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THE COMING OF THE ROYAL SHEPHERD

REV. DENNIS LEE

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And I will set up one shepherd over them, and he shall feed them, even my servant David; he shall feed them, and he shall be their shepherd. And I the LORD will be their God, and my servant David a prince among them; I the LORD have spoken it. And I will make with them a covenant of peace, and will cause the evil beasts to cease out of the land: and they shall dwell safely in the wilderness, and sleep in the woods. And...there shall be showers of blessing.... And I will raise up for them a plant of renown, and they shall be no more consumed with hunger in the land, neither bear the shame of the heathen any more. Thus shall they know that I the LORD their God am with them, and that they, even the house of Israel, are my people, saith the Lord GOD. And ye my flock, the flock of my pasture, are men, and I am your God, saith the Lord GOD—Ezekiel 34:23-31

Renewal! Blessed renewal! This is the theme of Ezekiel 34, and is a much welcome change. For the theme in the first thirty-three chapters of the book has been judgment: judgment after judgment, chapter after chapter! And rightly so, for Judah had sinned greatly and continually against God. And yet, out of the dark backdrop of sin and judgment shines forth a ray of hope. Renewal and restoration is announced by the prophet—beginning with the coming of its blessed source: the coming of the Royal Shepherd of Jehovah's sheep.

AN ASTOUNDING COMING

These verses we consider announce the astounding coming of the Royal Shepherd—a coming that is also much needed. It was much needed because God's people suffered greatly under the rule of unfaithful royal shepherds.

We do well to consider what royal shepherds (or shepherd kings) are all about. A shepherd is one who

leads his sheep: he leads them unto green pastures and still waters for their nourishment and care. Besides leading them, he also protects them from predators. And that is what kings do too. Good kings are like good shepherds who lead by their good rule. And as part of their good rule, good kings also provide good protection for their citizens, just as good shepherds do. When the prophet combines these two descriptions into one, he makes plain that he is referring to One who is very special, and sent from God: One who would be the promised Seed of the woman and be of royal nobility (Gen. 49:10); One who would be closely linked to King David, who grew up a shepherd boy and who received the promise that his royal throne would be forever.

The need for such a Royal Shepherd was due to unfaithful royal shepherds or kings ruling over Israel, whom the prophet railed against (Ezek. 34:1-2a). These unfaithful shepherds cared not for the people, but instead ruled in such a way to enrich themselves at the expense of the people (Ezek. 34:2b-5). And that resulted in the scattering of the people of God—likened to lost sheep scattered by their unfaithful shepherds. Even then, Jehovah provided faithful prophets (Elijah and Elisha in the northern kingdom of Israel, and Ezekiel and Daniel during the captivity of Judah in Babylon) to care for them. And beyond that, Jehovah would also intervene in other significant ways, ways that would reverse the abusive rule of the unfaithful shepherds. Jehovah tells us that He will declare His word of wrath and judgment against these unfaithful shepherds (v. 10). He also promises to search for His lost sheep, to feed them, to strengthen the sick among them, and to gather them (vv. 11-16). Indeed, He is going to accomplish all these things through the coming of His Royal Shepherd.

An *astounding* coming! For it will be one that is humanly impossible. And why is that? Because verse

23 declares that “my servant David” will be the one who feeds His people. How can that be? By the time of these prophet’s words, David had come and gone hundreds of years before! Surely the Royal Shepherd promised was not David. Nor could it refer to the kings of Judah, that is, the line of kings from the royal house of David. For these kings had repeatedly failed the people. Besides, the line of kings had all but ended with the destruction of Jerusalem. Even after God’s people returned to Canaan after exile, they would have no king of their own. Nor would there be any prophetic voice heard after Malachi. How was this Royal Shepherd to come?

But make no mistake. The Royal Shepherd would come as promised! He came two thousand years ago. We see this only when we understand that the identity of this Royal Shepherd is Jesus Christ. He is the Good Shepherd who gives His life for the sheep and gathers all His sheep into one fold (John 10:11, 16). And He is also King: the King of kings and Lord of lords (Phil. 2). He is the Shepherd-King who rules us, His sheep, by a rule of grace within our hearts. David was but a type of Christ, the Royal Shepherd. The believing Jews knew that and waited faithfully and patiently for Him to come. And He came two thousand years ago! That is what the birth of Christ and the ushering in of the New Testament age was all about. It would be a time when all believers and sheep from all the nations would be called and gathered by this Royal Shepherd through His Spirit and Word: “And I will bring them out from the people, and gather them from the countries”(v. 13a).

ITS BOUNTIFUL BLESSINGS

Christ has come! He is the Royal Shepherd who comes and brings bountiful blessings to His sheep. The source of those blessings is Jehovah’s covenant of peace (v. 25a). Jesus came in order to establish that covenant of peace with God for us, and with it opened up the enjoyment of bountiful blessings for us. Unlike unfaithful shepherds who took advantage of the sheep and fed themselves at their expense, Jesus laid down His life for His sheep, giving Himself to die in our place for our sins at the cross. Through His death on the cross, Jesus took away the punishment of our sins, removed the enmity and barrier of sin, and gave us the right and ability to be and to live as covenant friends with God. He established

that covenant of peace by His blood, and with it, has given us access to bountiful blessings!

Those blessings begin with peace with God through Him (cf. Rom. 5:1). And with that peace comes the enjoyment of covenant friendship with God, through which the many great blessings of God’s salvation come to be enjoyed by us! In a word, *spiritual* prosperity comes to be enjoyed by us! This *spiritual* prosperity is pictured by the various descriptions of *earthly* prosperity set forth in verses 25-29; one of which is the “showers of blessing” (v. 26) that Jehovah causes to come upon the land, a beautiful picture of Him *feeding* us, *refreshing* our souls, and *caring* for us. We are also told that Jehovah raises up “a plant of renown” (v. 29). That refers to the church of Jesus Christ, for Jesus is the Vine, and we are the branches joined to Him by faith (John 15). It is through the church that we are fed, refreshed, and cared for by the Royal Shepherd through the means of grace, chief of which is the preaching of the gospel, by which we hear His voice!

Nor is that all. Not to be overlooked is the blessing of sure protection and safety we enjoy as the sheep of our Royal Shepherd, who “will cause the evil beasts to cease out of the land,” so that “they shall dwell safely in the wilderness, and sleep in the woods” (v. 25). We who are in the midst of the wilderness of this world, facing all kinds of temptations and enemies who would do us harm, are kept safe by our Royal Shepherd. While this safety is pictured in the Old Testament, it is set forth plainly and explicitly in the New Testament. Jesus puts it this way in John 10:28-29: “And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all, and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father’s hand.” We are kept safe in Father’s hand! Accordingly, the apostle Paul exults in triumph when it comes to the abiding and everlasting nature of the safety and love of God in Jesus Christ:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, For thy sake we are killed the day long: we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Nay in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth,

nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:35-39).

Dear reader, you are not a stranger to these bountiful blessings of peace, prosperity, and the ever-abiding safety and love of God in Christ, are you? It is little wonder, therefore, that the prophet concludes chapter 34 with these wonderful words of assurance: “Thus shall they know that I the LORD their God am with them, and that they, even the house of Israel, are my people, saith the Lord GOD. And ye my flock, the flock of my pasture, are men, and I am your God, saith the

Lord GOD.” (vv. 30-31). What wonderful comfort and assurance God’s people in the prophet’s day enjoyed—and we enjoy with them—while we are yet here in the “wilderness” and the “woods” of this world!

THE FITTING RESPONSE

What, then, ought to be a fitting response from all who are unworthy recipients of such bountiful blessings from our Royal Shepherd? May it be a life of thankful service and heartfelt praises—marked by joyful celebration during this season of Advent and Christmas!

EDITORIAL



DWELLING TOGETHER IN UNITY IN THE SCHOOL (1)

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INTRODUCTION

How thankful we must be for the schools God has given us! They are the implication of marvelous truths of Scripture, the fruit of conviction worked into the hearts of many who have gone before us, the outcome of great sacrifice through both years of lean and of plenty. God forbid we take them for granted!

How thankful we must be for our teachers! They sacrifice themselves for the sake of the covenant seed. They strive to develop what has been placed in that seed along the lines of antithetical living to God’s glory in all aspects of life. When I gave the substance of this article and the next as a speech for the teacher’s convention this year, I thanked the teachers for their work and told them I view them as so many vertebra making up a large part of the backbone of the kingdom of God in our midst. In my judgment this was no exaggeration. God forbid we take them for granted!

How thankful we must be for godly parents who faithfully raise their children before, during, and after their school years! These parents also give themselves for the benefit of the school. Busy helping the church and running their homes and giving themselves to

other God-given callings, they also sacrifice for the sake of the schools. These parents sacrifice sometimes large portions of their paycheck to ensure the school has the financial backing to fulfill its calling. They also volunteer for committees, boards, and more out of love for the schools. God forbid we take them for granted!

Part of the evidence that we do *not* take the schools, teachers, and parents for granted is that we live in unity with each other in our schools, willing to die to self to preserve that unity. Part of the sign that we *are* taking the schools, teachers, and parents for granted is that we fail to express the unity of the body of Christ in the life of our schools. Instead, self-seeking abounds.

But the situation can be a bit more complex than merely saying to all, “Don’t be selfish toward boards, teachers, and parents.” When we face the matter of unity in the life of the school, we confront a twofold concern. The first is concern for the thriving of the whole, and the second is concern for the thriving of the individual. In other words, we must maintain what is bigger than the individual—the whole student body together and the institution itself. And at the same time we must care for the individual student and his/

her individual needs. These two concerns can clash with one another. And when not tempered by selfless attitudes, can bring disunity.

Speaking generally, these two concerns are *always* present whenever there is a collective whole to maintain, and yet the purpose of maintaining the whole is so that the individual thrives. This double concern is also present in the life of the church. The whole church institution must be maintained. At the same time, the individual sheep within the flock have particular needs. This is why when the Scriptures speak of Jesus as the Good Shepherd of the sheep, they speak of His concern for the whole flock together: “And he [Christ] shall stand and feed [shepherd the flock] in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God; and they [flock] shall abide...” (Micah 5:4). And in the New Testament, “And other sheep...shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd” (John 10:16). At the same time, Scripture contains passages where the Good Shepherd gives attention to the individual sheep, even temporarily disregarding the needs of the whole to attend to that one sheep: “What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it? And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing” (Luke 15:4-5).

Sometimes concern for the whole seems to erase concern for the individual. Conversely, sometimes concern for an individual seems to rub up against concern for the whole. A unified school maintains (1) a common foundation firmly undergirding both the whole and the individual; (2) a shared understanding of how concerns for the whole and the individual fit together in the school; and (3) vital spiritual qualities possessed by the majority involved that allow harmony as we live together on the foundation and embrace both concerns.

In this article I will explain the common foundation and introduce how the double concern fits together as told us in Ephesians 4. Next time I will delve more specifically into the double concern and the danger of extremes on both sides. I will also explain the vital spiritual qualities that the majority involved must possess for the two concerns to harmonize on the firm foundation.

THE FIRM FOUNDATION

As is the case in any manifestation of the unity of believers, the unity of believers in the school too is fundamentally rooted in the fact that God regenerates people and makes them new creatures. God creates unity by a miraculous work of sovereign grace uniting people to His Son and to others united to His Son. The result is similar to a grove of aspen trees. If you could trace the root systems underground, you would find that an entire mountainside of aspen trees is bound to one central tree from which all the others developed. The trees are united to that one tree and to each other. This is the unity of the Spirit that elect and true believers from every time, age, place, and various true churches share. They are united by the Spirit to one Head, Jesus Christ, and are united to each other in Him.

