placed upon the office. Elders must be held to a higher standard (that is, "blameless," 1 Timothy 3:2) as examples to the flock.

I note that you did clarify the exceptions to Matthew 18 in your March 2025 article in this series and referenced the September 15, 2022 editorial regarding the misuse of Matthew 18 in cases of sexual abuse. However, this leaves the question, "When are two witnesses to an elder's sin required, and when are they not?" Can you please clarify your explanation of 1 Timothy 5:19? Do the same exceptions to the rule of Matthew 18 apply to the prescription of 1 Timothy 5:19? If I have misunderstood you, I expect others have also and would benefit from a further clarification.

Cordially in Christ,

Kyle Tanis

Southwest PRC

RESPONSE:

Mr. Tanis' letter raises a question about an incidental aspect of my article on Matthew 18. But since it is an important question, and Mr. Tanis' conclusions about my teaching are serious ("an elder is effectively free to commit gross sins...with impunity so long as it is never observed by more than one other person"), it is good to take time to address the letter.

The article was identifying the "witnesses" of Matthew 18 and showed that they are not those who observed the alleged *sin*, but who observed the *rebuke*. In that connection, I showed that the word Jesus used in Matthew 18 ("every *word*") is different than the word Paul used in 1 Timothy ("an *accusation*"). From that paragraph arises Mr. Tanis' question whether there are different standards of judging accusations against elders (higher) than against common members, and thus the possible conclusion that elders are more likely to get away with serious sin.

In 1 Timothy 5, Paul is teaching that elders are

to be honored (v. 17), that teaching elders are to be supported (v. 18), and that all elders are to be protected from unfounded and careless accusations of sin (v. 19). It is reasonable that the Holy Spirit would give special attention to protection of elders because (as Calvin explains) godly teachers and rulers are “more liable to slander and calumnies” than others in the church. But this requirement of witnesses to establish charges against elders (as Calvin also says) “is a law common to all.” All accusations against *anyone* must be “supported by sufficient proof.” Which is the point the February article was making.

So *no protection of elders may afford any of them the ability to sin freely*. Members may and *must* bring accusations against an elder if he sins, even if the member is the only one who witnessed the sin, just as in Matthew 18. A consistory will take that accusation with utmost seriousness, investigate immediately and thoroughly, (probably with the help of others). They will try to find more evidence to substantiate an accusation that they do not have reason to doubt. But before a consistory may *depose* such a man, sufficient proof of the sin must be brought forth. What that “sufficient proof” looks like is most difficult to say (could it be a very convincing description of the sin, matched by

a very unconvincing denial?) and must be judged by a multitude of elders.

Similarly, no member may be *excommunicated* from the church without sufficient proof. (Of course, Matthew 18 allows only one eyewitness of the sin to bring a charge to the consistory; but this does not mean that a consistory may lodge the charge of sin without sufficient proof of the sin.)

In many cases, therefore, sufficient proof will be the testimony of two persons. In other cases, sufficient proof will be one witness and other evidence that the elders judge to be sufficient. But the elders’ declaration to a member, “You are outside the kingdom,” or their deposition of an officebearer, may not take place without *sufficient evidence*, lest they show themselves to be unfaithful to their master, a *righteous* Judge.

If, God forbid, one of our male readers is accused of sexual assault by a female coworker (or a female by a male), he (or she) may be sure that no faithful elder will vote to charge him with that sin unless there is evidence, in addition to the woman’s (or man’s) accusation, to corroborate the charge. And if an elder is accused of sexual assault, that elder may be sure that no faithful fellow elder will vote to depose him for that sin unless there is evidence beyond the one accuser’s words.

BG

SPECIAL NOTICE

A SIGNIFICANT REPRINT ON PRC HISTORY AND DOCTRINE

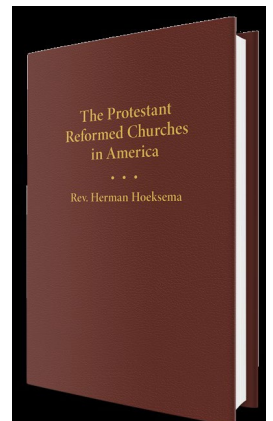
MRS. ASHLEY MULDER, RFP

The following are two announcements that appeared in the *SB* in 1935 and 1936, shortly before the publication of the first edition of *The Protestant Reformed Churches in America: Their Origins, Early History, and Doctrine* (also known as *History of the PRCA*). Current *SB* readers may be more familiar with the second edition of the book, released in 1947 and 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 RFP 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."

It has often been emphasized that the history of our churches ought to be preserved.

Especially what took place in 1924 and became the historic occasion of the rise of the Protestant Reformed Churches may not be allowed to sink into oblivion.

On this, I believe we are all agreed.

And this applies especially to our younger generation, that did not live through the days of 1924.

Those of us that were eye-witnesses of what happened, that were indoctrinated from the beginning of our history, yea, before 1924, that attended the various meetings of the synod of the Christian Reformed Churches in 1924 and of the classes that were involved in the deposition of the first consistories, will never forget that history.

But it is our younger generation, that did not live through those days and all that happened in them, that are in need of being informed.

If this is to be done, however, that history must be preserved on the printed page, so that future generations may be able to read it and make study of it, become acquainted, not merely with the historical events in their proper light, but also with the doctrinal principles that were involved in the origin of the Protestant Reformed Churches.

It is with this dire need that this proposed plan is concerned.

Such a history may soon be prepared in book form.

The book will comprise more than three hundred pages and will be cloth-bound.

It will cost approximately one dollar and seventy-five cents.

But!.....

The author, undersigned, has no funds to finance the printing of such a book. For the printer it would be too great a risk to prepare and publish it, then to wait until it may be sold.

We talked the matter over, the printer and undersigned, and concluded that the only possible way to realize this plan is to ask for orders in advance, the

book to be paid as soon as it will be ready for delivery.

We would need about five hundred such orders in order to feel that we could safely proceed with the printing.

Now it is up to you, ministers, parents, young people.

The plan is, of course, not at all impossible. Five hundred parties that can afford to buy a book at the price of one dollar seventy-five, can easily be found among us.

If you are really interested in preserving the history of our churches for our future generations, write a card and send in your order black on white.

If you can afford it, order more than one, that you may help those that cannot afford to buy one.

The book could be used in older catechism classes or in young men's societies.

Perhaps some of our consistories could purchase several copies to present to their young people, say when they make confession of faith.

Perhaps some of our Sunday schools have some ready money and are able to purchase copies for distribution.

Let us all work together to realize this plan!

H.H.

from "Another Plan Proposed!" Vol. 12, Issue 1

The book on the history of our churches, the proposed publication of which was announced sometime ago, is almost ready to leave the press. It will be published by the Zondervan Publishing House, 815 Franklin St., Grand Rapids, Mich.

The publisher promised us that it would be ready the first part of June.

The book will contain about three hundred fifty pages, will describe the origin and history of the Protestant Reformed Churches and include a discussion of the "Three Points."

Pictures of our churches and ministers, the deposed consistories of Eastern Avenue and Hope Church, ought to increase our interest in the book.

Those that ordered the book, please, secure their copy sometime in June at the Zondervan Book Store.

And those that did not order a copy yet, please, send the order to the address mentioned above.

H.H.

from "As to Our History," Vol. 12, Issue 17



THE OBEDIENCE OF PHILIP

MR. KYLE BRUINOOGUE

teacher of New Testament history at Covenant Christian High School in Walker, Michigan, and a member of Faith PRC in Jenison, Michigan

Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria, and preached Christ unto them—Acts 8:5

In the early church, though often overshadowed by apostles like Peter and Paul, Philip the Evangelist's life and ministry offer a profound example of Spirit-worked faithfulness and obedience. From the bustling streets of Jerusalem, to the land of Samaria, to the desert road that led to a eunuch's baptism, to raising a family of four daughters in Caesarea, Philip's story is a testament to the power of the Holy Spirit to reveal the glorious gospel.¹

For Philip preached Christ.

His ministry began with his selection as one of the first deacons (Acts 6:5), and he soon revealed himself as a man with tremendous gifts as he took the lead after Stephen's martyrdom (7:54-60).² As a result of Saul's "havock of the church" (8:3), many faithful followers of Christ "were scattered abroad...preaching the word" (8:4).

Did Philip react by keeping a low profile?

"Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria, and preached Christ unto them" (Acts 8:5). Immediately, Philip reflected the boldness of Stephen and *obeyed* the instruction of the Spirit to continue preaching Christ.

Philip's ministry in Samaria marked a significant step in the expansion of the gospel beyond traditional Jewish boundaries and fulfilled the words of Christ at His ascension before the apostles: "And you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea *and Samaria*,

and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Simply put, Philip obeyed the Spirit's command to preach Christ to the Samaritans.³

Through Philip's preaching and miracles many people "with one accord" believed the gospel (Acts 8:6). Exorcism and healings of physical ailments were used to bring "great joy in that city" (8:8). Faith in Christ!

More specifically, Luke tells us of Simon, a renowned sorcerer who bewitched many people in Samaria, but who "believed also" (Acts 8:13) through the powerful witness of so many (8:12). Not in the least hierarchical, Peter and John were sent to support Philip's ministry by affirming the authenticity of the new converts, praying for their reception of the Holy Ghost (8:15).⁴ And so, while their work in Samaria was fruitful, it was time for Philip, Peter, and John to return to Jerusalem (8:25).

But the Spirit, through the angel of the Lord, gave Philip another test. "Arise, and go toward the south unto the way that goeth down from Jerusalem unto Gaza, which is desert" (Acts 8:26).

The desert? Towards Gaza?

