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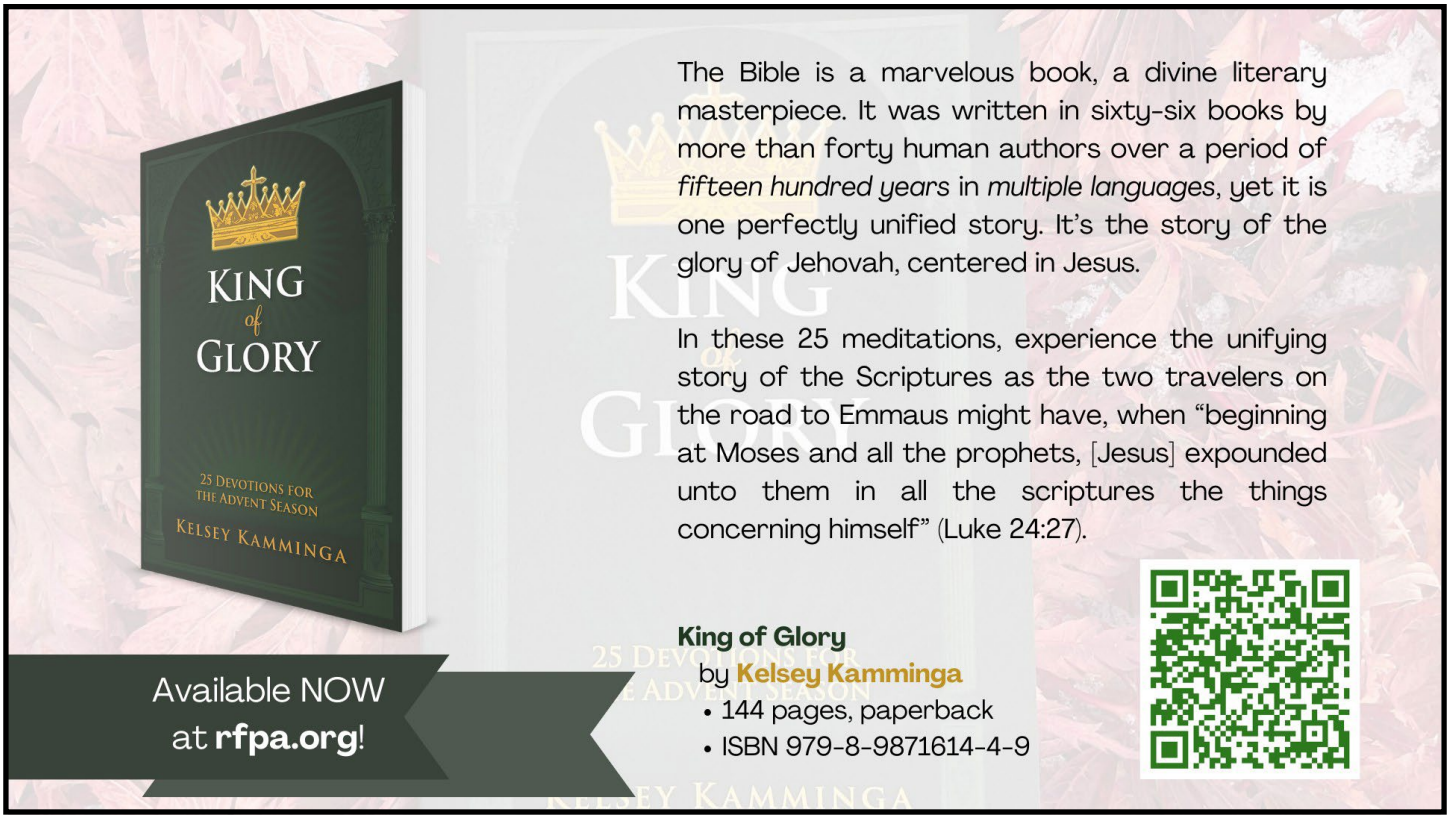
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WE HAVE NOT PASSED THIS WAY BEFORE

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Yet there shall be a space between you and it, about two thousand cubits by measure: come not near unto it, that ye may know the way by which ye must go: for ye have not passed this way heretofore—Joshua 3:4

Perhaps you find yourself sometimes thinking the words of this meditation's title. Looking back to what happened in 2025 and what occurred in just the first month of this year, we understand that we did not know certain things would occur. So also, the weeks and months ahead are uncharted waters. Maybe you say today, or will say in future days, what Joshua said, "We have not passed this way before."

This text is for our encouragement. It reminds us that as God was with Israel when they faced something new and difficult, so God is with us believers for Jesus' sake. May we be built up in that hope through this history in Joshua 3.