Due to various reasons, chief of which is sin, believers are never perfectly united in expression in this life. In fact, the results of sin even produce expressed divisions between the regenerated that *must* be there in this life even as we are united to Christ and to each other. Sin breeds doctrinal, practical, denominational, and even sadly, personal, divisions (that one prays can be overcome in a right way, but alas, it is not always so). It is not that the Scriptures are so unclear, although some things are clearer and some things less clear; it is that there is a nature inside of each one of us that is rebellious and that sits alongside the new life planted in us in regeneration.

Yet, the Spirit of God has led the church through the ages to develop together an understanding of His Word and to record that understanding in creeds adopted by the church. The result is that confession of truth is not dependent on the whims of any individual man or woman. These creeds are not inspired, but they are marks of God’s working in His church through the ages. They are forms of unity, and they give expression to the faithful teaching of Scripture. Whereas believers may (and delight to) find varying degrees of unity with any true believer in the world, they find and express doctrinal and practical unity with those of like precious faith in the church institutions that stand on these creeds as they do. This too is a unity of the Spirit.

Unity of the Spirit in such a church communion is expressed in various ways. One of those ways is by members joining together to raise and educate the covenant seed according to the truths that unite them.

This is the necessary foundation for unity in our schools. Without this we have no solid basis for unity in a school and no shared understanding of the dual needs of the individual and the group. Instead, we become in the words of Ephesians 4:14, “children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive.” We will pull in different directions, destroying unity. No matter how kind we are to each other, we are no longer building on the same foundation, and unity will fall away. Our schools are Protestant Reformed schools established by Protestant Reformed people. We welcome any who are willing to abide by our creed, but we also deny those who militate against our shared purpose.

Herman Hoeksema explained how the Free University in the Netherlands was taken away from its creedal moorings.¹ Dr. Robert Swierenga gave a speech at the PR Seminary a few years ago showing how a number of Christian Reformed schools left their creedal moorings. May it not be so among us.

The unity I have just described is not *uniformity*. We may disagree on various non-essential matters, but there must be substantial and essential unity on the basis of biblical and creedal truth. If I may put it this way, we do not all wear the same shirt and tie and shoes and pants and skirts and dresses, but we do all wear the same belt: the belt of truth. Both from the point of view of the whole and of the individual, the Christian day-school must operate submitted to one creedal truth to be unified.²

PEACE ON THE FOUNDATION

The goal is expressed oneness in peace, as the apostle Paul says in Ephesians 4:3, “Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit *in the bond of peace*.” True peace is grounded in the truths of Scripture, with the redeeming cross of Christ at the center of these truths. But this peace requires more. The apostle goes on to speak of the concern for the whole on that foundation of truth.

“There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all” (vv. 4-6). In that oneness, notice the apostle says there is another concern, to care for (in this case) the individual covenant children in their individual needs and unto the development of their individual gifts: “Wherefore he saith, When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men...for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith” (vv. 8-13). Built upon the foundation of unity in truth, the apostle in Ephesians 4 has this double concern for the whole and the individuals that make up the whole. He also explains that the relation between the two is reciprocal. The concern for the whole is that the institution be maintained so that the individual may thrive. And the concern for the individual is that his or her gifts may be developed and thus serve and strengthen the whole. In this way the double concern for the whole and the individual fits and functions together in peaceful unity.

We maintain peace and unity in the school on that foundation, then, by working to preserve the whole (flock and institution) without idolizing it, and by working for the good of individual students, without idolizing any one of them.

Next time I will apply these matters to the life of the school and warn of the dangers of such idolatry to the bond of peace.

Dear *SB* readers,

You no doubt noticed that it took over two months to receive your September 2025 issue—and it was a special one we wanted you to have right away! While the RFPA and the *SB* editors tried to figure out what happened to that issue and what to do, suddenly it appeared in our mailboxes! During this process of waiting, we learned that in late summer the US Postal Service instituted a new bundle processing system throughout the country, which became overwhelmed and behind schedule. This may mean future delays with magazines like ours. In any case, we were thankful to see that the special issue on PRCA100 finally made it to your hands.

The editors

1 H. Hoeksema and H. Danhof; C. Hanko, transl.; H. Hanko, ed., *Sin and Grace* (Grandville, MI: RFPA, 2003), 35-70.

2 For an early expression of some of these creedal principles expressed for the school, see Herman Hoeksema’s six principles in the August 1, 1932 issue of the *Standard Bearer*, pages 488-489. Further, see David J. Engelsma, *Reformed Education* (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2000).

NICENE CREED/LUTHER AND TYNDALE

I am writing this response to “Why the Nicene Creed Still Matters” written by Rev. Joshua Engelsma to thank him for his timely article! It was a wonderfully written piece of history that emphasized the importance of what the Christian church has accomplished in times past. If I were to add anything to his well-expressed value of the formulated statements of the Nicene Creed, as well as the other clarifying creeds of the early church, it would merely be a word or two that would address, perhaps, the greatest enemy of history’s lessons...forgetfulness! I would have put it this way, “...Therefore, they ought not be disparaged, discarded or forgotten, but treasured!” Many thanks, again, to Rev. Engelsma for his well-written and timely article!

I also write to praise your team for their October 15, 2025 issue. That special issue, covering the anniversaries of Luther’s *Bondage of the Will* and Tyndale’s translation of the New Testament is without doubt one of the best things I’ve read in a long time from anybody. From the cover to the content...everything was well done. These monumental events seem to come and go these days with little-to-no mention at all. It’s a shame. Last year was the anniversary of Machen’s *Christianity and Liberalism* and very little was said of it by anyone. I hope you continue with these bigger, broader themes as they are important milestones not only in the history of the Christian church but in the history of Western Civilization as well.

Frank Schnitzler
White House, Tennessee

BIBLE BIOGRAPHIES



THE FELLOWSHIP OF PETER

MR. KYLE BRUINOOGUE

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And when James and Cephas [Peter] and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given unto me [Paul], they gave to me and Barnabas the right hands of fellowship; that we should go unto the heathen, and they unto the circumcision—Galatians 2:9

The basis of true Christian fellowship among God’s people is fellowship with the Father and a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Therefore, there is fellowship among believers in the church of Christ. The apostle John understood true fellowship when he wrote,

That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ...But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin (1 John 1:3, 7).

True Christian fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ.¹

Within the context of early New Testament leaders Peter and Paul, this truth applied. These men had different personalities, gifts, and callings, but they experienced true Christian fellowship because they were one in Christ.

Peter and Paul may not have been close friends, but they enjoyed Christian fellowship.

Despite differences, they stood together as co-laborers for the gospel—sometimes in tension, but always in truth. While one was called to minister to the Jews (Peter) and another was called to minister

¹ For a helpful resource on the biblical concept of Christian fellowship, see Jerry Bridges, *True Community* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2012). This book was published in previous editions as *True Fellowship* (1985) and *The Crisis of Caring* (1992).

to the Gentiles (Paul), both men gave each other “the right hand of fellowship” (Gal. 2:9). Therefore, Peter and Paul mutually participated in the gospel ministry. Each man was an encouragement to the other, and they understood and approved of the other’s work.

FELLOWSHIP IN DISTINCT CALLINGS

The gospels record key events in the life of Peter: his calling to be a fisher of men (Matt. 4:18-22); being named “Peter,” (‘rock’) (John 1:40-42); his confession of Christ as the Son of the living God (Matt. 16:13-20); his denial of Jesus (Matt. 26:69-75); and Jesus’ final encouragement to Peter and His command to shepherd His flock (John 21:15-17).

Peter was an uneducated fisherman (Acts 4:13), confident (Matt. 14:28-31), and sometimes spontaneous (John 18:10). As a Hebrew child, Peter *had* received extensive education, but was “uneducated” in that he had no formal rabbinic training. However, he was a writer (1 and 2 Peter), and believed with deep conviction the doctrine of justification by faith alone.² He was given the command by the Lord to “feed my sheep” (John 21:15-17), specifically, the “circumcised” (Jews) (Gal. 2:7), and gave the first apostolic sermon (Acts 2).

In contrast, Paul was a rising Pharisee, trained by one of the best teachers (Acts 22:3), intellectually gifted, and a persecutor who would be made a preacher (Phil. 3:5, 6). After God converted him, He declared that Paul was “a chosen instrument” to “carry” his name before the Gentiles (Acts 9:15).

FELLOWSHIP IN RECOGNITION

Peter and Paul’s recognition of each other was significant. Peter recognized, even before the New Testament canon was completed, the authority of Paul’s epistles. There is one passage in particular where Peter directly mentioned the significance of Paul. Peter wrote the following:

the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation; even as our beloved brother Paul also according to the wisdom given unto him hath written unto you; as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things;

in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction (2 Pet. 3:15, 16).

Peter understood Paul’s letters to have authority—of no lesser value than the rest of the Scriptures. He wrote that they were written with “wisdom given unto him” which indicates divine authority. Furthermore, he referred to Paul as “our beloved brother,” as Peter had written his letter to the Hebrew Christians, wanting his readers to know that this missionary to the Gentiles was also their brother in Christ. They enjoyed true fellowship in the knowledge of Christ as their salvation.

Regarding Paul’s recognition of Peter, there is an example, early on, when Paul saw his need to receive guidance from Peter. Galatians 1:18 says: “Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and abode with him fifteen days.” After his conversion and isolation in the Arabian desert (1:15-17), Paul sought out Peter, recognizing already that Peter was a man who would support him as a newly called missionary. He knew that Peter had shadowed Jesus throughout his earthly ministry, and Peter could help instruct and encourage him in his new labor.

FELLOWSHIP IN TENSION

Here we will explore two moments that reveal the strain between Peter and Paul, one exposing tension among their followers (1 Cor. 1), and the other revealing open conflict between the apostles themselves (Gal. 2).

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul revealed tension in Corinth over party strife. It is impossible to confirm whether this led to tension *between* Peter and Paul, but the Corinthians *were* divided over which leader in the church had their allegiance. The church was in disarray because she ignored the truth that Christ was head of the church. Paul wrote to them: “Now this I say, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas [Peter]; and I of Christ” (1 Cor. 1:12).³ Some were drawn to the personality and strengths of Paul, and others to the personality and strengths of Peter.

2 Peter was very outspoken at the famous Jerusalem Council (c. AD 49) where he supported the church’s Spirit-led decision that new Gentile converts did not need to be circumcised to be received as members into the church (Acts 15).

3 His personal name was Simon, but Jesus gave him the surname “Peter,” or “rock.” “Cephas” is the Aramaic form of the Greek name “Peter.” Paul used both names, Cephas (Aramaic) and Peter (Greek) in his writings.

Therefore Paul instructs through questions: “Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you? or were ye baptized in the name of Paul?” (1 Cor. 1:13). No party strife! No appeal to the personality of man! Paul continued: “For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel: not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect” (1:17). As mere instruments in the sovereign plan of God, Peter and Paul preached Christ *alone*. The cross unites the church in fellowship, guarding against the sinful tendency to idolize the preacher instead of Christ.

While tension existed through the Corinthian struggles, Scripture records a confrontation between Peter and Paul in Antioch (Gal. 2:11-14). During table fellowship, as Peter enjoyed a meal with Gentiles, some “of James” (Jews) entered, and Peter “withdrew and separated himself, fearing them which were of the circumcision” (2:12). Paul reacted with a rebuke: “I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed” (2:11). The seriousness for Paul was that this segregation revealed that “[Peter] walked not uprightly according to the truth of the gospel.” These two men were to be chief examples of Christian fellowship, and here Paul was appalled at Peter’s weakness and fear of man. Knowing that Peter was convinced that the gospel was for all men (Acts 15:7-11), we can be confident that Peter received the rebuke in a spirit of humility.

