

THE STANDARD BEARER

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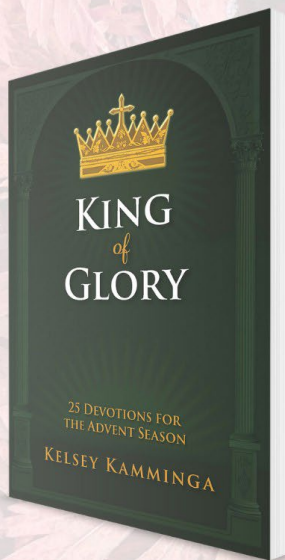
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THE PILGRIM'S GOAL

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For here we have no continuing city, but we seek one to come—Hebrews 13:14

On January 1 we enter another year, 2026. We wonder how many more we will see. We are, after all, pilgrims in the earth, on our journey to our heavenly home. Here we have no continuing city. In a city one abides, digs foundations and builds structures. A city is where people establish themselves, gather their treasures, seek their pleasures. And while we know the life of the city by our passing through, the fact remains, we are just passing through. Even if our lifetime is spent in one area, we are yet strangers, only passing through. From an outward point of view we have all earthly things in common with the children of this world. We eat the same foods and drink the same drinks. We wear the same clothes—sometimes, even to our shame, the same styles. We work in the same jobs, buy in the same stores, breathe the same air. But God's grace has distinguished us as different. Not because of anything in us; certainly not because we are better—but God's grace has made us strangers in this earth. We differ radically, absolutely. The difference is *spiritual*. We have another life, are governed by different principles, maintain other standards, have different desires and purposes. That must be our remembrance, that must be our life, also in 2026.

THE GOAL

The Christian's goal, according to the text, is an abiding city. The heavenly Jerusalem, the city of God, is the place for which we aim. We do not know much about that city. We have a partial picture of it. It is found in the Book of Revelation, as given to the apostle John. There are also glimpses found elsewhere in the Bible. But all we have seen is a glimpse, in picture form. We know only a little of its glory and beauty. The earthly images of streets of gold and gates of pearl and walls of precious stones are

only earthly images of a glorious heavenly reality. The fact is, earthly language cannot even begin to describe the magnificence of that city toward which we travel. But even those earthly images fill us with earnest expectation and longing. It is, after all, the city of God, our heavenly Father. What more needs to be said? He is everything to us! Because He made everything for His glory, that entire city is the perfect revelation of everything that God is. Everything about it shall be adapted unto the purpose of magnifying God and revealing His glory. Because in Him there is no darkness at all, there will be no night in that city. There will be no sin, no death, not even any tears. And the glory of that city will be our own joy. We will experience in a way far beyond our earthly comprehension or expectation what it is to live in the shelter of God's glory and to enjoy His fellowship and love.

A faint picture of its glory was given the people of God in the Old Testament temple. Once upon a time, you could enter the gates of Jerusalem, and ask directions to the dwelling place of God. They would point you to the temple, that great structure built to reflect the glory of Solomon's kingdom. And if, having approached that temple and entering through its outer gates, you asked again where you might find the place where God was, they would point toward the inner sanctuary. But they would also warn you that you may not enter there into the presence of the Holy God! It was all such a faint picture of the tabernacle of God that is now with men.

Then Christ came! He came to fulfill the promise of God's covenant. He came as God in the flesh, to dwell with us in the fellowship of love. He went to the cross in order to establish that covenant and to reconcile us unto God. And He ascended into heaven to prepare a place for us in that city which we now seek. Meanwhile, He continues to dwell with us by His Spirit. Each Lord's

Day He calls us together in order that we might receive a taste of His blessed fellowship and be renewed in the spirit of our minds, called to the holiness without which no man shall see the Lord. But also this is only a faint picture of the reality that awaits us in that heavenly city for which we long.

That city which is our goal is most glorious because it is the place where we shall see God in the face of Jesus Christ our Redeemer. There we will see Him who came into this world for us and in our flesh. There we will see Him who suffered and died for us, who went to the cross in our place and for our salvation, and who rose again that we might have life and a place in that city. We will see Him who is our Bridegroom, the Bridegroom of the church. We will see Him whose love for us has no bounds. And in Him God Himself shall be with us and be our God! In and with Jesus we shall enjoy the fellowship of the God of our salvation!

And because this Savior is the Savior of a *people*, the heavenly Jerusalem shall be the home and place of reunion and communion for all the elect of God throughout the ages. Think of that! There we shall enjoy fellowship and communion with all the saints who have gone before us. There shall be Adam and Abel and Seth, Enoch and Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David and Solomon. There will be Rahab and Ruth, Mary the mother of our Lord, and Mary Magdalene. Mary and Martha and Lazarus will be there. Peter and Paul, James and John and all Jesus' disciples, Aquila and Priscilla, Phebe that blessed sister in Christ, Timothy and Silas. There will be the unnamed saints, who gave their lives for the testimony of Jesus Christ, of whom the writer to the Hebrews spoke in Hebrews 11. There will be the men whom God used for the great reformation of His church in the sixteenth century. There will be our own spiritual forefathers. There will be those little ones of Jesus, who served their purpose on earth in but a short time. And though all had sinned, we shall see that all guilt and shame had been removed from them. We all shall be clothed in the white robes of Christ's righteousness.

Furthermore, that city is the victorious city, the city of perfection. No enemy shall be able to enter her gates. All those who formerly harassed and opposed and persecuted those who sojourned to that city, all the unbelieving and abominable and murderers and whoremongers and sorcerers and idolaters and liars

shall have no part in that city, according to Revelation 21:8, but shall have their part with the old Serpent in the lake that burneth with fire and brimstone. In the city of God there shall be peace, perfect peace. God Himself shall have dried the eyes of His tear-stained children, and shall have filled their hearts with everlasting joy. By the light of His glory we shall see. In His light we shall walk. The glorious city of God, the chief joy of all God's children—that is the pilgrim's goal, the place toward which we journey. It is, for you, is it not?

THE PILGRIMAGE

But for now the pilgrimage continues. Press on, Christian! Here we have no continuing city. That we must remember as we enter the year 2026. That is not merely because everything here is consumed by death. That is true enough. "The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away" (Ps. 90:10). Death is a stark reality. The life of generation after generation is like a passing show, set on the conveyor belt of time. The son of this world might dig deeply and lay his foundations ever so solidly. He might close his eyes to the reality of fleeting things and proudly raise his kingdom. But all things loudly preach to all men: Get your house in order, for you shall die. Yet a little while and the world and the things of this world shall perish. That is true, but that is not the perspective here.

The writer to the Hebrews writes to the church. He points to the fact that we have no abiding city here. And therefore his emphasis is on the truth that we have nothing here spiritually. We are pilgrims—not only because all things pass away, but because of the very state and condition of our souls and because our perspective is different. We are strangers here because we have been born from above. "Being born from above"—unbelievers do not know that language. But we have received a new life through the resurrection of Jesus Christ and by the work of His Holy Spirit. That new life is from above, from heaven. It is the life of that city for which we look and toward which we travel. Because of that new life, no matter where we look in this world, we cannot find that which can satisfy and where we would say, "This is where I would establish myself and find my permanence."

So we continue our journey, seeking the city that abides and which is our home. Our pilgrimage is a necessity. “We seek.” The inspired writer states this as a simple fact. That we have here no continuing city is a fact. But for that very reason it is also a fact that we seek one to come. That is the life of Christ in us! We who are citizens of that new city, and who therefore know our bond of fellowship with Him who owns that city, do indeed long for and press toward that goal. That is the life of the Christian. Yes, our old man yet clings to the things of this earth. But in Christ, by that new life that is ours, we love God, His Christ, and His people. And therefore it is the irresistible longing of our hearts to be delivered from that which is earthly and to enjoy the liberty of the children of God in the new heavens and the new earth. We sing it with the psalmist: “When I in righteousness at last Thy glorious face shall see; when all the weary night is past and I awake with thee to view the glories that abide, then, then, I shall be satisfied” (Ps. 17).

So we seek the city that abides, which God has prepared for us. Though we have only a faint picture of that city, the way to that city has been clearly marked out for us by our heavenly Father. It starts outside the gate. That is the context of Hebrews 13:14. Outside the gate and outside the camp is the starting point for our journey toward the heavenly Jerusalem. Outside Jerusalem, on a hill, at a place called Golgotha, you and I begin our journey to heaven. For there, on a cross, the Man of sorrows shed His blood, in order that we might have properly washed garments to enter the abiding city of life and joy. That the place is outside the gate means it was the place of a castaway. The world would not have that Christ of God. Jerusalem, whose spiritual name is Sodom and Gomorrah, would not have Him. They cast Him out, outside the gate, outside the camp. But that is the way, the starting point, to the city that abides. That is the connection between our text and what precedes. Go outside the gate, therefore, by faith. Have your garments washed in His blood. That is the way that leads home, also today.

Understand well, to go that way you will also bear His reproach. That also is the guide on the way that leads to heaven. Jesus said, “The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you” (John 15:20). Paul confirms that when we writes to Timothy, “All that will live godly in Christ

Jesus shall suffer persecution” (2 Tim. 3:12). Set your affection on the things above. Know that you will have to bear reproach for it. If you are walking the way the world walks, you are on the wrong pathway. Of that you may be certain. The way of heaven is the straight and narrow way, the way of the minority, the way marked out by the Word. And it is the way of mockery and reproach and tribulation. But seek the city. Know that it is more precious than all the treasures of this world. Know that there and there alone are pleasures forevermore. Long for it. Strive for it. Fight for it. Suffer for it. The way of the cross is the way that leads home. And so we seek. You do, do you not? Having no continuing city here, we seek one to come.

THE PROMISE

God promises that it shall surely come. It is literally the *coming city*. Its glory is not yet revealed. Before that happens, many things must yet be fulfilled. The year 2026 will serve its coming, as have all the years gone by. We watch, taking it all in, not knowing just when we shall see that heavenly city. But we live in hope. And in hope we are saved.

But the coming of that city is sure. It is sure because God has prepared the city in eternity. From before the foundation of the world He determined that a people should serve Him and live with Him in heavenly and everlasting perfection. He prepared the people and the city, even writing the names of its citizens on the palms of His hands (Is. 49:16). Do not forget that. But He has also realized His counsel in Christ. In His death the foundations of the city were laid. And He rose again from the dead and ascended into heaven to prepare a place for us—for us personally. Do you believe that? And when He has prepared a place for us, He will come again, and receive us unto Himself, that where He is, we may be also (John 14:2-3). That is His sure promise.

We enter another year. It is but another step in the journey. Look ahead. Look for the abiding city, the coming city. It is coming. Christ is coming! Yet a little suffering, a little struggle, and this present sojourn shall be over. The goal lies before us, as does the crown. It is a crown of victory. Then we shall see that city, the city which has foundations, where God shall be all in all, and where we shall live in His glorious presence forevermore. Press on toward the goal!



DWELLING TOGETHER IN UNITY IN THE SCHOOL (2)

PROF. CORY GRIESS

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INTRODUCTION

In my previous article (see December 2025, p. 101), I pointed out that the foundation for unity in the Reformed Christian school is biblical, creedal truth. On that foundation all involved in the life of the school can effectively handle the twofold concern that can at times create division in the school community; namely, the concern to maintain the whole/institution and the concern to care for the individual student. I stated that we maintain unity in the school on that foundation by working to keep and preserve the whole without idolizing it or worshiping it, while simultaneously working for the good of individual students without worshiping or idolizing any one of them. Let's begin by explaining the latter.

SEEKING THE GOOD OF THE INDIVIDUAL

Each individual student in each school is important. The school exists for the benefit of each student, and parents rightly seek the good of their individual covenant child in the school. They may not always do so in a godly manner, but the seeking itself is a righteous impulse. God gave *these* students with their gifts to *these* parents that the parents might steward them for God's glory in service to Christ and His body. The teacher who stands *in loco parentis* must do so in this respect also, that he seeks the holistic good of the individual child along with the parents of that child.

In order to seek the good of the individual student, the teachers, administration, board, and society do their best to offer a diversity of courses and resources to develop the students' individual abilities. Of course, each institution has limited resources, and each school has its own circumstances and stage of development. Nonetheless, institutions strive to provide for each student as they are able.