A WAY UNTRODDEN

In verse 4, Joshua summarizes the position God's people Israel were in by saying, "Ye have not passed this way heretofore." The idea is that Israel faced something different. Their parents had left Egypt and then died during the forty years of wandering in the wilderness. The next generation began walking through the hot desert towards Canaan and had to fight mighty enemies on the way. They had now come to the eastern edge of the Jordan River, and Joshua indicates that what they encountered here was something new.

What did they face that was new and different? They had to get past an overflowing and fast-moving river. The Jordan River averages about ninety feet wide, but at that time of the year it would overflow its banks and be about twelve feet deep in the middle (v. 15). Somehow, the Israelites, with women, children, babies, animals, and household goods had to get across and not drown. These current Israelites had not faced a hardship like this. Additionally, they had a new leader, Joshua (v. 7). God had given Israel victories and cared for them when Moses was their leader, but they faced this new hardship without Moses.

Thus, there was some apprehension for Israel. Imagine the people standing there, the water rushing in front of them. They probably had a barrel full of "what ifs." What if I or my child gets caught in it? What if Joshua's instructions fail and God is not with him as He was with Moses? You can imagine Joshua himself thinking, "How are we going to get everyone over, and what if we don't?"

Perhaps your way now is very much like Israel's was at the Jordan River. You say, "We have not passed this way before." For the PRCA presently, there are questions about ministers and calls, possibly more than ever before with all the vacancies. Maybe a vacant church asks, "What if we do not get a minister for another half-year, or full year? What will happen to us?" Or, a church thinks, "What if our minister accepts a call, and we, in our current difficult situation, are vacant for a long time?"

Some churches in the PRCA also have questions about the way forward with contacts in other countries. How can we best teach this group that is quite different culturally? How can we help them physically without damaging our work? We have apprehension about advancing with certain plans and think, "What if we are doing this wrong?"

The PRCA face a situation we have not before too with sexual abuse cases that have come to light. Some members have departed because they do not believe things have been handled correctly. There are questions about the path forward. We have not gone this way before.

Apostasy in the church world is also increasing as

we head into 2026, and presents new challenges. It is hard, for instance, to keep the Sabbath holy when it is under attack all around us. Then, there is the battle with worldliness that is fiercer than ever. What will happen to us and our young people?

In addition to what the church faces, we also encounter things in our personal lives we have not before. How should we handle smart phones and all their apps in our homes and what rules should we give our children concerning them? Some of us have loved ones who recently became sick or sicker. We worry, "What if this or that happens to them?"

Undoubtedly, there will be other things also in this coming year about which we say, "We have not passed this way before," and some of those things will be very difficult.

A STEP OF FAITH

Facing an unknown future, Joshua and Israel went forward by faith. After three days at the edge of the raging Jordan, Joshua revealed a plan. He told the Israelites they must be ready to march and instructed them to advance when they saw the priests carrying the ark of the covenant towards the river. When they marched, they were to leave a space of more than a half mile between themselves and the ark so that all the people could see it. The priests must walk with the ark to the edge of the river and stand still as soon as their feet touched the water. The water flowing down the river would stop and stand up on heaps, and the river in front of them would become dry. Then, all the people were to pass by the ark as they crossed.

Scripture does not say if Joshua received this plan directly from God, but Joshua did plan to lead Israel here the same way they had been led in the past. Numbers 10:33 says, "And they departed from the mount of the LORD three days' journey: and the ark of the covenant of the LORD went before them in the three days' journey, to search out a resting place for them." Similarly, Joshua now called for the ark to lead the way.

Why was this so important? The ark was a box overlaid with gold that normally sat in the Most Holy Place in the tabernacle. However, this was not an ordinary box. It was a symbol of God's presence with His people. That is why it was called the "ark of the covenant." The ark pictured Jehovah being with the Israelites as their covenant Friend through the blood of the promised Messiah. On the Day of Atonement in the Old Testament, blood was sprinkled on the lid of the ark. This symbolized the people's sins being covered in the promised Christ, giving them the right to live with God and be cared for by Him. Thus, when the Israelites fixed their eyes on this ark at the river, they would recall that Jehovah could and would bring them safely across. The ark would remind them of God's covenant promise to be their Friend for the Messiah's sake and His promise to give them the land. It would lead them to trust in Him to provide.

Joshua gave this plan to Israel only by faith and Israel followed it by faith. Joshua believed God would do wonders among them as He promised, and that is why he shared this plan. The priests and people stepped into a riverbed with rushing water piling up nearby only because they believed God would keep them as He promised. They did not take this step of faith because they were such great people. Of themselves, they would have done the same as their parents and doubted God's promise to give them the land. They would have said, "We'll maybe try crossing at a different time." It was by God's power that they believed and executed the plan.