FELLOWSHIP IN HUMILITY

Despite tension and conflict, we find comfort in the fellowship maintained between Peter and Paul, and we understand that humility undergirds Christian fellowship in God’s church. Both men demonstrated this quality, and it served to strengthen their fellowship as they recognized their need for Christ.

A study of the chronology of Paul’s letters reveals his growing humility and deepening awareness of his sin. First, he wrote in relation to the apostles: “I am the least of the apostles” (1 Cor. 15:9, c. AD 55-57). Second, he wrote in relation to all believers: “who am less than the least of all saints” (Eph. 3:8, c. AD 60-62). Third, he wrote using a superlative title in relation to all of God’s elect: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief” (1 Tim. 1:15, c. AD 64-65). Furthermore, Paul always understood and remembered his sinful past (Acts 7:54–8:4) and

referenced it often (Acts 22:4-5, 20; 26:9-11; Gal. 1:13; Phil. 3:6-7).

Peter also understood his past (1 Pet. 5:5-6; 2 Pet. 1:9). Specifically, his close relationship with John Mark (Acts 12) demonstrated Peter’s humility. As Peter and Mark both labored in Rome (1 Pet. 5:13), they were near one another when Mark drafted his gospel account. Specifically, in narrating the resurrection, Mark recorded that the angel told the women to “tell his disciples *and Peter* that he goeth before you into Galilee” (Mark 16:7). And Peter! The angel understood that Peter, due to his denials of Jesus, needed the comfort and assurance that his Lord had conquered the grave and forgave his sins! It is possible that Peter urged Mark to preserve this account in his inspired gospel for the benefit of all posterity, offering comfort to God’s people in their recurring cycles of sin and mercy—a striking example of humility.

ETERNAL FELLOWSHIP

We have seen how Peter is to be properly viewed, that he, along with Paul, were means to preach Christ and gather His church. In contrast to this biblical view of Peter, he is often falsely memorialized. Christ had famously declared to Peter, “Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church” (Matt. 16:18). But he was not the first pope. He was not the perfect preacher, a saint to be worshiped. Rather, it was Peter’s *confession* that *must be* proclaimed by all preachers who followed: “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God” (16:16), and that to all people to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

So Peter faithfully carried out his calling to preach Christ until the Lord took him unto Himself after more than thirty years of ministry as a disciple and apostle (c. AD 62). While the New Testament does not record his death, the Lord Himself foretold Peter’s martyrdom during one of His post-resurrection appearances before the ascension. After repeatedly affirming Peter’s love for Him and commanding Peter to feed His sheep, Christ said to Peter,

Verily, verily, I say unto thee, When thou wast young, thou girdest thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldest: but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldest not. This spake he, signifying by what death he should glorify God (John 21:18, 19).

Christ was telling Peter, “You will follow the path I have walked, but it will be for my glory.” Therefore, Christian tradition holds that Peter was indeed crucified under Emperor Nero. According to that same tradition, he requested to be crucified upside down, feeling unworthy to die in the same manner as his Lord.⁴

Through Peter’s martyrdom, Jesus’ love for him was fully realized. But Peter does not dwell in heaven as one “stationed at the pearly gates.” He would be appalled to learn that anyone identifies him as a gatekeeper to eternal life! Peter knew his total inadequacy as God’s servant—that without Christ, he would be lost, still floating aimlessly on the sea of Galilee. But he knew

⁴ As a Roman citizen, in contrast to Peter, Paul received a merciful execution. He was beheaded, also at the hands of Emperor Nero (c. AD 67). He, like Peter, died with confidence, knowing there was a crown of righteousness laid up for him (2 Tim. 4:6-8).

Christ as his salvation and now dwells with his Savior in perfection. He enjoys perfect fellowship, not only with his Savior, but also with the throng of just men made perfect:

After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands; and cried with a loud voice, saying, Salvation to our God which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb (Rev. 7:9, 10).

Peter now enjoys the glory of heaven, one among a vast throng. Peter’s sins as an apostle—even his melancholy fall in denying the very “fellowship” with his Lord—were forgiven by his Savior, Jesus Christ.

Perfect fellowship. Eternally.

Oh, child of God...for you, too.

SEARCH THE SCRIPTURES



ACTS: WHAT CHRIST CONTINUED TO DO AND TEACH

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THE WRITER

The Lord used the same man, Luke, to write both the book of Luke and the book of Acts. This is clear from a comparison of Luke 1:1-4 with Acts 1:1. The opening verses of these books point to a close connection between them, with Acts being essentially a continuation of the book of Luke.

The Lord prepared and used Luke as a man who was knowledgeable in medicine. He was a medical doctor, described by Paul as “Luke, the beloved physician” (Col. 4:14). He possessed a good understanding of medical matters, as is evident from the medical language in Acts as well as from how often he wrote about sickness and the sick. He mentions, for example, lameness (Acts 8:7), palsy (Acts 8:7; 9:33), blindness (Acts 13:11), diseases

and evil spirits (Acts 19:12), and fevers and a bloody flux (Acts 28:8). Luke was obviously a well-educated man, as is also seen through his extensive vocabulary and literary style.

The book of Acts shows that Luke accompanied Paul on some of his missionary journeys. We learn this from the passages in which the pronoun “we” is used (Acts 16:10-17; 20:5 to 21:18; 27:1 to 28:16). Luke first accompanied Paul on his second missionary journey. Part way through that journey, however, he remained in Philippi. He joined Paul again when Paul returned to Philippi on his third missionary journey. He then accompanied Paul on his return to Jerusalem, as well as on his journey as a prisoner to Rome. We also know he remained with Paul during Paul’s imprisonments. Luke

was obviously a beloved friend of Paul and a faithful fellow laborer in the cause of the gospel.

THE PURPOSE

Luke's purpose in writing Acts was to complete the record of the "acts" of Christ that he had written in the book of Luke. He states that in the book of Luke he wrote concerning the things which Jesus "began" to do and teach (Acts 1:1). In Acts, therefore, he wrote concerning what Jesus continued to do and teach after His exaltation.

This makes the book of Acts an important and necessary complement to and continuation of the accounts of the work of Christ in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. A close relation exists therefore among all five books.

In light of this, the title that is commonly given to this book ("The Acts of the Apostles") is not the most suitable. We recognize, of course, that this title is not part of the original text of Scripture and thus not inspired. But since we most often refer to the book by that title, we do well to note that a better title would be something along the lines of, "The Acts of the Risen Christ." The book is not really about the works of the apostles, for not all the apostles are even mentioned, and only portions of their work are mentioned. What unifies everything in Acts is to understand that the book records what the exalted Christ did as He carried out His work through His Spirit and through the labors of the apostles.

CHARACTERISTICS

Acts is a history book, containing most of New Testament biblical history. However, it is not a history that follows a specific line. It is not a chronological history of New Testament events. Nor is it a history of persons, such as the apostles, for we are not given a complete account of what any one of them did. Instead, Acts is the history of a subject. And that subject is the gathering of the church. Acts 13:48 summarizes well the history recorded in this book, namely, that "as many as were ordained to eternal life believed."

There are a number of main elements in the history of the gathering of the church. First, there is Pentecost and the pouring out of the Spirit. Second, there is the element of persecution, which strengthened the church

and caused the gospel to spread. Third, there is the spread of the gospel itself, and that to the Gentiles. The latter certainly occupies a prominent place in this history.

Although the book is not a history of the apostles, the book does emphasize the work of a few of them. Peter is on the foreground, for example, when the book treats the spread of the gospel in Jerusalem (chapters 1-12). The work of a few of the other apostles is prominent when the gospel goes into Samaria (chapters 8-12). And Paul's work is emphasized when the gospel goes to the Gentiles and to the ends of the earth (chapters 13-28).

As a New Testament history, Acts provides the historical background for many of the remaining books in the New Testament Scriptures. It specifically does so for ten of Paul's epistles.¹

PROMINENT POINTS²

The first of three significant points in Acts is the prominence of the work of the Holy Spirit. The powerful presence and work of the Spirit was what Christ had promised (John 14-16; Acts 1:4-8). Acts 2 records the fulfillment of that promise with the Spirit being poured out upon the disciples and the church. The Spirit then directed everything in the New Testament church. The work of missions was His work: He called men to be missionaries, He strengthened them for their labor, and He directed where they went (Acts 13:1-4; 16:6-10). The fruit of the preaching of the gospel was the Spirit's work: He converted thousands on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:41), then many others from that point on as He gathered the church from all nations (Acts 13-21). The work of establishing churches as a result of missions was also His work, along with decisions that needed to be made for the benefit of all the churches (Acts 15:28). We do well to remind ourselves that we are no less dependent today on the powerful presence and work of the Spirit in all these same ways, and more.

Second, the book of Acts is of significant interest

- 1 Those ten books are Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, and Philemon.
- 2 For a more detailed list of the characteristics of and prominent points in the book of Acts, see Henry C. Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1954), 187-188.

in the area of missions. It is the great missionary book of the New Testament, and of all Scripture. The book describes in detail the church's mission work as prophesied by Christ Himself when He said (Acts 1:8), "But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth." The book, therefore, provides valuable instruction concerning missions, including such things as the calling to suffer for the sake of the spread of the gospel, and the character of missionary preaching (as can be learned from some twenty-four addresses and/or sermons found in the book of Acts).

Third, Acts is of interest as regards the establishing of the New Testament church. As believers were saved by means of the preaching and the work of the Spirit, churches were organized and instituted. The book of Acts is therefore very helpful, and even authoritative, in the area of church polity. It contains fundamental truths regarding Reformed and biblical ecclesiology. This includes valuable instruction concerning the existence of the three special offices, the appointment of officebearers, the organization of churches, and the necessity of church federation.

CANONICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Acts occupies a unique place in the canon of Scripture because it informs us of the things Christ continued to do and teach after He ascended into heaven. While on earth, Christ *began* to do and teach things for and to His church. In Acts (and until He returns at the end of time), Christ *continues* to do and teach things for and to His church. He is busy gathering the church from all nations of the world. He is teaching the church all she needs to know and do. He is present with and in His church and accomplishing His work by the power of His Spirit.

The emphasis in Acts is on the continued work of Jesus Christ in the New Testament church (which ought also to be our focus in any study of or sermon on this book). Christ is King of His church. It is He who gathers, defends, and preserves her, who pours out His Spirit upon her, who rules her, and who protects her from her enemies. He teaches His church concerning mission work. He calls and sends missionaries, He directs them, and He prospers their labors. He controls

the spread of the gospel and the growth of the church. He makes His disciples bold in the face of opposition and persecution. He guides His church to make good and right decisions. He is the Head of the church who determines the church's structure.

The book of Acts highlights that Christ's work is a catholic work. In the Old Testament, the church was Jewish, with only a few Gentiles being saved and gathered into her midst. This changed with the cross, as demonstrated by the superscription written in three languages. With Pentecost, the change was completed. We know that it took some time for the church to adjust to this, so that Christ even had to use persecution to drive the early church out of Jerusalem in order to bring the gospel to other nations. But in Acts the catholicity of the church is clearly seen. And the book demonstrates that "catholic" did not simply mean the salvation of both Jews and Gentiles, but rather that Gentiles did not need to become Jews to be saved. They were saved as Gentiles. Christ is a catholic Savior who saves a catholic church.

OUTLINE OF CONTENT³

Here follows a detailed outline of Acts.⁴

- Acts 1:1-11—Christ commissioning the apostles.
- Acts 1:12 to 2:47—Disciples equipped for their task.
- Acts 3:1 to 8:1—Development of the work in Jerusalem.
- Acts 8:1-40—Gospel to Judea, Samaria, and the surrounding country.
- Acts 9:1-31—Conversion and early ministry of Paul.
- Acts 9:31 to 11:30—Progress of the gospel to the Gentiles.
- Acts 12—Persecution by the civil government.
- Acts 13, 14—First missionary journey.
- Acts 15:1-35—The Jerusalem council.
- Acts 15:36 to 18:22—Second missionary journey.
- Acts 18:23 to 21:16—Third missionary journey.