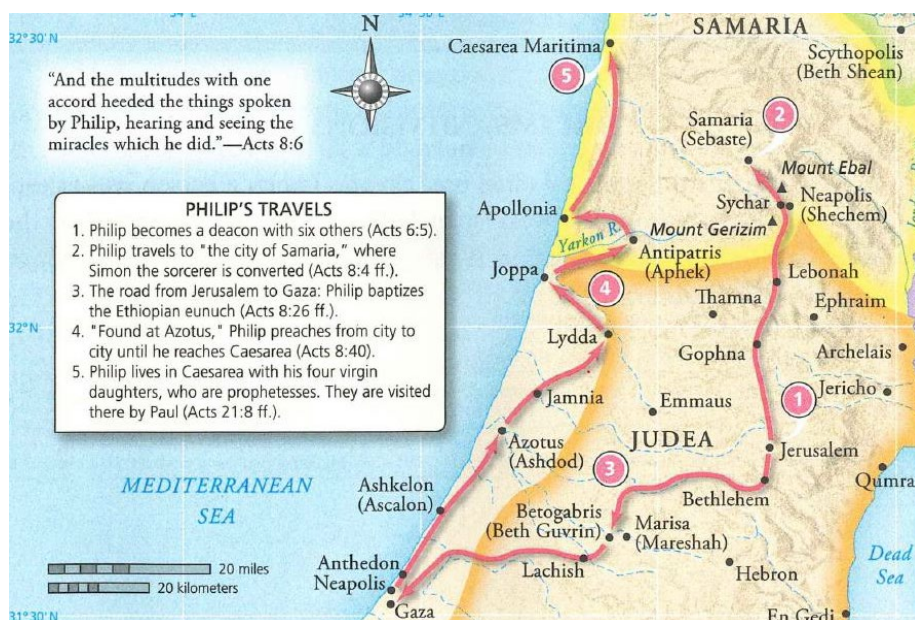
"And he arose and went" (Acts 8:27). Philip obeyed the curious command of the Spirit, sending him in the

¹ Philip the Evangelist (as he's referred to in Acts 21:8) is distinguished from Philip the Apostle (Matt. 10:3).

² Philip, like Stephen, was a Hellenist, meaning he was a Greek-speaking Jew. See "The Living Testimony of Stephen," *Standard Bearer*, (December 1, 2024), 112.

³ Tension between Jews and Samaritans remained severe. During Jesus' ministry, disciples James and John inquired of the Lord if fire should come down to consume these very same Samaritans (Luke 9:51-56).

⁴ Peter and John's follow-up trip to Samaria (Acts 8:14-17) is both ironic and significant. After previously inquiring if fire should come down from heaven, these early church leaders slowly learned that God is no respecter of persons (as Peter himself preached in Acts 10:34). But the story with Simon continued with his bizarre attempt to purchase the gift of the Holy Spirit, followed by Peter's strong rebuke, and then Simon's prayer for deliverance of his own ignorance and folly (Acts 8:18-24).



Nelson's Complete Book of Bible Maps and Charts, 3rd ed.
(Thomas Nelson, 2010), 349.

opposite direction of Samaria (where he was just used mightily) to go into the desert. The Spirit does not give a reason, but simply says, *go*. And Philip went.

The narrative of Philip's experience on the road south to Gaza is familiar. He is led to an Ethiopian eunuch, one who is on his return trip from Jerusalem. Likely a dedicated proselyte making a form of pilgrimage to Jerusalem, he is now, upon his return trip, reading Isaiah 53.⁵

As an eager evangelist who wants nothing more than to share the good news of Jesus Christ, Philip *ran* to the chariot to meet the Ethiopian.

And what was his method of engagement? Did he immediately exegete the passage for the eunuch? No. He asked the man a *question*. "Understandest thou what thou readest?" (Acts 8:30). Philip's method is instructive for our personal witnessing. He asked a question to gauge the man's understanding. And the Ethiopian responded, rather innocently: "How can I except some man should guide me?" (8:31). This response was all Philip needed to preach Christ to him.

Philip's successful ministry with the eunuch shows that God uses *means* to spread His Word. Further, He uses *weak* means to preach Christ. Within the broader

context of Acts 8, the very next chapter demonstrated that the newly converted Saul would need the aid of Ananias (Acts 9), and that later the centurion Cornelius would rely upon Peter (Acts 10). There is already a pattern in the early church of how God brings His word. Let no man in the church become individualistic and refuse the God-ordained means to bring the glorious gospel!

And bring that glorious gospel Philip did. To which the Ethiopian innocently observed and inquired, "See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized?" (Acts 8:36). Philip responded with simplicity: "If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest" (Acts 8:37).

No hesitation by the Ethiopian! "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God" (Acts 8:37). "And he commanded the chariot to stand still: and they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him" (8:38). Notice that no further questions were asked by Philip. He heard the confession and baptized him, right then and there. And the Ethiopian, not surprisingly, "went on his way rejoicing" (8:39).

What happened next was mysterious. "And when they were come up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip, that the eunuch saw him no more" (Acts 8:39). Of this disappearance it can be inferred that the Spirit wanted to remove any possibility that Philip be rewarded by the Ethiopian for his "part" in his baptism.⁶ Philip disappeared no richer than when he first traveled to Gaza.

But Philip was rewarded. His reward was seeing the Spirit-worked faith in the heart of the Ethiopian.

But he was also rewarded with the blessing of further success in ministry as he plodded his way north. We read that after he "was found at Azotus" (Acts 8:40), Philip preached north along the coast of the Mediterranean, coming to Caesarea. Here he was blessed with a settled family life, with "four daughters, virgins, which did prophecy" (21:8). Not to be overlooked in

5 The eunuch is described as the "chief financial officer" in Queen Candace's court (Acts 8:27). Therefore, he was someone of prominence, and thus was able to secure a copy of the Old Testament for his own personal reading.

6 See John Calvin, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries: The Acts of the Apostles Vol. I*, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. John W. Fraser and W. J. G. McDonald, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965), 254.

this passage is that Philip led as he was led. He obeyed the Spirit's leading, but also led his family, specifically his four daughters, and was an example of obedience to the Lord. His daughters followed his example, for they were gifted with prophecy, meaning, they were prophetesses. We cannot be certain of the nature of their prophesying, but we can be certain that they had a thorough understanding of the Word of God and were apt in expressing it to others.⁷

Within this same context, twenty years after he was selected as one of the first deacons of the church, Philip provided refuge and refreshment for the apostle Paul as he made his way towards Jerusalem after his third missionary journey. Paul and his companions rested in Philip's home for several days (Acts 21:8-10). They prepared mentally and physically for the turmoil they would face in hostile Jerusalem.⁸

Therefore, Philip's refreshment of Paul is significant. Twenty years earlier, when Paul's persecution led many to flee, Philip obeyed and preached Christ to those who lived in fear (because of Paul!). Now, Philip and Paul are brothers in Christ, and for these few days they could enjoy each other's company, with Philip encouraging Paul before his foreboding trip to Jerusalem.

Philip's refreshment of Paul gave him courage to speak the confession of Acts 21:13. After several days with Philip, the prophet Agabus came to them and foretold the "binding" or imprisonment of Paul upon his return to Jerusalem (21:11). With no hesitation, after being encouraged to stay in Caesarea, Paul replied, "What mean ye to weep and to break mine heart? for I am ready not to be bound only, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus" (21:13). God used Philip's

hospitality and spiritual encouragement to strengthen Paul's resolve for the challenges he would face.

After Paul's missionary work was over, years later, Philip and his daughters, with other Christians from the region, relocated to the province of Asia and spent their remaining days there.⁹ The daughters "lived to a great age, and were highly esteemed as informants on persons and events belonging to the early years of Judean Christianity."¹⁰ Why is this important? Because Luke composed much of his New Testament works (Luke and Acts) during Paul's two-year imprisonment in Caesarea prior to his appeal to Caesar Nero (Acts 23:23; 24:27), for Luke was with Paul during this time (c. AD 58-60). We can speculate that before their family's move to Asia, Philip's daughters were reliable witnesses for some of the content of Luke's writings. And so, God may have used Philip's spiritual influence in the training of his spiritually minded daughters to aid Luke in recording the inspired Scriptures found in Luke and Acts.

As we have seen Philip's example in both mission work and family life, our calling is to reflect his obedience. Because Christ lived a life of perfect obedience (Phil. 2:8), His obedience is *ours*, and we live in the confidence that He will bless us according to His promises to us, even as Philip was blessed with successful ministry and family life.

Finally, may we model Philip as *we* evangelize, with our lives *and mouths*, even "running" to opportunities to share the good news of Christ with others. In this, may we all be encouraged by the promise of the Lord Jesus Christ: "Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven" (Matt. 10:32).

7 Their gift of prophecy was along the lines of being able to set forth God's will from His Word. This is not in conflict with 1 Cor. 14:34, 25 and 1 Tim. 2:11-14, but more in line with Paul's instruction on the gift of prophecy in 1 Cor. 14:1. See R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, (Columbus, OH: The Wartburg Press, 1944), 866, 867.

8 This hostility on the part of the Sanhedrin was due to Paul's success on his missionary journeys, where he planted new churches, and showed both Jews and Gentiles their need for Christ. This led the Sanhedrin to accuse Paul falsely of teaching Jews "everywhere" to forsake their customs. A false charge as Paul laboriously proved.

9 See F.F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of Acts*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), 424. It is possible that Philip's leave of Caesarea was due to the upheaval that took place there in AD 66. Tensions were mounting between Roman authorities and the Jewish nation, and as the Romans sympathized with Greeks in Caesarea, thousands of Jews were massacred. This led to the First Jewish-Roman War (AD 66-73). Philip and his family may have been spared these dreadful years in Judea.

10 Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of Acts*.



THE PROPER METHOD OF BIBLE INTERPRETATION: THE GRAMMATICAL-HISTORICAL-SPIRITUAL METHOD (2)

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Previous article in this series: April 2025, p. 241.