How do we go forward into all the uncertainties we face? We must fix our eyes on God's covenant promises in His Word. We do not have an ark anymore to assure us of God's presence, but God is present in us believers today by His Spirit. He assures us of His presence with us by the Word and the promises in it. So, as Israel kept their eyes on the ark when facing something they had not before, we must keep our eyes on God's covenant promises.

We face denominational vacancies and mission questions, as well as personal issues such as health. God says that He will never leave us or forsake us (Heb. 13:5). He promises that He will make all things work together for the good of them that love Him (Rom. 8:28), and that nothing can separate us from His love (Rom. 8:39). He declares in Psalm 73:24 that He will guide us with His counsel and afterward receive us to glory. Jehovah knows exactly the way for us into the heavenly Canaan, and He is guiding us there.

There are fears about the future of our churches in this world and the attacks our children face today that we have never had to face. Yet, God says in Acts 2:39,

"For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call." He adds in Philippians 1:6 that in whom He has begun a good work He will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.

Write these promises down as you face new and hard things this year. Pray using them. Repeat them when you are in a way you have not gone before. Rest in Jehovah. To summarize, go forward with one abiding and constant thought: "The living God is among us."

AN ASSURANCE OF SAFE PASSAGE

Wonderfully, Israel was given safe passage along a way they had not gone before. The priests holding the ark came to the swift and high Jordan River, and as soon as their feet touched it, the water flowing from upstream did stop and rise heap on heap. This left a dry riverbed in front of Israel, across which they walked.

The river remained piled up until all the Israelites were passed "clean over Jordan" into the land God promised. Flowing with milk and honey, this land was a picture of the spiritual wealth that was Israel's for the sake of the Messiah to come. Canaan was the place where Israel would especially enjoy rest with God. And, they got this delightful land because of Jehovah alone, who carried them all safely through Jordan.

So, for you! God will carry us believers safely through whatever we face for Jesus' sake. There will be troubles, but He keeps everything from truly harming us (Ps. 121:7). He will carry us until we are all passed clean over Jordan into the heavenly Canaan. Soon, we will be in the glorious place of which the earthly Canaan was just a small picture, and it will be overflowing with the joy of salvation. God is even using these new things we face now to bring us to that day and prepare us for it.

Go forward, assured of safe passage, trusting in Jehovah.



CALVIN'S IMPORTANT SERMON ON DEUTERONOMY 22:5

PROF. CORY GRIESS

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The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment: for all that do so are abomination unto the LORD thy God—Deuteronomy 22:5

INTRODUCTION

The church of Christ, especially in Western nations, exists in societies undergoing a moral revolution. The center of that revolution right now concerns whether or not biological sex and gender are one. Historically it has been so, but transgender activism separates the two, teaching that the source of one's gender ought not necessarily be one's biological sex. Inward feelings of dysphoria concerning one's sex *may* and *ought to* dominate a person's identity to the point that those feelings determine dress, behavior, and (since the advent of endocrinology and reconstructive surgery in the 1950s) bodily sexual characteristics. One must overcome sex, not endeavor to bring one's inner sense of self in line with one's sex.

The teaching of Scripture, however, is the opposite. Even though both gender and sex are affected by the fall, gender and sex are indivisible. God calls the church to the task of upholding this basic truth in the face of mounting pressure, all the while ministering to those who fight against its irrepressible reality. To do so is to invite criticism, even hatred, which the faithful church in the West at times experiences.

It strikes me that few if any, even in Reformed churches, are looking back into the Reformed tradition

for help in facing the issue of transgender behavior. This article begins to remedy that oversight by examining John Calvin's sermon on Deuteronomy 22:5. Deuteronomy 22:5 is the Old Testament prohibition against cross-dressing. Calvin preached on this text late in his life in a series of over 200 sermons on Deuteronomy, preached between March 1555 and July 1556. His sermon is important for the contemporary church to consider.

DOES THE TEXT OF SCRIPTURE SPEAK TO THE CURRENT SITUATION?

Before engaging Calvin on Deuteronomy 22:5, however, we must face two questions: First, does the *Bible text* of Calvin's sermon apply to the current issues the church faces? And, second, could *John Calvin*, preaching on this Bible text, possibly apply the text to issues that are the same as those the church faces today?

Concerning the first question, transgender activists within the church world argue that the text does *not* speak to transgender issues. They argue the text only applies to those who cross-dress for sexual purposes. But notice, the text is sweeping in its prohibition. The command of the text clearly forbids *any* social expression different from one's sex, *regardless of the reason*. Whether or not the behavior is for sexual arousal, or because one thinks he or she is actually a different gender, the prohibition applies. It is an all-encompassing, divine "No!"