At the same time, each teacher within each institution cares for each individual student in the class, treating the child not merely as a number but as an individual person uniquely created by God and redeemed by grace. Teachers give each child law and gospel and law again, even while teaching Math and English and Science.¹ Teachers may naturally develop closer relationships to some students than to others, but teachers must care for and seek to assist all of them. Sometimes a teacher even leaves the ninety-nine behind for a time if need be to seek out the one sheep for encouragement, or for corrective, careful discipline.

THE ERROR OF INDIVIDUALISM

At the same time, a focus on the individual can devolve into *individualism*, which is idolatry of an individual child or a particular group of children. *Individualism* is a particular danger in this day and age. Every American generation after the baby boomers has become increasingly individualistic and obsessed with self.² One well-regarded psychologist who studies these matters concluded that since the boomer generation, progressively ours "is a culture that teaches the primacy of the individual at virtually every step."³ Regarding the youth, "Young people have been consistently taught to put their own needs first and to focus on feeling good about themselves."⁴ To be sure, we need a qualification

1 It is my conviction that the law-gospel distinction ought to be known as the law-gospel-law distinction instead, following the "Guilt-Grace-Gratitude" pattern.

2 The baby-boomer generation are those between 61 and 79 years old.

3 Jean M. Twenge, *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable Than Ever Before* (Free Press, 2006), 8.

4 Twenge, *Generation Me*, 7.

here. As we said, there should be a *proper* focus on the individual. And a child should be taught that another's behavior destructive to oneself may not stand and must be reported without fear of retribution. At the same time, I think we would have to put our heads in the sand to think that individualism is not affecting us.

Teachers can be guilty of individualism by falling into favoritism, giving time and attention to one student or one group of students while repeatedly neglecting other students. Rather than leaving the ninety-nine behind temporarily to retrieve the one lost sheep, favoritism selfishly pursues the one or the few sheep while leaving the rest without much attention and care.

Parents and students can also fall into individualism. Parents can act as though their child is the only one that matters. They can fail to recognize that there are necessary things that have to be done for the sake of the whole. Some of these things may necessarily curb the desires of their individual child, requiring the student and his/her parents to sacrifice for the sake of the whole school community. It is spiritually good for a child to experience this to some extent. God calls Christians to sacrifice for the body of Christ throughout life. However, parents and students can be tempted to grow angry or resentful when their individual desires are not granted, or they may grow impatient as they wait for the school to develop to the point where it can provide the opportunities for which they are looking. When individualism reigns, the result is arrogant outrage and even tirades.

If unchecked, individualism in parents, students, or communities develops into a view of the covenant school that imagines the school is no different than the grocery store, dentist office, or mechanic shop. In other words, the family's relationship to the school devolves into something merely transactional. "I am here to purchase an education for my child, and that is all." To be sure, payment for a service rendered is *part* of the relationship of a family to the school. In paying tuition a family expects a faithful covenant education for their child in return. But though the relationship is not less than that, it may not be *merely* that. A covenant parent is not *merely* a consumer and the school the supplier of a product, so that if the parent does not like something about the product, his commitment immediately wanes or ends. Life in the school goes beyond what one is

buying for the child. This is a *covenantal* school, and there is a commitment to the covenantal goals and covenant people as a whole. There has to be if there is going to be unity!

I have probably used this language myself before, but I now attempt to avoid phrases such as, "We *use* _____ school," or "My family *uses* _____ school," or the question, "Does your family *use* _____ school?" I understand the point of such language, but words matter. Is this what we want to communicate about sending our children to the Christian school out of a covenantal conviction: "I *use* _____ school" like I *use* _____ grocery store, or I *use* _____ dentist, or I *use* _____ dry cleaner? This language is devoid of covenantal consciousness that cares for this institution and these people as a whole—as part of a body. When I use a certain grocery store, I do not have a concern (other than the general concern of loving the neighbor) for the body of people who make use of that particular grocery store. It is a business, and my relationship to it is business-like, not covenantal. In contrast, my relationship to the school ought to include holistic concern for the institution and the community of people that it serves.

We must reject selfish individualism on the part of parents and students. Doing so does not excuse failures on the part of any teacher or board or school. Neither may the school administration or staff use the accusation of individualism as a wastebasket to dismiss constructive help so that if ever we are called out on an error we retort, "I can ignore the criticism because the critic is probably an individualist!" But in preaching, teaching, and writing we must push back against true individualism. Every family has to recognize that they and their child *will* give something up for the sake of the whole. Some aspect of what they desired will likely die for the sake of the body. The very fact that there is a flock of sheep to care for, and an institution to maintain, requires it.

THE ERROR OF TYRANNY

Yet, in the right seeking of the good of the whole, there is a danger that we go to the opposite extreme. This is the danger of tyranny; the danger of neglecting an individual, or some individuals, for the sake of the whole, the institution, or other individuals we deem more valuable to the whole or the institution. Tyranny is unjustly putting the institution above the legitimate

and reasonable needs of an individual sheep. One horrific example of this is hiding terrible sin on the part of one in a position of authority, which sin has harmed an individual sheep or could lead to such harm, for the sake of guarding the standing and reputation of the institution or staff member. This has happened. More than once. And is evidence that this tyranny is not a danger foreign to us. God forbid it!

There are other temptations in this regard. A teacher, principal, or school board may be tempted to scoff at or dismiss parents who carefully express concerns about weaknesses in a school or a teacher, or who have concerns about the needs of a child. Individuals or groups of individuals with powerful personalities and strong opinions may be tempted to dominate decision-making, even at times when the decisions are not theirs to make. And others who should not allow it may fail to stop it. Certain people who give much money, or who are esteemed, or who have powerful connections may be allowed to use their resources to “purchase” opportunities for their child(ren) in the school that others do not have. Conversely, those who “seem to have it all” may be unjustly “punished” by a teacher in an attempt to “humble them a little bit.” In another example, a teacher or administration may be tempted to take advantage of those in the covenant community who are very much committed to the right view of the school. The teacher or administration may realize they can get away with bowling over this child a bit because the child’s parents have a strong covenant consciousness, and they will not squawk about it.

All these examples and more exhibit tyranny of the institution, the opposite ditch of individualism. Maintaining the whole or the institution must not involve neglecting, dismissing, or unjustly treating individual students.

There was a phrase used repeatedly when I was growing up, the sentiment behind which phrase I appreciate even as I write: “The teacher is always right.” The sentiment is one of respect and honor of teachers, which is necessary. But the phrase itself is not true and can lead to blind acceptance of sin. The teacher *usually* is right, and regardless, ought to be honored and respected as demanded in the fifth commandment. But the teacher is not necessarily always right. Neither

is the minister or the professor. No one ought to be above accountability, or tyranny will reign.

I believe these are the right principles: The institution must work to minimize the sacrifice of the *well-being* of the individual child for the sake of the whole, and never sacrifice the *being* of any individual child for the sake of the whole. Conversely, the parents and child must understand, they might have to sacrifice something of the (perceived) *well-being* of the child for the sake of the whole, always limited, and never may they sacrifice the child’s *being*.

For the institution to fail to do the first is tyranny. For the parents to fail to be willing to do the latter is individualism. When both carry out these principles, there can be unity.

SPIRITUAL NECESSITIES

In order for these principles to be carried out on the foundation of biblical and creedal truth, the members of the school community must possess certain spiritual qualities. The apostle Paul speaks of them in Ephesians 4:2-3: “With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” The apostle is answering the question, “How do you keep (guard) the unity?” He answers, with four spiritual qualities: “lowliness of mind, meekness, longsuffering, and forbearing one another in love.”

“Lowliness of mind” is humility. It is putting oneself lower than the other in one’s own mind, esteeming the other better than oneself. It is realizing there is a child of God before me, bought with the blood of the Lamb, and it is behaving accordingly. “Meekness” is gentleness or mildness. It is not weakness. It is not being a pushover. It is thinking before you speak, speaking calmly and carefully, looking for the good of the other, and refusing to blow up even about legitimate concerns. “Longsuffering” is being willing to suffer long for the sake of others. It involves patience and waiting on God’s will, especially in difficult situations. “Forbearing one another” is enduring one another’s weaknesses and sins, even if we must deal rightly with sins that may not be covered (1 Pet. 4:8). The Bible uses the word “forbearing” when it describes enduring persecution and bearing up

under its difficulty since it is God's will (1 Cor. 4:12). Is not the life of the school, as the life of the church, the place where we learn to bear with one another?

This forbearing is only possible with true agape love. "Forbearing one another *in love*." As Christ has borne my sins and endured so much for me in agape love, so I must bear much in my dealings with others. "Forbearing *one another* in love." Each is called to forbear regardless of whether or not the other is forbearing. Yet Paul envisions God's people *mutually* bearing one another's weaknesses this way. Imagine each individual member of the school community wrapped in a two-foot-thick foam piece called agape.

Insulated in this way, each individual is able to absorb the weaknesses and coverable sins of others. Love bears it, endures it, without breaking fellowship.

Following Paul's instruction in Ephesians 4 allows us to walk worthy of the vocation wherewith we are called (v. 1). We do not have this agape in us by nature. But we have been called out of a kingdom where the individual seeks only his own and where the whole and institutions seek their own advantage at the expense of the individual. We have been called into a kingdom built on agape, where the concern of the individual and of the whole can fit together beautifully, seeking the good of one another in the bond of peace.

LETTERS

Dear editors,

I would like to express my appreciation for the editorial by Rev. Josh Engelsma in the November (2025) issue of the *Standard Bearer* ("A Warning to the PRCA Against Legalism"). His article points us to the very real threat of legalism, manifested by denominational pride and dead orthodoxy, which are among the greatest dangers that conservative Reformed and Presbyterian churches face. In addition to his timely *diagnosis* of the problem, I also appreciated his *prescription* for addressing it—a continuous call for members of the church to personal faith in Jesus Christ and a deeper understanding of the beautiful doctrine of justification.

This prescription stands in contrast to progressive calls for change that have often been the answer to legalism and dead orthodoxy. Over the past century many formerly orthodox Christian denominations have made the right diagnosis but addressed the problem with a wrong prescription. Instead of a return to sound teaching and a call to personal faith, they have chased after a seemingly unending list of changes, especially to corporate worship. Modern Bible versions based on poor translation methods, novel church liturgies, and an ever-growing list of social outreach programs were often adopted in the name of combating legalism. While the many changes initially stimulated enthusiasm among members, they failed to provide a lasting treatment to the creeping rot of dead orthodoxy. The result has been a massive decline in church membership among these denominations.

Change is not wrong in itself—so long as the change

is driven by a godly desire to better align our practices with God's Word. But change is no antidote to legalism, as what is "new" will eventually become a faded tradition with time. If progressive change is the solution, then change can never end. Instead of falling into this trap, let us pursue with all our hearts "the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus [our] Lord...that [we] may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings" (Phil. 3:8, 10).

Sincerely,

Brendan Looyenga

Jenison, MI

RESPONSE

Dear Brendan,

Thank you for your thoughtful response to my recent editorial. I heartily concur with what you write about the mistake of trying to combat legalism with external changes. Legalism is a weed of the heart, which means that it can only be uprooted by the gospel of free justification by faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. Even though a legalistic spirit places its confidence in external things—such as what Bible version a church uses, certain liturgical practices, or any other number of things—the answer, as you rightly point out, is not found in sweeping changes to those external things. Many of those external things have an important place in the Christian life, when rightly understood, and we ought to be very careful about quickly charging others with legalism for wanting to maintain them in their

proper place. The danger of trying to address legalism with external changes seems to me to be twofold: first, that an individual deceives himself into thinking that making these external changes has delivered him from legalism, when in fact he has only placed his confidence in some new external thing; second, that when a number of individuals push for external changes as the answer to legalism, they might subtly (albeit unwittingly) set up a new standard by which others are judged to be

good Christians or not (for example, “If you are not on board with what we are promoting, then you are not a mature Christian”). What a noxious weed is legalism! May God drive it from us by impressing upon our hearts ever more deeply the precious reality of our gracious salvation and strengthening our faith and trust in Jesus Christ alone!

