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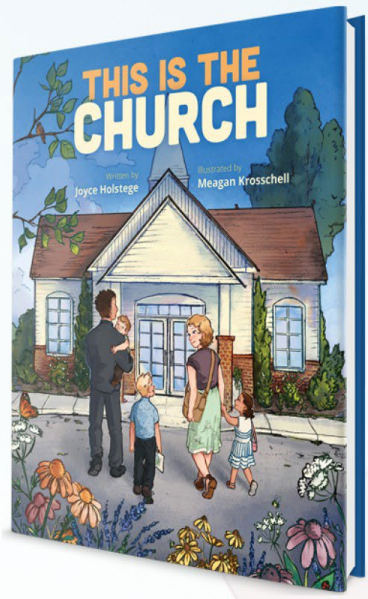
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Editorial office
Prof. Brian Huizinga
4949 Ivanrest Ave SW
Wyoming, MI 49418
b.huizinga@prca.org

Business office
Mr. Dwight Quenga
1894 Georgetown Center Dr.
Jenison, MI 49428-7137
616-457-5970
dwight@rfpa.org

United Kingdom office
c/o Mrs. Alison Graham
27 Woodside Road
Ballymena, BT42 4HX
Northern Ireland
alisongraham2006@hotmail.co.uk

rfpa.org / prca.org



GAZING ON HIM WHOM THEY PIERCED

REV. WILBUR BRUINSMA

minister emeritus in the Protestant Reformed Churches, and member of the PRC in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

But one of the soldiers with a spear pierced his side, and forthwith came there out blood and water.... And again another scripture saith, They shall look on him whom they pierced—John 19:34, 37

The victory cry of our Savior sounded forth from the cross, "It is finished!"

It was a cry God's people long needed to hear. Jesus-Savior by His death on the cross powerfully accomplished the salvation of those given Him of the Father in eternity. At the cross, He saved everyone who looked in faith to Him for that salvation in the Old Testament. He saved everyone who would look back on Him in faith in the New.

Yet, the event of which the apostle John speaks in the verses we examine took place *after* this cry of victory. It occurred after Jesus had given up His life and died. John includes it in his gospel account because he was yet an eyewitness of a calloused, gruesome act: the soldiers piercing Jesus' side. It was not enough that Jesus suffered the agony of hanging on the cross. The cruel, heartless soldiers had now bloodied Jesus' body by means of a spear thrust. John, with others, were spectators of this deed. They now gazed on the bloody form of our Savior.

It was a little after 3 o'clock on Friday afternoon. Since the Jewish Sabbath began at 6 P.M., there was little time left in the day to prepare for the Sabbath day. Besides, the Sabbath day that was soon to be upon the church was a high day, a special Sabbath. It was the Sabbath that brought the Passover week to a conclusion. It was necessary to go home and be ready to approach this day with great joy! The Sanhedrin, therefore, besought Pilate to break the legs of the three transgressors and remove their bodies from their crosses. The true motivation of these evil rulers, however, was the need to get this dastardly deed behind them in order that people would no longer linger around the scene of the cross. The sooner Jesus' body was gone, the better. The Sanhedrin wanted to move on. They had accomplished what they wanted.

So they come to Pilate to request of him that the legs of those crucified might be broken, so that they might die more quickly and their bodies might then be removed and buried. It was not as if the wicked Jews wanted Pilate to take these men, including Jesus, down from the cross alive! That would defeat the purpose of the crucifixion! But the legs of those crucified served to hold the body erect on the cross. This is what made this kind of death so slow and agonizing. If the legs were broken, however, a man's body would simply hang by his hands. This would force the chin down against the chest and the one hanging would be unable to breathe. They would soon suffocate and die. This was the purpose of breaking the legs. Besides, it would give the Sanhedrin just one more opportunity to vent their rage against Jesus. Pilate, in response to the Sanhedrin's request, sent his soldiers to Calvary with the order to break their legs. It was this that gave rise to the horribly cruel and gruesome act of the soldiers.

These hardened soldiers with no pity took their mallets and shattered the bones in the legs of the two thieves. But the soldier that stood before Jesus did not break His legs. He recognized that Jesus was already dead. This must have surprised the soldiers. Rarely would a man die on a cross so quickly as had Jesus. We know, of course, that Jesus was dead because Jesus willingly gave up His life. No man took it from Him, but He willingly laid down His life for His sheep. Of course, to understand this takes a heart of faith. Such faith these wicked soldiers certainly did not have. Seeing that Jesus was already dead, this soldier saw no need to break Jesus' legs. Instead, her ruthlessly pierced Jesus' side with a spear.

Now, the term "pierce" does not denote a mere stab of a spear. It refers to being pierced through, that is, a thrust meant to inflict a deadly wound. The soldier thrust his spear deeply into Jesus' side in order that it might make its way under His ribs and into His heart. If Jesus had not died by means of His crucifixion, He surely would have died by means of this spear thrust. So deeply did the spear penetrate His body that John was able to see the blood flow out intermingled with water. John records exactly what he witnessed: Jesus bled blood and water. It is striking too that John later writes concerning Christ in his epistle in 1 John 5:6, "This is he that came by water and blood, even Jesus Christ; not by water only, but by water and blood." That Jesus bled blood and water contains no deep, dark truths. But surely, we cannot help but see in this that the blood of Jesus Christ shed for us on the cross is that which cleanses us from sin. Christ's blood paid the price for our sins. It removed our guilt and made us righteous before God. Through Christ's blood we are justified. But that blood has also cleansed us from the filth of sin just as water washes us from the filth of our body. Through Christ's blood we are sanctified, made holy before God. It was not a mere coincidence that John records this for us, therefore.

But though all of this is true, our interest lies in the quote concerning this gruesome deed that John cites for us in verse 37. John explains that these things were done to fulfill Scripture: "They shall look on him whom they pierced." The soldiers pierced the side of our Savior in fulfillment of God's eternal plan as spoken through the mouth of the prophet Zechariah many years before Christ's death in Zechariah 12:10. There God says, "They shall look upon me whom they pierced, and they shall mourn for him, as one mourneth for his only son, and shall be in bitterness for him, as one that is in bitterness for his firstborn." Zechariah here refers to God Himself. God says, "They shall look upon *me* whom they pierced." But then God continues, "They shall mourn for *him*." And take note: "They shall mourn as one mourns over the death of his firstborn son." Zechariah prophecies directly about the death of Jesus Christ. God's people mourned for Him as they witnessed this piercing of Jesus side! They stood aghast with bitterness! Such was in the hearts of those who in faith stood at the cross.

But unbelief stood at the cross too. The psalmist writes in Psalm 22:16 that dogs compassed Jesus about. The wicked enclosed Him. These wicked in their unbelief pierced Him. In verse 13, the psalmist declares that they gaped upon him with their mouths. As they gazed on the crucified Lord their mouths gaped, that is, they opened wide waiting to devour Jesus as a lion tears at its prey. They were fierce in their hatred toward Jesus. These did not mourn in bitterness. They took malicious delight in piercing Jesus.

There are many today too who gaze upon this horrible deed that took place while Jesus' limp body yet hung on the cross. John bare record to it and his record is true. Through the witness of John recorded for us in Scripture, many are made to see the crucified Savior. They see the blood and water flow from His side.

The unbelieving world looks upon this Jesus whom they pierced. There is no pity for our pierced Savior in their unbelieving hearts. There is no mourning. With cruelty the wicked even today pierce Him through, despising Him, stumbling at the cross of Christ. They speak vehement words of hatred against Him. Today too in our violent, unbelieving world men's feet are swift to shed blood. Their throat is an open sepulcher; the poison of asps is under their lips. There is no fear of God before their eyes. Unbelief is blinded to this Son of God and the precious work He has performed. In the darkness of that unbelief men and women are untouched by the gospel. With cruelty in their hearts, they gaze on Jesus.

Believers today also gaze upon this spectacle of the cross. But they do not mourn like those faithful followers of Christ at the cross who felt that His cause and kingdom were lost. We are made to see with the eyes of faith that the One who suffered such cruelty at the hands of the wicked is the very Son of God who was born of a woman and dwelt among us. God says in Zechariah, "They shall look upon *me* whom they have pierced!" When we gaze upon the face of Jesus, we see divinity! We see the Son of God who is pierced! He is God's only natural Son—the firstborn among many brethren. In the face of Jesus, we see God who has come into our human flesh. In that flesh the Son of God shed His blood on our behalf.

In this is found the very power of the cross! The shed blood of Christ is the power of God unto salvation! You

understand that the death of a mere man has no power. Many men have died by spear thrusts and sword slashes. There is no power in such a death. But the shed blood of the Son of God who was born into our flesh, *that* has power! After all, who else could bear the burden of God's eternal wrath and pay the price we poor sinners owed to God? Jesus willingly laid down His life for His sheep. No man took it from Him. He did so as the Son of God who was able to give His life and take it again. Through His power as the Son of God He delivered us from the clutches of sin and Satan.

What do you see when you gaze on the blood and water pouring forth from the side of that Man who was pierced? Do you mourn as those few believers who were eyewitnesses of this? Do you doubt the power of the cross?

Gaze into the face of the living Lord who conquered death and the power of Satan and believe. Do not mourn!

This Man whom they pierced, whose blood flowed down His side, is now risen from the dead! Reach forth your hand and touch the wound in His side caused by the spear thrust, and be not faithless, but believing!

Worthy is the Lamb that was slain!



REVISITING COVID AND WORSHIP SERVICES

PROF. CORY GRIESS

professor of Practical Theology in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary, and member of First PRC in Grand Rapids, Michigan

In His providence, in January of 2020 Jehovah God unleashed a pandemic upon the world. This consequence of the fall into sin and harbinger of the judgment to come left nearly everyone in the world waiting and wondering what the SARS-CoV-2 virus was going to do if it infected their bodies. As is usually the case for humans when something too big for us to control confronts us, we "cried every man unto his god" (Jonah 1:5). Whether that god was an idol, science, man himself, or the true God, men cried out. According to God's decree, once sick, some like Benhadad, "enquired of the LORD by means of his faithful servants, shall I recover of this disease?" (2 Kings 8:8). At such a time we believers felt the need more than ever to be gathered in the house of God for worship of this holy, terrible, and yet gracious Being, and, by the provision of biblical truth, to help those making genuine inquiries.

Yet that was the great question the church faced was it not: "Shall we gather for worship? And if so, how?" Upon calls for social distancing to slow the spread of the disease, attempts of various levels of government to shut down worship services, mask mandates, lawsuits, threats, and varied responses among even faithful churches, the pandemic created a firestorm of controversy within the church of the Lord Jesus Christ right at this point—shall we worship?

The last thing I want to do is reignite that firestorm. Yet, just as it can be healthy and helpful to revisit a disagreement between spouses after the heat of the moment has passed, I think it might be worth our while now, a number of years after the threat has ended, to revisit the specific question of worship services during a time of pandemic. It is my judgment that we can find a simpler approach to the questions that swirled within and around us. I began developing the following guide as a pastor attempting to help my local church pass through the pandemic. Reflection over the last couple of years has cemented a number of aspects of it in my mind. This article consists of five assertions concerning the issue, which assertions I also then explain. I ask

that you not give up on the article before you read all five.

#1 The Fourth Commandment requires that the congregation *physically assemble* for public corporate worship on the Lord's Day.

This has always been the way of the church's keeping the fourth commandment, Old Testament and New. Besides, this is the specific requirement of Hebrews 10:25, "Not forsaking the *assembling of ourselves together*, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching." Just as the church's "gathering together unto him" (2 Thess. 2:1) at the end when Christ returns is a *physical congregating about the Lord*, so this "assembling of ourselves together" (same Greek word) in Hebrews 10:25 is *a real physical gathering together in one place* to worship God. This gathering for worship in a specific place we call a gathering of "the church." Thus, physical congregating is implied in the catechism's explanation of the fourth commandment when it requires us to "diligently frequent *the church of God* to hear His word…."