What about the second question: does John Calvin have any understanding of the issues as we face them today? For one thing, cross-dressing did exist in Geneva during Calvin's ministry. Speaking of men, Calvin says, "We see diverse times that they attire themselves like brides." And, speaking of the offense in women, he says, "Again, when women go appareled like men of war…it is against kind, and we ought to abhor it."[1]

More importantly, Calvin was aware on some level of people who were (as we would say today) gender dysphoric—that is, uncomfortable with their own sex and gender. In the sermon on Deuteronomy 22:5 Calvin says he is aware of men who at times "seem to be sorry that God made them not women."[2] What could he be referring to, other than people who on some level experience what we now call gender dysphoria?

Both the text itself and Calvin's recognition of the issue make Calvin's sermon on the text applicable to the current situation.

CALVIN'S SERMON IS HELPFUL IN FOUR WAYS

Calvin's sermon is helpful for the church facing the issue of transgender behavior and activism today in four ways: First, in Calvin's belief that Deuteronomy 22:5 applies to the New Testament church; second, in Calvin's pointing the church to the seventh commandment when he preaches the text; third, in Calvin's pointing the church to the ninth commandment when he preaches the text; fourth, in Calvin's pious unwillingness to allow compromise of the text's prohibition. For each of the four points I will explain Calvin's understanding and then demonstrate how his understanding is helpful for the church in today's context.

#1—CALVIN BELIEVED DEUTERONOMY 22:5 IS BINDING LAW FOR THE NEW TESTAMENT

Calvin's Understanding

In Calvin's first sermon on Deuteronomy, he explained that the Old Testament law still applies in the New Testament. The law "not only served till the coming of the Son of God: but also serves still to our behalf, and shall do so still to the world's end."[3] The question is *how* does the Old Testament law remain applicable to us to the world's end? Calvin divided the Old Testament laws into the three traditional categories: civil, ceremonial, and moral.[4] The moral law endures for all times and places. The *principles* in the civil and ceremonial laws endure, while the laws themselves fall away at the coming of Christ.

How does Deuteronomy 22:5 fit into these

1 Both quotations from Calvin, *Sermons on Deuteronomy*, 773.

2 Calvin, 773.

3 Calvin, 4.

4 The distinction between civil, ceremonial, and moral law is consistent throughout church history. Augustine appealed to it. Aquinas did the same. Melanchthon, Calvin, and the Reformation tradition carried it forward as is evident from Belgic Confession, Article 25 and The Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 19.

categories? Calvin believed Deuteronomy 22:5 was a *civil law* that is at the same time *entirely moral*. In other words, it was an application of the moral law to Israel, but in such a way that it applied in all times and places. Therefore, Calvin preached the prohibition to his congregation as a *moral law*, stating explicitly, "It is but only an exposition of this saying of his [God's], 'Thou shalt not commit adultery.'"[5] Because it is part of the moral law, the church must read Deuteronomy 22:5 and conclude that even though it is in the Old Testament, it is in force still today.[6]

Help for Today

The argument of some transgender activists in the sphere of apostatizing churches is that the only divine command that is in force in the New Testament is an ill-defined command to love God and love one's neighbor. Their contention is that the command in Deuteronomy 22:5, and indeed *every* Old Testament law, fell away with the coming of Christ. Therefore, as one representative concludes, "laws related to sexual conduct" do not "carry over into the New Testament."[7] All laws regulating sexual ethics fell away with the coming of Christ, including Deuteronomy 22:5. Calvin's understanding of the applicability of Old Testament law, and of the prohibition in Deuteronomy 22:5 in particular, are vitally important for the church to maintain against the compromises of the apostatizing church today.

2—TRANSGENDER BEHAVIOR IS A SEVENTH COMMANDMENT ISSUE

Calvin's Understanding

In his sermon on Deuteronomy 22:5, Calvin points out the prohibition in the text is specifically *a seventh commandment* issue:

> Therefore, whereas in this text it is said that the man shall not wear the apparel of the woman; does God let down an eleventh commandment? Did God bethink himself better afterward and add somewhat else to that which we had heard of him heretofore? No, it is but only an exposition of this saying of his, Thou shalt not commit adultery.[8]

Calvin recognized that cross-dressing was often a sexual perversion. And while in itself it is not the act of adultery, for Calvin, it was a "vice that tendeth towards adultery."[9]

Help for Today

What about transgender people who cross-dress because they claim to be another gender? Are there seventh commandment issues here? Normally, these people take offense at the notion that there are any sexual desires involved and that the seventh commandment applies to their situation. The two concepts of gender identity and sexuality are distinct according to transgender activism. One refers to what gender one feels one *is*, the other to the gender one *finds attractive*. How should the church respond?