3 For a more detailed outline of the contents of Acts, see Herman Hoeksema, *New Testament Introduction* (syllabus published by the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary), 12-13.

4 Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 187.

- Acts 21:17 to 23:30—Arrest and trial of Paul in Jerusalem.
- Acts 23:31 to 26:32—Imprisonment of Paul in Caesarea.
- Acts 27:1 to 28:15—Paul’s journey to Rome.
- Acts 28:16-31—Paul’s imprisonment in Rome.

A much briefer division of the book is the following.⁵

- Acts 1:1 to 12:25—The Establishment of the church from Jerusalem.
- Acts 13:1 to 28:31—The Establishment of the church from Antioch.

5 Louis Berkhof, *New Testament Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1915), 117-118.

A WORD FITLY SPOKEN



MOON

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“There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon” (1 Cor. 15:41). The greater light God made to rule the day. The sun blazes with intense glory. Nothing is hidden from its heat (Ps. 19:6). God ordained a lesser light to rule the night. The moon presides with a gentler radiance, yet a splendor all its own (Gen. 1:14). The moon mellows the light it borrows from the sun and imbues a cool silver glow into the darkness. The moonlight, like the sunlight, shows forth the manifold glory of the living God, our Creator and our Redeemer, who both dwells in blazing light no man can approach (1 Tim. 6:16), and also draws near to His people, in the gentle light of His love and grace, mellowing His radiance in the Word made flesh. Jesus shines with both the blazing light of the sun and the mild glow of the moon. The mighty King, the meek Lamb, our Savior, our Immanuel!

“When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained,” the psalmist exclaims, “What is man, that thou art mindful of him” (Ps. 8:3-4)? Have you ever gazed upon the moon in the night sky, and found it prompting you to ponder and praise? Consider the greatness of God, whose fingers fashioned these great lights that give sight to our eyes, make beautiful the world, bring forth creation’s bounty: “the precious fruits brought forth by the sun, and for the precious

things put forth by the moon” (Deut. 33:14). What power can match our sovereign God? The Lord rules over the very lights that rule our world and rule our lives. Even as we obey the dictates of sun and moon, waking and sleeping, with their rising and setting, so too these great lights obey the Creator’s dictates, going out and coming in at their appointed time (Jer. 31:35), even standing still when He commands it (Hab. 3:11). How great is our God!

The moon shows something of the beauty of God. Its pure white light gives a glimpse of His holiness, His grace. A glimpse, too, of what His grace achieves in us. For by saving grace, the bride of Christ, once marred with spots and wrinkles, becomes “fair as the moon, clear as the sun” (Song of Solomon 6:10). So precious and beloved to the Lord, she is “clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars” (Rev. 12:1). Yet this pales in comparison to the beauty of the Holy One Himself. “Behold even to the moon, and it shineth not; yea, the stars are not pure in his sight” (Job 25:5). Indeed, before the glory of the Lord, “the moon shall be confounded, and the sun ashamed, when the LORD of hosts shall reign in mount Zion” (Is. 24:23).

How foolish, then, man often is when he beholds such glory, and will not bend his knee to God. Or, instead, he bows to sun, moon, and stars rather than

the Maker and Giver of their light (Deut. 4:19). Sun, moon, and stars tirelessly praise and point us to the Lord (Ps. 148:3). Their shining is their singing. Every sunset, every moonrise, is a call to join in worship of our God, our God who is worthy! Beloved Christians, amidst our busy lives in this hectic world and distracted age, do not forget still to read creation's elegant book. Let its characters—sun, moon, and stars—lead your heart, thoughts, desires, heavenward!

Look again. God made the moon to serve as a sign, for the measurement of time, seasons, days, and years (Gen. 1:14). But the eyes of faith, looking through Scripture's lens, see in the moon a sign of the covenant faithfulness of God. In this creation, marked by change, the moon endures. The moon stays constant in its cycle. The moon has permanence that few other things have. Thus, the psalmist, speaking of God's promise of the Messiah and His "forever throne," exclaims, "His seed

shall endure forever, and his throne as the sun before me. *It shall be established for ever as the moon, and as a faithful witness in heaven*" (Ps. 89:36-37). As enduring as the moon, constant in its cycle, unfailing in its light-giving, darkness-banishing office, so enduring is the throne of David and the kingdom of David's greater Son who shall reign forevermore. "In his days shall the righteous flourish; and abundance of peace so long as the moon endureth" (Ps. 72:7).

Look up, Christians! Consider the heavens. Gaze upon the moon. Ponder God's witness in the night sky. God is faithful to His covenant, constant, unchanging as the moon above. Even in the dark of night, the moon gives light. Even in the darkest hours of the night in this vale of tears, we are never without God's light. The light of His countenance shines upon us. Christ our Lord and Savior sits upon the throne, established forever as the moon.

TAKING HEED TO THE DOCTRINE



VICARIOUS

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THE MEANING OF VICARIOUS

One very important word in connection with the death of Jesus Christ is the word imputation. In the previous article in this rubric, we examined the biblical teaching concerning imputation (see July 2025, pp. 372).

Another equally important word is *vicarious*. Jesus' death was a vicarious death. That means that Christ's death was in the place of and as the substitute for others. Christ did not die for His own sins, but He died on account of the sins of others. He did not pay the penalty for any of His own wrongdoing, but He suffered what others deserved on account of the guilt of their sins.

The word "vicar" is taken from the Latin and means "substitute." Vicarious atonement is substitutionary atonement.

The Roman Catholic Church teaches that the pope is the vicar of Christ. The pope, currently Leo XIV, is supposed to be the substitute for Christ upon earth. The Roman Catholic faithful are taught to view the pope as Christ in the world, clothed with Christ's holiness, receiving the worship of Christ, and speaking infallibly as Christ.

Rome's doctrine is heretical. It is not the Bible's teaching concerning substitution. A sinful man is not the vicar of Christ, but Christ is instead the vicar of sinful men. A sinner is not an infallible substitute for Christ, but Christ is the efficacious substitute for guilty sinners. Rome has turned the truth on its head.

The doctrine of vicarious redemption is widely maligned today. It is often alleged that the teaching

of vicarious atonement is cosmic child abuse—God the Father punishing His Son for sins that He did not commit. Or, it is charged that the teaching violates all sense of justice because an innocent man is made to suffer for transgressions of which He was not guilty.

These objections are wide of the mark and, what is more, they contradict the plain teaching of Scripture. The Bible teaches that vicarious atonement magnifies both the justice and the mercy of God. It exalts God's justice in that God demands that sin must be punished. And it exalts God's mercy in that God punishes sin not in the sinner as he deserves, but in the substitute whom God provides.

Jesus Christ was a fit substitute.

First, He was a proper substitute because He was appointed by God. In eternity, the sovereign God determined that His Son would stand in the place of His elect people. No man has the right to challenge the sovereign will of God.

Second, Christ was a fit substitute because He willingly stood in the place of those for whom He died. He was not forced against His will to die for others, but He died voluntarily. Who could challenge the justice of a soldier diving on a grenade to save his buddies? No one would dare to blacken such a selfless act. How much more the Savior's willingly putting Himself forward as the substitute for His beloved people.

Third, Christ could be the substitute for us because He was fully God. If He was not fully God, neither could He have borne the wrath of God against our sins. But because He was God in our flesh, He was qualified to be our substitute. What is more, the fact that He was God rendered all His work as our substitute of infinite value.

And last, besides being fully God, Christ was also fully a man—a man among us men. Otherwise, He could not have stood in the place of us men. That would disqualify Him from being our substitute. As a complete human being, both in body and in soul, He was fit to be our vicar.

BIBLICAL SUPPORT FROM THE OLD TESTAMENT

Decisive as regards the teaching of substitutionary atonement is whether the Bible supports it. And emphatically it is the case that God's Word teaches

this truth. In a brief article, we are able to cite only a limited number of passages. However, the teaching permeates both the Old and New Testaments. We will cite a sufficient number of Scriptures to demonstrate that this truth is clearly taught in the Bible.

One outstanding passage is Isaiah 53, a prophecy of the suffering of our Savior. In verse 4 the prophet proclaims, "Surely he hath borne *our* griefs, and carried *our* sorrows." He goes on to say that "he was wounded for *our* transgressions, he was bruised for *our* iniquities: the chastisement of *our* peace was upon him" (v. 5). And he concludes: "with his stripes *we* are healed."

The Old Testament sacrificial system pointed typically to the vicarious satisfaction that Christ would accomplish. The book of Leviticus details the sacrifices of unblemished animals that symbolically were offered up to God in the place of the one who brought the sacrifice. The animal that was put to death on the altar of burnt offering pointed to the substitute who was to come, the One who would die in the place of His people. God says through Moses in Leviticus 17:11 that He had given the sacrifice "to you upon the altar to make an atonement for your souls." The epistle to the Hebrews teaches the fulfillment of the Old Testament sacrifices in the one sacrifice of Christ Jesus on the cross. In Hebrews 10:12, the writer says, "But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down on the right hand of God." Christ offered one sacrifice for sins—our sins. That one sacrifice for sins accomplished what all the sacrifices in the Old Testament could not accomplish. Christ's one sacrifice actually paid for all the sins of those for whom He died.

Christ as the substitute for His people was especially typified in the Passover lamb. At the time of the exodus, the Israelites had sprinkled the blood of a lamb over their doorposts. Seeing the blood, the angel of death "passed over" their homes, whereas the angel went into the homes of the Egyptians and slew their firstborn. Reflecting on this event, the apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 5:7, "For even Christ *our* Passover is sacrificed *for us*." Christ is our Passover lamb who on the cross was sacrificed for us as our substitute. On seeing Jesus, John the Baptist proclaimed, "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world." Christ is the Lamb, who is provided by God and is God. He takes away, not His own sin, but the sin of the world.

BIBLICAL SUPPORT FROM THE NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament teaches the fulfillment of that which was foreshadowed in the Old Testament. It identifies Jesus Christ as the divine substitute who accomplished what all the sacrifices pointed to.

In Romans 4:25, the apostle teaches concerning Christ, “Who was delivered *for* our offences, and was raised again for our justification.” Christ was delivered up, not for His own offences, but for our offences. In chapter 8:32, Paul writes that God “spared not his own Son, but delivered him up *for* us all.” Christ was delivered up to the cross for us, in our place, as our substitute.

Second Corinthians 5:21 is an outstanding passage in support of vicarious atonement. “For he hath made him to be sin *for* us, who knew no sin; that *we* might be made the righteousness of God in him.” Christ was not sinful but was “made to be sin” in our place and as our substitute. That happened at the cross where the righteous died for the unrighteous.

Paul writes in Galatians 1:4 about our Lord Jesus Christ, “Who gave himself *for* our sins, that he might deliver us from this present evil world, according to the will of God and our Father.” Once again, Christ willingly gave Himself for us and our sins. He put Himself forward in our place, enduring what He did not deserve to endure.

It is not only Paul who teaches substitutionary atonement. This is also the teaching of Peter. In 1 Peter 2:24, he writes, “Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed.” Christ bore our sins on the cross, not His own. Not by the stripes that we endured but on account of His stripes we are healed.

In the third chapter of his first epistle, Peter teaches that “Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just *for* the unjust, that he might bring us to God” (1 Pet. 3:18). The just—the Just One—suffered in the place of the unjust, that He might bring us who are unjust unto God. Clearly, the apostle teaches the truth of the vicarious atonement of our Savior.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE TRUTH OF VICARIOUS ATONEMENT

Important implications follow from the truth of vicarious, substitutionary atonement.