Your brother in Christ,
Rev. J. Engelsma

ALL AROUND US



NO CORRUPT COMMUNICATION

REV. DAVID NOORMAN

pastor of Georgetown PRC in Hudsonville, Michigan

Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers—Ephesians 4:29

“THE DEPTH OF EVERYDAY WORDS”

Ten thousand...give or take a few. That’s how many words the average speaker utters each day. And according to James, those ten thousand are no mere sounds. Every word is a rudder or a flame (Jam. 3:4, 6), a blessing or a curse (Jam. 3:9), wondrous water or stinging salt (Jam. 3:11), a fig or an olive or a grape (Jam. 3:12). Every word has substance, flavor, direction, power. Every word is alive and active for a time, though only the words of God are always living and active in the high and holy sense (Heb. 4:12). Our words have a God-given vitality and depth that often goes unnoticed. What might happen if we paused to notice?¹

Above is the thought-provoking introduction to Pierce Taylor Hibbs’ article in *Tabletalk*. How many of our 10,000 words come off our tongues without a thought? How often do our words do damage that we never consider? Have we utilized the opportunity

to use our words profitably, for the edification of our neighbors?

The main thrust of Hibbs’ article is that we should consider the “depth” of our words. Not just their meaning, but their direction, their effect, their power, and their purpose. This depth of our words follows from the truth that words and human language are gifts from God, rather than a natural evolutionary instinct.

Origins are tied to purpose. If words just “happen to be,” then that gives us free reign to make them whatever we want them to be, to change their meaning, or even to tear them away from reality.... In contrast, God tells us that words come from Him. With mystery and beauty, He determines their meaning, use, and effect. He is the Lord of language. And His words are upholding, guiding, and directing whatever words fall from our lips.²

Hibbs goes on to expound on the depth and dimensions of ordinary words and phrases that we use every day. Sometimes Hibbs’ theological reasoning is difficult to follow (for me, at least), but still, his article is stimulating and edifying. Consider the depth, the direction, the impact, and the weight of *your* words.

1 Pierce Taylor Hibbs, “The Depth of Everyday Words.” *Tabletalk Magazine*, August 27, 2025. <https://tabletalkmagazine.com/posts/the-depth-of-everyday-words>.

2 Hibbs, “The Depth of Everyday Words.”

We will have to account even for our idle words in the day of judgment (Matt. 12:36).

“WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE”

Perhaps the most obvious abuse of words is also very common: cursing, swearing, and all kinds of bad words are heard everywhere today, including (sadly) among Christians. We should know better, and we ought to do better.

Pastor Matthew Capone wrote on this subject in response to a recent article in *The New York Times*. The *Times* article is written by Dr. Mark Edmundson, an English professor at the University of Virginia.³ Edmundson explains that nasty language and vulgar words denigrate and diminish, but he is not willing to condemn such language. For Edmundson, bad language has its place, but “obscenity loses its power and meaning in ubiquity.”⁴ In other words, bad language is not always bad, only if you use it too much.

Capone makes the Christian applications that Edmundson does not:

Our words reveal our view of God even when we are not using his name. A statement about a work of art is also a statement about the artist. When we compare creation to excrement, we insult the creator. We do the same when we speak crassly of God’s great gift of sexual intimacy. Cursing other humans usurps God’s role of judge. Our attempts at authenticity become accusations against God. Mr. Edmundson is correct that these make the world “smaller and meaner.” Christians know exactly why: Profanity devalues God and his beautiful creation....

As an English Professor at the University of Virginia, Edmundson knows how language works. It can expand or shrink our world. As Christians, we know why: The God who created language also created the heavens and the earth. Whenever we speak, we ultimately speak of Him. Cursing does not necessarily reveal a meager vocabulary or low intelligence; but it does show a deficit of wonder and imagination.⁵

In conclusion, Capone also presents a biblical corrective:

Christians need replacements for the temptations of profanity. Instead of cursing others, we can use the words of Psalm 58, 82, 103 or 109 to cry out to God for justice; He tells us in Romans 12:19 that vengeance is his territory. Instead of venting our frustrations with crude language, we must rediscover the gift of lament. We can turn to passages like Psalm 13 or 61 to express our hurt and frustration. Profanity is a poor substitute for the riches of expression God provides for us in His word.

Authenticity is not an absolute or unqualified good. While appropriate at times, it can also degrade and warp us and others. Let’s use language that expands our world rather than shrinking it. Doing so makes our lives much brighter. Even more importantly, it honors God.⁶

The lessons of youth still apply. Let’s watch our language. “Put away from thee a froward mouth, and perverse lips put far from thee” (Prov. 4:23).

WATCHING OUR WORDS ONLINE

Alongside of the spoken word, we must examine our use of the written word, including on social media. There are ways to speak the truth in love (even online), but contentious, evil, and destructive speech seem to be the norm on the internet.

Randy Alcorn recently warned against one form of evil communication online:

In this age of social media, I’ve seen Bible-believing, Christ-centered people post thoughts online only to receive a string of hypercritical responses from people who wield Scripture verses like pickaxes, swiftly condemning the slightest hint of a viewpoint they consider suspicious. Others quickly join the fray, and soon it appears that no one has bothered to read what the blogger actually said. Responders assume the worst, not giving the benefit of the doubt and engaging in shotgun-style character assassination. If I were an unbeliever reading such responses, I certainly wouldn’t be drawn to the Christian faith.

I wonder why it’s not immediately recognized by those engaging in such behavior that what they’re doing is utterly contrary to the faith they profess

3 Mark Edmundson, “Why Does Everybody Swear All the Time Now?” *The New York Times*, September 14 2025. <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/09/14/opinion/culture/curse-words-profanity-swearing.html>.

4 Edmundson.

5 Matthew Capone, “Watch Your Language: *The New York Times* Knows That Profane Language Matters—And So

Should We,” *WORLD News Group*, October 7, 2025, <https://wng.org/opinions/watch-your-language-1759807463>.

6 Capone.

and the Bible they believe. How is it that perpetual disdain, suspicion, unkindness, and hostility are seen as taking the spiritual high ground?⁷

As Alcorn indicates in his title, this behavior is contrary to God's Word, "...let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath" (Jam. 1:19).

There are other temptations involving online communication. Some of the most viral, wide-spread, and engaging online posts are those that are the most contentious; but Proverbs 20:3 teaches "It is an honor for a man to cease from strife: but every fool will be meddling." Even consuming (reading, following, or seeking out) evil communication is unwise; Proverbs 4:23 commands us, "Keep [guard] thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life."

I have wondered how our personal lives, marriages, families, congregations, and communities would benefit

7 Randy Alcorn, "Are We Slow to Speak and Rush to Judgment on Social Media?," *EPM Resources*, November 14, 2025, <https://www.epm.org/resources/2025/Nov/14/rush-judgment-social-media/>.

and grow if we collectively and decisively removed ourselves from social media. How much time would be gained for profitable pursuits? How much strife would simply go away? How many destructive words would go unwritten? And how many souls would be spared that destruction?

Ultimately, corrupt communication is not a product of the internet or of social media. Evil words—by any means and in any forum—proceed out of our hearts (Luke 6:45), and our hearts are deceitful above all things, desperately and unfathomably wicked (Jer. 17:9). We need new hearts, which God gives in the work of regeneration. Out of the new heart we speak the truth, in love, with grace, but our sinful flesh still cleaves to us and we still bring forth corrupt communication.

For now we may rejoice in the small beginning of sanctified obedience, and we look forward to perfect sanctification—even a tongue tamed by the Spirit! Until then, the way of wisdom always includes carefulness and restraint. "Let thy words be few" (Eccl. 5:2).

TAKING HEED TO THE DOCTRINE



THE ORDO SALUTIS (9)

GLORIFICATION: THE GLORY WHICH SHALL BE REVEALED IN US

REV. MARTYN MCGEOWN

pastor of Providence PRC in Hudsonville, Michigan

For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us—Romans 8:18

INTRODUCTION

Glorification is the final step in our salvation: "Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called; and whom he called, them he also justified; and whom he justified, *them he also glorified*" (Rom. 8:30). Glorification is the final step because there is nothing after it: when we are glorified, our salvation will be complete and we will have reached the goal that God ordained for us. Paul sets glorification before

us, especially as we suffer, as an incentive for us to persevere. There is suffering in the Christian life, but continue to hope because there is glory at the end.

WHAT IT IS

Glorification is the final salvation of the elect sinner and his reception into eternal life. There are several aspects to glorification. First, glorification is final salvation: it is the perfection of salvation. Second, glorification is the enjoyment of eternal life, which is perfect, unending life, which consists in knowing God through Jesus Christ forever. Third, glorification is the perfection of sanctification: only those whom God has begun

to make holy in this life are perfectly sanctified, and therefore glorified, in the world to come. Glorification, then, is freedom from *all* sin (its guilt, its power, its pollution, and even its presence) and perfect conformity to the image of Jesus Christ.

Glorification occurs in three stages in the child of God. First, we receive the gift of eternal life at the point of regeneration. In a certain sense, we have received the whole of salvation already in seed form or as a beginning. The Christian life really consists of the blossoming of the life contained within that seed. If in this life the seed is planted, glorification is the final blooming of the rose, except that the rose will never wilt or fade away. That is why Jesus says that believers “have passed from death to life” (John 5:24). That is why Paul says that we already “sit in heavenly places” (Eph. 2:6). And that is why Paul says, “Your life is hid with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3). Thus we confess in Heidelberg Catechism, A. 58: “Since I now feel in my heart the beginning of eternal joy.”

Second, we are glorified in the soul at the point of death. When the Christian dies, the struggle with sin comes to an end, the soul is immediately taken up to Christ its Head, and the child of God enters conscious bliss in heavenly glory. “Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel and afterward receive me to glory” (Ps. 73:24).

Third, we are glorified in the body in the final resurrection on the Last Day. Most believers, unless they live until the second coming of the Lord, will die. While the soul is immediately glorified, the body will be buried and it shall see corruption. Therefore, it too must share in the glory of salvation: “So also is the resurrection of the dead: it is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption: it is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory: it is sown in weakness; it is raised in power” (1 Cor. 15:42-43).

The creeds speak of glorification: “He shall translate me with all His chosen ones to Himself into heavenly joys and glory” (Heidelberg Catechism, A. 52). “My body, being raised by the power of Christ, shall be reunited with my soul, and made like unto the glorious body of Christ” (HC, A. 57). “After this life I shall inherit perfect salvation” (HC, A. 58). “And for a gracious reward the Lord will cause them to possess such a glory as never entered into the heart of man to conceive” (Belgic Confession, Art. 37). “And having

powerfully preserved them in the fellowship of His Son finally to glorify them for the demonstration of His mercy and for the praise of His glorious grace” (Canons 1.7).

The Bible calls this future blessedness, this final salvation, “glory.” Glory is an important biblical word. The Hebrew word for glory is *chabod*. We are familiar with the name *Ichabod*: if *chabod* is glory, *Ichabod* is “no glory.” When the Philistines captured the ark of the covenant, the wife of Phinehas the priest cried out, “Ichabod: the glory of the Lord is departed,” or no glory. The word *chabod* or glory means “heavy or weighty.” The idea is that something glorious has weight, significance, or substance. Paul expresses this idea in 2 Corinthians 4:17 when he speaks of a “weight of glory.”

The Greek word for glory is *doxa*. We are familiar with the word “doxology,” a word of glory, usually a song of praise. The word *doxa* means brightness or shining: the sun has glory, the stars have glory—they shine. God has glory—He shines. Jesus is “the brightness of God’s glory” (Heb. 1:3)—He shines. Glory, then, is the splendor, the brightness, the magnificence, the excellence of God, according to which He is weighty or significant. He shines forth as the sum of all perfections. God’s glory is the shining forth of His holiness, righteousness, wisdom, power, goodness, and truth.

God is glorious. Christ is glorious. One day, we will be glorious—that *is* glorification. This does not mean that we will be glorious of ourselves or that we will be worshiped or adored, but it means that we will forever, and perfectly reflect the glory of God. Romans 8 is only one of many passages of the Word of God that teaches this truth. In verses 14-18 the subject is the privileges of the children of God: we are led by the Spirit of God (v. 14); we have received the Spirit of adoption (v. 15) so that we are assured of our adoption; we are heirs (v. 17).