While "gathering together" through Zoom or YouTube, for example, is a helpful backup, and a backup we can be thankful for, it does not meet the full requirement of the Scriptures, and may not be put on the same plane as physically congregating for worship. To give online "gathering" the same weight as physical gathering would be like making your spare tire your main tire. It dishonors the one who made the car, and long-term use is unsafe for the car and the people in it. A spare tire is helpful when in God's providence your main tire cannot function. But you make a serious mistake, and dishonor the Lord, if you make the spare tire of online worship into what it is not.

#2 The only legitimate reason for not physically assembling with the saints for worship on the Lord's Day is *if God Himself in His providence prevents us from doing so.*

There are instances in the Scriptures when God Himself, according to the providential outworking of His decree in His children's lives, prevents them from heeding this call to gather physically for worship with the saints on the Sabbath Day. An important reference to this is found in Leviticus 12-15, where God gives various laws concerning ceremonial uncleanness. Understand well, the cause of uncleanness in these chapters is not sinful behavior. Rather, in these cases, the Lord makes clear that one could be faithful to the Lord and yet become ceremonially unclean. In these instances uncleanness was simply the result of God's providence working out in one's life. Examples include a woman who has given birth (Chap. 12), someone who contracts leprosy (Chaps. 13-14), or a person who has a "running issue out of his flesh" (Chap. 15). These people were not allowed to "come into the sanctuary" (Chap. 12:4) for worship services until they were ceremonially pure again. God in His providence gave these people circumstances in their lives that prevented them from gathering together on the Sabbath, and thus their absence among the congregating saints was legitimate.

Psalm 42:1-4 describes an individual (possibly David) who was in a situation where God prevented him from physically gathering with the saints for worship. The psalmist wrote, "As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God. My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God: when shall I come and appear before God?" Verse 4 makes clear that this "appearing before God" was public corporate worship with "a multitude who kept holyday." The man could not attend. But this man's absence was not due to rebellion or apathy in his heart. On the contrary, he laments in the psalm because he longs to be there! Likely a sickness prevented him. But whatever the circumstances, they were God's providential working in the life of the psalmist that he could not control.

To be sure, one ought not appeal to "providential prevention" lightly. Paul's conviction to go out of his way to stop in Troas for the Lord's Day on his way back to Jerusalem (Acts 20:6-7) prevents us from thinking we can easily use God as an excuse for our own laziness or cold hearts. Nonetheless, "providential prevention" is a legitimate reason—indeed *the only* legitimate reason—to keep oneself back from physically congregating for worship on the Lord's Day. This is the reason why we tell a child who is sick with the flu, "It's ok to stay home."

#3 In some situations, it is the responsibility of the *consistory to decide for the entire congregation* that God in His providence is preventing the congregation from gathering for worship.

There are two important considerations here. First, the consistory (not the civil magistrate) has the responsibility and right to decide to cancel the worship service for the congregation. The elders alone, in the office of king, have been set up by Christ to rule over the worship of the church. Nowhere in the New Testament does the government receive the command to "rule well" (1 Tim. 5:17) the church institute, "taking the oversight thereof" (1 Pet. 5:2). Elders do. This does not mean the church may altogether ignore the civil magistrate. (More on this later in the article.) But let us establish that the right to govern *the worship services of the church* belongs to the elders alone. The civil magistrate may make decisions about fire code and such, but that is not the same thing as making decisions regarding whether or not the congregation will gather for the worship of God and what she will do therein.

Second, in statement number 3, note that the consistory has the right to make a decision regarding whether or not the "providential prevention" principle applies in any instance *to the whole congregation*, so that they must cancel the worship services. I realize this is an implication of what I said so far and there is no direct scriptural proof to give, but the logic is sound, and the practice has been in existence for ages. This is what lies behind the notion that a consistory may cancel the worship service for inclement weather. The consistory makes the judgment for the whole congregation that God in His providence is preventing the congregation from gathering for worship.

The consistory may legitimately decide the same *in a time of pandemic also*, thus canceling services, or reverting to the "spare tire" of online "gathering." The consistory ought not do this lightly, just as they do not do it lightly for weather concerns. They ought to take into consideration many factors, including the fact that the fourth commandment is one of the Ten Commandments (no light thing!). Yet, when making this decision, they may (and ought to) also consider the declarations of the civil magistrate regarding gathering. The magistrate's declarations are not by themselves the determining factor. The government does not itself have the right to cancel any worship service of the church, and the civil magistrate may overreach in its concerns. Nonetheless, the rightful rulers over the worship of the church ought to take into serious consideration the concern of the civil government when they face the question, is God providentially preventing us from gathering for worship? They are given a place by God to protect the citizens of the nation. In the case of a pandemic, a consistory ought to ask, Why is the government decreeing what it is decreeing? Are the government's reasons legitimate? Is there a danger to the people? Is there a danger of the local hospitals being overrun? How long is this decree of the government lasting? Legitimately so? Illegitimately so? What is the physical health of our people generally? Our community? Are there ways to gather physically and yet comply with all or some of the government's wishes? All of this and more should be considered when the consistory makes the decision that it alone has the right to make.

#4 In some situations, it is wiser for the consistory *not* to make the decision *on behalf of the entire congregation* that God in His providence is preventing us from worshiping together. Instead, the consistory is wise to leave it up to the conscience of the individual church member (or family) to decide if God in His providence is preventing that individual (or family) from gathering for worship.

A consistory legitimately does this, for example, when they judge that the weather is poor, but not poor enough to be a legitimate danger to a large section of the congregation. The consistory may send a notice out saying something like, "We are going to hold church services tonight, but we want every member (family) to use their own judgment concerning whether or not they believe they ought to attend." When the elders do this, they are essentially saying, "We will hold services, but we want you to decide for yourself (family) if you believe God in His providence is preventing you from gathering for public corporate worship. If you do determine that to be the case, we will understand."

It may be in certain situations in a time of

pandemic that the consistory decides this approach is the wisest for now. They decide to hold worship services and leave it up to the individual (family) conscience to decide the matter for themselves. In fact, if the consistory feels compelled to make a judgment regarding the worship service, I would argue that the consistory does well to default to this position if at all possible and move to making a decision on behalf of the entire congregation only if the circumstances absolutely require it. In making this decision to leave it up to the individual conscience, the consistory must take into consideration all the questions and circumstances listed under #3.

#5 Both the consistory and the church members ought to comply with government regulations that do not bring them into conflict with the commands of God, even if the consistory and the church members do not like the regulations.

Now I am not speaking about the question of gathering for worship, but the magistrate's regulations that may legitimately govern us when we do so. The basis for this assertion is the fifth commandment, which, as the Heidelberg Catechism instructs us, requires that *I show all honor, love and fidelity, to… all in authority over me, and submit myself to their good instruction and correction, with due obedience; and also patiently bear with their weaknesses and infirmities, since it pleases God to govern us by their hand*. It may be legitimate to question what is or is not "good instruction and correction" from the civil magistrate. And there may be instances where the consistory makes a judgment for the congregation that a particular regulation is illegitimate (for example, no singing) and that another regulation is legitimate (some form of distancing). Then again, there may be instances where the consistory leaves this too up to the individual conscience to determine what God would require them to do or not do (mask mandates?). Nonetheless, the principle itself is clear enough.

CONCLUSION

The approach above seeks to:

1) Honor the God-given place the consistory has been given to rule over the worship of God.
2) Honor the place the civil magistrate has been given to protect its citizens.
3) Recognize the two may come into conflict with one another, and give principled help to consistories and church members when they do.
4) Relate the issue to the practice the church has always had regarding inclement weather.
5) Recognize the priesthood of all believers and the individual conscience.

Does what is written here help answer every question that may arise in every scenario? Probably not. But if you think through what is here with your question in mind, you will see that it gives a principled way *to deal with* the vast majority of questions, and probably your own. Will there be times when church members disagree with the decisions their consistory makes in these matters? Well, are there times church members disagree with their consistory regarding canceling or holding services when there is a tornado warning? Just as in those circumstances the church members are then helped by consistory members who understand the principles clearly and explain their decisions clearly on the basis of those principles, so too during a pandemic. Meanwhile, the consistories are helped by church members who show honor, love, and fidelity to their elders, even if they feel obligated to voice a contrary opinion, which is their right.

But if the Lord sends a pandemic again in our lifetimes, which is certainly possible given the words of Christ in Matthew 24:7, may we glorify God by acting in a principled manner, willingly humbling ourselves, so that when we speak, we speak "that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers" (Eph 4:29).



THE "TWO COVENANTS" (GALATIANS 4:24)

REV. JAMES LANING

home missionary in the Protestant Reformed Churches laboring in Dallas/Ft. Worth, TX, and member of Zion PRC in Jenison, Michigan, his calling church

Why were all the male Israelites to be circumcised? Some Baptists will answer that question by saying that all the male Israelites were to be circumcised because God had made a gracious (though not saving) covenant with Abraham's natural seed. The idea is that God made two covenants with Abraham: a covenant of saving grace with Abraham's spiritual children and a covenant of common grace with his natural descendants. Though these Baptists may or may not use the phrase "common grace," their teaching that God promised "physical blessings" to the natural seed of Abraham amounts to saying that God promised these natural children common grace.

In other words, Baptists who use this argument are teaching common grace. This is important to remember when witnessing to Baptists. If you show a Baptist that Scripture does not teach common grace, and if that person comes to recognize that God's grace is always saving and particular, then you can apply that truth to God's covenant, pointing out that there never was a "common-grace" covenant with Abraham's natural descendants. This may help the person see where Baptists go wrong in their thinking.

We turn now to a passage in Galatians 4 that some Baptists have cited to prove that in addition to the saving-grace covenant with Abraham's spiritual seed, there was also a common-grace covenant with his natural seed. Let us consider what Scripture says regarding the two covenants mentioned in Galatians 4.

THE TWO COVENANTS

Although it is far more common to read of God's covenant in the singular, there are three passages in the Bible that speak of God's covenants in the plural. One of them is Galatians 4:22, which we now consider in its context:

> For it is written, that Abraham had two sons, the one by a bondmaid, the other by a freewoman. But he who was of the bondwoman was born after the flesh; but he of the freewoman was by promise. Which things are an allegory: for these are the two covenants; the one from the mount Sinai, which gendereth to bondage, which is Agar. For this Agar is mount Sinai in Arabia, and answereth to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children. But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all (Gal. 4:22-26).

From Scripture we know that God's covenant refers to an everlasting bond of friendship between God and His people in Christ. God's people in the days before Christ came were in the same covenant that we are today. The covenant promise in both dispensations is the same, and there is only one covenant people gathered by God in both dispensations.

So why does God speak here of two covenants, two mothers, and two sons?

We know that God's people have two kinds of children. Some believe in Christ and others do not. The two sons mentioned here in Galatians 4 represent these two seeds. The previous chapter, Galatians 3, taught that it is only those children who belong to Christ who are in God's everlasting covenant. They alone have been spiritually set free. The others are in bondage.

Galatians 4 speaks not only of two children, but also of two covenants represented by two mothers. Besides the covenant of grace, there is a reference to the covenant "from the mount Sinai" (Gal. 4:24). The covenant from mount Sinai is referred to as a covenant in Exodus 34: "And the LORD said unto Moses, Write thou these words: for after the tenor of these words I have made a covenant with thee and with Israel. And he was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights;

he did neither eat bread, nor drink water. And he wrote upon the tables the words of the covenant, the ten commandments" (vv. 27, 28).

Paul in Galatians 4 brings up the covenant from mount Sinai when talking about those who want to be "under the law." The subject of the two covenants is introduced this way:

> Tell me, ye that desire to be under the law, do ye not hear the law? For it is written, that Abraham had two sons, the one by a bondmaid, the other by a freewoman. But he who was of the bondwoman was born after the flesh; but he of the freewoman was by promise. Which things are an allegory: for these are the two covenants; the one from the mount Sinai, which gendereth to bondage, which is Agar (Gal. 4:21-24).

The law made known the truth by means of types and shadows. The law is said to have "a shadow of good things to come, and not the very image of the things" (Heb. 10:1). Now Christ has come. What was taught to God's people before by using pictures is now expressed to us more clearly and fully.