The church ought not quickly agree with the notion that a person's transgender claims are always free of sexual overtones. Is it not the case that the more diverse and perverse the sexual attractions are, the less definable the subjective identity is? The two are not partitioned off from one another. Listen to the testimony of one anonymous faithful pastor who experienced gender dysphoria for years, but whom God delivered:

> After that period, the longing to be a woman came back. I never again got close to my previous obsession level as a youth, but I struggled quite often with daydreaming about being a woman. Cross-dressing also became something that usually was sexually pleasurable. Because of this it became especially addictive. (Many years later I learned that this sexual pleasure from cross-dressing is a common temporary stage or even a permanent characteristic for the majority of male-to-female biological men who identify as transgender. Trans activists aren't quick to reveal this fact because many transsexuals feel shameful about it as it feels

5 Calvin, *Sermons on Deuteronomy*, 774.

6 Calvin also saw the prohibition as part of the law revealed in nature. "That is the effect of God's intent in saying that men ought not to put on women's apparel, nor women ought not to be clothed in men's apparel: For it is good reason that there should be a difference between men and women. And although there were no law written, does not even nature teach it us?" (*Sermons on Deuteronomy*, 773). Calvin believed all ten of the Ten Commandments were revealed in nature.

7 *The Reformation Project*, "The Prohibitions in Leviticus Do Not Apply to Christians," Accessed 12/10/25, https://reformationproject.org/case/levitical-prohibitions/

8 Calvin, 774.

9 Calvin, 774.

> like an invalidation of their transsexuality. This fact also makes transsexualism less palatable to the public. From what I've read from various studies, I approximate that about 75% of m-t-f transsexuals experience this)."[10]

In other words, this pastor argues, in 75% of male to female cases, errant sexual desires are wrapped up with gender identity. If this is correct, Calvin was correct.

3—TRANSGENDER BEHAVIOR IS A NINTH COMMANDMENT ISSUE

Calvin's Understanding

The ninth commandment says, "Thou shalt not bear false witness." Importantly, Calvin saw the breaking of God's law in Deuteronomy 22:5 as a *ninth commandment* issue just as much as a *seventh commandment* issue. Calvin says to dress opposite one's sex is to be dishonest. It is to disguise reality.

> For they that love to go so *disguised*, do despise God: as for example…when men put themselves into women's apparel, and women put themselves into men's….

Seven times in the sermon, Calvin calls for "honesty" in the dressing of oneself. He says,

> Whereupon we have to remember that God likes well that there should be an *honesty* even in our apparel.… Then is it as a witness that we walk as before God when we regard a kind of *honesty* in our apparel.[11]

Calvin's point is, someone who presents himself/herself in dress (or otherwise) as a different gender from his/her sex, *lies*. "Disguising" oneself by one's clothing is lying, and "honesty" in clothing is telling the truth. Even if God has not specifically prescribed what kinds of clothes are men's or women's, God *has* prescribed that clothing be distinct for the two genders. This is something that the prohibition in Deuteronomy 22:5 itself calls for. A prohibition against cross-dressing assumes gender specific dress. Calvin taught that honesty requires dressing according to one's God-assigned gender, while dressing according to the opposite gender is breaking the ninth commandment—bearing false witness.

Help for Today

The church must contend for what Calvin observes here. Presenting oneself as a gender that is different from one's sex, whether that is the opposite gender, or some other supposed gender, or even in an attempt to present oneself as gender-less, is sin against the *ninth commandment*. The church has not spoken of this enough.

The ninth commandment forbids gender expressions that lie to the world about one's sex *in any way*. It also forbids lying about one's sex by the use of certain pronouns. Calvin's emphasis on the ninth commandment can help the church with the pressing question of whether or not to use a transgender person's "preferred pronouns." Christians increasingly face this moral dilemma. Have you faced this yet? Many have. Adding to the pressure, laws are being passed *requiring* the use of a person's preferred pronouns.[12] What does the Christian do? Mark Yarhouse, one of the leading evangelical authors on this issue, advises, "It is an act of respect, even if we disagree, to let the person determine what they want to be called."[13] Preston Sprinkle, another popular evangelical writer, likewise advises using a transgender person's preferred pronouns as a sign of "hospitality" and "meeting people where they are."[14] Andrew T. Walker in his otherwise excellent book agrees: "My own position is that if a transgender person comes to your church, it is fine to refer to them by their preferred pronoun."[15]

While wisdom would say that Christians ought

10 "Freedom from Gender Confusion: A Pastor's Testimony," *The Abide Project*. Accessed 2/22/24. https://www.abideproject.org/p/freedom-from-gender-confusion.