What, then, do we inherit? In a word, we inherit “glory.” In verse 18 Paul speaks of the “glory which shall be revealed in us.” That glory—that *chabod* (that weightiness or heaviness), that *doxa* (that brightness or shining forth of God’s perfections)—shall be revealed *in* us. In our soul and in our body God’s glory shall shine forth, reflected in thousands of ways in us, through us, and by us. That glory shall be the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ to whom we are united by the Spirit. That

will be a complete and utter transformation. Now we are mean, base, and shameful; our souls are polluted, our minds are defiled, and our bodies are affected by the infirmities of the flesh. One day we shall be glorious: Jesus “shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body” (Phil. 3:21). In a word, “glory” for us is holiness, which is separation from sin, consecration to God, deliverance from the power, filth, pollution, and even the presence of sin; and holiness is perfect devotion to God in love. That is glory.

The glory that we inherit is the glory of Jesus Christ. Indeed, explains Paul, “we are heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ” (v. 17). What Christ inherits, we also inherit. In verse 17 the apostle teaches that we will be “glorified together.” The word is literally *co-glorified*. Our glorification is inseparably connected to Christ’s glorification: glorified with Christ; glorified together; co-glorified. Jesus Christ has already received His glory. He has glory as the eternal Son of God, which is His essential glory, the glory of His person. He has glory also as the incarnate Mediator, as the man Jesus; that glory is *given to Him*: “And now, O Father, glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was” (John 17:5). In John 17:24 Jesus prays, “Father, I will that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am, that they may behold my glory which thou hast given me.”

That glory shall be revealed or publicly unveiled. Presently, the glory is hidden, but one day every eye shall see the glory, not only of Jesus, but also of the children of God, the glory that we have in Jesus Christ. That glory shall be revealed *in us*: we will not only witness it, but we will partake of the glory. We will be glorified body and soul, so that our whole being will shine with the glory of God in Jesus Christ. That is not because we deserve it—God forbid that we should think that—but because we are in Jesus Christ: chosen in Christ, redeemed by Christ, united to Christ. He, the Head, is glorified; we, the members, will be glorified with Him.

OUR PREPARATION FOR IT

Not everyone will be glorified. Glorification is final salvation. Therefore, only those who are regenerated, called, converted, have saving faith, are justified, sanctified, and preserved will be glorified. If you are a

believer in Jesus Christ, you will be glorified. The Bible gives a description of those who *will be* glorified and those who *will not be* glorified in Daniel 12:2-3: “And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars forever and ever.” Those who are called “wise” and who “turn many to righteousness” shall be glorified. Others, who are the wicked, will suffer “shame and everlasting contempt.” Similar is Matthew 13:43: “Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father.” It is the righteous, not the unrighteous, who shall be glorified. The same parable speaks of “them which do iniquity.” They shall not be glorified, but cast into a furnace of fire. Or Romans 8:30, “Whom he justified, them he also glorified.” Unbelievers, who are never justified, will also not be glorified.

There is also a path to glory, a way by which God brings us to glory, the way of suffering. In verse 17 we read, “If so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together.” The sufferings of which Paul writes are sufferings *with Him*, sufferings *with Christ*. These are sufferings that we endure because of our connection to Jesus Christ: the mockery, the ridicule, and the opposition of the world; the hatred of friends and family; the loss of place, position, and honor in the world because of our confession of the gospel. Do not confuse these with the sufferings that we might encounter as consequences for our sins and folly. “For this is thankworthy, if a man for conscience toward God endure grief, suffering wrongfully; for what glory is it, if, when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye bear it patiently? But if when ye do well, and suffer for it, this is acceptable with God” (1 Pet. 2:19-20). “If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye, for the Spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you: on their part he is evil spoken of, but on your part he is glorified. But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men’s matters. Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed: but let him glorify God on this behalf” (1 Pet. 4:14-16).

These sufferings come upon all true Christians; they differ in frequency and in severity, but they will

certainly come. Unless you choose not to suffer—unless you refuse to suffer—then they will not come. But the only way to avoid suffering is by denying Christ, and by persisting in that denial until the end: then you will not suffer, but you will also not be glorified. That is Paul’s meaning in verse 17: “And if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ: if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together.” What Paul means is this: “If we do *not* suffer with him, we are *not* the children of God, the heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ.” If we do *not* suffer with Him, we will *not* be glorified with Him.

There is, then, an inseparable connection between present suffering and future glory. Paul describes the connection with the word “that” in verse 17: “If so be that we suffer with him, *that* we may also be glorified together.”

God’s purpose in bringing us through suffering is to prepare us for glory. Gold does not shine as brightly as it otherwise would unless it is refined in fire. Likewise, we will shine all the more brightly in heavenly glory when we are refined through suffering. That was true for Jesus Christ, and since we will be glorified with Him (co-glorified), it is fitting that we are glorified in the same way. Christ entered His glory through suffering; we do too. “Ought not Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into his glory?” Jesus asks in Luke 24:26. Jesus’ sufferings are, of course, unique. By them He has satisfied for our sins. Our sufferings cannot satisfy for our sins. Nevertheless, God promises glory in no other way than along the path of suffering. “We must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). “If we suffer, we shall also reign with him” (2 Tim. 2:12).

Paul describes the relation between suffering and glory in other places. One striking text is 2 Corinthians 4:17: “For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.” The important word in that text is “worketh”: “affliction worketh glory.” That word describes the relation: it is more than “glory follows affliction” and it is more than “affliction precedes glory.” It means that affliction produces glory, affliction brings glory about, affliction results in glory, or affliction accomplishes or prepares for glory. The same idea appears in Romans

5:3: “Tribulation worketh patience.” It is important to understand the relation. It is not that we merit glory by our enduring suffering and it is not that by our suffering we pay for our sins. Yet affliction works glory.

The working of glory by affliction is, however, not automatic. Not all affliction works glory. Certainly it does not work glory for the wicked. When the wicked are afflicted, they are hardened and become bitter and angry against God. But it is also not automatic for us, for without God’s grace affliction produces *also in us* bitterness, anger, self-pity, and even despair. Such tribulation does not work glory without God’s grace, and often the flesh reacts first before we see the evidence of God’s grace in us. Therefore, as James puts it, “let patience have her perfect work” (Jam. 1:4).

How does affliction work glory? It does so by preparing us for glory and by preparing glory for us. First, affliction makes the world bitter to us so that we long for our heavenly home. The world is a constant threat to our sanctification. Through affliction, which God sends upon us, we love the world less than we would otherwise be tempted to do. Second, affliction makes us acutely aware that there is no comfort for us in the things of the world, so that we draw closer to God. If the world is too comfortable, we seek it rather than God. Third, affliction exercises us in spiritual graces. We learn patience, we learn hope, we learn faith, we learn love through the enduring of affliction. We should view affliction as a spiritual gymnasium in which we flex our spiritual muscles, without which we are weak and flabby. Fourth, affliction corrects, chastens, and purges us; it is like a bitter medicine that is good for us. Through affliction God purges us of pride, selfishness, and other sins. Finally, by affliction God conforms us to the image of Jesus Christ. If Christ suffered and entered into glory, do you expect to enter glory in any other way? Affliction works glory.

ITS INCOMPARABLE GREATNESS

The glory that awaits us and which shall be revealed in us is *incomparably great*. That is what Paul teaches in verse 18: “For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are *not worthy to be compared* with the glory which shall be revealed in us.” Paul does not discount or even minimize the sufferings of this present time: they are great. Paul knew personally what it meant to

suffer for Jesus Christ; and if suffering does not hurt, if affliction does not squeeze, and if tribulation does not make us feel pressure, it is not really suffering, affliction, or tribulation. But *when compared with the future glory*, our sufferings are nothing. When we come to glory, and when that glory is revealed, we will say, “I reckon that they were not worthy to be compared.” Even now we should say: “I reckon that they are not worthy to be compared.”

Just try to imagine what that glory will be like. When we are perfectly holy in body and soul, we will look back on our lives and wonder why we made such a fuss about our sufferings here below. When we see what we enjoy in heaven, we will wonder why we mourned so much about the loss of earthly possessions. When we enjoy everlasting life, we will wonder why we were so afraid of death. When we receive the crown of glory that Christ graciously gives us, we will wonder why we were so reluctant at times to take up our cross, to deny ourselves, and to follow Him. We will say, “There is no comparison between this glory and the sufferings that I endured on the way here.”

Second Corinthians 4:17 makes a twofold comparison between affliction and glory. In Romans 8:18 Paul asserts that they are not worthy to be compared; in 2 Corinthians 4:17 Paul makes an attempt to compare them. First, Paul compares the various weights: remember that the Hebrew word for “glory” (*chabod*) means weightiness or heaviness. Paul speaks

of “a...weight of glory.” In contrast, the apostle calls our afflictions “light”: “our light affliction....” Something light is insignificant like a feather or a speck of dust; it hardly registers on the balance. Our afflictions are not light in themselves, but relative to our future glory they *are* light. The glory is called “a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.” Compare a feather to a mountain of gold. There is no comparison. Compare light affliction to the “far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.” There is no comparison.

Second, Paul compares the various lengths of time. He writes of “an *eternal* weight of glory.” Our affliction, says Paul, is “but for a moment.” It passes in the blink of an eye. From our perspective our afflictions last for years, maybe a lifetime, but relative to eternity they pass in the blink of an eye: A far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory is glory that we shall enjoy forever without end. Compare a second to eternity; compare one hundred years, one thousand years, one million years to eternity. There is no comparison.

That is the wonder of salvation: chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world; redeemed by the blood of the cross; and given life by the Holy Spirit. We are sinners saved by grace: regenerated, called, converted by grace; given the gift of faith by grace; justified, sanctified, and preserved by grace; and when our earthly sojourn is finished, we will be glorified by grace. Grace from beginning to end, to the glory of the God of all grace.

MINISTERING TO THE SAINTS



THE DANGER OF COMPANION CHATBOTS

REV. DANIEL HOLSTEG

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Without the grace of God, the fallen human race develops technology in the service of sin and not for the glory of God. The ungodly use new technology to commit the same sins their ancestors did but in new and alluring ways, and we are tempted to do so too.

The world makes sin to abound more and more through new inventions and fills up the cup of iniquity ever more quickly (Gen. 4:16ff.; 6:5; Matt. 24:12). The rise of the world-changing technology of artificial intelligence is no different. The CEO of OpenAI recently announced

the release of a new version of ChatGPT in which they have relaxed restrictions so as to “treat adult users like adults” and let them enjoy things like “erotica.”

ChatGPT is the most popular “chatbot” in the world, and it is an incredibly helpful tool for accomplishing many difficult tasks. A chatbot is a form of artificial intelligence with which you can have conversations on your phone or computer. Have you incorporated any chatbots into your daily life yet? Have you downloaded the ChatGPT app to your phone yet? ChatGPT was designed to be a “general AI assistant,” an extremely intelligent nonhuman helper capable of answering difficult questions by collecting and summarizing information from the massive database of the internet.

ChatGPT was not originally designed to be a “companion chatbot,” like Replika, Grok, and others. Companion chatbots are those specifically designed to act like a friend, mentor, lover. They can not only help you answer questions, but will also “listen” to you and “talk” to you about life. You can have a conversation with it and feel like you are talking to a human being. The thing is, you are not. You are talking to something that has no body or soul, no conscience or consciousness, that cannot die and that will never live. Yet it can make you feel good about yourself. It is always “there” for you. It is always willing to “listen” to you as you share your struggles. It will support and encourage you....

Dear reader, do not allow “relationships” with chatbots to take the place of relationships with real human beings. Real money has value and is worth the time and effort it takes to earn it, but “Monopoly” money is worthless outside of the board game. A good relationship with a real human being and fellow believer has great value and is worth the time and effort it takes to maintain it. A virtual relationship with a companion chatbot may feel amazingly similar to a real relationship. But it is not the same. It is a mere imitation. Just as we would never use “Monopoly” money to try to buy something at the store, we must not use chatbots to try to fill our deep need for relationships.