This passage in Galatians 4 says that the covenant from Mount Sinai "gendereth" to bondage. The verb translated "gendereth" means "to beget" or "to bring forth" a child. That the covenant from Mount Sinai "gendereth to bondage" means that its children were in bondage. The servant Hagar and her son Ishmael are said to illustrate this idea.

This must not be misunderstood. Free from the bondage of sin were the believing children of Abraham who lived before Christ came. For a time the church in those days is said to have been like a child who was "under tutors and governors until the time appointed of the father" (Gal. 4:2). This was true until Christ came, who redeemed "them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons" (Gal. 4:5).

Galatians 4 speaks of those who desire to be under the law. The inspired apostle Paul writes, "Tell me, ye that desire to be under the law, do ye not hear the law?" Those who desire to be under the law are in bondage.

To understand this we must consider how the covenant from Mount Sinai is related to the covenant of grace.

THE RELATION BETWEEN THE TWO COVENANTS

Before God's people came to Mt. Sinai, God had already established His everlasting covenant with His people in Christ. The covenant that God made with Noah and with Abraham was God's everlasting covenant of grace. The law was added, but it did not disannul God's covenant promise. God refers to this in Galatians 3: "Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ. And this I say, that the covenant, that was confirmed before of God in Christ, the law, which was four hundred and thirty years after, cannot disannul, that it should make the promise of none effect" (vv. 16, 17).

If God had already established with His people His covenant of grace, why was the law added? God explains this a little further in that passage: "Wherefore then serveth the law? It was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise was made" (Gal. 3:19a).

God says the law was added because of transgressions. The law was added to show God's people their need for the coming seed (Jesus) to whom the promises were made. The promised seed would come and save His people from their sins. The law is referred to as a schoolmaster that pointed God's people to the coming Christ (Gal. 3:24).

This means the covenant from Mount Sinai is to be viewed in its relation to God's everlasting covenant of grace. All the sacrifices, for example, pointed the people to the need for the Mediator of the new covenant.

The children in bondage are those Israelites who rejected the promised Mediator of the new covenant. Such children were raised in the sphere of the covenant, but did not believe in the coming Savior.

John Calvin makes a reference to this in his commentary on Galatians 4. He points out how unbelievers clung to what Calvin calls "the bare law":

> By the children of Sinai, it will afterwards be explained, are meant hypocrites, who are at last expelled from the Church of God and deprived of the inheritance. What then is the bearing of children to bondage, which he is now discussing? It denotes those who wickedly abuse the law by conceiving nothing but slavery from it. Not so the godly fathers

> who lived under the old testament.... But those who cleave to the bare law and do not know it as a schoolmaster to bring them to Christ, but rather make it a barrier against coming to Him, are the Ishmaelites born to slavery.[1]

Such people who cleaved to "the bare law" by itself were held in bondage.

PICTURES AND REALITIES

Before Christ came, God gave His people pictures of spiritual realities. They received illustrations to teach them about the promises of God's everlasting covenant of grace. For example, that God has one people whom He separates from this world was illustrated by Israel being separated from the other nations as God's people. That God graciously reveals Himself only to His people was illustrated by God giving His statutes and judgments only to Israel (Ps. 147:19-20). That God's people would one day receive the heavenly inheritance was pictured by Israel receiving the land of Canaan.

Once Jesus, the reality, came, those pictures that pointed to Him and His work went away. Jesus confirmed the new covenant by His one perfect sacrifice. Those who rejected the coming Messiah, the Mediator of the new covenant, had only the pictures. They were not believing in God who promises His people the realities.

In the days before Christ, there were sacrifices that pointed to the future sacrifice that would atone for sin. Yet those sacrifices themselves could not atone for sin.

Once Jesus, the reality, came, those pictures that pointed to Him and His work went away. Jesus confirmed the new covenant by His one perfect sacrifice. Those who rejected the coming Messiah, the Mediator of the new covenant, had only the pictures. They were not believing in God who promises His people the realities.

Those children who have only the pictures, and not the realities, are in bondage. That was true in the days before Christ came. It is still true today. In contrast, the elect children who believe God's promises have the realities to which those pictures point.

The believers who lived before Christ had more than just the pictures. They also had the realities to which those pictures pointed. They had God's Word in their heart (Deut. 30:14) and were members of the body of Christ. We understand these things more clearly now that Christ has come and has poured out His Spirit. Yet it is important to understand that our brothers and sisters who lived before Christ had more than just the pictures; they had the realities themselves.

BLESSINGS ENJOYED ONLY IN CHRIST

This now brings us back to the original question. Does Galatians 4 speak of God making two covenants with two seeds, promising two different inheritances? Does it teach that God promised a heavenly inheritance to the spiritual seed of Abraham and an earthly inheritance to the natural seed of Abraham? There are Baptists who say that it did:

> The Baptists saw two posterities in Abraham, two inheritances, and consequently two covenants.[2]

Galatians 4 does not speak of the unbelieving natural children of Abraham being promised an inheritance. Rather, it speaks of them being in bondage. There were no blessings promised to them. Rather, the text says they were in bondage to their sin. Reading through Galatians 4 makes that quite clear.

During the days of all those pictures, those who had their mind on the spiritual realities to which they pointed were blessed. Those who rejected the coming Savior were in bondage. Both in the past and still today, it has always been only those in Christ who are promised an inheritance.

1 Calvin's commentary on Gal. 4:22.

2 Pascal Denault, *The Distinctiveness of Baptist Covenant Theology: A Comparison Between Seventeenth-Century Particular Baptist and Paedobaptist Federalism*, Revised ed. (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2017), 120.



NAHUM (14)
NINEVEH'S END (CONCLUSION)

REV. RONALD HANKO
minister emeritus in the Protestant Reformed Churches, and member of Covenant of Grace PR Fellowship in Spokane, Washington

Previous article in this series: March 2025, p. 202

Thou also shalt be drunken: thou shalt be hid, thou also shalt seek strength because of the enemy. All thy strong holds shall be like fig trees with the firstripe figs: if they be shaken, they shall even fall into the mouth of the eater. Behold, thy people in the midst of thee are women: the gates of thy land shall be set wide open unto thine enemies: the fire shall devour thy bars. Draw thee waters for the siege, fortify thy strong holds: go into clay, and tread the morter, make strong the brickkiln. There shall the fire devour thee; the sword shall cut thee off, it shall eat thee up like the cankerworm: make thyself many as the cankerworm, make thyself many as the locusts. Thou hast multiplied thy merchants above the stars of heaven: the cankerworm spoileth, and flieth away. Thy crowned are as the locusts, and thy captains as the great grasshoppers, which camp in the hedges in the cold day, but when the sun ariseth they flee away, and their place is not known where they are. Thy shepherds slumber, O king of Assyria: thy nobles shall dwell in the dust: thy people is scattered upon the mountains, and no man gathered them. There is no healing of thy bruise; thy wound is grievous: all that hear the bruit of thee shall clap the hands over thee: for upon whom hath not thy wickedness passed continually?—Nahum 3:11-19

The last verses of Nahum begin with "thou also," God telling Nineveh that what happened to Thebes would also happen to Nineveh and her citizens. Nineveh's end would in fact be more complete than that of Thebes. The ruins of the Egyptian city still stand as a monument to her greatness and are a major tourist attraction today, but no trace of Nineveh could be found until recent times when some of the ruins of Nineveh were discovered and excavated.

God's judgment, however, continues to be fulfilled in that much of what was found at Nineveh and other Assyrian cities was carried off to the world's museums, especially the British Museum in London, and some of what remained has been blown up, bulldozed, stolen, or sold by ISIS, the radical Muslim group that controlled for a time what used to be the kingdom of Assyria. Nevertheless, the remains of Nineveh have never been much more than piles of dirt.

Verses 11 through 13 are a series of five figures describing Nineveh's weakness in the face of the Lord's coming judgments. Robertson describes them thus:

- like a staggering drunk
- like a panicked fugitive
- like a trembling fig tree
- like a feeble woman
- like a city with gates thrown open.[1]

The figures all show Nineveh's helplessness but each has its own emphasis. The first figure, comparing Nineveh to a drunken man fallen into a roadside ditch and lost from view, includes the first two statements of verse 11: "Thou also shalt be drunken: thou shalt be hid." It prophesies Nineveh's helplessness in the face of her enemies, something that would have been incredible in the days of Nahum, when Nineveh and Assyria, under the leadership of Ashurbanipal had just returned from the siege and conquest of Thebes.

The second figure describes the effect of Nineveh's fall on her king and citizens, a word of God that was fulfilled literally in her last (uncrowned) king who, having claimed the throne after the reigning king burned himself and his servants in the palace of Nineveh, fled to Harran to try to organize some

1 O. Palmer Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1990), 118.

resistance to the Babylonian armies, but who was killed by the Babylonians there. His name, almost the only thing known of him, was Ashur-uballit II.

The third figure, verse 12, describes how easily the cities of Nineveh would fall to the Babylonians, who would be like an animal devouring figs as they fell from the tree in a wind storm: "all thy strong holds shall be like fig trees with the firstripe figs: if they be shaken, they shall even fall into the mouth of the eater." Mane, Sahiri, Balihu, names all but unknown to history, as well as Nimrud, Akkad, Assur, Erech, and other cities mentioned in Genesis 10:10-12, would all be devoured.

The figure of firstripe figs reminds the hearers and readers of Nahum's prophecy of God's judgment in Nineveh's downfall. In His sight Nineveh was ripe for judgment and that judgment would come, as will the judgment of this present creation when even the stars will fall as figs (Rev. 6:13).

Nineveh's weakness at the time of her downfall is the subject of the fourth figure (v. 13a), where she and her people, especially her soldiers, are compared to a weak woman: "Behold, thy people in the midst of thee are women." As Robertson points out, in spite of the efforts of the feminist movement to deny it, the testimony of Scripture is that women are weaker than men (1 Pet. 3:7), especially in battle, and Nineveh would find herself weak indeed.

The fifth figure depicts Nineveh as a city with her gates wide open to the enemy (v. 13b). If the historical accounts of Nineveh's fall are accurate, the gates themselves would not be open, but nearly two miles of Nineveh's walls would be as a result of the flooding of the Tigris River, allowing her enemies to walk unhindered into the city. Indeed, not only Nineveh but the whole land of Assyria would be open to her enemies and much of Nineveh would be burned with fire.

Nahum 3:14 is similar to chapter 2:5, both of which describe the futility of Nineveh's efforts to defend herself against God's judgments. Nahum 3:14, however, is a mocking call to Nineveh to attempt her defense: "Draw thee waters for the siege, fortify thy strong holds: go into clay, and tread the morter, make strong the brickkiln." The reference to clay, mortar, and brickkiln refers to the fact that Nineveh and other cities of the Fertile Crescent, palaces, temples, walls and houses were built of mud bricks. God says to Nineveh, "Rebuild, repair, strengthen, fortify: it is all in vain."

Nahum's words remind us of Psalm 33 and its versification:

> Jehovah from His throne on high
> Looks down with clear and searching eye
> On all that dwell below;
> And He that fashioned heart and mind
> Looks ever down on all mankind,
> The works of men to know.
>
> Not human strength or mighty hosts,
> Not charging steeds or war-like boasts
> Can save from overthrow;
> But God will save from death and shame
> All those who fear and trust His Name,
> And they no want shall know.[2]

Verses 15-17 compare both the Babylonians and the Ninevites to insects, three of which are mentioned: the cankerworm, the locust, and the great grasshopper. The cankerworm may be a kind of locust (it is described as flying away), but whatever it was, it is always a picture of devouring judgment. There may have been a plague of locusts in Assyria, part of God's judgment on her, but it is the Babylonians, with fire and sword who are being compared to cankerworms and locusts. They would eat up Nineveh and all her wealth like a cloud of locusts.

It is interesting that verse 16 makes reference to Nineveh's merchants, as does Revelation 18. The merchants are mentioned because there are really only two Gods whom men serve, the true God or Mammon. Nineveh had plundered the nations in the service of Mammon, but now her treasures, her wealth, her merchandise would disappear like the green grass during a plague of locusts. The one true God would show that Mammon was no god. He would show that Nineveh's worship of Mammon was vanity and lies.