In the first place, this truth underscores the justice of God. The world of our day is not much concerned about justice—the injustice, for example, of releasing repeat violent offenders into society or illegal immigrants receiving a host of benefits at the expense of the American taxpayer. But God is concerned about justice. According to His justice, sin must be paid for. The sinner cannot sin with impunity. In the cross of Jesus Christ, God’s justice shines forth. In the cross, Christ “was made sin, and became a curse for us and in our stead, that He might make satisfaction to divine justice on our behalf” (Canons of Dordt, 2.2).

At the same time, in the second place, God’s mercy is displayed. For God does not punish us, as we deserve, but He punishes our sins in the substitute that He has provided. As God provided the ram as the substitute for Isaac (Gen. 22), so God in His mercy has provided His own Son as our substitute.

Third, the truth of Christ’s vicarious suffering supports the doctrine of limited atonement. Since Christ died as the substitute and in the place of others, all for whom He was the substitute are saved by His substitutionary death. But since all men are not saved—there is a hell—it is plain that He did not die for all men. He was not the substitute for every human being but only for some. The truths of vicarious atonement and limited atonement stand or fall together.

And last, the truth that Christ was our substitute underscores His love for us. Willingly He stood in our place. Willingly He offered Himself up as the sacrifice for our sins. Willingly He endured what we deserved. What explains that? Only one thing: His enduring love for us. The apostle writes in Ephesians 5:2, “And walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself *for* us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet smelling savour.”

In your darkest moments, look at the cross. By faith see the One who willingly stood in your place under the wrath of God. What love! And since He loved us unto death, the most awful death imaginable, His love will never fail. He will love us to the end.



RE-ENTRY: LEAVING THE MISSION FIELD AND GOING BACK (5)

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Previous article in this series: October 1, 2025, p. 24

REFOCUS

A phrase that molds our consideration of the last stage of re-entry from a field of mission labor and into a new and different field of labor is found in “The Form for the Ordination (Or Installation) of Missionaries.” The phrase is worded thus: “...until it pleases the Lord to lead [the missionary] along a lawful way to a different field of labor.”¹ This phrase helps the minister of the Word, released from his mission labor and going back to his home churches, with an edifying reminder about what he needs to refocus on and with encouraging hope as he, with his family, moves forward through the challenges of the re-entry process. What are those things of which the minister needs to be reminded?

First, the minister of the Word needs to be reminded of his relationship to the Lord Jesus Christ as a servant in his labors as a minister. Perhaps, this point might seem rather obvious for a minister of the Word re-entering his sending churches, yet it is fundamental for his conviction and confidence about the direction of his service in the ministry of the Word. This relationship was so fundamental to the Apostle Paul that he frequently identified himself in his epistles as a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ, regardless of how long he had served in the ministry. As the above-mentioned Form points out, because Jesus Christ is Lord and all ministers of the Word are His servants, He governs, directs, and leads His ministers of the Word by various means to their specific fields of labor in His good time and determines the length of their service in a particular place.

This is particularly helpful for the re-entering

missionary who may wrestle for some time with the objective and subjective realities of his release from a former field of labor. As he transitions into his new place of labor, he must look up to the Lord and embrace His will that has governed the change from one field of labor to the next. Moreover, while there may be identifiable earthly means by which the Lord governed his re-entry, the returning missionary must look believingly beyond the means to the Lord, who according to His good pleasure and promises, leads the released missionary along a lawful way to a different place of labor. By a humble trust in the governing Lord of the harvest, the minister-servant may enjoy spiritual peace and rest in his soul within his new area of service, either in another mission labor or in an established congregation.

Second, aware and convinced of his servant relationship to the Lord, the returning minister of the Word must then be committed to faithful labor of hazarding his life for the ministry of the Word in his new field of labor. This follows the example of the Apostle Paul, who had been commended by the council of the church in Jerusalem by a letter that was sent to the churches in Antioch and beyond. In that letter, the church testified concerning Paul and Barnabas that they had “hazarded their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 15:26). They had given over their lives to the will of the Lord in their labor, even to the extent of great hazard and risk. Having done so in his first missionary journey, was Paul ready to do that again in new places of mission labor? Observing Paul’s subsequent labors, one discovers that Paul was indeed willing to hazard his life again for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Similarly, the minister of the Word, directed to a different field of labor in his home

¹ Found in *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005), 301.

country, must be willing to submit fully his life again to the Lord's call for His name's sake in a new place of labor.

Third, the minister of the Word must be committed in his new field of labor to being a faithful pastor and teacher of the gospel. Fundamentally, his task remains the same, whether in missions or in an established congregation. He must preach the Word of the Lord (Acts 15:35) and preach His death and resurrection by reasoning, opening, and alleging that truth of the holy Scriptures (Acts 17:1-4). This was true for the apostle Paul throughout his varied labors, but that was also the duty of pastors in the local congregations, such as Timothy in Ephesus (1 Tim. 4:11-16, 2 Tim. 4:1-2). Similarly, the re-entering missionary ought not to expect that his task will fundamentally change or that the content of his sermons about Christ crucified and risen will radically change. The sheep of our Lord Jesus Christ, in an established local congregation, in a newly formed congregation through mission work, or in a mission station, need essentially the same Word preached to them unto their repentance and true believing in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Fourth, the minister of the Word needs the grace and strength to be focused fully in his new field of labor, just as he may have been in his former field of labors in missions. While he may have labored as the Apostle Paul to be spent in his mission labors, so he must again give his attention, time, and abilities in the new and different field of labor in the service of the Lord (2 Cor. 12:15). Of course, it may take some time to readjust to various aspects of life and labor in a new place of labor, yet the desire is that he be once again focused on being spent in the service of the Lord and His church.

Finally, the aim of the last stage of re-entry is to be focused anew on an honorable twofold goal of his ministry. The first goal is summarized by John the Baptist when, in response to the decline in his earthly ministry and the rise of the ministry of Jesus, he confessed, "He must increase, and I must decrease" (John 3:30). As a servant of the Lord and His church, the re-entering missionary must again embrace his servant role in all of his labors so that before the mind and heart of God's people Christ increases in the preaching and teaching of the pastor.

Accordingly, the complementary goal is that the

people of God in the new and different field of labor may increase spiritually and numerically. His aim is the increase of the people of God in their trust in the Lord and, out of that trust, their love for Him made evident in their following Him and His Word and joyfully bearing their crosses in life. The aim is also that the church in the new field of labor may increase, the Lord willing, in the number of households and individual members. His desire for numerical growth is neither carnal nor selfish, but a godly desire for the gathering of the church and for the continuation of her faithful witness in this world until and in the service of the final coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Even as a returning missionary with his family moves through the six phases of re-entry, there is an element in the last phase that he and his family must embrace for encouragement and perseverance for a positive reintegration into their home churches.

This element becomes necessary and important in the face of the potential challenges and discouragements of re-entry. The potential challenges vary from one returning missionary family to another, and are affected by various factors that might have led to the missionary's release and return: immigration, politics, church, family, schooling, finances, mission development, health, and age. There will be the challenges of the reintegration process into the home or passport culture in various areas, such as communication, dress, food, holidays, leadership, and visiting. There will be times of discouragement when one unthinkingly reverts to habits or ways of communication that worked well formerly but no longer do in the next place of labor. Memory flashbacks, triggered by sounds, smells, and words, and the tug of former church friends may be a burden for some time. Such growing pains are not just true for returning missionaries, but also for their wives and children.

In light of these challenges, what is the hope upon which a re-entering missionary must focus for his encouragement? He may find encouragement in the truth that Lord governs the missionary's labor and life in the Lord's kingdom. He may be encouraged to know that the Lord will continue to supply graciously all of the spiritual and earthly needs of himself and his family according to His goodness and enduring mercy. The means that the Lord uses to supply those

needs include the means of His Word chiefly, the means of the support of calling churches, and the means of conversation and debriefing with others who have had similar experiences. A returning missionary may find comfort and peace in the perfect work of our Lord Jesus Christ and in His abiding Word and sure promises for continued faithful service in the new and different place of labor.

CONCLUSION

We have reached the end of an overview of the six stages of re-entry process for a foreign missionary and his family. If this overview might have given the impression that re-entry is usually a nicely arranged process, then be aware that the reality is not so nicely packaged. Some phases run concurrently. Some phases require more time than others. Moreover, because of varying circumstances by which the Lord governs re-entry, each case is as unique as the men, women, and children whom the Lord is graciously pleased to lead through such a process.

For example, one Reformed missionary, John Kempers, related the unique story of his and his wife's

re-entry into their home country and sending churches after over 40 years in mission labors in Mexico. He wrote that "our return to the United States was inevitable. We had to go back to a country that, by now, was almost unknown to us. After forty-four years of living in the tropics, we had no interest in living in the cold snow-and-ice country...." Then, reflecting on all that happened in God's perfect guidance and providence in going back to the warm, southwestern USA, he wrote that although God had released them from their labor among their beloved churches in Mexico and brought them back, "...it took us some five years to become Americanized again. Even now after many years, almost all of my dreams at night are of Mexico and our life there."²

However the transition might go for returning missionaries and their families, our faithful Lord is always sufficiently gracious and abundantly merciful to His servants who are given the opportunity to serve Him in His work of gathering and preserving His eternally chosen church by His Word and Spirit.

2 Pablo A. Deiros, *Kemp* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2016), 477-478.

WHEN THOU SITTEST IN THINE HOUSE



TEACHERS OF GOOD THINGS (2) LOVE YOUR HUSBANDS

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Previous article in this series: April 2025, p. 249

In a previous article we began a study of the calling of God's Word in Titus 2:4–5 to older Christian women: teach the younger women both in word and by example the duties that are ours. We noted that the category "older" is a flexible one and that the "good things" that we are to teach are good works that adorn the doctrine

of God our Savior (v. 10), silence those who would blaspheme God's Word (v. 5), and of which we must zealous (v. 14). Finally, we considered the first of the good things listed in the passage: sobriety.

The second good thing that older women are called to teach young women is this: "to love their husbands."

TO BE FOUND

Of course, before a woman can love a husband, she first must have one. Herein lies a heartache for some single young women who long to be married—and a calling incumbent on Christian young men to grow up and seek a wife. Twice in recent months I had conversations with young men who leveled the same criticism at the Protestant Reformed Churches: the PRC pressures people to get married too young. If that truly is the case, I do not think that we are as persuasive as we once were, for it seems to me that there are more single adults in our pews than there were when I was a child. Perhaps my memory is faulty, or perhaps I was less observant then. But Christians in other churches have observed this phenomena as well.¹ Yes, there is an important place for single women and men in Christ's church: the same inspired apostle who wrote Titus 2 stated that it is good to remain single, as he was (1 Cor. 7:8). Remember, however, that he described single life as one characterized by undivided care not for oneself but for the things of the Lord (32). A holy single life testifies to the sufficiency of the gospel.

However, in Titus 2 the apostle assumes that most of the young women are married, and Proverbs 18:22 declares that the man who finds a wife finds a good thing. After all, when God declared, "It is not good that the man should be alone," He did not have a roommate in mind (Gen. 2:18). Perhaps the sad reality is that in this area as in so many others the church is being influenced by the world around us, a world in which marriage is being increasingly delayed or worse, supplanted altogether by things like career development, financial independence, and travel.² Young men, hear from Martin Luther:

It is said that it takes a bold man to venture to take a wife. What you need above all else, then, is to be encouraged, admonished, urged, incited, and made bold. Why should you delay, my dear and reverend sir, and continue to weigh the matter in your mind? ...Stop thinking about it and go to it right merrily. Your body demands it. God wills it and drives you to it.³

1 Tim Challies, "Lots of Single Christians but Few Weddings," Feb. 5, 2025, www.challies.com.

2 Albert Mohler, *The Briefing*, podcast, Sept. 12, 2025.

3 Martin Luther as quoted by Greg Morse, "Go Get Her: To Men Delaying Marriage," Jan. 25, 2025, www.desiringgod.org.

But it must be noted that in contemporary American society it is largely *women* who are giving up on marriage, women who bemoan "the lack of quality men" and "have no intention of marrying or linking themselves to a young man of lesser educational or economic attainment," sentiments that also contribute to a growing number of disheartened young men.⁴ An unmarried Christian should have high standards when it comes to a spouse, but those standards should be determined by the Word of God, not worldly ideas of romance or success. Sisters, not only is it a good thing for a man to find a wife, it is also a good thing for a woman to be found by a husband.