THE THREE ASPECTS

This is the second article in a short series regarding *biblical hermeneutics*, the study of sound principles of Bible interpretation. The first article noted that the Grammatical-Historical-Spiritual method is based on a high view of Scripture as God's inspired Word, His revelation to His people. This high view also holds Scripture to be inerrant, infallible, internally coherent and unified, clear, reliable and trustworthy, and sufficient for salvation.

The first article also stated the foundational principle for all Bible interpretation: Scripture interprets itself. It gives the believing child of God the clues how to understand it, from the main message of an entire book to the meaning of an individual passage. The Holy Spirit enables the child of God to understand what the Spirit says to the churches.

This foundational principle is not the only principle for Bible interpretation; after all, one must still know how to use the Bible rightly. Following from this foundational principle is the method that we promote: the Grammatical-Historical-Spiritual method. We consider the first two aspects of this method in this article.

THE HISTORICAL ASPECT

To understand a passage rightly, one must understand the historical circumstances in which the passage was written. In the case of an epistle, or Revelation, or a psalm, this means understanding who the inspired writer was, in what circumstances he wrote, and what his purpose for writing was. In the case of a historical narrative, this means understanding the historical context in which the recorded events take place. In the case of prophecy, this requires knowledge not only of

the general historical context, but also of the specific timing of a particular prophecy.

Why must we know the historical circumstances in which the inspired writer wrote, and of God's covenant people who received the writing? First, often the historical circumstances help us understand *why* the inspired writer is making certain points, calling the people to certain actions, or prohibiting others.

Second, knowing the historical circumstances helps understand which themes in a book are especially important. Knowing that John wrote his epistles when a heresy called Gnosticism was prevalent explains why he brings up certain doctrines (Christ's incarnation) and concepts (knowledge). Again, knowing that he wrote Revelation when the emperors claimed to be either a god or the representation of a god, and therefore required the people to worship them, helps explain why John relates his vision of one exalted God, at whose right hand is one glorified Lord Jesus Christ, who receives the church's worship and the praises of all creation.

Third, knowing a book's historical situation enables us to trace development in revelation and in the church's understanding of doctrines.

Finally, the historical occasion and purpose can affect the *kind*, or *genre*, of writing. To help Israel worship, David wrote psalms (poetry). To instruct the church more in her understanding of the doctrines of sovereign grace, Paul wrote epistles (didactic literature). To remind the church of spiritual battles that are being fought throughout all history, to teach that the demonic spirit world suffers defeat already now, and to kindle hope in the certain victory of the kingdom of Christ, John wrote Revelation (apocalyptic).

To understand a text's historical aspect, then, one must do the following:

- understand the historical (including geographic) circumstances of the inspired writer.
- understand the historical (including geographic) circumstances of the recipient.
- understand the book's historical purpose, its main theme, and its sections.
- see how a later book develops a theme beyond what an earlier book did (Romans 3-5 develops the doctrine of justification by faith alone beyond what David expressed in Psalm 32).
- find ways in which our own history is similar to the history of that day, in order to make applications.

While doing these things, one must guard against several errors. One tries to find too close a similarity between the historical situation *then* and *now*. Sometimes a person or preacher might try to force something on the historical situation of the inspired writer or recipient, because it is a factor in our life today. In Bible interpretation, nothing should be “forced.” Even if the similarity is only general, God’s Word applies.

The opposite error is to conclude that a passage does not apply to us today because the historical situation then was so different from now. Many do this with Paul’s instruction to husbands and wives and to masters and servants; they suppose that because the cultural view of women and servants is different today than in Paul’s day, these parts of his writings do not apply today.

A third error to avoid is that of reinterpreting a passage’s historical background in a way that fits a theory, and completely changes the meaning of a passage. N. T. Wright, for instance, and other men committed to the New Perspectives on Paul movement, redefine what Jewish culture was and what the Pharisees were like in a way that entirely reinterprets the books of Romans and Galatians. According to them, these books do not teach justification (imputation of righteousness) by faith alone (knowledge and confidence, worked by God in us), without works. Rather, it is alleged, these books teach how we continue as members of God’s covenant community—by faith, that is, our faithfulness. To restate the main purpose of the book, these men completely reexplain the historical background of Jesus’ and Paul’s day.

These are not the only errors to avoid, but listing just these is enough to underscore the necessity of studying a book in its historical context, understanding that context, and realizing what issues the book addresses.

To understand this historical context, one should read the entire book all at once, perhaps several times, and note clues in the book. One should also study other pertinent Bible passages. For example, if studying an epistle, one should note what the book of Acts says about Paul’s ministry in *that* church being addressed; or, if studying an Old Testament prophecy, one should turn to the historical narratives that tell us about the times in which that prophet lived.

THE GRAMMATICAL ASPECT

The grammatical aspect focuses on the text’s “ground level”—its words, phrases and sentences, and the book’s literary structure. The need for this aspect of Bible interpretation should be self-evident. First, God revealed Himself to us in human language. Whether studying the passage in the Hebrew or Greek original, or reading a translation in our own language, we must pay attention to words and sentences. A sloppy approach to grammar will result in misreading and misunderstanding a text.

Second, we know that language is not only a textbook science, but also something of an art; it contains figures of speech, idioms, and other grammatical constructions that must be observed. We must know how to interpret these.

Third, historical narratives unfold in a sequence of events, and doctrinal points that apostles make in epistles are developed in a sequence; therefore, paying attention to what has preceded (literary context) is important.

To understand a text’s grammar and words, one ought observe the following guidelines. (Note that I present a list of what an English speaker might do, using one or more English Bible translations, as well as a concordance, digital Bible study software, and good commentary. I do not explain how specifically to do what this list says, and where to start, although those who are new at Bible study might benefit from more instruction. So if you are new at this, ask someone else for more guidance.)

- When treating the historical aspect, we noted

the need to understand the book's sections. Now, within a section, note the sentences and the development of thought. Note carefully the *conjunctions* that tie one sentence to another, and see what relationship between sentences these conjunctions indicate. For instance, "but" indicates a contrast; "then" is a consequence; "that" could be a purpose or a result. An understanding of the grammar will help one understand the logic and sequence of thought.

- Pay attention to the words, starting with the *nouns* and *adjectives*. What do the nouns mean? Does the Bible use a certain noun in more than one sense, and if so, in what sense is the noun used in this passage? Especially if it is an abstract noun (for example, truth, righteousness, or justice), work to understand what ideas are compressed into the noun. In short texts (psalms, proverbs, epistles), one must know which noun represents a main concept in that sentence or text, and which is less important. In longer texts (historical narratives), one will find many nouns. Some are not so important; one must not overlook the nouns that are important. Sometimes in the Old Testament and Revelation a name has symbolic meaning, which must be noted. Then, if two nouns are related or distinguished by *adjectives* or other phrases, observe the relationship or distinction.
- Now pay attention to the action components of the sentences, such as *verbs*, *infinitives*, and *participles*. As you did with nouns, study the meaning of the verbs and the force of the *adverbs*. The Greek and Hebrew student must ask many questions here, but these articles are for English speakers, so I avoid them now.
- Note the *conjunctions*, *prepositions*, and other *little words within* the sentence. How are all the pieces fitting together? Try diagramming the sentence to be sure you get it right!
- If you notice word constructions that seem odd, consider the possibility that you have an *idiom* or *figure of speech*. Understand the different kinds of figures of speech (I teach

almost twenty of them at seminary), and how they work.

- Finally, if the passage contains *typology*, *symbolism*, or *prophecy*, one needs to understand more specifically how to deal with these; I am not able to explain that in detail here.

By doing these things, you have noticed all the individual trees. Now step back and look at the forest—the text as a whole. What is a basic concept, doctrine, or thought, that is found in the text? How does the rest of the text relate to and further develop it?

While doing this aspect of Bible study, one must avoid a multitude of errors—some of which we quickly make. Even pastors must continually guard against them. One would be to misidentify, misinterpret, and therefore, misunderstand any individual word or the entire sentence. A second would be to commit logical errors (fallacies) when it comes to the meaning of words. A third would be to misrelate one part of the sentence to another. Perhaps you put a prepositional phrase in the wrong place in your understanding of a text. Or perhaps you find a pronoun, look for its antecedent (the word for which it substitutes), and get that antecedent wrong. A fourth would be to go wrong in explaining the type, symbol, or prophecy.

The potential of making mistakes here is very real. To train our seminarians to beware of these mistakes is one reason we have them exegete (interpret) close to 100 passages during their time at seminary and on their internship. For the average Christian, this is why it is good to discuss a passage with others; for instance, a benefit of Bible study or of family discussion at the dinner table is to hear a number of ideas about what a text might mean, and evaluate them.

Having done the historical and grammatical aspects of Bible study, we noted the broader surrounding of the entire forest, and the individual trees at ground level. Still, we must ask: What is the Holy Spirit saying to us? To answer that question more fully, we must also treat the *spiritual* aspect of Bible interpretation.

To that we will return next time.



GLUTTONY IS AS GREAT A SIN AS DRUNKENNESS

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THE WIDESPREAD PROBLEM

You have likely heard a public confession of sin in your congregation for drunkenness. Maybe the repentant sinner was guilty of public intoxication, or had been arrested for driving under the influence (DUI), or brought to jail for causing an accident while impaired. When was the last time that you heard a public confession for the sin of *gluttony*? I doubt that there has ever been such a confession in the history of our churches. And yet, the Scriptures make plain that gluttony is as great a sin as drunkenness.