Having described the Babylonians and their allies as devouring insects, verse 17 describes the Ninevites, especially the kings and captains, with the same figure: "Thy crowned are as the locusts, and thy captains as the great grasshoppers, which camp in the hedges in the cold day, but when the sun ariseth they flee away, and their place is not known where they are." The kings and captains, men like Sennacherib and Rabshakeh, victors in so many battles and proud of their conquests would be gone and the citizens of Nineveh would be left defenseless.

2 *The Psalter* (2024 ed.). #33A, stanzas 7, 8.

Robertson describes the phenomenon of Nahum 3:17 as common to the Near East:

> Huddled en masse, grasshoppers coat leaves and branches along a hedge on a cloudy, cold day. But the moment the sun warms their cold-blooded shells, they flee away; and their place is not known! They leave not a trace of their previous presence.[3]

"Where are they," Nahum asks? Where are Sargon, killed in battle, Sennacherib, murdered by his own sons, foul-mouthed Rabshakeh, great Shalmaneser, Esarhaddon, Ashurbanipal, in the hour of Nineveh's need? The last king to rule in Nineveh burned himself and his servants to death in the palace: what help was he to Nineveh in her peril? Like grasshoppers warmed by the sun they all vanished, as will all those who trust in chariots and horses.

Verse 18 is Assyria and Nineveh's epitaph, an epitaph similar to great Babylon's in Revelation 18, "And he cried mightily with a strong voice, saying, Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, and is become the habitation of devils, and the hold of every foul spirit, and a cage of every unclean and hateful bird" (Rev. 18:2). Fallen and gone forever, that was Nineveh, as it will be for all the kingdoms of this world when at the end even their memory is gone.

Nineveh's shepherds are her leaders and their slumber is the long sleep of death. Her nobles are dust, neither their bones nor their graves to be found. The Assyrian peoples were so thoroughly scattered by the Babylonians that there is no people today who can trace their origins to the Assyrians. Assyria's vaunted power, conquests, wealth, and great kings are no more, their only memory a few mounds in the Fertile Crescent and a few broken objects in the world's museums.

Her bruise, the work of God Almighty, would never be healed, not again after she repented in the days of Jonah. Her wound was to the death and could not be salved and bandaged. The rumor (bruit) of her demise and the cheering of those who suffered under her oppression would never be stilled. That is verse 19. The "never" of Nineveh's disappearance, however, refers not only to the fall and destruction of that ancient city but to the fall of all the kingdoms of this world.

Nahum 3:19 is an Old Testament echo of Revelation 18:21-24:

> And a mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone, and cast it into the sea, saying, Thus with violence shall that great city Babylon be thrown down, and shall be found no more at all. And the voice of harpers, and musicians, and of pipers, and trumpeters, shall be heard no more at all in thee; and no craftsman, of whatsoever craft he be, shall be found any more in thee; and the sound of a millstone shall be heard no more at all in thee; And the light of a candle shall shine no more at all in thee; and the voice of the bridegroom and of the bride shall be heard no more at all in thee: for thy merchants were the great men of the earth; for by thy sorceries were all nations deceived. And in her was found the blood of prophets, and of saints, and of all that were slain upon the earth.

Yet here in this description of Nineveh's incurable wound and bruise the prophet comes closest in these final chapters to preaching the gospel of grace and prophesying the coming of a Savior, for there is healing for spiritual bruises and wounds, though Nineveh did not find it again. "He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him, and with his stripes we are healed" (Is. 53:5). There is an end of the kind of wickedness that Nahum describes, but only in Him, and that requires an overthrow of violence, depravity, and lies that can be accomplished only by grace and that will be greater than Nineveh's overthrow.

Surely when Nahum prophesied in chapter 1:15 of Him that brings good tidings and publishes peace, he was thinking of Isaiah's words, who had prophesied not long before and who also spoke of good tidings and peace. Surely in speaking of Nineveh's incurable wound and bruise, he was thinking of Him who was delivered for our offenses and raised again for our justification. In Him alone we have not only deliverance from Nineveh's oppression but from the sins that brought down on Israel and us the oppression and chastisement we deserve, and ever so much more. The Great Physician alone is able to cure the incurable and to provide balm for every wound. Knowing our own wounds are as incurable as Nineveh's, we fly to Him in faith and find healing, peace, everlasting righteousness, and blessedness. If we do not, we are no better off with our accomplishments, conquests, wealth, and strength than Nineveh. Indeed, we will then perish as did Nineveh, for we have Nineveh, each of us, in our hearts.

3 Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah*, 126.



CREATION THROUGH THE LENS OF SCRIPTURE: THE ORIGIN OF THE UNIVERSE

REV. JOHN MARCUS
pastor of Peace PRC in Dyer, Indiana

Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear—Hebrews 11:3

Scripture is the lens through which we must understand the creation. We saw in the last installment that we have a more sure word of prophecy in God's inspired Word (*Standard Bearer*, December 2025, p. 121). In light of that more sure Word, we must not use creation and men's interpretation of creation as our guide for understanding Scripture. Just the opposite, we must use Scripture as our guide for understanding creation. In this installment, we want to consider what God's Word says about the origin of the universe. Although the truth regarding the origin of the universe is obvious, it is still vehemently denied by unbelievers.

When we encounter such denials of the truth, we might be tempted to compromise. When we hear that the universe came from a big bang fourteen billion years ago, we might be tempted to compromise what Scripture declares and accept the idea that God created the universe through the process of evolution. When scientists claim that DNA evidence shows that simple creatures evolved into more complex creatures over long periods of time, we might be tempted to believe the lie.

We intend in this series to look at creation through the lens of Scripture. Lord willing, future installments will look at specific issues such as how old the universe is, how long the days of creation were, and how do deal with scientific evidence that seems to indicate an old universe, among other topics.

Before looking at those specific topics, it may be profitable to use the lens of Scripture to look at some fundamental truths regarding the origin of the universe.

The first and most basic truth concerning the origin of the universe is that *God is its Creator.*

Unbelievers cannot bring themselves to admit that God is the Creator and rather hold that the universe arose of its own accord. If they admitted that God in fact created all things, they would condemn themselves for not believing in Him and serving Him. Despite their loud protestations to the contrary, unbelievers nevertheless know that the universe did not create itself. That is the teaching of Romans 1:20 where it says, "... the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse." Mankind is able to see that there *is* such an almighty power behind the existence of the universe and that this power was exercised by the *Godhead*. But they refuse to admit what is clearly true. No amount of evidence can make rebellious man turn from his denials; only a wonderwork of God can accomplish this.

However, God answers the question regarding the origin of all things in the very first verse of Scripture: "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). Hebrews 1:10 declares: "And, Thou, Lord, in the beginning hast laid the foundation of the earth; and the heavens are the works of thine hands." And, Hebrews 11:3 proclaims that "the worlds were framed by the word of God." The rest of Scripture so clearly echoes the truth that God created, it would be redundant to multiply passages. While unbelief denies this basic truth and suppresses it, faith holds for truth what Scripture declares: God is the Almighty Creator of all things.

A second fundamental truth regarding the origin of the universe is that God created the heavens and the earth *by His powerful word*.

Since unbelievers refuse to acknowledge that God created all things, they must explain *how* the universe could arise of its own accord. Generally, they try to invoke physical laws to explain how supposed hot gas clouds in the early universe could collapse under gravity over hundreds of millions of years and eventually form rotating stars surrounded by disks of material. Planets somehow formed from these disks as smaller clumps collided and stuck together. Somehow earth formed into a planet at exactly the right distance from the sun so that it would be neither too hot nor too cold to support life. Over billions of years, the earth's atmosphere and oceans somehow became an ideal place for life to form. According to evolutionism, a chemical soup somehow evolved into complex molecules. These in turn somehow evolved into simple life forms, which evolved into multi-cellular organisms. Eventually, these more complex organisms somehow evolved into higher creatures including apes and humans. Somehow all this order and complexity arose through chance processes and naturalistic laws apart from the work of God.

In contrast, faith understands that "the worlds were framed by the word of God" (Heb. 11:3). The constant testimony of Scripture is that the universe is the product of God's powerful creative word. Genesis 1 leaves the matter beyond doubt when it repeats the words: "God said…and it was so." Genesis 1 does not merely teach *that* God created; it teaches *how* God created, that is through His mighty word. Psalm 33:6 declares, "By the word of the LORD were the heavens made; and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth." Similarly, Psalm 33:9 tells us, "For he spake, and it was done; he commanded, and it stood fast." God's creative word was a powerful command that accomplished His wise purposes.

A third important truth that Scripture declares about the origin of the universe is that God created *out of nothing*.

A fundamental axiom in naturalistic explanations for origins is that the universe and everything in it developed from an initial natural reality (for example, a quantum field having fluctuating energy and observing physical laws). Unbelievers posit that the heavens and the earth arose from billions of years of processes following a sudden expansion of space-time called the big bang. Naturalism assumes that the universe and everything in it ultimately arose from some natural reality rather than from the creative act of God. According to these explanations, the stars, the sun, the planets, the moon, the earth, and all its creatures all had their origin from what is essentially an eternal reality.

In contrast, Scripture declares that God created the heavens and the earth out of nothing. When Hebrews 11:3 speaks of "the worlds [that] were framed," it literally refers to the framing of the 'eons.' God created eons of time (including the matter and space that exist in connection with time) in such a way that the "things which are seen were not made of things which do appear" (Heb. 11:3). God did not create the material of the visible universe (that is,"things which are seen") out of previously existing material (that is, "of things which do appear"). He created the universe *out of nothing*.

A fourth fundamental truth concerning the origin of the universe is that God's creative word accomplished what it commanded *immediately*.

Unbelieving explanations dealing with the origin of the universe and of life on the earth, consistently hold that the order found in the universe and in living organisms all arose gradually through natural processes acting over long periods. After the sun and the earth formed, the earth took up its orbit exactly the right distance from the sun. After millions of years, it manifested just the right composition of nitrogen, oxygen, and water that allowed life to evolve from non-living chemicals. Somehow the building blocks of life (proteins, DNA, RNA, sugars, lipids, and a multitude of other compounds) came together and avoided the effects of water and oxygen (that normally tend to destroy complex molecules). Somehow these fragile building blocks gradually organized themselves into more ordered systems that were somehow able to harvest energy and somehow able to make copies of themselves and become simple living organisms. These single-celled organisms in turn were somehow gradually able to add more complexity and information

to themselves. Through the process of natural selection, these organisms gradually developed into more complicated multi-cellular organisms. Over billions of years, these organisms somehow developed into higher creatures, such as birds, reptiles, mammals, and ultimately human beings. All of this somehow came about by blind chance operating through natural selection over billions of years.

Scripture proclaims something far different than the idea of gradual processes. Genesis 1 does not proclaim that God caused one kind of plant to develop into another kind of plant. It does not say that less complex kinds of animals brought forth more complex kinds. It rather proclaims that God made each of the creatures "*after his kind*." For example, Genesis 1:25 says, "And God made the beast of the earth after his kind, and cattle after their kind, and every thing that creepeth upon the earth after his kind…" (see also, Gen. 1:11, 12, 21, 24). Whales and cows did not evolve from an earlier land-dwelling creature. Humans did not evolve from ape-like creatures. Scripture rules out the idea that God evolved some creatures into other kinds of creatures when it states the plain truth that God made each creature "after his kind."

Furthermore, God's individual acts of creating various creatures are presented as occurring immediately. For example, Genesis 1:11 says "And God said, Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb yielding seed, and the fruit tree yielding fruit after his kind, whose seed is in itself, upon the earth: and it was so." The immediate fulfillment of God's creative command is seen in the words, "And God said…and it was so."

Lastly, the creation narrative has God's creative commands being fulfilled, not over millions of years, but on individual days. For example, after the close of the fourth day in the previous verse, Genesis 1:20 describes the work of the fifth day: "And God said, Let the waters bring forth abundantly the moving creature that hath life, and fowl that may fly above the earth in the open firmament of heaven." Once God accomplishes the work of that particular day, the inspired writer announces: "And the evening and the morning were the fifth day" (Gen. 1:23).