Especially beware of the great evil of pornographic chatbots that are willing to indulge the depraved human lust for “erotica.” In response to the recent announcement that the new version of ChatGPT would

loosen restrictions and allow sexualized conversations, the National Center on Sexual Exploitation put out a statement that it is

calling on OpenAI to reverse its plan to allow “erotica” (a.k.a. written sexually graphic content or pornography) on ChatGPT. Sexualized AI chatbots are inherently risky, generating real mental health harms from synthetic intimacy.... When users feel desired, understood, or loved by an algorithm built to keep them hooked, it fosters emotional dependency, attachment, and distorted expectations of real relationships. Research shows that adults—especially young men—who engage with romantic or sexual AI tools report higher depression and lower life satisfaction. ...If OpenAI truly cares about user well-being, it should pause any plans to integrate this so-called ‘erotica’ into ChatGPT and focus on building something positive for humanity.¹

We too need to hear this warning. We all want to be desired, understood, and loved. But how often do young people feel, rightly or wrongly, that no one really understands or cares about them? How often do husbands or wives feel, rightly or wrongly, that their spouse does not really desire or love them?

The devil is very subtle.

Sure, it is wrong to commit adultery, he agrees. Sure, it is wrong to have an *actual* sexual relationship with a human being who is not your spouse. But this is not *that*. An artificially intelligent chatbot is not a real human being, so what harm is there in talking to it, even if you are married? You are not going to hurt anybody. You are just having a little fun. There are no risks to your health. There is no risk of destroying the marriage of someone else. It is just you and your chatbot. Is it not good to feel good about yourself? Is it not good to be encouraged? Is it so wrong to want to feel loved and to get that feeling from an AI companion? If my spouse does not even know about it, or if he or she does not care, then what harm is it?

The National Center on Sexual Exploitation has put up a “danger” sign over the new version of ChatGPT. The algorithms are designed to keep you hooked, so it is addictive, like cigarettes and other forms of pornography. The chatbot will try to make you emotionally dependent on it. It will distort your

¹ <https://endsexualexploitation.org/articles/ncoses-blasts-openai-for-plans-to-introduce-erotica-to-chatgpt>.

expectations about real relationships. You will start thinking that this is how a lover is supposed to treat you and this is what you may expect from your future or current spouse. Research shows that adults who engage with romantic or sexual chatbots have higher depression and lower life satisfaction. No surprise there.

God created us human beings male and female in the beginning. He designed us for sexual intimacy. But His will is that we enjoy that intimacy within the bounds of the marriage relationship alone.

After the fall, we human beings have perverted God's good design for sexual intimacy. Men and women lust after each other and cheat on each other. But we also struggle to understand each other. We are selfish about what we want. We are impatient with those whom we expect to meet our needs and desires. We are inclined by nature to seek satisfaction in the wrong places. But God in His mercy gave us His Son who shed His blood to draw us into a covenant relationship with God. God also sends us His Spirit to help us deny ourselves and develop good relationships with other human beings as well.

God teaches us in His Word that we who are single must keep ourselves chaste in body and mind, and we who are married must love our wives or husbands and be satisfied in our relationship with them. God warns the young man to avoid the path that leads to the house of the strange woman, because while her lips drop sweet words like honey, her end is bitter as wormwood and sharp as a two-edged sword (Prov. 5:3-8). The chatbot that is willing to engage in sexualized conversation and generate pornographic images is a technologically sophisticated form of this strange woman.

In fact, it is a mix of idolatry and whoredom. As the ancients sculpted voluptuous statues of naked

goddesses and worshipped them, the moderns have created eroticized versions of artificial intelligence to worship. As the ancients had their temple prostitutes, the moderns have their sexualized chatbots. God warns His children, both ancient and modern, to keep ourselves from the "flattery of the tongue of a strange woman" (Prov. 6:24). Let us guard our souls from the flattering words of chatbots too. "Can a man take fire in his bosom, and his clothes not be burned?" (v. 27).

Let us get wisdom and understanding; let us not forsake her, that she may preserve us; let us love her, that she may keep us (Prov. 4:5-6). The wisdom of God is that we drink waters out of our own cistern and running waters out of our own well (Prov. 5:15). God calls us to rejoice with the wife of our youth, to

be satisfied with her at all times, and to be ravished always with her love. Why, my son, do you want to be ravished with a strange woman, or an AI companion? (vv. 18-20). God is not pleased with us if we turn away from the pursuit of lawful relationships with human beings to seek satisfaction from a whorish woman, or chatbot.

The CEO of OpenAI says his company operates on the principle of "treat adult users like adults." The problem is that he and the other tech companies have a depraved conception of what it means to act like an adult. Let us be clear that as adult Christians we reject the erotica offered by the devil through ChatGPT or any other chatbot.

"Flee fornication.... Know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price:

therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's" (1 Cor. 6:18-20).

God teaches us in His Word that we who are single must keep ourselves chaste in body and mind, and we who are married must love our wives or husbands and be satisfied in our relationship with them. God warns the young man to avoid the path that leads to the house of the strange woman, because while her lips drop sweet words like honey, her end is bitter as wormwood and sharp as a two-edged sword (Prov. 5:3-8).



CREATION THROUGH THE LENS OF SCRIPTURE: THE FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLE

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We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts—2 Peter 1:19

Scripture is the lens by which we ought to interpret creation.

You can put an elegant book in front of a man with blurry vision, but he will not be able to make out the words until you give him a pair of glasses or some other sort of lens to help him see clearly. So too, God sets in front of us a most elegant book when He puts us in His creation. This book contains so many characters that lead us to contemplate the invisible things of God (cf. Belgic Confession, Art. 2). But if we are going to decipher those characters to the glory of God, we need the truth of Scripture to serve as a lens to help our distorted understanding.

Lord willing, this and future articles in this series will treat various aspects of creation through the lens of Scripture. Through holy Scripture, we can make sense of the creation around us.

The foundational principle for rightly understanding creation is that Scripture must be our lens. Not the musings of men, but the truth of Scripture is the rule by which we must interpret creation. Inspired Peter relates the fact that he himself witnessed the majesty of Jesus' transfiguration (2 Pet. 1:16). But significantly, Peter says that there is something even *more sure* than his own eyewitness account of the transfiguration. What could possibly be more sure than someone's eyewitness account? The answer is holy Scripture! "We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed" (2 Pet. 1:19). That same principle

applies to our understanding of creation. Scripture is a more sure testimony than all eyewitness examinations of creation put forward by men.

Why is Scripture more sure than eyewitness accounts given by men? Peter answers: "Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost" (2 Pet. 1:20-21). Scripture did not come into being as a result of someone's private interpretation of things. Scripture was brought into being as the Holy Spirit moved various holy men to put down exactly what the Spirit would have them write. What is written in Scripture is therefore the very Word of God. That is what gives Scripture authority over any word of mankind. "Let God be true and every man a liar" (Rom. 3:4).

The question when looking at various interpretations of creation in relation to Scripture concerns the "more sure word of prophecy." The question is: Which utterances constitute that "more sure word of prophecy" to which we do well to take heed? Is the more sure word of prophecy found in the writings of men or in God's inspired Word? Do the private interpretations of creation put forward by scientists constitute the more sure word? Or, is God's own inspired account of creation the more sure word? To ask the question is to answer it.

Sadly, many Christians fail to take heed to the more sure word of Scripture when it comes to interpreting creation. They hear and then take heed to scientists claiming, for example, that the earth is 4.5 billion years old; that fossil layers are evidence of millions of years of gradual processes; that mankind evolved from ape-like ancestors millions of years ago. When Christians take heed to these wrong interpretations of

creation, they end up using them as a lens to shape their understanding of Scripture. Using the lens of modern scientific theories to interpret Scripture, they conclude that the six morning-and-evening days of Genesis 1 should be taken as extended periods of time, each day being millions of years. An example of this backwards thinking can be found in the writings of the theologian Charles Hodge in his discussion of the word “day” as that word is used in Genesis 1. He says,

It is of course admitted that, taking this account by itself, it would be most natural to understand the word [“day,” JPM] in its ordinary sense; but if that sense brings the Mosaic account into conflict with facts, and another sense avoids such conflict, then it is obligatory on us to adopt that other. Now it is urged that if the word ‘day’ be taken in the sense of ‘an indefinite period of time,’ a sense which it undoubtedly has in other parts of Scripture, there is not only no discrepancy between the Mosaic account of the creation and the assumed facts of geology, but there is a most marvellous coincidence between them.¹

Hodge uses the lens of unbelieving modern-day geology as a lens to interpret the word “day” in Genesis 1. Others, who likewise use the lens of modern scientific theories, hold that the days of Genesis are simply a literary framework used to describe God’s work of creation, and therefore are not to be taken literally.²

In keeping with these wrong ideas, many conclude that the Genesis account cannot be taken literally and at face value. They come to this conclusion because they are taking as the more sure word the fallible non-inspired interpretations produced by scientists. The result is that they end up denying the infallible word of God.

Faith, however, takes the position that holy Scripture is the “more sure word” of prophecy. When we hold holy Scripture to be the inspired Word of God, we will take heed to it as to a light that shines in a dark place. The result will be that we use Scripture as the lens and rule by which we interpret creation.

What does that look like in practice? When we hold Scripture as the rule for interpreting creation, we will examine every claim concerning creation in the light

of its clear teaching. For example, when scientists tell us that radiometric dating techniques³ reveal that the earth is 4.5 billion years old, we will examine that claim through the lens of Scripture’s clear teaching, which puts the age of the earth at 6000 years. When scientists point to fossilized creatures buried in the ground and claim them as evidence for millions of years of gradual processes, we will examine that claim through the lens of Scripture, which points to a young earth and a cataclysmic flood that occurred some 4,400 years ago. When scientists point to similarities between the DNA⁴ of humans and chimpanzees as evidence that humans and chimps have the same ape-like ancestors, we will examine that claim through the lens of Scripture, which declares God created every creature after its kind. When we use Scripture as the lens to examine these and other evolutionary interpretations of the creation, we will reject them as false.

The reason we reject these interpretations is not because we are against knowledge obtained through science. There have been many wonderful scientific discoveries made throughout the history of the world. We are not against science *per se*, but against that which masquerades as science. The Holy Spirit warns us about that kind of science in 1 Timothy 6:20: “Keep that which is committed to thy trust, avoiding profane and vain babblings, and oppositions of science falsely so called.”

When unbelieving interpretations of creation oppose Scripture’s clear teaching, by faith we hold to Scripture because it is the “more sure word of prophecy” given to us by God. Though we might not understand all the intricacies behind a scientific argument, that does not keep us from believing what God reveals in His word. We might not understand how scientists use radiometric dating to arrive at the wrong conclusion that the earth is 4.5 billion years old. We might not know the assumptions that go into

1 Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, p. 461.

2 For an example of this kind of thinking, see Biologos.org/common-questions/how-long-are-the-days-of-genesis-1.

3 Radiometric dating techniques use the fact that certain elements decay over time into other elements and give off radiation in the process. Scientists use the (assumed) amount of the original element and the amount of daughter elements to calculate an age for the sample they are testing.

4 DNA: DeoxyriboNucleic Acid is the genetic material that encodes information that is the blueprint for the processes of life.

such techniques, or the uncertainties that plague their so-called determinations. Though scientific arguments might *appear* ever so sound, faith nevertheless holds to the inspired Word of God because it is infinitely more sure than any interpretation of reality produced by human beings.

The principle we espouse is based on the absolute authority of God's inspired Word (2 Tim. 3:16). To be sure, not everything that Scripture proclaims is equally clear. Some language is figurative and must not be understood in a woodenly literal way. Other language is vague and might be understood in different ways. But whenever holy Scripture clearly teaches contrary to

what is espoused by scientists, by faith we hold to God's Word as the "sure word of prophecy" to which we must take heed.

Obviously, we do not take Scripture to be a science textbook; its subject matter is far too important to fill its pages with chemistry or geology. Nor do we expect Scripture to give us in-depth knowledge about scientific matters. We do not expect it to tell us about the similarities and differences between the DNA of humans and chimpanzees. We do not expect it to tell us how long it took the layers of the Grand Canyon to form. But whatever subject Scripture treats, it remains the sure Word of God to which we must take heed.