In my last article (January 2025, p. 145), I responded to a very interesting question on the dietary laws of the Old Testament and where they fit into the scheme of the civil and ceremonial laws. But apart from the Old Testament dietary laws, Scripture has plenty to say on the subject of eating and drinking. God made Adam and Eve so that they needed to eat. He permitted them to eat of all the trees of the Garden of Eden, but forbade them to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. After the fall into sin and the curse upon the creation, the animals became predators and prey, with predators killing and eating their prey for food. After Noah came forth from the ark, God told him: “Every moving thing that liveth shall be meat to you; even as the green herb have I given you all things” (Gen. 9:3). Now for the first time, human beings were permitted to eat meat—the flesh of animals.

God created man with the need to eat and drink. As is so often the case, man’s sin is the abuse of God’s good gifts—overdrinking and overeating. Our main concern is with overeating, the sin of gluttony. Gluttony is eating in excess. It is eating more than is necessary to sustain us, to satisfy our hunger, and to enable us to carry on with our life and calling.

Even though drunkenness and gluttony are distinct sins, they are often associated in the Bible. In

Deuteronomy 21:20, the parents of a rebellious and wayward son are called to report their son to the elders: “This our son is stubborn [in his sin] and rebellious, he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton, and a drunkard.” The warning of Solomon is, “For the drunkard and the glutton shall come to poverty” (Prov. 23:21). Jesus referred to the false accusation of the unbelieving Jews: “The Son of man is come eating and drinking; and ye say, Behold a gluttonous man, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners!” (Luke 7:34).

American society is plagued by gluttony. Despite gyms, workout machines, and diet foods, more Americans are overweight than ever before. According to figures compiled by the National Center of Health Statistics in 2024, 75% of American adults are overweight. Over 40% of these adults are considered obese. Upwards of 20% of children aged 6-19 are classified as suffering from obesity.

At this point, a caution needs to be sounded. We must be charitable enough to recognize that not all who are overweight are guilty of the sin of gluttony. Not everyone who is overweight is guilty of being lazy and continually eating junk food, sweets, and fattening fare. By no means! Some people are physically and genetically predisposed to being overweight. In others, there may be an underlying health issue that results in weight gain. A woman’s weight gain may be due to successive pregnancies or to an underactive thyroid. People may be taking medications that result in weight gain—steroids, insulin, beta-blockers, or antidepressants. All of these factors must be considered when someone appears to be overweight. We ought always to be gracious in our judgment of others.

Another warning may be given. Something that parents ought be on guard against is that their children do not torment other children who are overweight. It is easy enough for children to do this at school or in the family. Besides being wrong, this sort of thing

only aggravates the stress placed on those who are overweight, often driving them to eat still more. We must rebuke our children when this happens and call them to befriend rather than to hurt these children.

ENJOYING GOOD FOOD AND FELLOWSHIP

Scripture teaches in many places the believer's privilege of enjoying good food and fellowship. In fact, this ought to be viewed as a distinct blessing of God on His people.

In 1 Kings 4:22-23, Scripture describes the food that was prepared and set on king Solomon's table every day: "And Solomon's provision for one day was thirty measures of fine flour, and threescore measures of meal, ten fat oxen, and twenty oxen out of the pastures, and an hundred sheep, besides harts, and roebucks, and fallowdeer, and fatted fowl." Staggering! Thirty measures of fine flour that was baked into bread amounts at conservative estimates to 150 bushels of flour. The sixty measures of meal for other baked goods and pastries amounted to 300 bushels. And to think of all the meat from domestic livestock and wild animals that every day had to be butchered and prepared for Solomon's family, as well as the guests who sat at his table, is nearly overwhelming. Food in abundance and good fellowship besides.

We read in the opening chapter of the book of Job concerning the good food and fellowship that Job's ten children enjoyed among themselves, which also likely included their spouses—for they all had their own houses. "And [Job's] sons went and feasted in their houses, every one his day; and sent and called for their three sisters to eat and to drink with them" (Job 1:4). When a great wind smote and destroyed the house, killing all of Job's children, they "were eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother's house" (Job 1:13).

Solomon writes in Proverbs 13:25, "The righteous eateth to the satisfying of his soul: but the belly of the wicked shall want." Proverbs 23:1-2 contains the well-known warning, "When thou sittest to eat with a ruler, consider diligently what is before thee: and put a knife to thy throat, if thou be a man given to appetite." And Proverbs 28:7 warns, "Whoso keepeth the law is a wise son: but he that is a companion of riotous men [literally, gluttons] shameth his father."

The oft-repeated statement of the preacher throughout the book of Ecclesiastes is that there is

nothing better for a man than to enjoy the fruit of his labors and to eat and to drink that which the Lord has provided. "There is nothing better for a man, than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour. This also I saw, that it was from the hand of God" (Eccl. 2:24). "And also that every man should eat and drink, and enjoy the good of all his labour, it is the gift of God" (3:13). "Behold that which I have seen: it is good and comely for one to eat and to drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labour that he taketh under the sun all the days of his life, which God giveth him: for it is his portion" (5:18). "Then I commended mirth, because a man hath no better thing under the sun, than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry: for that shall abide with him of his labour the days of his life, which God giveth him under the sun" (8:15). "Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart; for God now accepteth thy works" (9:7).

THE SIN OF GLUTTONY

Undoubtedly contributing to the temptation to gluttony is the wide variety of foods from around the world that are available today at relatively inexpensive prices. We likely have a wider selection of foods than were available to Solomon. The shelves of our grocery stores, their produce and meat departments, their bakeries and delis, provide choices for the taste buds of every shopper. Add to that what fast food establishments like McDonald's, Burger King, Long John Silver's, and Taco Bell offer, as well as all the sit-down restaurants. There are Chinese restaurants, fried chicken franchises, restaurants serving Mexican cuisine, steak houses, seafood joints, pizza establishments, and sub shops.

Besides the availability of food, other factors contribute to the cause of overweight and obesity in our society. One factor is that so much of our food is high in calories, full of saturated fats, and processed rather than prepared from scratch. Many of our drinks, especially soda pop and fruit drinks, are high in sugar. Additionally, many of us have sedentary lifestyles and engage in far too little physical activity. We sit behind desks or stand at our station on the assembly line. This is something that bedevils ministers. The presence of stress in our lives and a lack of sufficient sleep contribute to weight gain. It is also a fact that,

apart from differences in metabolism, our metabolism slows down as we age so that we do not burn as many calories as we did when we were younger.

Some who are plagued with being overweight may resort to surgery. Gastric bypass and similar surgeries, also called bariatric or metabolic surgery, may help them when all other measures have failed. Some weight loss procedures limit how much a person can eat. Other surgeries reduce the body's ability to absorb fat and calories.

Why is gluttony sinful? Gluttony is sinful, first, because it demonstrates a lack of self-control. The gluttonous person is overcome by the lust for pleasure, in this case, the lust for food. Second, they who are guilty of gluttony take away from that which could be given to the poor. The glutton is selfish, concerned primarily with satisfying himself. John the Baptist told the people who came to hear his preaching, "He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none; and he that hath meat, let him do likewise" (Luke 3:11). Third, the sin of gluttony is often associated

with laziness and drunkenness. Paul says in Titus 1:12, "One of themselves, even a prophet of their own, said, The Cretians are always liars, evil beasts, slow bellies." "Slow bellies" are literally "lazy gluttons." Fourth, the glutton exposes himself to adverse health consequences: heart disease, diabetes, certain cancers, and strain on joints like knees and hips. And fifth, the glutton lives for himself rather than for the glory of God.

The children of God recognize that we do not live to eat, but are called to eat in order to live. The ungodly are only motivated not to overeat by their physical and mental health. But Christians are motivated by a higher purpose, that whether "ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do," we are called to "do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31). For unbelievers, their "God is their belly" (Phil. 3:19). For believers, their "body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own" (1 Cor. 6:19). We belong not only with our souls, but also with our bodies to our faithful Savior. With body and soul, we are to consecrate ourselves to Him in thankful service.

FOR THE CHURCH



IF MY BROTHER SIN...THE POTENT MEDICINE OF MATTHEW 18 (6)

PROF. BARRETT GRITTERS

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

You did not gain him. Now you must tell the church. This is your next responsibility when your loving

efforts to bring a sinner to repentance are not fruitful. You went alone once, maybe even twice. Then you took witnesses. But the brother did not hear you. Nothing moved him. Jesus now requires you to "tell it to the church." Then, if he does not hear the church, he must become to us as "heathen" and "publican."

I conclude my treatment of Matthew 18 with this article and the next, not because I have exhausted the subject of discipline. For, implied in Jesus' words "if he neglect to hear the church" is a mountain of labor that the consistory must perform with the impenitent sinner. They have many words that the sinner must 'hear' before

he may become to us a heathen man and publican. This work of the consistory deserves its own study. In these articles, I have been emphasizing Matthew 18's teaching about the important role of the believers.

Here, in this article, I want to explain what Jesus means by "tell the church." In the next and last article, "let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican."

TELL THE CHURCH

We understand these words to mean, "tell the elders," not "all the members."

Even when Jesus first spoke these words, the disciples would not have understood Jesus to mean that a man would make a public announcement from the temple's pinnacle or at the city's gate, or hire a town crier to reach as many members of the church as they could. Jesus used the word *church*, not because the church had already been formed into the organized body with officebearers that it would soon be, but *anticipating* that. In his explanation of the Reformed Church Order, J. Jansen put it well: "Jesus here discharges discipline to the congregation, which at first was still without a consistory, but was later placed under the leadership of the consistory. The congregation exercises discipline through the instrument and under the direction of the officebearers" (translation of the Dutch by Rev. J. Engelsma).¹

This is why our confessions say that "tell the church" means "report to the consistory." The Heidelberg Catechism, explaining the key-power of discipline, says that the impenitent sinner is "complained of to the church, or to those, who are thereunto appointed by the church...." The Reformed "Form for Ordination of Elders and Deacons" takes the same view: the ministers and elders "form a body or assembly, being as a council of the church, representing the whole church; to which Christ alludes when He saith, 'Tell the church'—which can in no wise be understood of all and every member of the church in particular, but very properly of those who govern the church, out of which they are chosen."