WHAT IS A HUSBAND?

A husband is a man, and, although I do not know Greek, my Greek Bible dictionary notes that the word rendered *husband* in Titus 2:4 is often translated just that way: "man." Contrary to feminism—which still attempts to erase the differences between the two sexes that God created and, in so doing, paved the way for transgenderism, its logical but ironic fruit—men and women are distinct. They are not so distinct that they hail from different planets, however. No, Adam was created from the dust of the earth, and Eve from his rib. Husbands and wives are more alike than they are different. And yet, your husband is a man. Often he will think differently than you, act differently than you, respond differently than you, and lead differently than you would were you given his position, which you are not. These dissimilarities are not flukes: they are design features. Delight in them.

A husband is a man who is married to a woman. There is no such thing as a man who is the husband of another man. God ordained marriage to be a lifelong union between one man and one woman. Within marriage, sexual relations bless and unify, but sexual activity outside marriage results in shame and sorrow. God created the woman to complement the man, and He selected you, sister, to be your husband's perfectly suited helper. Why, then, can marriage sometimes be so difficult?

A husband is a sinner. Our marriages are plagued by our sins and sinful natures, and Satan also levels some

4 Albert Mohler, *The Briefing*, podcast, Mar. 26, 2025.

of his fiercest attacks at this foundational institution: a relationship that mirrors Christ and His Bride deals a death blow to the aims of our adversary. In a note to her engaged daughter, Elisabeth Elliot wrote the following:

Who is it you marry? You marry a sinner. There's nobody else to marry. That ought to be obvious enough, but when you love a man as you love yours it's easy to forget. You forget it for a while and then when something happens that ought to remind you, you find yourself wondering...where did things go wrong? They went wrong back in the Garden of Eden. Settle it once for all; your husband is a son of Adam.⁵

There will be times when sin influences our husbands' thinking, actions, responses, and headship. When that is the case, it is our calling to help them with a respectful entreaty. As important as it is be reminded that our husbands are sinners who will sin against us, it is perhaps even more important to be reminded that we are sinners too, sinners who, like Eve, are easily deceived and quick to shift the blame.

With regard to the sinful men to whom we are married, the Bible requires of us this: love them.

AN AFFECTIONATE WIFE

The word *love* in the Bible glitters like a diamond: it has many facets. In Titus 2:4 the Greek word translated "love their husbands" is unique: *philandros* is a combination of two words, *philos*, which is always translated "friend" or "friends," and *aner*, which, as noted above, is translated "man" or "husband." *Philandros* is used only in this passage of the New Testament, and its definition reads this way: "*fond of man*, that is, affectionate as a wife." Does that surprise you? In the singular passage in which God directs wives to *love* their husbands, the word that He inspired emphasizes affection and friendliness!

In what practical ways do you show affection to your husband? How do you nurture the friendship you share? Those are good questions to ask yourself—and the older women in your life! For now, let's consider some of the other passages in which we find the word *philos*. It is used twice to refer to Jesus as a "*friend* of publicans and sinners": He ate, drank, and

fellowshipped with them (Matt. 11:19, Luke 7:34). In Luke 11:5–8 one *friend* gives another *friend* all the bread he needs at midnight in spite of the inconvenience to himself. The woman who swept her house and found her lost coin called her *friends* to rejoice with her (Luke 15:9). Luke 23:19 notes that Pilate and Herod, who had been at enmity with one another, unite as *friends* over their shared contempt of our Savior. In Acts 19:31 Paul's *friends* warn him of a threat on his life, and in Acts 27:3 his *friends* are those who refresh him.

Sisters, do you enjoy fellowship with your husband around your table? Are you cheerfully inconvenienced to meet his needs? Do you go to him when you receive good news and celebrate with him? Are you unified in purpose, or do you regularly chafe against his aspirations or goals? You might warn your husband of a threat on his life, but what about a more trivial threat to his reputation or possessions? Are you a person to whom your husband goes to be refreshed?

The word *philos* also appears twice in John 15:13–14: "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his *friends*. Ye are my *friends*, if ye do whatsoever I command you." Sisters, are we that kind of friends to our husbands?

Love your husband: that is a good thing. We will have further opportunity to consider love in this light in a future article when we consider the next duty listed in Titus 2:4: "to love their children."

⁵ Elisabeth Elliot, *Let Me Be a Woman* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 2004), 69.



A CHURCH BAND

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How much do you know about locusts?

Let's go over some facts. Locusts are a kind of insect. More technically, locusts are acridids in the Acrididae family in the Orthoptera order. Locusts have hind legs for jumping and wings for flying. Adult locusts can grow to around two and a half inches long. The creature can be found all around the world.

The Bible has much to say about locusts. Scripture especially points out the ability of locusts to gather together in a large group and leave widespread destruction in their path. Exodus 10:14-15 record the plague of locusts that came upon Egypt:

And the locusts went up over all the land of Egypt, and rested in all the coasts of Egypt: very grievous were they; before them there were no such locusts as they, neither after them shall be such. For they covered the face of the whole earth, so that the land was darkened; and they did eat every herb of the land, and all the fruit of the trees which the hail had left: and there remained not any green thing in the trees, or in the herbs of the field, through all the land of Egypt.

Still today, news stories from around the globe detail the devastation brought about by locusts.

So, you're not surprised when Proverbs 30:27 says about locusts that they go forth *by bands*: "The locusts have no king, yet go they forth all of them by bands." This requires some explanation.

First, locusts going forth by bands means that they travel and go about their business as a *group*. They stay *together*. This is a fascinating fact about locusts. National Geographic helps us understand the science of it:

Locusts look like ordinary grasshoppers—most notably, they both have big hind legs that help them hop or jump. They sometimes share the solitary lifestyle of a grasshopper, too. However, locust behavior can be something else entirely. During dry spells, solitary locusts are forced together in the patchy areas of land with remaining vegetation. This sudden crowding releases serotonin in their central nervous systems that makes locusts more sociable and promotes

rapid movements and more varied appetite. When rains return—producing moist soil and abundant green plants—those environmental conditions create a perfect storm: Locusts begin to produce rapidly and become even more crowded together. In these circumstances, they shift completely from their solitary lifestyle to a group lifestyle in what's called the gregarious phase. Locusts can even change color and body shape when they move into this phase. Their endurance increases and even their brains get larger.¹

Second, when Proverbs 30:27 says that locusts go forth by bands, this indicates that they travel together in an *orderly way*. Think of a band as an army. Every soldier in an army has his own place in the whole, and the army marches forward together in one direction to accomplish a common purpose. Like this, the locust "bands" go forth, each locust occupying its own place in the whole, flying forward in one direction to carry out one goal.

Third, Proverbs 30:27 tells us that the locusts go forth in these bands, *even though they have no king*: "The locusts *have no king*, yet go they forth all of them by bands." Striking about locusts is that they need no leader to tell them what to do and when to do it. They simply fly here and there without being commanded.

What an amazing creature! So often in our thinking we gravitate toward large animals and their capabilities, but we neglect the small creatures in God's world. That's a mistake. Proverbs 30:24 and 27 say, "There be four things which are little upon the earth, but they are exceeding wise.... [T]he locusts have no king, yet go they forth all of them by bands." This reminds us that locusts are little, and yet, exceeding wise—so wise, that even with no head locust to direct them, they fly in one cloud, all the same direction, and all with one purpose.

¹ Author unknown, "Locusts," *National Geographic* (August 25, 2025), <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/invertebrates/facts/locusts>.

But this amazing creature should point us to an even more amazing *Creator* who holds every locust in His providential hand. Since God is able to make and sustain the *exceedingly wise* locust, then He is *infinite* in wisdom. Let us praise Him! But let us also learn lessons from the locust—that is mainly, after all, why Proverbs 30:27 (“The locusts have no king, yet go they forth all of them by bands”) is in the Bible.

Locust lesson #1: Just as locusts go forth all of them by *bands*, flying as a *group*, so, young people, *you* have been made part of a band—that is, a member of the church...a church band. Scripture uses the figure of a body to describe the church. The church is a body made up of all different kinds of members. All those members are connected, and together they’re united to the Head, Jesus Christ. Similar to that figure of a body, we learn from Proverbs 30:27 to think of the church as a “band” of believers. Christ has made you, young reader, a part of His band, and daily He’s adding to His band! One of the terrible effects of the fall is that totally depraved men and women are all alone. Sure, they form their clubs, teams, and groups...but if you peel back the layers, the wicked are, in reality, deeply self-serving and at enmity against one another. What grace and mercy that Christ has taken us to Himself and placed us into meaningful, rich fellowship with other believers.

Locust lesson #2: Locusts in some ways need each other in their bands. But especially in the *church* band, it is true that we need each other. Always we must be called to *be* what we are—to *live out* what God has by His grace made a reality. You have been brought into the band, the church band—now, *express* this by consciously seeing your need for others and reflecting that in your life.

This is scriptural. It wasn’t just David—it was David and the band of mighty men. It wasn’t just Elisha—it was Elisha and the band of the sons of the prophets. It wasn’t just Daniel—it was Daniel and the band of three friends. It wasn’t just Peter—it was Peter and the band of disciples. In these examples and others, no man was a “lone ranger,” but benefited from and stood in need of others.

It’s not good to be alone. It’s dangerous to push away parents, grandparents, siblings, friends, and members of your local church. It’s unhealthy to separate yourself from others and live in seclusion. At the same time, it’s also sinful to exclude *others* so that *they* are made to feel alone: leaving classmates out because they don’t “fit”

(whatever that means); bullying others; facial expressions and body language that tell others they don’t belong in your “group.” Bottom line: don’t be by yourself, and don’t make other people be by themselves because of your exclusive behavior. We Christians need the band!

Why do we need each other? There are multiple reasons.

We need the band, because with each other we accomplish things we couldn’t do alone. The next time you walk the hallways of your Christian school, think: “Parents, grandparents, and other members of the covenant community *band* together for the instruction of the youth.” This Sunday when you take your place in the pew waiting for the minister to enter, say to yourself, “Here’s a congregation that *collectively* supports kingdom causes, chiefly the preaching of the gospel, something my family and I wouldn’t be able to do by ourselves; and, here is a congregation *federated* with other churches that together support causes and go about activities that would be very difficult, if not impossible, for one congregation to do alone.” Examples could be multiplied.

We need the band, also, because in it we receive help during battle. We are Christian soldiers marching forward in formation against our enemies—sin, the Devil, and the world. But we must go forth *together*, fighting the enemy as an *army*. We must not press forth alone, but rather, with our fellow soldiers who pray for us and with us, admonish us, encourage us, hold us accountable, and warn us from God’s Word. Our fellows are of help in the battle.

Further, we need the band because God uses other Christians for our spiritual development. Recall the interesting fact from National Geographic, that when locusts become crowded together and transition into the gregarious stage, they change color and body shape, their endurance increases, and their brains enlarge. Does not God use the influence of Christian parents, teachers, pastors, friends, and church members for positive spiritual change and growth in your life? The frequent counsel of your parents applies here: “Son, daughter, surround yourself with godly friends!”