11 Calvin, *Sermons on Deuteronomy,* 773.

12 For example, in New York City one can be fined up to 250,000 USD for *intentionally* not using someone's preferred pronouns: Eugene Volokh, "You can be fined for not calling people 'ze' or 'hir,' if that's the pronoun they demand that you use," *Washington Post,* May 17, 2016.

13 Mark Yarhouse, "Understanding the Transgender Phenomenon," *Christianity Today,* June 8, 2015. Accessed 12/22/22. https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015/july-august/understanding-transgender-gender-dysphoria.html.

14 Preston Sprinkle, *Embodied: Transgender Identities, the Church, and What the Bible Has to Say* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2021), 208-209.

15 Andrew T. Walker, *God and the Transgender Debate* (UK: Good Book Company, 2017), 157.

not directly confront a person immediately about their pronoun usage, that is very different from the advice that a Christian *may deliberately lie* by calling someone a "he," when it is known that the person is a "she" (or vice versa). This makes one culpable for cementing the lie the person has been telling himself or herself. As much as one's heart breaks for the pain and confusion of the person, love for God and neighbor ought to constrain the Christian *not* to heed the advice Yarhouse, Sprinkle, and Walker give. The Christian may not break the ninth commandment!

Walker's additional advice is better, "The best solution is to avoid pronouns altogether if possible."[16] Nonetheless, likely the day comes when Christian conviction regarding the ninth commandment will mean loss of job or freedoms. If so, God calls believers to suffer for righteousness' sake. Calvin helps us think rightly about these matters by focusing as much attention on the ninth commandment as on the seventh. In the process, he helps us steel ourselves for what may come.

4—NO COMPROMISE

Calvin's Understanding

Calvin faced the objection from his own community that wearing the clothing of the opposite sex ought not be of great concern: "Truly it should seem to be no matter of great importance for a man to be appareled after one fashion or other."[17] But in the sermon on Deuteronomy 22:5 Calvin called the church to "eschew all looseness,"[18] even if it seemed to others like small compromises would do little damage to oneself and/or to others.

Calvin saw a slippery slope in small compromises of Deuteronomy 22:5. He warned, "Propriety and modesty are prescribed, not only for decency's sake, but lest one kind of liberty should at length lead to something worse."[19] In another place he added,

> When men put themselves into women's apparel, and women put themselves into men's as ye know: what comes of it?...We are sure that the suffering thereof is the opening of a gap to all whoredom. At a word, such disguisings are but enticements to bawdry, as experience proveth.[20]

Calvin has an honest understanding of human nature. When we let ourselves go an inch, our nature takes a mile. Sin is never content with a little bit, but having gained a foothold, it will push for more. And having become weak by giving in to the little thing, we are prone to give in to the greater thing.

Calvin brooked no small compromises of the prohibition in Deuteronomy 22:5 also because he expected the Christian to love and reverence God enough to keep His commandments. Commenting on the final part of the verse that says cross-dressing is an "abomination" before God, Calvin's simple yet fervent piety comes through: "Although no evil ensued thereof, yet the very thing itself displeases God. We hear what is said of it in this place: *Whosoever does it, is an abomination*. Ought not this saying to make the hair of our heads stand up, rather than we would provoke God's wrath upon us willfully."[21]

Help for Today

Mark Yarhouse recommends that the church allow Christians who experience gender dysphoria to ease the discomfort by taking on certain limited transgender expressions both in dress and behavior: "Some may live a gender identity that reflects their biological sex, depending on their discomfort. Others may benefit from …find[ing] ways to identify with aspects of the opposite sex, as a way to manage extreme discomfort."[22] While one sympathizes with the distressing experience of gender dysphoria, this is wicked advice. Compromising with the distressing feelings will bring a short-term comfort, but it will only bring a greater long-term discomfort. Is not Yarhouse's approach similar to advising a Christian addicted to pornography to look at suggestive pictures when the temptation becomes extremely uncomfortable, in an effort to temporarily ease the temptation?

For the child of God who struggles with gender dysphoria or any of the sinful desires that arise within

16 Walker, *God and the Transgender Debate*, 157.

17 Calvin, *Sermons on Deuteronomy,* 773.

18 Calvin, 773.

19 Calvin, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses: Arranged in the Form of a Harmony*, 3, 110.

20 Calvin, *Sermons on Deuteronomy,* 773.

21 Calvin, 773.

22 Yarhouse, "Understanding the Transgender Phenomenon."

him, Calvin's instruction provides better help. It is indeed true that a Christian's hair ought to stand on end when he hears God call this an abomination. Is it not enough for us at the end of the day to recognize that it displeases Him, the God who loves His people and exonerates them in Christ from their sins?