When Matthew 18's first doses of medicine do not win the sinner, you must not tell the whole church, but the elders.

And yet, Jesus said *church* and not *elders* for a

reason. Even though the church was not yet formally organized, He could have said *elders* (Acts 11:30; 14:23) or *bishops* (1 Tim. 3:1; 2 Tim. 4:22) or *rulers* (John 3:1, for example), for these were all known in His day. Instead, He chose to say *church* because, in the end, it is the *church* that exercises discipline, as Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians 5:4,5 and other passages (2 Cor. 2:6; see also Deut. 21:18-21). The elders do take the lead, but always aware that they are leading the entire body of believers in this holy activity. "Tell the church" means, in the New Testament, "First inform the elders."

TELL THE CHURCH

You have exhausted the means of private admonition. Now you make a visit to the consistory room and meet the elders to ask them to take the matter further. There are other ways that elders can receive reports of impenitent sinners, but if you began the process with the private admonitions of Matthew 18, Jesus requires *you* to bring it to them.

A personal visit and face-to-face meeting is in order. It may sound easier to mention the matter to an elder and ask him to bring it to the consistory. Or it might be less intimidating to send a letter to the brothers in the elders' seat. But Jesus calls us to *tell* the church, using a verb that refers to the spoken word. Our communication with the elders should be as it was with the sinner, where the emphasis was on personal interaction: *mouth, word, hear, tell, go*. So now, you *go* to a meeting of the elders to *tell* the sad story about your brother (or sister), and with your *mouth* speak *words* that they can *hear* and understand. Wanting to be wise and righteous judges, they will need to ask questions for clarification.

It stands to reason that careful preparation is required for this visit.

The preparation by prayer is primary. As much as prayer was needed for going to the erring brother, prayer is needed for a godly spirit when you visit the elders. Prayer is one of the chief marks of a spiritual man, and Paul says that only the *spiritual* are to restore others, in a spirit of meekness (Gal. 6:1). That spirituality and meekness are required in this visit also. Go to your chair or on your knees and pray.

Then you will want to sketch out a plan of what you should say to the elders, working with the notes you took to prepare for your other visits as well as the

¹ *Korte Verklaring van de Kerkenordering (A Brief Explanation of the Church Order)* 1923.

record of the visits you put on paper so that you would not forget what happened. Included in your plan will be when and how you first heard of the sin, the date(s) and setting(s) when you visited the sinning brother, and how he responded to you. You will explain to them why you chose the witness or witnesses you did, when these accompanied you to the erring brother, and how this visit went. Now you call the clerk and schedule a visit, informing him only that you would like to bring a charge of sin against a brother, *without giving the brother's name*. Why not, I explain in a moment.

When you get to the meeting, before you speak one word, the elders should help you with a few preliminary questions. They want to be sure you do not tell them something they should not yet hear.

Thank you for coming to our meeting. Our clerk informed us that you have a charge of sin against a brother (or sister). We are very thankful that you care for the purity of the church and the welfare of the members. We want to be faithful to the Scripture as we proceed, so before you tell us names or any details, we would like to ask you a couple of questions. First, did you visit the brother (or sister) according to Matthew 18? Would you explain that just a little to us without revealing names. Second, did you take witnesses according to Matthew 18? If so, are they here with you tonight? We ask you these questions because, if the sin is not a public sin, we may take it up to investigate only if we can be assured that you followed Matthew 18 carefully. If you did not take witnesses to the sinner, please go back home and finish your admonitions with witnesses. If you need help and advice, we will give you more instruction about following Matthew 18. If you assure us that you have indeed visited the brother personally, and then did take witnesses, please take them along next time, and we will be willing to hear the name of the brother or sister with whom you worked.

The consistory must be very careful not to become party to a matter before they ought. And only when they are assured that the reporter is being careful and not hasty may they enter into the matter.

Having assured the consistory that you have followed Matthew 18, you are permitted to speak.

Dear elders, it grieves me to tell you that brother N.N. has sinned and is impenitent. He violated the 'X,' 'Y,' or, 'Z' commandment, and this is how he did so.

I know of it because.... On this and that date I visited him alone. After we spoke at length, he appeared impenitent. I found him hard. The next week I took witnesses and they found him impenitent. So I believe that the Lord's way for us to help the brother is for you elders to confirm what I have found and, if so, use Christ's instrument of Christian discipline. I pray that the Lord will do through you what He has not done through me: win the brother.

When you leave the consistory meeting, the elders will inform you what you ought to do and (perhaps) not do. Depending on the nature of the case and how the matter goes, they may involve you further, or not, according to their discretion.

Now the work becomes theirs for a time and you recede into the background. You will still pray fervently, approve the elders' work as it becomes public, and exhort the brother again if and when his name is announced. But initially you will serve the cause of discipline better by allowing the elders to do their work, lest you overburden the brother, or complicate the matter when he wants to inform the elders of your 'interference.' But these are judgments that the elders will help you make. Most importantly, you go back to your chair, pray for the Holy Spirit to soften hard hearts, and pray in earnest for wisdom and courage for your elders.

As you initiated the discipline, the elders likely will keep you informed of their progress. They certainly will inform you if he repents, so that you all can rejoice in the beautiful grace of God and be reconciled. That is always our prayer. We commit his heart to God.

If there is no repentance after many months, perhaps even a year or more of the elders' work of admonishing the brother, they make three announcements to the congregation. If the brother still does not hear the elders' admonitions, you and the entire congregation exercise the "extreme remedy" and cut him off from the church and communion with Christ in a public worship service (see 1 Cor. 5:4). And your prayer even now is that God will use this awful act (delivering him to Satan's realm; 1 Cor. 5:5) to bring him to his senses so that he flees for refuge to Christ. You recognize with greatest grief that he does not. And then your grief goes deeper, for Jesus' final instruction in Matthew 18 is: "let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican." (We reserve that for the final article, D.V., in the June issue.)



CARING COMPASSIONATELY FOR ONE ANOTHER

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Where do you go when your marriage is in crisis? How about when you have a difficult child to parent? Where will you find help in extreme suffering after a death, or in dealing with abuse and its affects? What if you are struggling with porn, habitual drunkenness, or drug use? Our covenant God has given us the gift of community so that in our suffering and sin struggles we find help in the church first and primarily.

Our covenant God who dwells with us has designed the church to live in community. When the church lives in community as God designed, she practices this with a culture of compassionate care for suffering and sinning saints. And it is sweet! It is a great joy in our lives! When we fail to practice this compassionate care, fellow saints are further hurt and their suffering increases. Therefore, I am writing to encourage us to care for one another in the church and to seek this care in the local congregation and in the broader church world because this is God's design. I am deeply saddened when I hear of church members who seek help for their struggles outside of the church. I think sometimes this is because the church has not been a place of compassionate care. Sometimes this may arise from the insecurities of those struggling. Or sometimes the church has not helped when asked. Whatever the reasons, God's call to the church does not change. He calls church members to care compassionately for each other.

To encourage us in this compassionate care, I want to answer four questions: Why seek help in the church? But can't we find help in the world? Are the members of the church equipped to help? How can we help all of God's people who are suffering?

WHY SEEK HELP IN THE CHURCH?

Although there are many more reasons, here are two. First, it is because the church is a community. The word

community means literally "to be one with." The church is a community of brothers and sisters who are redeemed, regenerated, and traveling together as pilgrims in this world to their heavenly home. The church's oneness has nothing to do with the superficial bonds that bring so many together today: neighborhoods, sports, food, work, or ethnicity. The church is a community of those who are one in Christ although we are all very different. God made His church a community of saints who know Jesus Christ and live to serve Him with heart, mind, soul, and strength. Together we are saints! We are not super-Christians who have done remarkable things. We are common, ordinary saints who suffer and sin. What brings us together is our common need for the cross of Christ Jesus to free us from sin and to comfort us in our suffering.

This idea of community has been hijacked by our digital age. In these communities "friendship" is based on a false reality of snippets of life shared with a community of followers to make everything look fantastic or to find sympathy. But fellowship enjoyed in the church must be richer and deeper than this. It is fellowship for the sake of the gospel and is a reflection of God's covenant with us. It is fellowship reflecting the deep, deep love of God for us in Jesus Christ and a desire to grow in being Christ-like.

Christian community is *needed!* This is not hyperbole. Every one of us needs our community, as we suffer and fight sin through this earthly pilgrimage. Just as an army needs all of its soldiers working together to fight a common enemy, so we need each other in the battle of faith. As brothers and sisters live in a home and learn to serve each other by helping with supper, dishes, laundry, and cleaning, so also in the church we learn to work side by side with each other in our struggles and hardships. When members of the church

suffer severe tribulation, we bring them the comfort by which we have been comforted of God (2 Cor. 1:4, 5). When members of the church sin, we do not ignore it, but surround them on a rescue mission to restore them in a spirit of meekness (Gal. 6:1). When a member of the church bears a great burden, we carry that burden with them (Gal. 6:2). We walk alongside each other in our suffering or sin struggles because our good God has given us the rich gift of community. We seek help in the church because this is the way God designed the church to function.

Secondly, we seek help in the church because the church has the ultimate book that can help us in our struggles: the living Word of God! We believe in the sufficiency of Scripture. The Word of God has the truthful answers for our hard questions. The Word of God is the power of God to transform us into the image of Christ. The Word of God provides our only comfort in life and death: belonging to Jesus Christ. Much more could be said about this, but this leads us to the second question.

BUT CAN'T WE FIND HELP IN THE WORLD?