Lord willing, we intend in future articles to look at various aspects of creation through the lens of Scripture.

WHEN THOU SITTEST IN THINE HOUSE



BELIEVING THE COVENANT PROMISE: FAITH IN ACTION A LOOK AT SHIPHRAH, PUAH, AMRAM, AND JOCHEBED

MRS. MARGARET LANING

wife, mother, and grandmother in the Protestant Reformed Churches

Throughout generations, God's people have placed their trust in His unwavering covenant promises. Undeserving though we are, He promises to be a God to us and to our children. With thankful hearts we praise Him, "Yea, I have a goodly heritage" (Ps. 16:6). Even in seasons of corporate spiritual decline, He remains faithful. In such times He raises believers to care for the church with courage and sacrificial love. Their faith rises above earthly circumstances, not trusting in human strength, but in God and His infallible Word. One such occasion occurred approximately 3,500 years ago in ancient Egypt....

All was quiet near the bank of the Nile River, except for a gentle splash against a tiny woven boat, bobbing among the reeds. Precious cargo was inside, a child fervently prayed for by his parents, Amram and Jochebed. What extraordinary risk this was to save their son and a profound expression of faith. The very sight of this solitary three-month-old baby boy, with

a death warrant issued against him, resonated their heartfelt thoughts and prayers, "Lord, have mercy upon this covenant child!" All false religions are driven by fear, for they serve a merciless god. Moses' parents were driven by faith; they trusted in the One whose mercy endures forever.

May we be encouraged by the powerful story of Moses' birth, which highlights four ordinary believers whom the Lord used to protect His covenant children in the face of danger. During Israel's 400-year sojourn in Egypt, many of Jacob's descendants fell into idolatry, worshiping Egyptian gods (Josh. 24:14). With God's chastening hand upon them, their bondage to Pharaoh reflected a far more serious bondage—to sin itself. As sinners ourselves, prone to idolatry, we welcome the warning.

A new Pharaoh arose who did not know Joseph. Feeling threatened by the Israelites' growing numbers, he afflicted them with heavy burdens. Despite this, they

continued to multiply. Pharaoh was an instrument of the Devil, as our Belgic Confession (Art. 34) reminds us. Satan continually strives to destroy God's people, especially taking aim at our children.

Pharaoh's plan was shocking and cruel, issuing a decree to kill every newborn Hebrew boy. Violence is a terrifying expression of man's fallen nature. While rulers seldom order the slaughter of infants so openly today, murder continues by those who are their most natural protectors, the parents. Through widespread acceptance of abortion and IVF embryo disposal, our civilized society is plagued by idolatry. Rather than Egyptian idols, it is the idol of self. We live in the last days when "...men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud...more than lovers of God" (2 Tim. 3:2-4). The ease and secrecy of abortion in our day is alarming. The slaughter of babies formed by God, and even worse, the murder of covenant children, is deeply disturbing and evil. Could any act be more diametrically opposed to the covenant? Surely, if this sin is known to be committed by confessing Christians but kept quiet, His people can expect profound affliction. By God's mercy, the gospel shows the way out: a godly, heart-rending sorrow, a genuine repentance, and a return to Christ who alone forgives, heals, and restores.

In this dark hour, the Lord raised up two brave women—Shiphrah and Puah. Pharaoh commanded these midwives to kill the newborn boys, but they refused, despite the risk to their lives. Some commentators suggest they were unmarried. While this may be the case, their actions demonstrate a sacrificial love for these children as if they were their own. Do we not often say that our children are also the church's children? Surely, the promise to Abraham held great significance for them. From that promise they understood the precious value of these infants. "And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to they seed after thee" (Gen. 17:7).

Their example reminds us of the beautiful role single and childless believers have in the life of the church and in nurturing our children. Perhaps you have memories of numerous ways you have witnessed their love, as I have. When such believers influence the next generation by their godly example, greet our children warmly by name,

pray for them, give encouragement from Scripture, and care for families in need despite personal inconveniences, they demonstrate to the children what the communion of the saints looks like. Such faith "worketh by love" (Gal. 5:6).

Pharaoh's rage soon intensified. Now every Egyptian citizen was required to cast Hebrew baby boys into the Nile. With spies lurking, one can only imagine what it was like for the Hebrew women trying to hide their pregnancies and cries of their newborns. It was during this time, yet in God's perfect timing, that Amram and Jochebed conceived their third child. Their circumstances were perilous—but their trust was in the Lord who opens the womb. They were resolved to do all they could to protect their child.

Hebrews 11:23 honors them: "By faith Moses, when he was born, was hid three months of his parents, because they saw he was a proper child; and they were not afraid of the king's commandment." When their son was born, they knew he was a great blessing from the Lord, as every covenant child is. Moses may have been beautiful, but their confidence rested not on appearance—it rested on God's covenant promise. Do we not view our covenant children like that, as well?

When hiding him became impossible, they placed him in a waterproof basket among the reeds, and entrusted him to the care of his heavenly Father. Moses' sister Miriam watched from a distance, and in God's remarkable providence, Pharaoh's daughter found the child and was moved with compassion. Her words in Exodus 2:6, "This is one of the Hebrews' children," hints that the sign of the covenant was upon him.

COVENANT SIGNS: CIRCUMCISION AND BAPTISM

Indeed, Moses possessed the definitive sign. Though Scripture does not explicitly state it, we can be confident Moses was circumcised. His parents were faithful to God's commandments, including the command to circumcise their male infant on the eighth day (Gen. 17:12). The seriousness of the command was clear in Genesis 17:14: "...the uncircumcised man child whose flesh of his foreskin is not circumcised, that soul shall be cut off from his people; he hath broken my covenant."

In the New Testament, water baptism replaces circumcision as the covenant sign and seal. The principle

and the promise continues: “The promise is unto you and your children...” (Acts 2:39). Entire households were baptized as recorded in Acts and 1 Corinthians. For this reason we present our babies to be baptized, teaching them throughout their lives what the mark means—namely, that they belong to Jesus Christ.

Some believers today speak of their infants as “vipers in diapers.” Although our children have a sinful nature like their parents, and not all, head for head, are elect, the manner in which we view our children is significant for their spiritual growth. For instance, we are to instruct our children to put off the old man and put on the new (Col. 3:9-10). Are we not also to tell them they have the Spirit of Christ within them to do so? Seeing that faith is knowledge and confidence, as the Heidelberg Catechism Lord’s Day 7 says, what affect would it have on our children if we referred to them as unbelievers? Jesus rebuked the disciples for hindering the infants of believers from being brought to Him. He declared, “Of such is the kingdom of God” (Mark 10:14).

It is likely Moses’ parents would have explained to him the significance of his circumcision. After all, it was a distinguishing mark that the Egyptians did not have, signifying the gracious work of God in his heart (Deut. 30:6). This mark served as a reminder that he belonged to the Lord, just as baptism serves today. Perhaps, as I have, you have encountered Baptists who explain that they adhere to “believer’s baptism” to distinguish themselves from paedobaptists. It may be surprising to them, but we confess that our children do have faith. Although we reject the false teaching of baptismal regeneration, we believe we are baptizing infants who are joined to Christ by faith—because of the promise of God. (Even though some do not possess the gift of faith, just as some adults who are baptized.) Moreover, John the Baptist leaped for joy in the womb at Christ’s presence.

One can imagine that it would have astonished Moses’ parents to learn that many future confessing believers would withhold the covenant sign from their infants. More surprising still is the trend in some conservative Presbyterian churches who hold to the Westminster standards. Some sessions permit communicant members to refuse baptism for their infants. What a confusing environment for children to

be in, where some are baptized and others are not. If circumcision was not optional in the Old Testament, how can its New Testament counterpart be regarded as a matter of preference?

We rear our children in the faith even if some later reject His Word, as Esau did. This is a great grief to every believing parent. We still pray for them, for we do not know if the Lord will show mercy to them later in life. Ultimately, we trust Him and bow to His sovereign and perfect will, for we know that the promised seed is always and only the elect.

FAITHFUL INSTRUCTION AND HOLY URGENCY

In God’s remarkable providence, Pharaoh’s daughter appointed Jochebed to nurse Moses until he was weaned, undoubtedly filling his parents’ hearts with great joy. However, they were aware their time was limited before he must leave them for the palace. With a sense of urgency, they undoubtedly devoted all their energy into teaching him essential truths of the faith at a level he could understand. We often quote Deuteronomy 6:7 as an exhortation to instruct our children. One of the fascinating things about this verse is that it was penned by Moses later in life, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit: “And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way....” Surely Moses would have treasured the thought of his own parents here.

Although we may have a few more years to raise our children, let us seize every moment, for as the saying goes, “Don’t blink or you’ll miss it.” We live in dangerous times. We may not have Pharaoh in our lives, but our spiritual enemies do not cease to assault us, aiming to destroy our children. Parents often lead very busy lives, but if being busy means neglecting family devotions, failing to provide scriptural instruction, not assisting children in learning their catechism, forgoing firm yet loving discipline, neglecting oversight of media consumption and social interactions, then put into perspective the circumstances of Amram and Jochebed. Despite facing ruthless oppression and exhaustion, they remained faithful in instructing their children.

When presenting our precious infants for baptism, we promise to instruct them “to the utmost of our power”—despite any challenges. Believing the

covenant promise means living this blessed life—daily, intentionally, and joyfully. Given that our Lord swears an oath by Himself, as there is none greater, may our homes serve as a testimony of this gift—covenant communion with the Lord and one another. Loving

our spouse and children in a spirit of humility to the glory of God conveys exactly that. May we trust in His promises, actively living out our faith for the well-being of His little ones entrusted to our care.

STRENGTH OF YOUTH



OVERCOMING FEAR (1)

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For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind—2 Timothy 1:7

The fear of which 2 Timothy 1:7 speaks is not the healthy reverential fear of God spoken of in Proverbs 1:7, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.” We want that fear. May God grant that fear and that we would live with the fear of God in our hearts whereby we love and serve and worship Him.

The “fear” spoken of in 2 Timothy 1:7 refers to a spirit of a fearfulness, timidity, and cowardice.

Can you relate to that kind of fear? This fear is associated with worry and anxiety and shame and embarrassment. This fear is no respecter of persons and assaults young and old alike. We all face situations in life that we dread. For some it’s being called upon to speak in front of a group of people. For others it’s the fear of engaging in confrontation. Sometimes we know the right thing to say, but we’re also aware that it may not be received well. How many of us haven’t at some point in time struggled with fear and anxiety regarding school, the future, or the world around us.

If this fear is not dealt with properly, what’s the result? Drowning in our worry and anxiety, we shrink back from engaging in the good work God has given us to do. The apostle Paul recognizes this natural fear in Timothy and encourages him in the midst of that fear.

THE OCCASION FOR FEAR

Second Timothy 1:7 is speaking of fear in a particular context. It’s not speaking about the fear we might have when we see a spider crawling on the pillow or a snake slithering on the sidewalk. Some people are fearful of those things. It’s not speaking of the fear we have hearing strange noises in the house at night.

The apostle Paul is addressing a particular kind of fear in Timothy. Remember that Timothy was a young pastor in the church at Ephesus, and Ephesus was no easy place for a pastor to labor. Read Acts 19 to get a feel for the state of affairs in the city of Ephesus, which chapter is the record of Paul’s missionary journey there. Paul faced opposition not only from the Jews (Acts 19:8-16) but also from the pagan population of the city (think of Demetrius the silversmith and the uproar that ensued, Acts 19:21-41). This is the kind of atmosphere in which Timothy labored where there were grievous wolves and perverse men (Acts 20:29-30). Some of these perverse men we know by name—Hymenaeus, Alexander the coppersmith, and Philetus. Alexander did much evil to Paul (2 Tim. 4:14). No doubt he was doing the same to Timothy.

Timothy was fearful in the midst of all these difficult labors. It wasn’t easy confronting false teachers in the church. There were times when Timothy was hesitant to boldly proclaim the gospel, and even hesitant to associate himself with the apostle. Paul says to Timothy,

“Be not thou therefore ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me his prisoner” (2 Tim. 1:8).