CONCLUSION

Calvin could not and would not have predicted the state of the world in the twenty-first century. And yet, "there is no new thing under the sun" (Eccl. 1:9). Even gender dysphoria and transgender behavior were part of Calvin's world. Indeed, they were part of the world when God inspired the Bible.

Calvin's sermon on Deuteronomy 22:5 offers a wealth of help for God's people as they think through today's challenges. In Calvin's understanding of the law of God, his pointing the church to both the seventh and ninth commandments, and his unwillingness to allow any compromise with sin, Calvin can be of great help to the church as she faces the challenge of transgender behavior and activism, both within and without her walls.



CONSERVATIVES CLASH OVER ISRAEL AND THE JEWS; HUMAN AND CHIMPANZEE DNA; ASSISTED SUICIDE LEGALIZED IN ILLINOIS AND NEW YORK

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CONSERVATIVES CLASH OVER ISRAEL AND THE JEWS

In a December 1, 2025 blog post, Kevin DeYoung wrote on his website, "Increasingly, the loudest voices arguing for Christian Nationalism are marked by juvenile insults steeped in online jargon from the dissident right. What's more, some of these proponents traffic openly in racist ideology, antisemitism, and Neo-Nazi sympathies...." Thus, one question he has for Christian Nationalists is this: "Do you unequivocally renounce antisemitism, racism, and Nazism?"[1]

What about you? Do you categorically renounce antisemitism (anti-Jewish thinking)?

There has been open antisemitism on the political left for a while now, especially since Hamas attacked Israel on October 7, 2023. In the last couple of years, many in the U.S. Democratic party have voiced loud support for the anti-Israel, pro-Palestinian cause, even though the radical Islamic leaders of that cause (Hamas) expressed a murderous desire to erase Israel from the face of the earth.

But lately we have also been witnessing the emergence of antisemitism on the right, as anyone who follows conservative politics and Christianity in America will have noticed—and I am learning that the issue is complex. Since the assassination of Charlie Kirk in September of 2025, conservatives with differing views of Israel and the Jews have begun to clash openly and bitterly.[2]

Many on the right support all things Jewish with a fervent zeal. Many Christians support Israel because they believe the Jews are God's elect people to whom

1 Kevin DeYoung, "6 Questions for Christian Nationalists" (December 1, 2025), https://clearlyreformed.org/6-questions-for-christian-nationalists.

2 Carolina Lumetta, "Out of the Shadows: Strains of anti-Semitism lurking on the edges of the conservative movement have infiltrated the mainstream," *World* (January 2026), https://wng.org/articles/out-of-the-shadows-1764648109.

God gave the holy land and for whom Jesus will return and reign for a thousand years. They think God will bless you if you bless the Jews, but He will curse you if you curse (or even criticize) the Jews (based on a wrong view of Genesis 12:3).

But anti-Jewish voices that used to hang out on the fringes of the far right have been edging into the mainstream of the conservative movement.[3] These voices espouse conspiracy theories about the Jews, denying, for example, that millions of Jews were murdered by Adolph Hitler in Nazi Germany (known as the Holocaust) and claiming that a large group of powerful Jews secretly control the world.

What should we think of all these swirling opinions about the Jews today? First of all, the *Standard Bearer* promotes Reformed theology and amillennial eschatology. Thus, we confess that God has loved and chosen a church out of all nations, including Jews and Gentiles, and that church is the true Israel of God (Rom. 9:1-8; Gal. 3:26-28). In the fog of controversy, let this be clear: the nation of Israel led by Benjamin Netanyahu is not God's chosen people, but His chosen people include all Jews and Gentiles who believe in Jesus Christ; Christ is not going to come down to reign over the Jews for a thousand years in the future; nor are we in danger of being cursed if we criticize Jewish beliefs, practices, or politics; but we must view Jews who deny that Jesus is the Christ as lost people in need of the saving grace of God (like the Muslims and Nazis who hate them). It is not antisemitic to say that.