Can we learn things from the experts of the world today in trauma, anxiety, depression, addictions, for example? My answer to this is, Yes, but.... There are things we can learn from worldly experts, but it must be tested with the standard of Scripture. When listening to worldly experts and reading their books, understand that they have an anti-Christian worldview. Their final authority is not Scripture, but man's expertise. Most, if not all of them, view man from the perspective only of the physical because they have an evolutionary view of man. This means they find the problems in the world to be physical only—problems of brain and body. Their solutions are man-centered and not God-centered. If you read or hear that the problem is mental or physical and there is no mention of sin as the cause of corruption and suffering, then you will know the “expert” does not fully understand the struggle. If they propose a solution that involves self-esteem, self-care, or doing what makes you happy, they have completely ignored the need for God's grace and a life lived for God's glory according to Scripture.

What we find in the world will only be descriptive and not prescriptive. In other words, you can come to

understand things like trauma, anxiety, and addiction through the world's studies, but you will not find the full and complete answer of how to view them and how to respond in a way that honors God. Comfort and deliverance are found in God and God alone. This is why we should go to the church with our struggles because the church will gently and compassionately lead to God's truth using His Word. This is what we desperately need.

ARE THE MEMBERS OF THE CHURCH EQUIPPED TO HELP?

Many today strongly argue that church members, pastors, and elders are not equipped to handle some of the struggles in the church. But Scripture shows that the members of the church are equipped to help saints who are suffering and sinning. I encourage the members of the church to rise up to care compassionately for those who are struggling. Walk alongside these hurting, struggling, sinning saints. You are able to help. Because this is true, when we struggle we can seek help in the church. What equips us to help?

First, you love God and each other. The Holy Spirit has planted God's love in your heart (Rom. 5:5). Therefore, you are able to display the love of God to those who are suffering and sinning. Where there is a culture of compassionate care, there is the exercise of compassion, patience, and kindness as a reflection of the very heart of Jesus.

Second, we are able to help each other because we are tethered to the truth of God's Word. God's Word is sufficient to deal with the messy struggles of hurting Christians. If someone is drowning in a rip current and you are watching this happen from a pier, are you supposed to jump in and help them? No! Why? Likely you will both drown. Instead, you find a life-ring, throw it, and pull the person to safety while you remain tethered to the pier. This is what we do when we see that a fellow saint is drowning. We do not join them in their suffering or sin, but we go to them remaining tethered to God's truth, and we bring them that truth gently and patiently for the good of their souls.

Third, although we may not have endured the same sin or suffering someone else has gone through, we can still help them. Some might say that only someone who has gone through the same struggle can help. For example, only someone who has grieved the death of a

child can help another who has endured this. Certainly, those who have similar suffering can be of great help. But are they the only ones who can help? This idea does not stand the test of Scripture. 2 Corinthians 1:4 says that God comforts us in all our tribulation, “that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble by the comfort wherewith we are comforted of God.” We are able to comfort “*in any trouble*” with the comfort we have come to know. The comfort we have come to know in our particular suffering can be of help to others in their suffering although the circumstances may differ. If you have suffered and God has comforted you, and if you have sinned and God has delivered you, you are able to help others with their suffering and sin. We waste the suffering and sin struggles of our lives if we do not help others in theirs. So, let us rise up to help each other in the church!

HOW CAN WE HELP ALL OF GOD’S PEOPLE WHO ARE SUFFERING?

We cannot. Nor are we called to this. As the wise, inspired writer of Ecclesiastes wrote, “To everything there is a season...” (Eccl. 3:1). In some seasons of our lives, we are very limited in the help we can provide because of our callings and responsibilities. For example, a mother with many young children is much more limited than when the children are all in school

or out of the house. At other times in our lives, we will not be able to help others because we are drowning ourselves. This is okay in God’s providence.

Additionally, our responsibility is not to everyone in the church community because we do not have the same kind of relationship with everyone in our church. The community of the church in which we live can be thought of as larger and smaller circles. The broadest circle is the broader community of Christians in our lives. Slightly smaller is the circle of our local congregation where we are members. Finally, there are the smaller circles of closer friends, children, parents, and spouse. We learn quickly that we cannot possibly help everyone within the church, nor is it our responsibility to help everyone. God’s Word teaches us to develop and focus on the smaller circles and do what we can in the larger circles.

When God’s people have endured great trials, they have testified over and over again how thankful they are for their church community. It is one of the great blessings of belonging to the church of Jesus Christ. God has given fellow sinners saved by grace to walk together, encourage each other, admonish one another, and bear one another’s burdens. God calls us to serve each other with the gifts He has given. Join me in thanking God for the people He has given. And pray that you will be used for their good as well.

WHEN THOU SITTEST IN THINE HOUSE



CONSIDER THE WARHORSE

MRS. MARGARET LANING

wife, mother, and grandmother in the Protestant Reformed Churches

If you see a child reaching over a fence with a fist full of tall grass, you might guess a horse is on the other side. How delightful it is when that beautiful, sure-footed animal trots over, large observant eyes, ears pointed forward inquisitively, nostrils flared. The young child squeals with delight, hurling the grass over. The horse

backs away, tosses its head, and paws the earth; its muscular neck quivers and twitches; it shakes its mane. A loud whistle, the kind made with two fingers, pierces the air from the other end of the field. Turning its head, the horse makes a low, staccato whinny. With a decisive snort and sweep of tail it gallops away toward

its master. The child steps down from the fence looking on, wide-eyed with wonder.

When our awesome God created the horse, He created a strong, spirited, teachable animal to help us with our work and to enjoy. Yet, there are lessons we can learn from the horse as well. When we are with our children, whether on a walk, at home, having devotions, or anytime, we can direct their attention to many biblical truths illustrated in God's creation. For example, Proverbs has us consider the tiny ant, an example of wisdom and industriousness. Isaiah brings out the startling contrast of the ox that knows its owner and rebellious Israel who demonstrated the opposite. In Matthew, Jesus compares His people to sheep among wolves exhorting us to be wise as serpents and harmless as doves.

Perhaps the most astonishing thing about the horse is that with proper training it is fearless in war. Scripture directs us to the warhorse in a number of places: "...the horse rusheth into the battle" (Jer. 8:6b); and, "The horse is prepared against the day of battle..." (Prov. 21:31a). God speaks to Job of the warhorse: "Hast thou given the horse strength? hast thou clothed his neck with thunder? Canst thou make him afraid as a grasshopper? the glory of his nostrils is terrible. He paweth in the valley, and rejoiceth in his strength: he goeth on to meet the armed men. He mocketh at fear, and is not affrighted; neither turneth he back from the sword. The quiver rattleth against him, the glittering spear and the shield" (Job 39:19-23). Throughout history horses have served their masters fearlessly in the most dangerous battles.

This is astounding because the horse naturally fears man (Gen. 9:2), and is a cautious animal of prey. Breaking in and training a horse must be done patiently to ease the animal's fears. Too much too soon, and the horse will be skittish and unmanageable. A well-trained warhorse will trust its master and feel safe with him. What is more, the horse will aim to please its master by doing what it is directed to do. These qualities have been crucial in battle.

One of my favorite psalms to hear the children sing in church is Psalm 144 (Psalter #392 "Trustful Praise and Prayer"). It starts like this: "Blest be the Lord my rock, my might, my constant helper in the fight, my shield, my righteousness, my strong high tower, my Saviour true, who doth my enemies subdue, my shelter in distress...." I love to hear them sing this loudly and with enthusiasm. Their joy of trusting their Savior in

spiritual battles, knowing that in Christ they are safe, warms my heart and no doubt yours, too. He is our Shield and constant Helper in the fight. He is our Might!

From an early age our believing children grow in conscious faith and begin to understand they are soldiers in the Lord's army. To be sure, the warfare is fierce against our threefold enemy and in all the difficulties in life. We are prone to worry about many things: uncertainty, failure, what others think of us, our health, safety, finances, the weather—all the what-ifs. The youth in our nation are arguably the most anxious generation on record; the church is not immune to this unhealthy trend in our culture. Fear paralyzes and takes our eyes off Christ; fear prevents us from trusting Him as we ought. Israel wandered in the wilderness forty lamentable years because they were afraid to enter the promised land.

Trust is crucial. The warhorse had to be trained to trust its master. At first it feared being led into danger. Skittish, bucking, kicking, ears pinned back, even the slightest touch could set it off. Over time it tolerated being brushed, allowed a blanket on its back, or a bit in its mouth. Yet the defining characteristic that trust was won was revealed when the horse wanted to be near its master. It might trot over to him with a whinny, relaxed, lower its head, lick, chew, nicker. It might breathe on its master, gently nuzzle and rest its head on him for pats. This is where the horse feels safe now. When a horse begins to trust its master, it is a transformation; much headway can be made in its training.

Years ago one of my children had a recurring nightmare. I told her just to chase the old monster right back with a frying pan and bonk it on its head. As ridiculous as that sounds, it worked. Even so, chasing down our monsters is not what is most needful. Scripture gives us the remedy for fear and it is rooted and grounded in love. When we understand, by faith, God's love for His people and apply His love to ourselves, we are strengthened much more than we realize. "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love" (1 John 4:18).

Satan wants us to doubt God's love: "Has God forgotten to be gracious? Hath he in anger shut up his tender mercies?" (Ps. 77:9). We need to help our covenant children cast out fear by bringing them to the foot of the cross. Where else can they understand, by faith, Christ's supreme love and forgiveness for His own? Knowledge

of His love, personally, is powerful and relevant for every one of our fears. Sing psalms and hymns together, pray, read the Scriptures, and talk about His sure promises (“I am with you always”), and His undeserved mercies (“there is none righteous, no, not one”). Strive to ponder the vastness of His love, its immeasurable length, depth, and height (Rom. 8:39; Eph. 3:18). At every turn look for fresh discoveries of God’s love. The more we understand His love for us, the more we want to love Him in return and trust Him. This is crucial for battle.