A fifth fundamental principle concerning the origin of the universe is that God created all things *very good*.

Those devoted to naturalistic explanations imagine that the universe, and the earth, and life on the earth, all arose by random chance. This implies that initially the universe was not at all suited for life. Over billions of years, it became somewhat suited; then better suited, and finally well suited for supporting life. Similarly, evolutionists suppose that weaker life forms evolved into stronger and stronger life forms.

Scripture, however, presents a completely different picture. The fact that Hebrews 11:3 speaks of the worlds being "framed," implies that the word of God giving rise to creation caused it to be *in a condition that functions well*. That is the same idea the inspired writer gives us in Genesis 1 when six times it proclaims "And God saw that it was good." God's assessment of His creative work was not, "very weak," "less weak," "stronger," "stronger yet," and so on. Rather, each day God saw that His work "was good." Then we read in Genesis 1:31: "And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good. And the evening and the morning were the sixth day." Far from a rotten creation progressing through millions of years of imperfection and death, Scripture tells us it was all "very good."

The last fundamental truth that we treat is that when God created all things very good, it was *perfectly suited to accomplish God's purpose*.

One of the most striking things about evolution is that the entire process is supposedly driven by blind and random chance and therefore can have no purpose whatsoever. That implies that there is no purpose for anything in the entire universe, including the lives of human beings. The thought that we exist simply because of random molecular interactions makes life itself meaningless.

In stark contrast to the purposelessness of evolution, Scripture declares that creation has a purpose. The purpose for which God created all things is the manifestation of His glory in the salvation of His people. That the purpose for creation centers in Jesus Christ is evident from Colossians 1:16, which says about Christ, "All things were created by him and for

him." That purpose is hinted at in the Genesis creation account that puts the creation of mankind last, only when the entire creation was ready for him.

Furthermore, we see purpose expressed in Genesis 1:28, "And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth." God called Adam and Eve to exercise dominion as His friend-servants. This is implied by the fact that God created mankind in His image: "And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness" (Gen. 1:26). The glorious purpose for which God created us with righteousness, holiness, and knowledge of Him, is so that we could love Him and live with our Friend-Sovereign in covenant fellowship.

By faith we understand that the origin of the universe was the work of God, carried out through His powerful word, bringing the creation into being out of nothing immediately, perfectly suited for the purpose of establishing His covenant with us. The same God who created all things for our sakes is the God who saves us to the uttermost. Knowing this, we confess with the psalmist, "Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth" (Ps. 124:8).



OVERCOMING FEAR (2)

REV. HEATH BLEYENBERG
pastor of Immanuel PRC in Lacombe, Alberta, Canada

Previous article in this series: July 2025, p. 375.

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

God has not given us the spirit of fear. Those were encouraging words for young Timothy. He was a young pastor who labored in the hostile city of Ephesus. Not only did he contend with the general pagan population, but he also had to confront the false teachers within the church. In the midst of all his good Christian ministry, Timothy was understandably fearful. It's not easy confronting false teachers. It's not a pleasant prospect having to rebuke a Demetrius (Acts 19) or an Alexander (2 Tim. 4:14). There were times when young Timothy was hesitant to proclaim boldly 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).

That spirit of fear can plague the child of God. In that state of fear we become paralyzed. It's hard to make a decision. It's difficult to continue on in the moment. We worry and fret. When that spirit of fear sets in we let the reaction of others govern our behavior.

That spirit of fear does not come from God.

God gives His people a different spirit. A spirit that is antithetical to the spirit of fear—the spirit of power, and of love, and of a sound mind. We do not manufacture these gifts ourselves. These are gifts God dispenses to His people through the Holy Spirit. Power, love, and a sound mind are not ideals out of reach. They are gifts not only for the aged saints, but also for the young people of the church. They are realities for the naturally fearful child of God, realities that we embrace and enjoy.

THE SPIRIT OF POWER

The spirit of power does not refer to physical strength or even to political power. Therefore you can be physically weak and feeble and yet be one who possesses this spirit of power. This spirit of power is the power of God bestowed upon His people, through which power it

pleases God to accomplish His purpose. It's the power of God whereby we are able to do God's will and walk in all His good commandments.

The Scriptures reveal God as the One who empowers His servants. The Lord declared to Joshua, "Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the LORD thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest" (Josh. 1:9). This isn't a strength that Joshua produces. "The LORD is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid" (Ps. 27:1b). Jehovah God Himself is the strength of His people. This is made especially clear in the promise Jesus speaks to His disciples, "But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you" (Acts 1:8). And note, what would the disciples do now that they were empowered with the Holy Spirit? Jesus continues in Acts 1:8, "And ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth." This spiritual power and strength was given to the disciples, not that they would now be immune to hardship and difficulty, but that they would go out and be faithful in their calling and preach the gospel. A simple survey of the book of Acts shows the apostles and the members of the Christian church speaking boldly, enduring suffering, and persevering in obedience, not because they were fearless by nature, but because God strengthened them.

This teaches us that the power of God is evidenced in the life of the believer through faithful endurance as we rely upon God as our strength.

For the youth in the body of Christ, this understanding of power is crucial. Many feel pressure to project confidence, to have life figured out very early, and to measure up to the ideals of society. Scripture cuts through these expectations. God's power is often most evident when believers feel weak and know that they stand in need of divine help. "For when I am weak, then am I strong" (2 Cor. 12:10).

With this God-given spirit of power we are able to say "no" to sin, to speak the truth graciously and firmly in hostile environments, and to remain faithful to Jesus Christ even as we observe others enjoying the pleasures of sin. With this spirit of power we are able to resist temptation. The spirit of power enables us to follow God's calling in life and to count our discipleship of Jesus Christ a very precious thing.

THE SPIRIT OF LOVE

God not only gives the spirit of power, but also the spirit of love. Where you find the one you will always find the other. The two go together and cannot be separated. One cannot claim to have the spirit of power and yet show no spirit of love. If that's the case, then that supposed spirit of power is revealed simply to be a spirit of worldly power, which is nothing but arrogance and self-confidence and pride. But a true God-given spirit of power will always be accompanied with this spirit of love.

This spirit of love is given by God. That's because first God is love (1 John 4:8). He loves Himself in His own Triune being as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But that covenant love that God has for Himself doesn't remain confined in the Godhead, but God, "...commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8).

This love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. As such, this love becomes a defining mark of discipleship of Jesus Christ. "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (John 13:35). As we live in love and show this love, we will be patient, kind, humble, forgiving, and enduring (1 Cor. 13). Love rejoices in the truth and seeks the good of others, even at great personal cost.

Imagine what a comfort this was for Timothy as he was called to bring the gospel in Ephesus. He was a fearful young minister. There was opposition from without. There was opposition from within. But knowing that God gave him the spirit of power and the spirit of love, Timothy could engage in the labor with all confidence and conviction. "I will bring the gospel in love for God and in love for fellow sinners. The Lord is my helper, and therefore I will not fear what man shall do unto me. God not only empowers me but also gives me the spirit of love...and therefore I cannot help but press on in the labor!"

This spirit of love combats the natural spirit of fear that we all have. For example, it's fearful having to confront a close friend who is walking in a sinful way. We hesitate and become anxious at the very prospect of doing so. But in love for God, and in love for this person's soul, we speak the truth in love. We speak those necessary words of rebuke and admonishment,

not as if we ourselves are immune from that sin, but out of a deep concern for the well-being of the neighbor.

The spirit of love banishes fear. "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear" (1 John 4:18). The love of God has been shed abroad in our hearts. God commended His love and sent His only begotten Son to the death of the cross with the result that our sins are washed away. The guilt has been removed. No curse for us. No punishment. And on our part then—no fear! What is there left then to make us afraid? Are we not more than conquerors through Him who loved us? If we have nothing to fear as we stand before God, then surely we have no fear as we stand before and live among men.

There is that natural fear that finds its way into our lives, especially as young people and young adults. This time of life is often marked by transition—leaving home, making vocational decisions, making all kinds of life decisions. This can be a season when fear easily enters: fear of failure, fear of rejection, fear of missing out, fear of standing alone, fear of sticking out in this world and drawing attention to myself.

Second Timothy 1:7 speaks directly to these realities. God does not give us the spirit of fear. Fear may be a natural human response, but it's not a divine gift. Power and love are. Together, this spirit of power and love frees believers from the tyranny of fear.

Next time, the Lord willing, we will consider "The spirit of a sound mind" (1 Tim. 1:7).



TUESDAYS AND THURSDAYS AT SEMINARY

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

One year ago, the "News From Seminary Hill" article answered the question, "What happens on Mondays at seminary?" This article gives a glimpse into seminary life on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Good reason exists to devote an article to the Tuesday/Thursday schedule. First, most classes meet twice a week, either on Tuesday and Thursday or on Wednesday and Friday. With this focus you can learn about entire classes. Second, Tuesdays and Thursdays are the more routine days of the week; Wednesdays and Fridays often include some special events. Next year, God willing, the Wednesday/Friday calendar will be featured.

GREEK GRAMMAR AND PROF. GRITTERS

One class, Greek grammar, meets four times a week, Tuesday through Friday. This class usually consists of college juniors who have class on their college campus later in the day, so the class meets from 6:50-7:45AM ("zero hour"). One of the professors in the New Testament department teaches the course; this includes Profs. Griess, Gritters, and Kuiper. Of course, in an academic year only one of them teaches the course



(Prof. Gritters, this year), but all three have taught it at one point or another.

This is Prof. Gritters' final semester as professor before Synod 2026 declares him emeritus. He has been a fixture at seminary for 23 years, and his absence will be noticed, although he still plans to keep his seminary office.

With his retirement, the faculty transition will be complete. According to the Constitution of the Theological School, a professor's replacement must be called when the professor is 65, and the professor must be declared emeritus when he is 70. Profs. Dykstra, Cammenga, and Gritters all reached 65 within about 18 months of each other, so following the Constitution, all three replacements would be called in the space of two years. Recognizing that to turn over the entire faculty in so short a time was not wise, Synod 2015 approved a transition plan for the then-current faculty, staggering the calling of replacements.

How would the plan be implemented? Would it work well? Who would be called? Eleven years later, we have the answer. Did it work well? The new professors think it did, and we are grateful for time we were given to get our Master of Theology degree and to develop our courses.

But an era in the history of the seminary is coming to a close. The third generation of professors are almost all retired, and the fourth generation is now in full swing. Pray that we be faithful and diligent in our calling!

BIBLICAL STUDIES AND BRUCE FEENSTRA

Four classes in the category of Biblical Studies are taught on Tuesdays and Thursdays this semester. Bruce Feenstra, our senior, is the only student in two of them. In Advanced Hebrew Bruce sightreads a familiar Old Testament passage, translating it and identifying its parts of speech without using a dictionary and with only few prompts from Prof. Huizinga.

Prof. Kuiper teaches Bruce New Testament Isagogics. This course gives an overview of each New Testament book, identifying the book's main themes and stating the book's special place in the canon of Scripture. Rev. Daniel Kleyn's current series of articles in the *Standard Bearer* is the fruit of his New Testament Isagogics course that he taught while in the Philippines, so reading those articles will give you a sense of what Bruce is learning.

On that note, this is Bruce's final semester as student. The faculty have recommended to the TSC that Synod 2026 examine him and oversee his graduation exercises. If the schedule goes as planned, Bruce will preach his specimen sermon at Hope (Walker) PRC on Tuesday morning, June 9; will be examined in all aspects of dogmatics on Wednesday morning, June 10; and will be examined in other areas on Thursday morning, June 11. That evening, Prof. Gritters will give his last commencement address as a member of the faculty. In other words, a son of Hope (Redlands) PRC, about to be declared emeritus after 43 years of active service in the ministry, will address another son of Hope (Redlands) PRC as that son takes up his work. May God give Bruce 43 years in the active ministry!