Locust lesson #3: Locusts, each having their individual place in the swarm, fly like an army in the *same direction*. So must we, each of us having his or her own place in the band, move forward like an army

in the *same direction*. Can you imagine the chaos of some locusts in a dense cloud flying backward, others forward, and still others sideways? Much more serious is the chaos, but also the confusion and pain, when the church band is not living in a unified way out of the one truth of God's Word. Do not walk contrary to the biblical direction given to you by godly parents; go in the way they teach you. Do not fly against the scriptural instruction you receive from the pulpit; move in the direction of the Word you hear.

After reading those last two lessons, do you not experience the weighty responsibility of being in the church band? No doubt, you feel unable to carry out

these callings in your own strength. We've already pointed out the striking fact in Proverbs 30:27 that locusts go forth in bands even though they have no king; they go about without a leader telling them what to do. As tiny as locusts are, they have a kind of wisdom (Prov. 30:24). But young people, we *do* have a King. We have a King who earned in His own blood the gift of wisdom, and who applies that by His Spirit, making us wise and strengthening us for a life to God's glory in the church. Do *locusts*, little as they are and without a king, go forth all of them by bands? Then so much more will *we*, led and gifted by King Jesus, go forth an active member in the band!

ALL THY WORKS SHALL PRAISE THEE



LESSONS FROM THE GARDEN (2) GOD'S SOVEREIGN USE OF MEANS

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Previous article in this series: June 2025, p. 349.

Sowing a seed in the expectation of an eventual harvest is a fundamental principle of gardening that we considered in a previous article. But this is not the only principle pictured in gardening. God's sovereign use of means—a core principle of earthly life (both physically and spiritually)—is pictured in gardening. For example, plants need various nutrients in order to grow and develop. These nutrients and how they are provided to the plant are *means* that God uses for plant development. *Means* are the things of this life that God uses to “exert His influence.” And we must remember that these *means* are an “almighty operation of God.”

As the almighty operation of God whereby He prolongs and supports this our natural life does not exclude, but requires, the use of means, by which God of His infinite mercy and goodness hath chosen to exert His influence, so also the...supernatural operation of God by which we are regenerated in

no wise excludes or subverts the use of the gospel, which the most wise God has ordained to be the seed of regeneration and food for the soul.¹

We now turn our attention to that vitally important principle regarding God's sovereign use of means. We do so by examining first the physical means God uses for the growth and development of plants, and then by examining the primary means God uses to grow and strengthen our faith.

GOD-ORDAINED MEANS IN GARDENING

Even from its earliest beginnings as a tiny seed, a plant needs moisture, a specific amount of light, and warmth, in order to sprout and to grow and mature. Though at various other stages of development other specific nutrients are required, in general, God has ordained that sunlight, water, and carbon dioxide be the fundamental

1 Canons of Dordt, Heads 3/4, Article 17

means for plants to live and prosper. Apart from these means, plants will wither and die.

God provides the means of light and warmth from the sun. Sunlight provides the energy to fuel the process of photosynthesis and the heat to protect tender cell structures. Without appropriate sunlight and its heat, a plant will neither grow sufficiently nor produce fruit. God formed tiny cell structures, called chloroplasts, to convert the sunlight's energy into energy forms that the plant uses for its own growth. The chloroplasts are so small that two thousand of them lined up next to each other are no wider than your thumbnail. In order for a plant to absorb sufficient sunlight energy, each plant needs multitudes of these chloroplasts. For example, it is estimated that a typical tree leaf contains over a million of these tiny solar-powered "factories."

In addition, a plant needs water to survive. Water is essential to a plant's existence in several ways: transporting nutrients within the plant, providing cell structure, and facilitating photosynthesis. Since water is the main component of every plant's cells, it is not surprising that the majority of a plant's mass (80-90%) is water. Since water easily dissolves nutrients, water serves an important role in transporting nutrients to the various cells throughout the plant. Water also provides turgor pressure—the necessary water pressure within the plant cell that opposes the exterior atmospheric pressure so that the plant has good structure, standing tall and firm rather than wilting. Finally, water is essential to the process of photosynthesis—having a vital role in the formation of the carbohydrates that are necessary for the plant's energy supplies.

God provides water to plants by means of rain, dew, fog, and other forms of precipitation. To appreciate the amount of water plants need, consider the following. At the peak of the growing season, one acre of corn "sweats" up to 3,000 gallons of water per day!² In the providence of God, rain and moisture within the soil provide the corn plant with sufficient water for turgor pressure, cell structure, photosynthesis, and its high transpiration rates ("sweat"). In dry climates or in times of seasonal drought, farmers often provide

thirsty plants additional water by means of irrigation. During this past summer, many of us in the USA have experienced a lack of rain, and we observed how dry the grass and soil have become.³ In such times we often pray that God might send rain!

Plants also need carbon dioxide. This too God provides. He does so by creating an atmospheric storehouse of carbon dioxide and by governing a carbon-cycle in which carbon dioxide and oxygen are recycled so that both plants and animals are constantly supplied with the air they need to live. As water is needed in the process of photosynthesis, so also is carbon dioxide.

Besides the critical raw materials that are used in photosynthesis (water, carbon dioxide, and the sunlight energy), plants also need many other nutrients for their development and growth. These too God provides. For example, dead organic material (dead leaves, manure, compost) is decomposed by micro-organisms and converted into mineral forms that the plants are able to use. Nitrogen and phosphorus are prime examples of these necessary nutrients. Nitrogen is a major component of the chlorophyll molecule which is needed in photosynthesis, while phosphorus is necessary to make protein molecules that are used to build the various plant components.

In addition to the materials and nutrients that plants need to survive, God also uses the means of worms, insects, and even humans to aid the plant in absorbing its nutrients. As worms wiggle their way through the soil, they loosen the compacted soil. This aerates the soil, providing the plant (via the roots) with necessary oxygen for its own respiration process (to burn sugar for the energy it needs for its own growth). This loosening of the soil also allows the roots to spread out and take in more nutrients. Insects like the ladybug feed upon unwanted pests, protecting the plants from damage. Bees assist plants in the fertilization process by transporting pollen. We, too, are used by God for the plants' benefit as we work the soil, weed, prune, and strategically place the plants where they can receive necessary nutrients (in a sunny location, in last year's nitrogen-rich field, etc).

As is easily observed from the previous examples,

2 "‘Corn sweat:’ What is it, and how will it make the heat wave worse?" (Doyle Rice, *USA Today*, July 21, 2025). Accessed August 18, 2025.

3 <https://droughtmonitor.unl.edu/CurrentMap/StateDroughtMonitor.aspx?conus>. Accessed August 30, 2025.

God uses *many* means to provide for the growth and development of the plants in our gardens and in the farmers' fields. We simply marvel at all the means that are organically connected and sovereignly controlled by God for each and every plant. Many means are appointed by God, apart from which the plants would not grow and develop, but would languish and die. We are thankful that God provides for the plants so that we may enjoy the beauty and fruit of our land, and we stand in wonder at the almighty operation of our sovereign God in all these things.

GOD-ORDAINED MEANS FOR OUR SPIRITUAL LIFE

As God is pleased to use means in the physical realm to support life, so God is pleased to use means to support our spiritual life. What are those means God has ordained to “[work] faith in our hearts”⁴ and “to nourish and strengthen our faith?”⁵ The preaching of the gospel and the sacraments are the means of grace that God, through the Holy Spirit, uses in the instituted church for this end. God is also pleased to use many other means for our spiritual growth, such as the study and discussion of His Word (1 Pet. 2:2), prayer,⁶ and godly instruction in our homes and schools (Prov. 4:1-13; 5:1, 2). We give thanks to God for His gracious provision of these means for our spiritual growth. How thankful we are that God, in His good pleasure, has placed us in congregations where we have grown under the faithful preaching of the gospel from a tender age. In addition, we have prospered under the faithful administration of the sacraments. We praise God for the life-sustaining means of grace!

In our gardens, we sometimes take for granted that God regularly gives sunlight, rain, carbon dioxide, and other nutrients for the plants. Only when the weather is too cold, too hot, too dry or too wet, do we give sufficient thought to God's good provisions. So it can be also in regards to God's provisions for our spiritual growth—we do not realize how much we have been given till we experience a lack of it. Let us, therefore, *continually* thank God for the ministers He has provided and daily pray to God graciously to give

us *more* faithful men to feed us with His Word! By nature we can easily despise the faithful preaching of the gospel or tire of it—failing to truly hear because we are sleeping, distracted with other thoughts or concerns, or perhaps listening with a critical spirit. Pray that God not remove this precious gift from us!

As children of God who recognize the importance of such means and are thankful for them, we must avail ourselves of these means. While plants involuntarily use the means God provides, we, as God's covenant people, *willingly* use the means God provides as good gifts for both our physical and spiritual growth. As we partake of food and drink, and as we avail ourselves of the good means of medicine and exercise, we grow and develop physically. Similarly, as we, by faith (for only those who have faith are spiritually benefited), use the means God has determined for our spiritual growth, *we grow spiritually*.

God forbid that we absent ourselves from the preaching of the gospel, neglect to partake of the Lord's Supper, or fail to bring our children for baptism. It would be detrimental to our spiritual health to separate ourselves from the church or neglect to attend the worship services. Have you seen how your plants wither, even after only a week, with no water? Why would we, even for one week, not seek to go where Christ speaks to us through the lively preaching of the Word. It is Christ—whom we hear and receive by faith in the preaching—who is the spiritual food for our souls. “But for the support of the spiritual and heavenly life, which believers have, He hath sent a living bread, which descended from heaven, namely, Jesus Christ, who nourishes and strengthens the spiritual life of believers, when they eat Him, that is to say, when they apply and receive Him by faith in the spirit.”⁷ We sinfully tempt God when we do not use the means He provides. “So even to this day, be it far from either instructors or instructed to presume to tempt God in the church by separating what He of His good pleasure hath most intimately joined together.”⁸

Though ordinarily God is pleased to use means to support our natural and spiritual life, He is, of course, not restricted to their use. God is sovereign, operating

4 Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 65

5 Belgic Confession, Article 33

6 Philippians 4:6-9; *Heidelberg Catechism* LD 45

7 Belgic Confession, Article 35

8 Canons of Dordt, Heads 3/4, Article 17

with or without them according to His good pleasure. Moses and Jesus both were sustained for 40 days without food and drink (Ex. 34:28; Matt. 4:2). In a moment the fig tree withered and died (Matt. 21:19). Whether it be by the use of means or more directly, God is accomplishing His sovereign purpose. In either case, the work is entirely His. In fact, His use of means serves only to *underscore* His sovereign power and wisdom. The proud lose sight of the fact that means are an almighty operation of God alone, and they are confounded (1 Cor. 1:27). In humility, the child of God clings to the truth of God’s sovereign use of means and praises Him for all His marvelous works. “To whom alone all the glory, both of means and of their saving fruit and efficacy, is forever due.”⁹

Therefore, we are diligent in our use of the means of grace, recognizing that this too is of God. When we, by faith, partake of the preaching and the sacraments, our faith is strengthened. That is the God-ordained way! God is not dependent upon our use of the means of grace, but He has sovereignly “chosen to exert His influence” in this way.

There is a profound beauty in all this, considering the *organic* relationship that God graciously established

9 Canons of Dordt, Heads 3/4, Article 17

with us—a shared covenant *life* with Himself and all believers. In that relationship, God deals with us not as empty, lifeless stocks but as personal, living beings—as sons and daughters, no less! We have a *living, personal* relationship with Him! He is pleased to *commune* with us—telling us what is in His heart and mind in the preaching, taking us unto Himself at baptism, fellowshiping with us around His table, always speaking to us of His love and delight in us through Jesus Christ. What a glorious privilege!