How did a horse train for battle? Cavalry units are largely a thing of the past, but we can imagine the horse had drills to help it grow accustomed to sights and sounds of warfare. There are some similarities in training horses today. In the American West horses are trained to do some challenging ranch work, even herding stampeding cattle, for example. Or mounted police horses that are trained for crowd control and public safety. One of the goals is to desensitize the horse to frightening situations. Sometimes called “bomb-proofing,” such training includes a variety of drills to keep the animal from rearing, bucking, or bolting, and to remain calm in chaos while heeding orders. Training might involve getting the horse accustomed to noisy objects like heavy chains thrown to the ground or objects thrown over its head. Large, colorful balls might be rolled toward it and rustling paper sacks run along its body. The horse might be led to cross water, walk near fire, be near a clamorous crowd, blaring traffic, barking dogs, all while obeying commands.

Our children love to hear about the battle at Jericho, which is exactly how we need to fight our spiritual battles. Israel’s army was small and weak but the Lord was with them, teaching them to trust and obey. The unusual battle plan of marching around the city each day would have appeared foolish to Jericho. Yet Israel had to learn that victory could be won only when they followed their Master’s orders. How tempting it is for us to do things our own way as if we are wiser than God. Soon after their victory they fought another battle in Ai. It was a disaster due to Achan’s disobedience. Such are the consequences of not heeding the Lord’s clear instruction. Our training is somewhat like “bomb-proofing,” too. Though we are surrounded by fiery darts, traps, hurling accusations, and serpents ready to pounce, we can remain calm. Psalm 23 has a beautiful word picture to

illustrate this: “Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies...” (Ps. 23:5). In our battles we are seated at a bountiful banquet table prepared and protected by our loving Lord. At first glance we might think we would have difficulty partaking of His goodness with enemies pressing in. Yet our Lord gives us peace, assuring us that He is fighting for us (Ex. 14:14).

Prepared soldiers are properly armed. The armor of God in Ephesians 6:10-18 makes for edifying Bible lessons with our children. Read the passages and explain the need for each piece of this armor. Pray together for God’s grace to take up the whole armor. Perhaps have them color a picture of the pieces: the belt of truth (to stand firm against deception), the breastplate of righteousness (guarding our hearts against the attacks of the enemy), shoes of peace (ready to bring the gospel), shield of faith (trusting God against the fiery darts of the wicked one), helmet of salvation (protection of our thoughts against false teachings while maintaining a focus on God’s Word), and the sword of the Spirit (the Word of God is our weapon enabling us to stand firm). By His grace we arm ourselves in the power of His might.

“No man that warreth entangleth himself with the affairs of this life; that he may please him who hath chosen him to be a soldier” (2 Tim. 2:4). Do you aim to please your Master? Do you want to make sure nothing interferes with your service to Him? Talk with your child about a sin, perhaps lying. Ask if it is pleasing to God to lie even a little? The answer is, of course, no, because the Lord tells us to “speak the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15). Jesus never lied, and we are to be like Him. The point is, if we lie, instead of fighting against our spiritual enemies, we are giving into them. Sadly, it is not uncommon to hear many adults say they love Jesus, yet they do not care to listen to a word He says. Jesus said, “If ye love me, keep my commandments” (John 14:15). Trusting, training, thankful obedience are crucial qualities in being prepared for our spiritual battles.

Sing with your children Psalm 144 (Psalter #392 “Trustful Praise and Prayer”) joyfully and loudly.

Blest be the Lord my rock, my might,
My constant helper in the fight,
My shield, my righteousness,
My strong high tower, my Saviour true,
Who doth my enemies subdue, My shelter in distress.



PROPER CHRISTIAN MONEY MANAGEMENT

REV. HEATH BLEYENBERG

pastor of Immanuel PRC in Lacombe, Alberta, Canada

Previous article in this series: December 2024, p. 127.

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

We are called to be wise stewards of all that the Lord has given us. Therefore it becomes the duty of every Christian to manage his money properly. Especially is this important in the consumer driven and affluent society in which we live. An honest evaluation of our lives reveals that the Lord has given an abundance of possessions and an abundance of money, more than any other generation. And with that affluence comes the temptation to spend that money and waste that money on all sorts of unnecessary and frivolous things.

But then a problem arises in all our consumption. The money isn't there anymore because it's all been spent. But no matter. There are instruments available nowadays to keep that spending spree going. Hence, for the impulsive buyer, the credit card. "Buy it now, pay for it later." And, for the college student, the plethora of different types of student loans. And, for the active stockmarket trader, what's known as "margin trading," which involves borrowing money from the lender in order to amplify one's returns (or losses).

All the above, and more, is what constitutes that reality we are all too familiar with—debt. In order for the Christian to use money properly and manage it wisely, he must have the proper view of debt. To that we now turn our attention.

Our culture has a problem with debt. According to Experian (major consumer credit reporting company) the average household debt (United States) in 2024 was \$105,056.¹ Included in that number is the top four types

of debt: mortgage, student loans, auto loans, and credit card debt. Keep in mind, that number is an average. Some households are more, some less. That number is minuscule in relation to the national debt of the United States which stands north of 36 trillion dollars and increases every second.

Now, I understand, there are times in life where it's well-nigh impossible to avoid a certain measure of debt: a married couple buying their first home and taking out a mortgage; the recent high school graduate deciding to attend college and finding it necessary to take out thousands of dollars in student loans; the businessman securing a loan to get his business up and running. In these instances there is a certain justification for incurring such debt: "My family needs a place to live. My education will pay for itself down the road. People will buy my product and in time I'll be profitable." If we find it necessary to incur such debt, then we ought to be wise and minimize that amount as much as possible and be honest to pay it back in a timely fashion. But then there is the type of debt that becomes difficult and almost impossible to justify: an auto loan for a bigger and better vehicle (though the one I have now is sufficient), or the most egregious being credit card debt.

It's not my purpose to pass judgment on all the various modes of lending that are available to the consumer and give a list of what's legitimate and what's illegitimate for the Christian. What we need to know is the biblical teaching regarding debt, and then how to apply those principles in all our daily living.

THE BIBLE REGARDING DEBT

Debt is bondage. "The rich ruleth over the poor, and the borrower is servant to the lender" (Prov. 22:7). That word "servant" can be translated as "slave." The

¹ <https://www.experian.com/blogs/ask-experian/research/consumer-debt-study>

borrower, by incurring that debt, becomes a slave to the lender. The lender becomes the master, and the borrower must do his bidding and comply with his orders.

If a man in the Old Testament could not pay off his debt, then the entire family was liable to become slaves. Remember the wife of one of the sons of the prophets who cried out to Elisha, “Thy servant my husband is dead; and thou knowest that thy servant did fear the LORD: and the creditor is come to take unto him my two sons to be bondmen” (2 Kings 4:1). There’s no freedom in debt. Debt is bondage.

By bringing the Israelites into the land of Canaan, God would give the Israelites freedom. Part of that freedom is the freedom from debt and bondage. “For the LORD thy God blesseth thee, as he promised thee: and thou shalt lend unto many nations, but thou shalt not borrow; and thou shalt reign over many nations, but they shall not reign over thee” (Deut. 15:6). Here we see the relationship—the lender has power to reign and rule over the borrower. The blessing of God for His people is to deliver from such debt and bondage.

Another blessing God gave to the Israelites—in connection to debt—was the year of jubilee (Deut. 25). The year of jubilee occurred every fiftieth year. It was the year of the blowing of the ram’s horn and a year of great rejoicing in Israel. The reason being that in the year of jubilee there was release and restoration, especially from debt! If any land was sold, in the year of jubilee it was restored to its original owner. If a man made himself a servant or slave by reason of unpaid debt, in the year of jubilee not only was he to be released from his bondage, but his debt was to be forgiven! God was teaching the Israelites many things by giving the year of jubilee. Teaching them the horror of debt and bondage. Teaching them the joy to be experienced in deliverance from such bondage. And most importantly, teaching the Israelites to look forward to the coming Messiah who would deal decisively with all their debts and give freedom and joy that would be experienced not simply once every fifty years, but every day of the year.

In the New Testament our sins are likened as debts before God. Jesus teaches us to pray, “And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors” (Matt. 6:12). Our debt before God is that we owe Him perfect obedience. And instead of rendering that perfect obedience, we sin and transgress God’s law. That debt began when

Adam sinned in the garden, and we inherited that debt (original sin). We cannot remove that debt, but on the contrary all we do is daily increase our debt by our actual sins. In this state of “indebtedness” we have become the slaves of sin.

That’s the ultimate reality and horror of debt. The horror isn’t simply that my physical debt incurs a 21.99% interest rate that accumulates month after month; the true horror is that my spiritual debt incurs the wrath of God as I have become a slave of sin.

But thanks be to God for giving us a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who has paid our debt and released us from bondage through his perfect obedience and death on the cross on our behalf. And what freedom and joy is ours in and through Jesus Christ. “But God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you. Being then made free from sin, ye became the servants of righteousness;” and “But now being made free from sin, and become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life” (Rom. 6:17-18, 22).

All the above is Scripture’s teaching concerning debt. Debt is nothing to be trifled with. Debt is something we ought to avoid. Debt is bondage and slavery. Debt is something we should very much be afraid of. Do not become comfortable with debt. Do not become friends with debt. Our debt becomes the reason for the intense pain and suffering of our Savior.

THE APPLICATION OF DEBT TO OUR LIVES

How then ought we to live? We will manage our money rightly as we press all things into the service of God and for the cause of the gospel.