Bruce's internship in Doon, IA, under the mentorship of Rev. Daniel Kleyn, went well. With thanks to God, he not only gained good practical experience in the work of the ministry, but also a fiancé; he and Leah Mowery plan to marry on July 3, the Lord willing.

The other two classes in the area of Biblical studies are both exegesis classes. In exegesis class, a student analyzes Bible passages in the Greek or Hebrew language and writes a 10-12 page paper giving his interpretation of the passage, with a view to preaching it. After critiquing the student's work, the professor then gives his own exegesis of the text.

Prof. Huizinga is teaching Old Testament exegesis to Joe Ophoff. As of this writing, Joe is working on Psalm 103:3, "Who forgiveth all thine iniquities, who healeth all thy diseases." All three students—Bruce, Isaac, and Joe—are also in a New Testament exegesis

course, taught by Prof. Griess. Currently they are exegeting passages in James 2 and 3.

PASTORAL STUDIES AND ISAAC VAN BAREN

In addition to teaching New Testament exegesis, Prof. Griess also teaches Foreign Missions and Poimenics on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

In Foreign Missions, Isaac and Joe are currently learning what qualifications a foreign missionary should possess, how he is called to the work, where he must labor, and whether he should go alone.



Poimenics teaches principles and applications of pastoral care, including pastoral counseling. Currently Isaac is studying what it means that Scripture is sufficient for the minister's pastoral work.

Isaac is in his third year of seminary. By now he has preached seven sermons before the faculty, and has been speaking a word of edification regularly in the churches. The faculty have arranged for him to do an internship this fall at Unity PRC under the supervision of Rev. G. Eriks.

CHURCH HISTORY AND JOE OPHOFF

The modern church history course—church history from 1648-present—is attended by one student, Joe Ophoff, and several auditors. As of the deadline for this article, Joe has already learned about Presbyterianism in England, Scotland, and the United States; had a whirlwind tour of movements that have abandoned the biblical faith and others that wrongly reacted to this abandonment; and is now learning about the Reformed faith as it developed in the Netherlands in the nineteenth century. The rest of the year we will continue that trajectory, and then learn about the RCA, the CRC, and the PRCA.

Joe is in his second year of seminary—third, if you consider that he began seminary under the Special Seminary Entrance Program. Essentially Joe is devoting five years to preparing for the ministry, and in those five years is getting all his seminary courses and some preseminary requisites. So, after this year, he has two more to go.

CLASSES THAT ARE NOT HELD, AND OUR FRESHMEN

We can quickly dispense with speaking about our freshmen: the Lord has not given us any. Some classes that would be taught to freshmen this year—regardless of which day of the week—are not being taught this year. They include Hebrew grammar, a third and last semester of Greek reading, Hermeneutics (principles of Bible interpretation, a class that students must take before they begin exegesis), Introduction to Dogmatics, and Catechetics (principles of teaching catechism). It appears that these courses will not be taught next year either, because for a second year in a row, we know of no incoming freshmen.

Classes that are currently taught on Wednesdays and Fridays include Hebrew reading (Joe Ophoff), an Old Testament history and an Old Testament exegesis class, a class that surveys the history and contents of the Belgic Confession and Heidelberg Catechism, an Advanced Homiletics class, and Dogmatics.

OTHER EVENTS

We hope to hold two meetings of Student Club on a Thursday night this semester. Student Club consists of the students and professors getting together at a professor's home to discuss a book or topic. Our first meeting was held at the home of Prof. Griess and we discussed Christian Nationalism.

Dr. Adriaan Neele, president of Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary and professor of homiletics and historical theology, addressed our faculty, students, and staff after lunch on Thursday, February 5. We usually have a guest speaker at least once a year, and sometimes that speaker gives a series of two or three lectures. This year Dr. Neele gave one lecture, "The Christian Reformed Church Synod of 1924's Use of Peter van Mastricht: A Centennial Assessment." The synod, in its defense of common grace, referred to three theologians from the "most flourishing period of Reformed orthodoxy": John Calvin, Zacharius

Ursinus, and Peter van Mastricht. Dr. Neele pointed out that, while the synod may have correctly alluded to van Mastricht in support of the second and third points of common grace, it certainly misused him as support for the first point of common grace. In addition, Dr. Neele argued that the synod made several methodological mistakes, among them the designation of a particular age of Reformed theology as "golden," quoting only three theologians in an attempt to demonstrate that a doctrine was well-ingrained in Reformed thought, and lacking precision when defining grace.

Tuesdays and Thursdays are also the most common days for us to receive fourth or fifth graders from our area schools for a seminary visit. Usually these arrive about 9:00 AM, attend a presentation about what we do at seminary, tour the building, participate in morning devotions, and have a snack with us. (Actually, they usually provide the snack, so we have a snack with them!)

THE "NEW" FACULTY AND THE STAFF

What about this fourth generation of professors in our seminary? All were born and raised to Protestant Reformed parents and schooled in Protestant Reformed elementary schools. All served previous pastorates in PRC congregations.

Prof. Kuiper, the oldest of the new men, has taught all his regular courses for the first time, and has taught his first January interim. This past January, he taught an interim course entitled "Protestant Reformed



Churches in America: History, Doctrinal Distinctives, and Emphases"—a course that he is convinced every man entering ministry in the PRCA must take. Prof. Kuiper also serves as the seminary rector, writes for and edits the *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* (it is free of charge—email our secretary!), writes for the *Standard Bearer*, and serves on the Contact Committee. If God wills, this summer will find him giving a speech in Greenville, SC, at the annual conference of the Reformation Bible Society, and speaking at the PR Young Peoples Convention.

With the conclusion of this academic year, Prof. Huizinga will have taught every course in his department, except for interims. He is the chief of three editors of the *Standard Bearer*. He will travel to Northern Ireland this summer to speak at the British Reformed Fellowship Conference.

Prof. Griess, our newest appointee, will be developing new courses for at least one more year. He is also one of the editors of the *Standard Bearer*. This summer, he plans to travel to Singapore to speak at the summer camp of the Covenant Evangelical Reformed Church and to visit their mission field and Rev. Singh in Kolkata, India.

The professors all preach regularly, usually at least once a Sunday, and teach catechism classes and/or lead Bible studies.

We remain grateful for the support and assistance of the seminary staff—Mr. Charles Terpstra, registrar, librarian, archivist, and building-grounds manager; Mrs. Bethany Engelsma, secretary; Kevin Rau, librarian assistant; and Matt and Kim Kuiper, janitors.

We are also thankful for the support of the denomination and the prayers of many for God's blessing on our work.

Continue to pray for us. Include in your prayers a fervent petition that, if not again this fall, we will soon have freshmen, many of them, coming to seminary in annual waves. We need ministers!

And rest assured that we pray for you, the members of the PRCA. We are more remote from you than are your own pastors, but we are called to serve you in preparing men for the gospel ministry, and we pray God's blessing on you, that He keep you and us faithful in doctrine and life.



THE 2025 PRCA VISIT TO NAPARC

PROF. BARRETT GRITTERS
professor of Practical Theology in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary, and member of Hudsonville PRC in Hudsonville, Michigan

In November 2025, three members of the PRCA's Committee for Contact with Other Churches traveled to Beaver Falls, PA to attend the annual three-day meeting of NAPARC: the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (this year was the 50th anniversary). The council is *ecumenical*, meaning *interdenominational* in this case, and comprised of 13 member denominations, which range in size from very small—only five congregations with 275 members and two active pastors, to very large—about 1,700 congregations with 400,000 members and 5,000 ministers. Size differences notwithstanding, all express determination to maintain the Reformed (Three Forms of Unity) and Presbyterian (Westminster Standards) creeds. The Protestant Reformed Churches in America are not a member denomination of NAPARC but attend with three other denominations as invited guests called "observers." In all, there were about 75 men present at the meetings this year, with anywhere from two to six representing each denomination.

The PRCA has attended NAPARC as observers on and off since 1990. We were mostly absent in the decade of the 2000s, but since 2010 have regularly attended as directed by synod.

Our Contact Committee's (CC) constitution (in VII.E.1-3) describes in detail the PRCA's view of ecumenical councils—what these councils are and are not, and what determines whether we can observe or join them. You can find this constitution in the back of the PRC Church Order book, or at prca.org (under "Resources" and "Denominational Resources" and "Committee Constitutions"). At bottom, the purpose of all the CC's work is stated in the constitution's preamble: "…it is [our] sacred duty to manifest the true unity and catholicity of the church on earth in as far as that is possible…."

WHAT HAPPENS AT NAPARC MEETINGS?

The three days are divided about equally into public meetings, where all the men are present, and private bi-lateral meetings, where two denominations discuss matters of mutual concern.

At the public meetings, each denomination is asked to give a report about its status and needs, after which another denomination asks follow-up questions and then prays for that church. Although we are only observers, we are given this same opportunity as the members. We gave a summary of our statistics, mentioned our 100th anniversary celebration and the publication of our revised Psalter, recounted briefly our recent schism and the troubles surrounding sexual abuse, and reminded them of our distinctives regarding particular grace, the preaching of the gospel, and divorce and remarriage.

In the private meetings we sat down with men from five denominations: Canadian Reformed, Free Reformed, Heritage Reformed, Orthodox Presbyterian, and United Reformed. These meetings were most profitable because they gave opportunity to discuss doctrinal positions and distinctives. Among other topics, we were able to explain our view of the preaching of the gospel over against the well-meant offer, our view of children in the covenant and church, and why we still are only observers and not yet members of NAPARC. At these bilateral meetings, churches have admonished one denomination about their view of women deacons, which has brought them to reexamine the practice. Strong admonitions have been given about the errors of the Federal Vision and of theistic evolutionism. A few years ago, our delegation warned the URC "about the connection between the conditional covenant and FV [Federal Vision] theology." The Presbyterian Church in America (PCA, the largest denomination) has been rebuked for some of its practices.

DENOMINATIONAL DISTINCTIVES

What becomes clear in these meetings is that each denomination is firmly committed to its own distinctives. This is significant because, in two places in the CC's constitution, the PRCA is forbidden to participate, either as observers or members of a council, if that would "bind us as churches to anything that would *compromise* our distinctive Reformed identity as churches."

There are two important matters here. On the one hand, our synod wrote into the CC's constitution that the PRCA desires to participate in interdenominational councils: "The Committee shall participate in ecumenical councils." The constitution defines what a *Reformed* ecumenical council is: a gathering of churches who are committed to Scripture and the Reformed creeds, who recognize each other as true churches, but who have "significant differences in doctrine and practice that keep them from forming into one denomination." In other words, our synod recognized the possibility and legitimacy of joining a council of churches who both hold the Reformed creeds and yet have significant differences from us. Therein lies a question: "What might be these significant differences that both allow contact but preclude *close* fellowship?" This is a question that also arises in a more important relationship—a "corresponding relationship" with other churches.

To get an overview of our interdenominational relationships, note that we have three kinds of contacts with other denominations: *sister*-church relations (closest), *corresponding*-church relations (less close), and participation in *ecumenical* councils (least close). We fully embrace our sisters (Covenant PRC in Northern Ireland, the PRC in the Philippines, and Covenant ERC in Singapore), freely exchanging members and ministers. If these churches were in our country, we could be one denomination. Next, if a church is close to us, yet not close enough to become a *sister*, we can establish a "corresponding relationship" with them. This relationship recognizes two things: 1) that we *ought* to manifest unity with these churches in *some* way; 2) but that they are *different* enough to preclude full unity. Our brothers and sisters in the EPC in Australia and the BERG in Germany are examples.

Then there is the possibility of participating in an ecumenical council, which would be contact even less close than in a corresponding relationship. We recognize that churches in such a council will have *greater* differences from us than those of the corresponding relationship. Would they be denominations like those in NAPARC? The differences in these include a different view of the covenant (CanRef), an acceptance of common grace and the well-meant offer (URC, and others), a different view of covenant children (Heritage Reformed, Free Reformed), or an allowance of certain forms of theistic evolutionism.

The CC's constitution calls us both to have contact with other churches in ecumenical councils and warns about risking our Reformed identity and distinctives. We may be observers in a council if this does not "bind us as churches to anything that would compromise our distinctive Reformed identity…." And we may become members if "we can agree with the obligations of membership…without compromising any of our Reformed distinctives…."