Let us, therefore, be encouraged faithfully to use the means of grace—drawing near to our God! “And as it hath pleased God, by the preaching of the gospel, to begin this work of grace in us, so He preserves, continues, and perfects it by the hearing and reading of His Word, by meditation thereon, and by the exhortations, threatenings, and promises thereof, as well as by the use of the sacraments.”¹⁰ Praise God, the God of means, for *providing* the means and *prospering the use of the means*! “To whom alone all the glory, both of means and of their saving fruit and efficacy, is forever due.”¹¹

10 Canons of Dordt, Head 5, Article 14

11 Canons of Dordt, Heads 3/4, Article 17

ANNUAL REPORT (RFPA)



RFPA ANNUAL SECRETARY REPORT

MR. RYAN KREGEL

retiring secretary of the RFPA, and member of Grandville PRC in Grandville, Michigan

We can now say that the RFPA has been publishing Reformed literature for over 100 years. That is quite the milestone. The world of the 1924 RFPA was astoundingly different than the world of the 2025 RFPA. Today we are facing challenges that may not have been imagined by the constituents of the RFPA in 1924. One of those challenges is a decline in the discipline of reading. For an institution whose mission is to distribute literature—whether in books, blogs, or magazines—in exchange for money that is a problem. Yes, the problem is financial. A readership that is trending downward also makes the association’s bottom line trend downward. Yes, we

need more financial support, but receiving more money does not fix the root issue.

The root issue is simply a lack of interest in reading. Why is that? What is different between 1924 and 2025?

TECHNOLOGY

Technology is a wonderful thing, but it is also pulling us away from taking the time to read good, quality, Reformed literature. If we tracked how much time each day we spend staring at a small, rectangularly-shaped glass screen versus how much time we spend reading, reading would most likely be far less. For some of us

that may be inevitable. Maybe the work we are engaged in requires large amounts of screen time. But what about when we are not at work? What about when we are sitting in our easy chair after dinner? Are we mindlessly scrolling through apps on our phone or are we reading books? How much of our free time do we spend engrossed in our phones?

That is what is different between 1924 and 2025. When the valuable discipline of reading a physical book suffers, the RFPA suffers. Unfortunately, the RFPA cannot fix the root issue of a lack of interest in reading.

Perhaps you are agreeing wholeheartedly with what you have read so far. That probably means you are aware of the issue and actively try to engage yourself by reading a physical book. Therein lies another problem. The people who read things like an annual RFPA secretary report are the people dedicated to reading. This report will most likely not be read by the people we want to reach most: the non-readers.

We ask for your help. We need your support in two ways. We need your financial help to continue publishing quality literature. We also need your help in reaching someone you know would not read an annual secretary report from the RFPA. While we do not necessarily need you to encourage people to read this report, we do need you to promote reading in general. If we make some headway in addressing the overall cultural problem we have when we observe a decline in the discipline of reading, we will also be making headway in addressing our financial needs. Will you commit right now to engage a non-reader within the next week? Will you commit to showing them the great gift we have in the RFPA? Will you encourage them to read?

So what has the RFPA board been up to in the past year? Below is a list of books we have published:

- *The Way, the Truth, and the Life*, book 3 by Abby VanSolkema
- *That You Might Believe*, book 4 by Abby VanSolkema
- *Go Ye Into All the World*, by Rev. Dan Holstege
- *The PRCA in America*, by Herman Hoeksema (republishing)
- *In Times of Trouble*, by Steve Kuiper
- *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, by Zacharias Ursinus

- *Grace House*, by Lee Kamminga
- *Peace in the Valley*, by Gerrit Vos
- *The Voice of Our Fathers*, by Homer Hoeksema (republishing)
- *Christ and His Church*, vol. 2 by Herman Hanko and Dan VanUffelen

The RFPA staff are instrumental in getting out each title we publish. They work diligently every step of the way, from manuscript development and editing, to shipping the finished product all over the world. In addition to the books, they work on distributing the magazines we publish: *The Standard Bearer* and our children's magazine, *Ignited by the Word*. Many thanks also to the writers and editors of these publications for their tireless efforts in bringing fresh and engaging content to our subscribers.

One major change that the board made this year was streamlining our membership levels to account for the needs of members and alleviating the high amount of administrative work needed from the staff under the old model. The new membership structure is outlined below:

CORE:

- Books represent the core of the RFPA's mission
- Likely 3 or 4 books in a calendar year
- Free shipping
- 25% off retail
- 25% off any other book purchases!
- Individually invoiced (autopay available)
- All Level 1 and Book Club members will automatically be transitioned to Core

FAMILY:

- New option designed for children and families
- Likely 3 or 4 books in a calendar year
- Free shipping
- 25% off retail
- 25% off any other book purchases!
- Individually invoiced (autopay available)

CORE+FAMILY:

- Receive all the new releases!
- Free shipping
- 25% off retail
- 25% off any other book purchases!

- Individually invoiced (autopay available)
- All Level 2 and Gold Star members will automatically be transitioned to **Core+Family**

The RFPA board consists of twelve men, with work being divided into three committees: Membership and Marketing, Children's Books and Finance, and Book and *Standard Bearer*. Working on the board is a joy. To see a book go from an idea to a written manuscript to a printed book in your hands is as fascinating as it is fulfilling. Many thanks to the men voted in at the

latest association meeting for their willingness to serve for the next three years: Derek VanOverloop, Eddie Nienhuis, Jim Holstege, and Josh Harris. Thanks also to the retiring board members: Jason Elzinga, Mark Feenstra, Ryan Kregel, and Zach Kuiper.

The board asks for your prayers and support as it begins another fiscal year of spreading Reformed literature throughout the world.

On behalf of the RFPA Board
Ryan Kregel, RFPA Secretary
September 29, 2025

HULL PRC'S 100TH ANNIVERSARY



In thankful commemoration of God's faithfulness, the Hull (Iowa) Protestant Reformed Church celebrated the 100th anniversary of our organization with the theme "Upheld With His Hand," based on Psalm 37:23: "The steps of a

good man are ordered by the LORD; and he delighteth in his way. Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down: for the LORD upholdeth him with his hand."

In celebration of this historic event, the church held an anniversary program of remembrance for church members along with brothers and sisters of our neighboring congregations on Friday, August 15, 2025. Our former pastor, Prof. R. Cammenga gave the keynote address, "Upheld by the Lord's Hand." There was also a church history presentation along with singing and special numbers from our church choir, all followed by an ice cream social. A history display room

was available for everyone to browse. This display was set up with historical memorabilia from the Hull church over the years.

More celebrations followed on Saturday morning with a softball tournament, inflatables, and devotions at noon with a picnic lunch. The afternoon started with a Book Talk/Read by Prof. R. Cammenga—"The Ten Commandments for Children"—for pre-school and



grade school children. The day ended with an organ/piano recital led by our organists and pianists, followed by a pie and ice cream social.

Commemorations concluded on Sunday morning in thankful worship with our former pastor, Rev. S. Key's message, "Rejoicing in the God of Zion." Our current

pastor, Rev. S. Regnerus delivered the final evening message, "Showing the Next



Generation.” In response of praise and song, a closing singspiration was held after the service and we were again favored with numbers from our church choir and the Sunday School children. The evening ended with our theme Psalter #55, “The Good Shepherd,” singing from our hearts, “The Lord my Shepherd holds me within His tender care....”

For 100 years, God in His mercy and grace has preserved Hull PRC faithful to His Word, not because of man but because He changes not. We give God all praise and glory with our prayer that He will continue to bless us and our children for many years to come.

BRING THE BOOKS...



The following book is reviewed by Prof. Douglas Kuiper, professor of Church History and New Testament in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary, and member of Trinity PRC in Hudsonville, Michigan

The Nicene Creed: What You Need to Know about the Most Important Creed Ever Written, by Kevin DeYoung. Wheaton: Crossway, 2025. 93 pages, softcover. \$12.99.

Today (as I write this) is May 20, 2025. Seventeen hundred years ago to the day (May 20, 325), the Council of Nicea, the First Ecumenical Council, convened. Several books have already been published this year commemorating the council’s anniversary. Some are large and scholarly.¹ Others, like this book, are small and concise.

The book’s introduction gives historical context to both the Nicene Council and the Nicene Creed. The book then explains the Creed in seven chapters. DeYoung does not comment on the entire Creed; for instance, he says rather little about God the Father, except in His relation to the Son. Chapter one defends the necessity of believing doctrinal statements, such as those included in the Creed. Chapters six and seven treat the doctrines of the church and baptism. Chapters two through five are the heart of the book, explaining those words and phrases of the creed that are most important.

I recommend reading this book for the following reasons.

1. The book is intended for the average church member. It is short (75 pages of text), small (small pages without dense font), and concise.
2. As a doctrinal history book, it explains what truths were at stake (is Christ fully God, and is the Spirit fully God), and why the church needed to defend these truths. It introduces the relevant terms that Scripture uses (*monogenes*) and that the Council used (*physis*, *substantia*, *hypostasis*, *persona*, *homoousios*, *filioque*), but it explains these terms.
3. It explains why this controversy mattered. The church prays to the triune God, worships Him, and baptizes in His name; she *must* defend the doctrine of the Trinity. Also at stake is our salvation: If Christ were not God, He could not save us (chapter four), and if the Spirit were not God, we could not have fellowship with Him (chapter five).

Though I have studied the history and doctrine of Nicea in more detail than many, I still benefitted from reading the book. First, I had not realized that the Nicene Creed’s reference to the unending kingdom of God was a response to Marcellus of Ancyra. He agreed with the orthodox that Arius was wrong, but differed on how he was wrong (59-60). The addition of these

1 Matthew Barrett, ed., *On Classical Trinitarianism: Retrieving the Nicene Doctrine of the Triune God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2024), 832 pages.

THE STANDARD BEARER

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words showed that the fathers of Nicea wanted to oppose error in any form.

Second, DeYoung emphasized that in 325, only *Christians* concerned themselves with doctrine; Rome's pagan religion had little use for doctrine (29-30). For Christians today to downplay doctrine in favor of practice is really a betrayal of our religion.

Third, DeYoung nicely reinforced the need to use non-biblical philosophical terms to express truth (45-47).

Fourth, the book taught lessons about controversy. Controversy always involves two or more parties. The parties will always talk past each other and misunderstand

each other, to some degree. The correct solution to a controversy will not always immediately appear to be the best. But in time, in God's providence, as the church's leaders grapple with *all* the issues involved, the controversy will be settled.

Despite its age, the Nicene Creed still serves us well. A wall that is quickly built might not be solid; doctrines that are hastily contrived might not be helpful. But when walls are built carefully and slowly with attention to detail, and when doctrines are hammered out carefully over time, they last.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

RESOLUTION OF SYMPATHY

The Council and congregation of Southwest PRC express their heartfelt Christian sympathy to Mrs. Evonne Kreuzer in the death of her husband, **Dr. Roderick Kreuzer**, on September 27, 2025. May she find comfort from God's Word 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."

David Rau, Vice-President
Steve Kuiper, Clerk

CLASSIS EAST

Classis East of the Protestant Reformed Churches will meet in Hudsonville PRC on Wednesday, January 14, 2026, at 8:30 A.M., the Lord willing. All material for the agenda is to be in the hands of the stated clerk by December 15 (30 days before classis convenes).

Rev. Clayton Spronk, Stated Clerk



REV. CARL HAAK

- 12/7 The Concealed Time of the Lord's Return, Mark 13:32
- 12/14 Watch!, Mark 13:33-37
- 12/21 The Wonder of Grace, Matt. 1:18-25
- 12/28 Our Comfort in the Last Days, Mark 13