First, we will never needlessly and recklessly plunge ourselves into debt. Yes, there will be times when a loan is necessary for various reasons—mortgage, student-loan, business loan, for example. But even when a loan is necessary and allowable, we will minimize the amount as much as possible. The question is not, “How much is the bank willing to give me?” Rather, the question is, “What is the amount sufficient and reasonable and necessary in the circumstances I currently face?” A needless and reckless plunging of oneself into debt betrays an ignorance of the Bible’s teaching concerning debt, and also of the work of Christ to forgive our debts.

Second, when we do incur a debt, we repay what we borrow. Psalm 37:21 says, “The wicked borroweth, and payeth not again: but the righteous showeth mercy, and giveth.” We never enter into a debt we know we would be unable to pay. Characteristic of the wicked is not only the refusal to pay off their debt, but also entering into debt without any intention of paying it off. You’ve heard these kinds of excuses, “Someone else will have to pay my debt; the credit card company will simply have to absorb the cost; the government will step in and take care of it. If they want to lend me the money in the first place, then that’s on them if I can’t pay it back!” What wickedness. What theft. What robbery. We ought never enter into a debt we know we would be unable to pay. Christ did not die on the cross

so that we would be like the wicked who do not pay their debts. But Christ has shown us great mercy by forgiving us our debts, and we likewise give and forgive one another.

Third, there is only one type of debt that is good and in which we ought to increase: “Owe no man any thing, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law” (Rom. 13:8). We can pay off the mortgage and the student loans and the credit card bill. And we ought to. That’s our duty. But there will be one debt we never can pay off entirely—love to the neighbor. That obligation stands. Let’s be busy in that work of loving and serving the neighbor.

Next time we’ll consider some final closing principles in proper Christian money management.

PERTAINING TO THE CHURCHES IN COMMON—DOMESTIC MISSIONS



DOMESTIC MISSIONS UPDATE

REV. JAMES LANING

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

May 2025

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

We are very thankful to God for the saints whom we have come to know in Texas, Hungary, and elsewhere. The saints here in Fort Worth are doing well, and we are getting to know them more as we labor in their midst. It is indeed a great joy to hear what our Lord has done in their lives.

Here is a brief update on some of what is taking place in Texas, Hungary, and France (see below).

TEXAS

We gather for worship at 4:30 on Sunday afternoons and have a Bible study on Thursday evenings. Since we moved here, we have met a number of people whom before we did not know. Some of them were invited by those who have been gathering with us, and others have found us from Facebook ads or by doing a Google search online.

There were thirty-four people who recently came down from Michigan to visit. From Zion PRC: Eric and Tonya Doezeema, their daughter Alivia and son Breyden; Mitchell and Sarah Kamps, their son Levi, and his friend Luke Dykstra; Kurt and Ruth Kaptein, and their daughters Amy and Kara. From Georgetown PRC: Brad and Kelsey Kamminga and their family, Brian and Jessica Kamminga and their family, Lynne Huizinga, and Beth Kuiper. From Grace PRC: Bill and Joanna Leep and their family.

There were different groups that went out witnessing on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday to various locations (a mall, downtown Fort Worth, a park, and the Discovery Center of the Institute for Creation Research). On the next page are some pictures taken during that time.

On Saturday we gathered for a speech on “Imitating God in our Personal Relationships,” and had a few visitors join us.



The speech and worship service were advertised in a number of ways. One couple who came said they heard about it

from the flyer they received in the mail. We also worked with Dallas Media who emailed our flyer to a very large group of people (perhaps over 50,000). It was also advertised on Facebook.

The saints here much enjoyed the time of fellowship we had together.

HUNGARY

I continue to preach [online] for a group in Hungary and other places on Sunday mornings. One woman who joins us is currently in Kuwait, but recently received a work permit to move to Romania, which borders Hungary.

At the end of April and early May, we plan to make another trip to Hungary. Toward the end of our time in Hungary, Rev. Stewart and I are scheduled to speak at a conference hosted by the Hungarian Reformed Church (HRC) in Pécel, which is east of Budapest. Pastor Bálint, a minister in the HRC has sent me information about the speeches that he would like Rev. Stewart and me to give at the conference in Pécel on May 6 and 7. They chose topics for six speeches, with Rev. Stewart giving the second speech:

1. What is the ministry that Christ has given to the local church?
2. A lesson from church history: James Fraser of Alness's explanation of Romans 6:1-8:4.
3. The importance of gathering for public worship on the Lord's day.
4. The ministry of the church towards Christian families.
5. How does culture influence the ministry of the church? What amount of culture can we let into the life of the church?
6. What are the marks of the true church, and what activities can rightly be said to be the ministry of the church?

We are looking forward to visiting with brothers and sisters in Christ there, some of whom we have met before, and hopefully a number of those whom we have never had the privilege of meeting.

FRANCE

I have had some very good discussions with a Christian brother named Suleman who lives in Lille, France, not far from Belgium. He had contacted Rev. M. McGeown in January and Rev. McGeown forwarded the email to me. I include some paragraphs that he sent to introduce himself:

My name is Suleman (you can call me Solomon), and I am 30 years old, currently living in Lille, France. Originally from Pakistan, I was born and raised in a Presbyterian pastor's household, the

6th of 8 children, and the youngest of my brothers. Growing up, I was blessed with a deeply Christian environment that shaped my early life. Though I initially aspired to become a medical doctor and was pursuing a degree in medicine, my Christian faith led to persecution, which forced me to abandon my studies. Eventually, I left my home and country in search of safety. In 2017, I moved to Belarus, where I faced an incredibly challenging year. Through it all, God guided and helped me to move to France in 2018 as a refugee.

In 2020, I began my business studies at EM Strasbourg Business School, and in 2021, I continued my education at the University of Lille for my Master's degree. It was during my time in Lille that I met my fiancée, Camille, a French-Portuguese professor at a French public school. ...For a long time, I resisted the call to ministry, partly due to the challenges of my father's pastoral life and my fear of preaching the wrong doctrine. Yet, the Reformed faith revealed God's grace, freeing me from this fear. Now, the Lord has filled me with a passion and zeal to faithfully serve His church. Though I faced loneliness in my spiritual journey, God's Word anchored me, and I was never led astray by false doctrine. After much reflection and study, I felt a deep passion for the Reformed faith and a desire to serve as a minister for God's glory, to shepherd His church. To pursue this calling, I enrolled in the Reformation International Seminary in the USA in 2022, where I am currently pursuing a Master's of Divinity. It is my prayer and hope that, through God's grace, I may one day serve as a Reformed pastor, faithful to His Word and committed to the ministry of the Gospel of Christ. ...

Although I face restrictions due to my refugee status, preventing me from going to Pakistan, the Lord has used this obstacle for His glory. He has inspired me to create a website called "Reformed by TRUTH," aimed at providing free Protestant Reformed resources in local languages for the Indian and Pakistani Christian communities, helping the church grow in biblical faith.

Suleman and Camille plan to marry in July of this year, and Margaret and I were invited to their wedding. We thanked Suleman for this gracious invitation. Though I do not think it will work for us to attend in person, we plan to travel to France to visit with them after the conference in Pécel. Suleman is very excited about this, and so are we. Though he said he hoped we would stay for "a couple weeks," we plan this time to stay only for a few days.

While we are there, Suleman has arranged for us to use a church building in a suburb of Paris on Saturday and Sunday evening. He plans to send out invitations and has asked me to preach there on Saturday and Sunday, with him translating into Urdu for those in the area who are from Pakistan and India. While we are there, we hope to communicate also with Suleman's family who are still living in Pakistan. We are very thankful for this open door to preach to people from India and Pakistan. Perhaps there will be others also who will join us for worship.

We give thanks to our God for the saints whom we have come to meet here in Texas, Hungary, France, and elsewhere. We much appreciate your prayers and are thankful for the cards we have received.

One of the elders at Hope PRC (Walker, MI), where I use to serve as pastor, sent us a package of cards from the beginners' catechism class that he teaches. Those were very much a joy to read, as were the other cards that we have received from friends in our churches. We are very thankful to God for all the love and support that has been shown to us.

May our God who has made His everlasting covenant with us, and who has sent His Son in fulfillment of His promise, continue to be with you all. May He continue to strengthen us together for this work as we seek to preach the gospel as He directs us to the honor and glory of His name.

In Christ's service,
Rev. James Laning

CORRECTION

In the April 2025 *SB*, the last line of Rev. R. Hanko's article (Nahum [9]), a quote from Isaiah 1:27-28, was cut off. It ends this way: "...and they that forsake the LORD shall be consumed." Only two words were left off, but important ones, as all of God's words are. Our apologies to Rev. Hanko and to our readers.

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ANNOUNCEMENTS

RESOLUTION OF SYMPATHY

The Council and congregation of the Kalamazoo PRC express our Christian sympathy to Brad and Lisa Bishop in the death of Lisa's Father, **Mr. David Markus**. May they find comfort from God's Word found in 2 Corinthians 5:1: "For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens."

Rev. D. Lee, President
Steve DeVries, Clerk

RESOLUTION OF SYMPATHY

The Council and congregation of the Kalamazoo PRC express our Christian sympathy to Tom and Kathy Verbeek, Tom and Marcia Kiel, and Dan and Deb Kiel, and their families, in the death of this sister and aunt, **Miss Sandy Kiel**. May they be comforted by God's Word, where we read, "Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory" (Psalm 73:24).

Rev. D. Lee, President
Steve DeVries, Clerk

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

**REFORMED
WITNESS HOUR**
FOR BY GRACE ARE YE SAVED

REV. CARL HAAK

5/4 Blessed Art the Poor in Spirit, Matt. 5:3
5/11 Blessed Are They That Mourn, Matt. 5:4
5/18 Blessed Are the Meek, Matt. 5:6
5/25 Blessed Are They That Hunger and Thirst, Matt. 5:7