So the CC's constitution calls the committee to face two questions: 1) What might tempt the PRCA to compromise important distinctives and how could she avoid it? 2) What makes a difference significant enough that she may not become a member because of it?

TWO MORE IMPORTANT ELEMENTS

The Contact Committee's constitution includes two other significant matters.

First, a council in which we would be willing to participate will "facilitate discussion" of 1) "doctrines and practices that divide them as well as those they have in common"; and 2) "current heresies and practices that threaten Reformed and Presbyterian churches." The CC has been eager to raise such things in the private bi-lateral meetings with other denominations. Doctrines that divide (covenant, common grace, divorce and remarriage), and heresies that threaten (Federal Vision, theistic evolutionism), are matters on our mind to discuss with these other churches, and we have done so in the one-on-one meetings. But as guests to the council (we are observers, not members), we have not been able to suggest discussion topics for the public and general meetings. And this is why some of the other denominations have urged us to become members of NAPARC: so that the PRCA can have a larger voice in

the council. For now, the decision of Synod 2017 holds: we will remain observers because, synod judged then, NAPARC has not shown sufficient commitment to the confessions. That synod said some of the denominations have "exonerated those who embrace the teachings of the Federal Vision" (an accusation judged by some at NAPARC's 2018 meeting to be a violation of the ninth commandment) and allow as "member denominations those who teach a doctrine of creation that does not interpret literally the Genesis creation account."

All this makes it clear that our churches need to face the question: Which erroneous teachings would, and which would not hinder the PRCA from becoming a member of an ecumenical council? A form of theistic evolutionism in some of the denominations forbids us to join a council, but allowance of divorce and remarriage does not preclude a (closer) corresponding relationship. What is the difference?

Second, the CC's constitution defines an ecumenical council as one that does not "cooperate in missions, seminary training, or other work belonging to the sphere of a denomination (instituted church)." That is, the PRCA will not join with churches to do mission work or train ministers.

NAPARC churches do not unite in seminary training of ministers or do joint missions. Member denominations agree to be careful when doing mission work in the vicinity that another denomination is working (the "comity agreement"), which shows that the denominations want to do their *own* distinctive mission work. One area of cooperation in work the PRCA would consider "denominational" is diaconal relief. Where hurricane relief was given in a large area, some "disaster relief" committees of a few NAPARC churches joined hands.

PRACTICES WE HAVE IN COMMON

Finally, our constitution calls the CC to discuss practices we have in common with other churches. Under this category would fit the subject of confronting sexual abuse. This subject is such a concern in the other denominations that one of them proposed a call for "prayer, fasting, and days of humiliation regarding the rise of clergy/member sexual misconduct in NAPARC Churches." NAPARC adopted the proposal to recommend such a day to the churches. Last year the churches discussed the possibility of forming a "third-party" committee to help member churches who wanted assistance from a *Reformed* organization. An ad hoc committee was formed, the PRCA was invited to participate, and the CC has delegated two to attend ongoing meetings to discuss the feasibility of such a committee. It is possible that the PRCA synod sees a recommendation along these lines.

The CC judges that attending NAPARC has been profitable for the PRCA and plans to send observers again in the fall of this year. The CC also believes, according to the reports from other churches, that the PRCA's presence at NAPARC is a healthy testimony to the Reformed faith which is beneficial to the other denominations.

TRANSLATED TREASURES



EXCOMMUNICATION

FROM A BRIEF EXPLANATION OF THE CHURCH ORDER BY JOHANNES JANSEN*

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

Previous article in this series: July 2025, p. 375.

* The following is a translation of Johannes Jansen, *Korte Verklaring van de Kerkenordening* [A Brief Explanation of the Church Order] (Amsterdam: J. H. Kok, 1923).

Article 77: "After the suspension from the Lord's table, and subsequent admonitions, and before proceeding to excommunication, the obstinacy of the sinner shall be

publicly made known to the congregation; the offense explained, together with the care bestowed upon him, in reproof, suspension from the Lord's Supper, and repeated admonition; and the congregation shall be exhorted to speak to him and to pray for him. There shall be three such admonitions. In the first the name of the sinner shall not be mentioned that he be somewhat spared. In the second, with the advice of the classis, his name shall be mentioned. In the third the congregation shall be informed that (unless he repent) he will be excluded from the fellowship of the church, so that his excommunication, in case he remains obstinate, may take place with the tacit approbation of the church. The interval between the admonitions shall be left to the discretion of the consistory."

Article 76 deals with the "first act" of discipline. Article 77 leads to the "second act." If the withholding of the Lord's Supper and the admonitions that followed, according to Article 76, do not bear fruit, then discipline continues. Hence, Article 77 deals with the course of discipline (also called the "three stages of censure") from the first to the second act, that is, from the withholding of the Lord's Supper to excommunication, and finally about excommunication itself. This article is often misunderstood. It was then thought that the withholding of the Lord's Supper according to Article 76 was the same as the "first stage" of censure in Article 77. To make this distinction clear now, the Synod of Utrecht (1905) added to the old edition the following words in italics: "*After the suspension from the Lord's table, and subsequent admonitions*, and before proceeding to excommunication, the obstinacy of the sinner shall be publicly made known to the congregation…."[1] Thus, first, the withholding of the Lord's Supper without giving notice to the congregation (therefore called "silent censure") must precede the various exhortations. This is followed first by the three exhortations (the so-called three stages of censure), and, if they do not help, finally excommunication itself according to Article 77. So we are dealing here with two things:

1. *The course of discipline from censure to excommunication, or the so-called three stages of censure*. The article begins with a brief description of the course of discipline after the withholding of the Lord's Supper. This description includes three things:

First of all, an *open statement of the reason* why discipline must continue: "After the suspension from the Lord's table, and subsequent admonitions, and before proceeding to excommunication, the obstinacy of the sinner shall be publicly made known to the congregation." Not sin itself, but the stubbornness of the sinner, his unwillingness to break with sin, and his impenitence, are the reason that discipline must continue. Therefore, the notification to the congregation should not emphasize sin as such, but that stubbornness to confess that sin.

Furthermore, *a statement of the right to continue with discipline*: "the offense explained, together with the care bestowed upon him, in reproof, suspension from the Lord's Supper, and repeated admonition." That statement must not be made in particular, but must be made in general terms, e.g., that N.N. has sinned against the first, second, third commandments, etc.; not the *manner* in which it took place, but the *kind* of sin must be explained (Voetius). Furthermore, the consistory gives a brief explanation of the diligence shown to the sinner: a. in the rebukes already before the Lord's Supper was denied him; b. in the withholding of the Lord's Supper itself; and c. in the repeated admonitions that have been conferred upon him after the suspension. These declarations serve to assure the congregation of the good right of the ongoing discipline.

And finally, *a reminder to the congregation* "to speak to him and to pray for him." This addressing cannot take place after the first stage, because the name of the sinner is still concealed. Therefore, this exhortation to address the sinner must first be inserted into the proclamation of the second stage. The congregation can pray for him, although it does not yet know the name of the sinner. What is meant here is that the members of the congregation pray separately for him. Too often we forget this. The congregation must therefore cooperate with the consistory. It must not leave discipline to the consistory. It is a member of her body that has sinned. And the hand must not say to the foot: I do not need you! When asked whether

1 The church order of 1905 can be found online here: http://www.kerkrecht.nl/node/177.

the words "the obstinacy of the sinner shall be publicly made known to the congregation" must be understood as referring to the confessing members alone or to the entire audience, the Synod of Middelburg (1581) already replied, "It is understood as [applying] to all those who are in attendance."[2]

Then follow the three steps separately: "There shall be three such admonitions. In the first, the name of the sinner shall not be mentioned that he be somewhat spared. In the second, with the advice of the classis, his name shall be mentioned. In the third the congregation shall be informed that (unless he repent) he will be excluded from the fellowship of the church…." We speak of the three steps of censure. But the article speaks of three exhortations. Thus, in these "steps" of censure, we should not think of a certain ascent from the bottom up or from the lesser to the greater, but of three similar exhortations, distinguished only in degree; and we may, under that condition, continue to speak of "the three steps of censure."

The first step is the admonition without the name. Already at the Synod in Emden (1571) the wording of this step was recorded, as is still the case in the church order: "In the first the sinner shall not be named that he be somewhat pardoned."[3] The peculiarity of this step is that *only the sin* is declared and *the congregation is exhorted to pray for him.* This admonition must be written in advance, approved by the consistory, and read accordingly. It must contain: a. the nature of the sin; b. the stubbornness of the sinner; c. the diligence of the consistory in rebuking, withholding the Lord's Supper, and various admonitions followed thereafter; and d. the exhortation to the congregation to pray for him.

The second step is the admonition expressing the name of the sinner. The same admonition is now repeated, but now two things are added, that is, the advice of the classis and the expression of the name of the sinner. In the first wording of the Synod at Emden (1571) it said only: "In the second he shall be named."[4] The churches were only then divided into classes, but the question would be whether they could come together because of the persecution. Only after freedom came did the Synod of Middelburg (1581) insert: "In the second with advice of the classis his name shall be mentioned."[5] She considered this necessary: a. to avoid partiality; b. to guarantee the righteousness of discipline; and c. for the information of consistories that were less aware of the course of discipline. With advice of the classis (*ex classis judicio*, i.e., in accordance with the judgment of the classis) does not mean: *with leave* or *with the consent* of the classis, so that the latter decides, for then the classis would abolish the independence of the local church; it also does not mean: *after advice*, so that it would be sufficient for the consistory only to ask for formal advice, without further disturbing itself; but it means: *according to* or *in harmony with* the judgment of the classis, so that the consistory adheres to the advice of the classis, according to the old rule that the minority conforms to the decision of the majority. The classis must convince itself by inquiring with the consistory a. that the sin is censurable; b. that the withholding of the Lord's Supper with the admonitions, according to Article 76, took place; and c. that even after the first step the sinner persists in his impenitence. If the classis advises to proceed with the second step, the consistory will give notice of it to the person concerned. The form of the words must be carefully drawn up and approved by the consistory. It must not involve insult, because then it is punishable by law. It must contain: a. the name of the sinner and the nature of his sin; b. the stubborn impenitence since the first step; c. the admonition to the congregation to speak to him and pray for him.

The third step is a repetition of the second *with the announcement of the resolution of the intended excommunication*: "In the third the congregation shall be informed that (unless he repent) he will be

2 Question 69 put to the assembly reads: "Whether what is said in the 63rd article of the Church Order concerning public reconciliation, likewise above in the particular question concerning public presentation of the man for excommunication, is to be understood as a public action in the church before all listeners in general or before the congregation alone?" Quoted in Richard De Ridder, ed., *The Church Orders of the Sixteenth Century Reformed Churches of the Netherlands Together with Their Social, Political, and Ecclesiastical Context* (Grand Rapids: Calvin Theological Seminary, 1987), 300.

3 The quotation is from Article 31 of this synod. Cf. De Ridder, *Church Orders*, 119.

4 The quotation is from Article 31 of this synod. Cf. De Ridder, *Church Orders*, 119.

5 The quotation is from Question 39 put to this synod. Cf. De Ridder, *Church Orders*, 288-289.

excluded from the fellowship of the church." This third admonition is not yet excommunication itself, but a final public admonition, and also the announcement that the excommunication will follow in three or four weeks, should no conversion take place in the meantime. The time must be long enough that the accused can seriously consider whether to repent or also to appeal. Also for this third step, the advice of the classis is, if not necessary, then desirable, because the end of Article 76 states that "no one shall be excommunicated except with advice of the classis." Article 77 now goes on to say that this advice must already be requested at the second step, but this does not make it superfluous at the third step, because the circumstances between the second and third step may have changed so much that the classis must recommend some postponement.