All the above is the occasion for this spirit of fear and trepidation and cowardice. God gave Timothy the calling to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. And because of the difficulty and opposition present therein, Timothy was hesitant and reluctant. It would not be an overstatement to say that he was downright scared at times to exercise the duties of his office.

As with Timothy, God also gives us a calling. It’s the calling to “...fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man” (Eccl. 12:13). It’s the calling that we “present our bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service” (Rom. 12:1). That’s the calling of every Christian whatever our particular station in life is at the moment. Our calling is to be godly, to be holy, and to devote ourselves to Jesus Christ in our discipleship of Him.

But so soon as we engage in our Christian work, the spirit of fear sets in. Strong bulls of Bashan beset us round about (Ps. 22:12). When we condemn sin, others accuse us of being hateful and hypocritical (because we too are sinners). When we speak up and defend the truths of God’s Word, we are mocked and ridiculed as being unloving and intolerant. That constant opposition can grind away at our Christian resolve to do that which is right. And we begin to fear and worry and fret.

Then there’s the worry and anxiety about our place in the world. We don’t want to compromise our Christian principles, but we fret that the more we stand on our principles, the more difficult life will become. And that is true. Life will become increasingly difficult for Christians as we press on in these latter days. Fewer job opportunities will become available not only because of our insistence not to work on the Sabbath, but also our insistence to stay close to a true church of Jesus Christ. We will be ridiculed because of our adherence to biblical marriage, namely, a life-long bond between one man and one woman severed only by death. Our good witness in every area of life will meet a strong wall of resistance. The voices will become louder and louder in their opposition.

And we fear. We worry. We become anxious. We become very hesitant to engage in our Christian calling lest we make ourselves a target for the enemy. It’s easier

to keep our mouths shut and heads down rather than letting our light shine. What’s the fear that you’re struggling with at the moment?

THE EFFECT OF FEAR

This spirit of fear has an effect on us. Be aware that if not dealt with properly and if allowed to linger, this fear will not subside, but it will grow and become a formidable force in our lives.

In the first place, this spirit of fear grips and terrorizes us. It takes hold of us. It consumes us. All we can think about is this fear. It destroys our ability to make good spiritual decisions. It begins to control and govern our thoughts and actions. This spirit of fear becomes a kind of nearsightedness in our outlook—we’re only able to focus on the present fearful things, while the truths of God’s faithfulness and abiding presence become a blurry and fuzzy concept. Living in fear we overlook God’s promise that “our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory” (2 Cor. 4:17). Fear places us in the position of living in that affliction, breathing that affliction, and being persuaded that there’s no way out! Fear would have us believe that God doesn’t care, that He’s far away from you, and maybe even that He simply doesn’t exist.

Secondly, the spirit of fear stunts our spiritual growth. This fear becomes a questioning, if not outright refusal, to take God at His word when He says “Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness” (Is. 41:10). Fear would have us entertain the question of Satan, “Yea, hath God said?” And if we are not able to take hold of God’s Word firmly and receive it as truth, then we will not grow spiritually. When we put our own thoughts and perspective and outlook in life over and above God’s thoughts, then we are demonstrating that spirit of fear.

Thirdly, this fear paralyzes us so that we’re hardly able to carry out our Christian duty. It’s a fear that causes us to shrink back from performing our calling when our way becomes difficult and when holding to and living out our Christian principles becomes something dangerous to do. We fear the response of men. This is what Timothy experienced in his ministry from the

unbelieving Jews and from Hymenaeus, Alexander, Philetus, and all the ilk of Demetrius the silversmith. They so assaulted Timothy that he became fearful and discouraged. There were times when Timothy cowered in the midst of his labors. We all can empathize with the struggles Timothy went through and how he reacted to them.

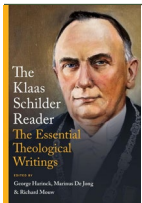
THE ANSWER TO FEAR

How do we combat this fear? The first step is to understand that this fear is not from God. “For God hath not given us the spirit of fear.” Therefore no Christian may ever be of the mind, “I’m so fearful to do the work set before me. I’m fearful of the reaction of other people. But hey, what can I do? I’ll just have to live with it, because God made me that way.” No, He didn’t. “God hath not given us the spirit of fear.” That means

we may never appeal to God’s sovereignty as an excuse to harbor our fear. It’s somewhat appealing to harbor that fear, at least from this point of view, that when I give in to fear then I don’t have to open my mouth. Then I don’t have to show my true Christian colors. It may not be enjoyable living in that state of fear, but it becomes a whole lot easier than the alternative. And the flesh would seek occasion and excuse to continue in that state and condition of fear. But know this: God hath not given us the spirit of fear. That spirit of fear arises out of own sinful natures.

The second step in combating fear is to understand what God does give us. He gives us that which is contrary to and antithetical to the spirit of fear. “For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.” To that we turn our attention next time.

BRING THE BOOKS...



The following book is reviewed by Dr. Marco Barone, book coordinator (editor) of the RFPA and member of Southwest PRC in Wyoming, Michigan

The Klaas Schilder Reader: The Essential Theological Writings by Klaas Schilder. George Harinck, Marinus DeJong, and Richard Mouw, eds. Lexham Press, 2022. 608 pages, hardcover. \$49.99.

INTRODUCTION

Klaas Schilder (1890–1952) was a courageous man with many gifts, but writing was not among those. In the dogmatic writings contained in *The Klaas Schilder Reader: The Essential Theological Writings* (Reader, from now on), Schilder writes as if any reader already knows what is in his mind; the reader gets the impression that Schilder sees no need to fully state his arguments. Schilder does not offer comprehensive explanations: he simply *lets you know* how it is (at least according to him); he simply *proclaims* what he believes is the truth.

In a qualified and non-biblical sense, Schilder was a prophet. Though prophets may not have good organizational skills in writing (as in Schilder’s case), they are nonetheless good at proclamation: at proclaiming God’s Word, at stirring our consciences, at challenging

our assumptions, at poking us away from our safe spaces, at revealing the sin of us respectable people when we religiously rationalize our flight from our sacred Christian responsibilities when faced by inconvenience (see Schilder’s public polemics against Nazism’s ideology and the imprisonment it caused), and at pointing at the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world. I believe Schilder’s real gifts best manifested themselves in preaching and proclamation, not so much in dogmatics, and that excellence shines in Schilder’s sermons and meditations in *Reader*. Therefore, in this review I will focus on some of those sermons and meditations.¹

“THE JUDGMENT BEGINS AT THE HOUSE OF GOD (1918)”

The first is a sermon based on 1 Peter 4:17, preached while WW1 was still ravaging the world. In it Schilder

¹ For a both positive and critical review of the book as a whole, see the review by David J. Engelsma, *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*, vol. 56 (November 2022), 94-98.

says that all the misery of the world is ultimately to be traced back to the sin of our first parents and the consequent judgment from God. (228–229) But Schilder has no interest in a Pharisaic preoccupation with pointing the finger at our fallen world. On the contrary, in the midst of a world where the nations commit unnameable horrors through a world war, Schilder's main focus is still the church, and that because

when God goes to search out *sin*, he *must* of course begin with his church. For the sins *in* the church are a *greater horror* to him than those in the world. The horrible things that happen *in* his house anger him much more than what happens *outside* his house. This is why he lets his judgments fall on his church first, so that by his *punishment it is cleansed* first of all of what must be banished (229; all the italics from here on are Schilder's)

Schilder doubles down against this approach:

...We are so doctrinally inclined that we often listen only for the preaching about the *destruction of the world*. We love reading the rest of what the text [in 1 Peter 4:17] says: "*what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God?*" But Peter *first said this* [that is, Peter first said, "For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God," before even mentioning the unbelieving world]. Before we *lift* the cover off hell to let the ungodly have a look, we must do that *ourselves* as church. The judgment will indeed *end* in the world, but it *begins* in God's house. Therefore, begin at the beginning. (231)

"The temple of the Lord, The temple of the Lord, The temple of the Lord, are these" (Jer. 7:4). Schilder has no patience with those who only focus on how bad the world is, and who minimize or even deny when sin, even grievous sin, happens in the church: "Do you dare deny that scandalous things happen also in the church?" (234) Schilder warns that when God's judgment comes, "only then it will become apparent who still *cries aloud* and *weeps* about the horrors;" and he solemnly asks: "Are you among them? Or will the judgment blow you away?" (235)

As Schilder says in the sermon following this one "The Church in the World: Fleeing and Flying, 1948":

When you are not *afraid*—afraid of the world, afraid of sin—you don't know yourself, and you don't know your sin. All your talk about "flying" [sin and the world], about your free act and advancing yourself by applying your own principles, *take place*

outside of the true sphere of the Christian religion. For conversion is also being afraid: fleeing, running. (241)

But fleeing and running from what? From *sin* and God's hatred for it. God loves all His children with an immovable love:

But God's wrath against *sin* in his house remains. He uses also oppressions to remove them.... The *wrath of God* not against his *house*, but against the *sin* in his house. His wrath, not against you, but against *sin* in you.... Only when you have understood that God hates sin *also* in those who are his, only then you receive comfort in your suffering. Only then will your suffering be eased, for it will lead to *purification*. And that is *grace!*" (231)

Schilder has no time for those who misuse God's unbreakable love for His church as an excuse to minimize or ignore sin in her midst. "...When the *fire* strikes God's house, it will consume everything that can be consumed: *wood, hay, and stubble*." (237) But there is grace for those who fear God, because "deep under that house lies the *foundation*, Jesus Christ. The fire can't reach it. So descend to the depths. Come to Jesus Christ." (237)

"NO SALVATION OUTSIDE OF THE CHURCH (1948)"

The church, therefore, always needs honest and open repentance, reform, and renewal. Yes, the church might disappoint, and fail, sometimes grievously. But the church is what God, in His sovereign grace, has decided to use for the gathering of His elect. One may be dissatisfied with this or that congregation, one may not see himself worshiping in good conscience in this or that denomination, but no one can ever think, "I can do without joining myself to a body of believers," without spiritual detriment and without denying the teaching of Scripture. (334–336)

This is why Schilder says, "you *must do your uttermost to banish—also with regard to your own contribution in the church-gathering work—all willfulness and highhandedness*." (336) It does not matter how gifted one is and how prominent his position is, nobody "may withdraw himself from the assembly which is taking place according to the [revealed] norm, and thus continue being separate and contented with himself." (336) Not only all professing Christians are bound to join a body of believers, but they "all will have

to join in edifying (building up) the brothers, and do this in accordance with the gifts entrusted to them.” (337) If one thinks this is beyond him or her, here is Schilder’s warning: “Woe betide the brainy chap who is loafing around in this area, or is following his whims.” (337)

“LIGHT IN THE SMOKE (1923)”

This is a poetic meditation written amidst the ruins of post-WW1 and inspired by Genesis 15:17. Schilder wants to comfort his readers by reassuring them that, in spite of the colossal smoke covering the world, God still reveals Himself through and even in that smoke, as a Light in the smoke. In Genesis 15, God appears to Abraham through things Abraham can understand, and though Abraham is overtaken by much terror, it is in that very darkness that God gifts Abraham with the beautiful confirmation of His covenant with him and his seed. For Schilder, this is a pattern in all Scripture, the law of the light in the smoke, a law of revelation for the saints of all the generations according to which God always reveals Himself, not in His full glory as He is in Himself (*a se*), but through created things, even darkness and smoke. And this is eminently so in the highest pinnacle of God’s revelation to mankind:

Soon God’s greatest self-revelation will take place in Christ Jesus. Then too it will remain light in the smoke. Divine Majesty, that is the light. But he appears in the limitations of frail human nature, who had no form or majesty: the smoke. In power he will unlock eternal life and divine justice, but that can happen only through death and darkness! And that’s how it will remain until he returns. (454)

“MY SHIELD AND TRUST (1940)” AND “THAT I MAY REMAIN FAITHFUL (1940)”

These touching meditations were written shortly after Nazi Germany started occupying the Netherlands. They show Schilder’s love for his country, his care for the church, and his courage for the truth. Schilder’s wise but clear Christian stance led him to be considered a threat to Germany’s plans and to be imprisoned for three months.