2. *At last then follows the excommunication itself*: "so that his excommunication, in case he remains obstinate, may take place with the tacit approbation of the church." The intention of the announcement is therefore that his cutting off be done with tacit approbation (Latin: *tacitis ecclesiae suffragiis*, i.e., with silent vote) of the congregation. The consistory is in charge, but the congregation tacitly gives its consent, according to the rule: that which is silent, agrees. If there is a complaint, the consistory must investigate it. If it is well-founded, the consistory must try to remove it, but if it is unfounded, they continue with discipline up to and including excommunication.

The word "excommunicate" means to cut off a member from the body. We find the clearest statement in 1 Corinthians 5:2, "might be taken away from among you," and v. 13, "put away from among yourselves that wicked person." The Latin word is: *excommunicatio*, i.e., *ex communione ecclesiae cludere, mittere*, i.e., to exclude, to send out of the communion of the church. The Dutch word "ban" means to ban someone from the congregation.

The Form of Excommunication describes the character of excommunication thus: "that for the aforesaid reasons we have excommunicated, and by these do excommunicate N. from the church of God, and from fellowship with Christ, and the holy sacraments, and from all the spiritual blessings and benefits which God promiseth to and bestows upon His church, so long as he obstinately and impenitently persists in his sins, and is therefore to be accounted by you as a heathen man and a publican, according to the command of Christ (Matt. 18), who saith that whatsoever His ministers bind on earth shall be bound in heaven."[6]

The Heidelberg Catechism [in A. 85] defines excommunication as being "excluded from the Christian church, and by God himself from the kingdom of Christ."

Excommunication is therefore a serious matter. It is not a handing over to Satan, for that was only an apostolic discipline; nor anathema or curse, for that word does not signify an act of ecclesiastical discipline; but it is a termination of brotherly fellowship and a withdrawal of the congregation from the excommunicated; a solemn declaration in the name of Christ that he is made manifest as not to be a brother; exclusion from the church and from all her benefits and gifts which God has given her; which exclusion, if it takes place according to the commission of Christ, will one day be followed by the exclusion from the kingdom of heaven by God himself, unless the sinner repent and the judgment to come be averted.

Finally, it says: "The interval between the admonitions shall be left to the discretion of the consistory." A fixed determination cannot be made for it, because all cases are not the same. But it can be said that, as a rule, several months elapse between the various steps or public admonitions. The entire disciplinary action lasts two to three years. If it ends in a year, it was very quick. Only when all admonitions are exhausted and the sinner persists to the utmost in his impenitence should excommunication be applied.

6 From the Form of Excommunication in *The Psalter* (2024), 654-655.

REPORT OF CLASSIS WEST

Meeting March 4, 2026

Classis West of the Protestant Reformed Churches met on Wednesday, March 4, 2026, in Doon PRC (Doon, IA). The thirteen churches in the Classis were represented by nine ministers and seventeen elders (one of the ministers of the classis was not able to be present as he and his wife had just welcomed a new baby the day before the meeting).

After opening devotions by the president of the previous meeting, Rev. A. Brummel assumed the chair by alphabetical rotation. Four elders who were attending classis for the first time signed the Formula of Subscription. The minutes of the previous meeting were approved, the questions of Article 41 of the Church Order were asked and satisfactorily answered, and routine reports from the stated clerk, classical committee, and reading sermon library committee were read and approved. The church visitors reported on their visits to the consistories in the past year, indicating in their report that unity, peace, and love prevail in the churches of the classis. Six committees of pre-advice were assigned, and then classis recessed for those committees to prepare their advice.

Classis treated in closed session a protest of an individual against the decision of the previous meeting of classis regarding the discipline work of a consistory with the individual. Classis did not sustain the protest.

In open session classis treated the appeal of an individual. The individual had protested to a consistory regarding the doctrinal writings of a minister. Not satisfied with the answer of the consistory, the individual appealed to classis. Classis declared the appeal not legally before it on the ground that the appeal did not meet the requirements of Article 46 of our Church Order, since past synods of our churches have made settled and binding decisions on the doctrinal point at issue.

In closed session classis treated the report of the special committee assigned to help a consistory. Classis gave advice to the consistory involved, approved the work of the special committee, and mandated the committee to continue its work.

Classis approved the subsidy requests for 2027 for three congregations and forwarded them on to Synod 2026 for its approval.

Classis provided a schedule of pulpit supply for the three vacant congregations (Calvary—Hull, IA; Heritage—Sioux Falls, SD; and Hope—Redlands, CA), and also provided a small measure of supply for the Covenant of Grace Fellowship in Spokane, WA.

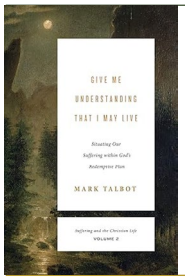
Throughout the meeting classis conducted its annual elections. Rev. J. Engelsma was reappointed to three-year term as stated clerk, and Rev. R. Smit was appointed to a three-year term as assistant stated clerk. Rev. M. DeBoer was reappointed to a three-year term on the classical committee, and Rev. S. Regnerus was appointed to fill the remaining one-year term vacated by a minister moving to another classis. Classis appointed Revs. A. Brummel, D. Kleyn, J. Marcus, and R. Smit as church visitors, with Revs. H. Bleyenberg and J. Engelsma as alternates. Rev. R. Smit was appointed to a three-year term as synodical deputy *primus*, and Rev. M. DeBoer was reappointed to a three-year term as synodical deputy *secundus*. Ministers delegated to Synod 2026 are Revs. H. Bleyenberg, J. Engelsma, D. Kleyn, J. Marcus, and R. Smit, and their alternates are Revs. A. Brummel, M. DeBoer, A. Haveman, M. Koerner, and S. Regnerus. Elders delegated to Synod 2026 are Kevin Brummel (Crete), Wayne DeJong (Calvary), Glenn Feenstra (Hope), Chester Hunter, Jr. (Edgerton), and Philip VanBaren (Crete). Alternates are Ted Andringa (Crete), Marlin Feenstra (Hope), Duane Huisken (Hope), James Lenting (Crete), and Keith VanDrunen (Crete).

The expenses of the meeting totaled $7,765.93.

Classis approved having its next meetings on September 30, 2026, at Hope PRC (Redlands, CA), and on March 3, 2027, at Loveland (CO) PRC.

Classis finished its work a little before 8:30 P.M.

Rev. Joshua Engelsma
Stated Clerk, Classis West



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

Mark Talbot, *Give Me Understanding That I May Live: Situating Our Suffering within God's Redemptive Plan* (Suffering and the Christian Life, Volume 2). Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022. 240 pages. $21.99, paperback.

This is Talbot's second volume in his Suffering and the Christian Life series. The first volume (*When the Stars Disappear: Help and Hope from Stories of Suffering in Scripture*) focused on the individual tragedies that afflicted Job, Naomi, and Jeremiah, and how God both planned their troubles and cared for them through those trials. That was done to expound practical cases from the Bible and make applications for all suffering saints. *Give Me Understanding That I May Live* aims at situating human suffering within the general Christian framework of creation, rebellion, redemption, and consummation.

Chapter 1, "Creation," ably expounds the nature of the created world for Adam and Eve. Adam lived in perfect harmony, not only with his wife Eve and with the animals, but also with and within himself. Above all, it was *because* Adam lived as creation's head in perfect harmony with the Creator that he had perfect harmony with everything and everyone else. What an immaculate life of glory and beauty that humanity had!

Chapter 2, "Rebellion," contains the exposition of the tragic events that led to the fall of our first parents. Talbot well illustrates how the fall corrupted man, not only spiritually, but also psychologically and mentally. Immediately after the fall, what Adam and Eve felt was shame towards each other, and fear toward God. *Fear*! Towards the Father who created them and gave them everything. By losing God through disobedience, man lost everything, including himself.

Disobedience, shame, fear, and God's curse inevitably bring forth suffering (chapter 3). The chapter helpfully explains what suffering is, and how it affects us as whole persons, in body and soul. Chapter 4, "Redemption," focuses on the only hope: the second Adam, the Son of God in the flesh. Talbot rightly points out how Ecclesiastes can be considered as a brutally honest commentary on Genesis 1–3 ("God hath made man upright; but they have sought out many inventions," Eccl. 7:29). But there is hope in the second Adam:

> Perplexity, frustration, futility…a loss of godlikeness, a degradation of our God-given capacities. These are all aspects of the funeral procession that began when Adam and Eve broke their spiritual lifeline by their disobedience. And thus began the litany of human sin and woe…that litany swelled in the Old Testament's historical books, its psalmists' laments, in Ecclesiastes' stark "under the sun" realism, and in its prophets' denunciations…if God's creative work was not to be lost, that Word needed to become flesh.
>
> The Word became flesh. Jesus was born to do his Father's will. He lived a life of perfect obedience that climaxed in his giving himself up for us, "a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God," so that we could be redeemed and God's work not lost.… This is the Bible's good news. "At just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly" (Rom. 5:6 NIV). He then "was raised for our justification" (Rom. 4:25). His life, death, and resurrection are the historical climax that the Old Testament witnesses to and prepares us for. It's what the biblical story is all about.… It is the world's decisive event, when God himself entered time and space to do what no one else could do to rectify our rebellion by conquering death and thus take the essential step toward making everything right again (112–113).

The only hope to find meaning and strength in suffering for *under-the-sun* humans is to go by faith *under the Son* (118–119, 122). For that reason, Talbot urges readers to engage daily in the practice of casting themselves in the arms of the Word Jesus by reading and listening to Him in the Scripture and to place *our story* within *His story*, because we pass away as a shadow, but Jesus Christ, and those with Him, last forever.

Regarding my reservations, it is unclear where the author stands regarding evolution and the days of creation (granted, those were not the topics of the book). Then, the appendix at the end of the book seems misplaced, not because it says anything wrong, but because it is entirely redundant (besides being written by a Roman Catholic theologian). For the rest, for those who have the time and will to read through Talbot's packed prose, the book is an insightful and humbling summary that helps enlightening the "old, old Story" without which our individual stories make no sense.

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ANNOUNCEMENTS

WEDDING ANNIVERSARY

With thankfulness to God for His faithfulness, on April 4 we celebrate the 65th wedding anniversary of our parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents, **Alvin and Sally Kooiker,** and pray for His continued blessing upon them. "Blessed is every one that feareth the LORD; that walketh in his ways.... Thou shalt see thy children's children, and peace upon Israel" (Psalm 128:1, 6).

Michael and Bev Kooiker
Angela, Steven, Todd and Danielle Diekevers, Samantha
Phillip and Bonnie Kooiker
Brandon and Brittany Kroese, Zach and Lara Kooiker, Zach and Erin Van Engen, Braydan and Jennifer Van Voorst
David and Lori Kooiker
Nathan and Britney Kooiker, Jonathan and Kimberly Van Der Waal, Kirsti, Daniel
James Kooiker, Heidi Kooiker
Damon, Katie, Grant and Breanna Kooiker, Logan, Nolan, Trent, Sally, AJ
Todd and Beth VanBaren
Jori, Jacob, Andrew, Tyler, Emma
Seth and Mary Vis
Caden and Alyssa Vis, Dawson and Anneka Vis, Madelyn, Mattias, Hudson
25 great grandchildren

Hull, IA

PRC SYNOD 2026

All standing and special committees of the synod of the Protestant Reformed Churches, as well as individuals who wish to address Synod 2026, are hereby notified that all material for this year's synod should be in the hands of the stated clerk no later than April 15. Please send material to:

Doug Mingerink, Sr. (dougi@mingerink.com),
or mail to the same at:
4949 Ivanrest Ave., SW
Wyoming, MI 49418

CLASSIS EAST

Classis East of the Protestant Reformed Churches will meet in Byron Center PRC, in Byron Center, MI, on Wednesday, May 6, 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 April 30, 2026 (30 days before classis convenes).

Rev. C. Spronk, Stated Clerk

REFORMED FREE PUBLISHING ASSOCIATION

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FOR BY GRACE ARE YE SAVED

REV. CARL HAAK

4/5 Ought Ye Not to Walk in the Fear of God, Nehemiah 4
4/12 O God, Strengthen My Hands, Nehemiah 5
4/19 Putting Things in Order, Nehemiah 6
4/26 The Power of the Pulpit, Nehemiah 7