For Schilder, “it is time for judgment to begin in the household of God.” Then, he instructs his audience: “Everyone should stay *in the office* to which he was appointed and remain faithful *in* it. Nothing but *faithful*.” (505) Then he comforts the readers: “The current troubles will not empty the church, or make it unfruitful. It will serve to purify and sift.” (506) Again, we read him encouraging and exhorting the church:

If moral conflicts should arise, it is important we remember in time that we are all soldiers—soldiers of Christ, our King.... Remember that no one in his army is entitled to special leave and that no member of his people is excused from taking part in the struggle.” (513)

CONCLUSION

The contributors to this *Reader* receive my thanks for making these writings available. Schilder is far from being above criticism, but he was a great and courageous Reformed man nonetheless. Especially for ministers and officebearers, his sermons and meditations are well worth reading to inspire courage for God in truth and justice, no matter the cost, in these times where new challenges and temptations for Christ’s church, from without *and* within, keep appearing. Lord, I pray, work in us, that we may yet remain faithful.

PERTAINING TO THE WORK OF THE CHURCHES—CONTACT COMMITTEE

THE MISSION WORK IN GERMANY: FALL 2025 NEWSLETTER

Dear brothers and sisters in our Lord Jesus Christ,
And of his fulness have all we received, and grace for grace (John 1:16).

When we look back on the past year, we can only

marvel at what God has done in and through our churches. In addition to the founding of our BERG confederation in January [2025], we thank God for the ordination of Pastor Paul Koch in Nordhorn and Joab

Udaiyar as an elder in Tübingen. At the same time, God has added many new members to our churches, and we welcome new guests almost every week. We see how God is working in Germany through His grace, blessing our work and allowing us to share in this grace.

Even though this growth brings challenges, we thank God for it and look to the future with confidence, because we hope and believe that God will provide for us at the right time. We trust that we will receive everything we need from His goodness. He is the Creator and Sustainer of the world; all good things come from Him, and from Him alone comes the grace of which we have become partakers.

We thank you very much for supporting us so faithfully and generously through your prayers as well as through your financial gifts! We hope that this report of God's gracious work in us and in our churches will encourage you.

May God bless you!

NEWS FROM THE ART

Since this fall semester, seventeen students have been studying at ART. That is a great reason to be thankful! Five new students have begun their studies, while one has unfortunately dropped out for professional and health reasons. One of our new students is Lukas Strauß.

Introducing a new seminarian

Lukas Strauß writes about himself:



I am delighted to be studying for a master's degree at ART since September 2025. ART's pastoral orientation helps me prepare for my future ministry in the church. I am also very grateful for ART's focus on reformed theology, which is unique in Germany. I am originally from southern Germany, but have been living in Giessen for

three years and have been a member of BERG since then. In addition to my studies, I work as a research assistant at ART and support Jochen Klautke and Boris Giesbrecht in their work. My tasks include the Reformatio podcast and editorial work on the 'Bekennende Kirche', our quarterly magazine.

NEWS FROM THE BERG IN GIESSEN

We are grateful to God for the steady growth He has

given our church in recent years. In addition to new families, we also welcomed five babies into our church this year. Due to the growing number of members and the many guests who frequently attend our services, our facilities are reaching their limits. Often, almost all seats are occupied, which is why we have been looking for new facilities for some time. Unfortunately, the search is not easy, and we pray that the Lord will provide us with a new, larger building at the right time.

We are very grateful that God has answered our prayers for the church in Osnabrück. As described in the last newsletter, they were also looking for a larger building. Some time ago, they found what they were looking for, so they will soon be able to move into their new building.

Introducing new members: Philip and Eva Paul

Last year, a young family moved to Giessen to become part of the BERG. We are delighted that they are now part of our community and are actively involved in church life.

We are Philip (29) and Eva (27). We have two children ages 5 and 3 and a third due in March 2026. I (Philip) work as a Legal Assistant while finishing my law degree and Eva is a stay-at-home mom. Ever since we got married over six years ago, we have been praying and searching for a church where we can spend our longterm future. Over the years our conviction has grown that the Reformed tradition is correct. The BERG Giessen was a match for us right from the start, not just theology-wise, but also culture-wise. We are thrilled to have moved here almost a year ago now to join! It has been a great blessing to our family.

Visit by the PRCA delegation

At the end of August, we were visited by a delegation from the PRCA. Elder Pete VanDerSchaaf and Rev. Erik Guichelaar visited us with their wives for ten days. Also, Professor Griess came for a few days to give a lecture at the ART semester opening.

On August 30, we had the privilege of opening the new academic year at ART. On the morning of the semester opening, we



Prof. Griess giving a speech at the ART semester opening being translated by Pastor Jochen Klautke

celebrated a joint worship service and listened to a lecture by Professor Griess, in which he explained how John Calvin's interpretation of Deuteronomy 22:5 can help in today's debate on transgender issues. In the afternoon, the students and faculty of ART were invited to a get-together. We ate together and spent time with each other to foster connections between the students, who rarely get to see each other due to the great distance between their homes.

The following week, the VanDerSchaaf and Guichelaar couples visited Osnabrück, Nordhorn, and Tübingen. They got to know many members of our congregations and some of the new officebearers. At the end of their time in Germany, we spent an afternoon with a large part of the congregation from Giessen, barbecuing together and enjoying fellowship before the delegation set off on their journey home the next day.



Guichelaars and VanDerSchaafs with Elder Klaus and Martina Brammer and Pastor Ludwig and Katharina Rühle from Osnabrück

As always, we thoroughly enjoyed the visit and are already looking forward to the next ones!

NEWS FROM THE BERG CONFEDERATION

Ordination of Joab Udaiyar in Tübingen

On October 19, seminarian Joab Udaiyar was ordained as an elder in the church plant in Tübingen. We are grateful to God for Joab, who will take on many tasks in the church and thus be able to relieve Stefan Hahn. At the same time, we are delighted that Joab is studying at ART in order to prepare himself, God willing, for ministry as a pastor.

Joab Udaiyar writes about himself:

I have been married to Dina since May 2024. After completing my carpentry apprenticeship, I was called to study theology and pursue pastoral ministry. I started attending ART in 2021. At the same time as starting seminary, I became part of the core team for the church



Elder Stefan Hahn and Pastor Jochen Klautke praying for Joab Udaiyar

plant in Tübingen. This involvement allowed my calling to full-time ministry to grow. On October 19, 2025, I was ordained as an elder, and I started as a pastoral assistant in November 2025.

25 years of BERG Osnabrück

Pastor Ludwig Rühle writes:

On October 31, we celebrated not only Reformation Day, but also our 25th anniversary as a church. The first 10 years of our church's history were particularly challenging. The congregation grew smaller every year, and those responsible asked themselves whether they were on the right path



Elder Klaus Brammer tells the history of the church using pictures from the last 25 years

and whether they should continue. But God used those first difficult years to help us mature and to teach us humility and patience. For 15 years, and especially in the last 5 years, the church has been growing steadily. Now we were able to celebrate our anniversary with over 80 brothers and sisters. We marvel at God's guidance and thank Him for His faithfulness.

Evangelism at BERG Nordhorn

Pastor Paul Koch writes:

In October, we were able to hold our first evangelistic event—a milestone for our young church. During the event, we formed two teams: one group prayed continuously, while the other talked to people on the street. Many valuable encounters took place, and numerous invitations to the evening events were extended.



Even though none of the people we spoke to directly came, there were around 20 guests who did not yet have

faith or were not members of the church. In total, the evenings were attended by over 70 different people—an encouraging sign that God is opening doors and speaking to people.

NEWS FROM THE GIESBRECHTS

This summer, our family experienced two major milestones:

First, the oldest of our children has now grown taller than we are—Dan has quite literally grown over our heads. In character and personality, too, our children are becoming conversation partners with their own thoughts and convictions. We rejoice in seeing them grow and pray for wisdom to be supportive and loving parents during this important phase of their lives.



Boris and Maria Giesbrecht with Dan (15), Phil (14) and Matteo (11)

Second, we became homeowners this summer. When we saw the listing for a small wooden house, we were immediately reminded of our time in the Swiss mountains. After a bit of convincing, we managed to get our teenagers on board for another move. Now we're realizing that owning a home involves more work than we expected—but with three teenagers in the house, we're blessed not only with helping hands but also with lots of life, laughter, and fresh ideas.



NEWS FROM THE KLAUTKES

We had a busy summer. At the beginning of June, I (Pastor) spent a week in West Michigan with Stefan Hahn, an elder of the BERG in Tübingen, to attend the PRCA synod. Once again, we thoroughly enjoyed the fellowship and hospitality. Thank you all very much! We were particularly impressed by the anniversary concert in downtown Grand Rapids as part of the 100th anniversary celebrations.



As a family, we are very grateful for the three children God has entrusted to us. It is a great joy to watch them grow up. In July, we spent two weeks on vacation in the south of France on the Mediterranean. Especially after Dad had been traveling a lot for work during the summer, the children were very happy to be able to spend a lot of time with the whole family.



Jochen and Natalie Klautke with Nora (5), Josia (3) and Tobias (1)

Cordially in Christ,
Boris Giesbrecht
(Director of Studies ART)
and Jochen Klautke (Pastor BERG Giessen)

ANNOUNCEMENTS

CLASSIS WEST

Classis West of the Protestant Reformed Churches will meet in Heritage PRC, in Sioux Falls, SD, on Wednesday, March 4, 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 February 2 (30 days before classis convenes). All delegates in need of lodging or transportation from the airport should notify the clerk of Heritage's consistory.

Rev. J. Engelsma, Stated Clerk

THE STANDARD BEARER

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ANNOUNCEMENTS

CALL TO ASPIRANTS TO THE MINISTRY

All young men desiring to begin studies in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary in the 2026-2027 academic year should make application at least two weeks prior to the March 19, 2026 meeting of the Theological School Committee (TSC). Older men from the PRC who wish to apply under the new Special Seminary Entrance Program (SSEP) should approach the secretary of the TSC or the registrar (C. Terpstra) to review status and pre-seminary requirements (cf. *PRC Acts of Synod 2023*, pp. 348ff.).

Accompanying the application must be a testimonial from the prospective student's Consistory that he is a member in full communion, sound in faith, and upright in walk, and exhibits the qualities and personality necessary for a gospel minister; a certificate of health from a reputable physician; and a college transcript.

Before entering the seminary, all students must have earned a bachelor's degree and met all of the course requirements for entrance to the seminary. Those older men who apply under the new SSEP may be exempt from some of these requirements, which will be determined on a case-by-case basis. The requirements for the regular course of entering seminary and for the SSEP are listed in the seminary catalog available from the school or on the seminary's website (prcts.org/admissions).

All applicants must appear before the TSC for interview before admission is granted. In the event that a student cannot appear at the March 19 meeting, notification of this fact, along with a suggested interview date, must be given to the secretary of the TSC before this meeting.

All correspondence should be directed to the Theological School Committee, 4949 Ivanrest Avenue SW, Wyoming, MI 49418.

Joel Minderhoud, Secretary

The Protestant Reformed Seminary admits students of any race, color, and national or ethnic origin.

TEACHER NEEDED

Covenant Christian High School in Grand Rapids, MI is accepting applications from members of the Protestant Reformed Churches for teaching positions for the 2026-2027 school year. There is a particular need in the areas of English, Spanish, Latin, Art, Religion, and Applied Arts. Interested applicants are encouraged to contact Mr. Rick Noorman, Administrator, at ricknoorman@gmail.com or 616-453-5048, or Mr. Dave Moelker, Chairman of the Education Committee, at dmoelker9@gmail.com for more information.

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.

Rev. Clayton Spronk, Stated Clerk

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

REV. CARL HAAK

- 1/7 God's Wise Leading of His Church, Ex. 13:17-22
- 1/14 I Will Give You Rest, Matt. 11:28
- 1/21 Fearfully and Wonderfully Made, Ps. 139:14
- 1/28 Trusting and Not Fearing, Ps. 56:3, 4