But in the second place, we must never allow into our hearts the kind of hateful, antisemitic thinking that led Hitler to execute them in gas chambers or that led two Muslim men to open fire on a group of them as they celebrated Hanukkah on Bondi Beach, Australia on December 14, 2025. We must unequivocally reject the antisemitic and racist thinking that views and speaks of Jews as evil just because they are Jews. We must beware of the racist pride that looks down on Jews or any other race because of stereotypes we have heard about them. We must beware of the racist pride whereby we think our ethnicity is superior to others. Our Lord Jesus was a Jew. He was very critical of His fellow Jews for their pride and unbelief. But He also commanded us to love our neighbor as ourselves, no matter who that neighbor is, even if we are a Samaritan and our neighbor is a Jew (Luke 10:25-37). God is no respecter of persons, and we must not be either. May God give us a desire for the salvation of the lost, both Jews and Gentiles.

HUMAN AND CHIMPANZEE DNA

In the end, there is really only one race, the *human* race, and a new study has shown that we humans are much more different from chimpanzees than we have been told. "A major new study has now completed *all* the great ape genomes to a very high standard. And they were aligned with each other so that people could start making comparisons. This is a big deal. First, many commentators have claimed that this proves that human and chimpanzee genomes are only about 85% identical. They are spot on."[4]

According to this article in *Creation* magazine, the first estimates of the similarity between human and chimpanzee DNA were made in the 1970s. The claim was that there is something like 99% similarity between us and these African primates, making them our closest living relative. That "fact" was touted as one of the strongest "proofs" that humans and chimps evolved from a common ancestor, but it was accepted without complete knowledge of the genomes of either one. Now those genomes have been sequenced in full, and we know that there are *many* more differences between human and chimp DNA.

There *are* long sequences of the two genomes that are 99% identical, which is not that surprising if you just take a look at a few chimpanzees at the zoo and compare them, say, to the elephants. But human and chimp DNA as a whole is only about 85% identical. Yet museums and scientists do not want to admit their grievous mistake or give up their evolutionary talking point, so they continue to make the claim of 99% similarity. If you challenge them, they might whisper

3 Many conservatives view Tucker Carlson's cordial interview of Nick Fuentes, a right-wing conspiracy theorist and forceful critic of the Jews, and the refusal of many conservative leaders to denounce Carlson for giving Fuentes a platform without pushing back on his ideas, as evidence that antisemitism is infiltrating the conservative mainstream.

4 Robert Carter, "Major update—human and chimpanzee DNA only about 85% similar," *Creation*, Vol. 47, No. 4 (2025), 16.

the fine print that they are only talking about those sections of DNA that *align*.

Another reason they do not want to give up their claim of 99% similarity is because the fact of 85% similarity throws a massive monkey wrench (no pun intended) into their theory of human evolution. They thought humans and chimps diverged from each other 6-8 million years ago and evolved down different paths. They thought 6-8 million years of evolution could account for the differences between humans and chimps. But now they must reckon with the facts about human and chimp DNA. Even 6-8 million years would not have been enough time for that many differences to develop.

As the above-mentioned article reminds us, "We are not the product of millions of years of evolutionary experiments and accidents," and "we do not share a common ancestor with chimpanzees, or any other creature." We were made by God in His own image as a distinct and special creature above all the beasts of the field, including the chimps.

We were made by God in His own image as a distinct and special creature above all the beasts of the field, including the chimps.

ASSISTED SUICIDE LEGALIZED IN ILLINOIS AND NEW YORK

But if you think of humans as nothing more than highly evolved animals, you devalue human life and make way for new laws that allow one to end his life if he does not think it is worth living. I have reported in the past on the legalization and advance of physician-assisted suicide in Canada, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States. On December 12, 2025, Illinois became the twelfth state to legalize assisted suicide. According to *World* magazine,

> Gov. JB Pritzker on Friday announced that he'd signed a bill that would allow terminally ill residents aged 18 or older to request life-ending drugs from doctors. The measure is set to take effect next September [2026] and makes Illinois the 12th state to legalize medically assisted suicide. State senators passed the measure in the early morning hours of Oct. 31 [2025] during a special veto session and moved it to Pritzker's desk.[5]

Only a few days later, it was announced that New York will become the thirteenth state to legalize this tragic evil: "New York Gov. Kathy Hochul reached an agreement with state lawmakers on a bill to legalize assisted suicide in 2026, according to a Wednesday release from Hochul's office. Medical Aid in Dying, or MAiD, would allow medical intervention to terminally ill New Yorkers with less than six months to live."[6]

Pastors in Illinois and New York will soon be in the company of pastors in other places who have an urgent responsibility to teach God's people the ethics of living and dying. Suddenly you find yourself in a hospital room with a member of your congregation who is very sick or dying. The doctor walks in and gives the grim report. He lays out the options. One of them is a pill that will bring the suffering to a swift and peaceful end. You are consulted for advice. Are you ready to explain in a pastoral way why that brother or sister in Christ may not go that route?

Let us give hope to God's people in their suffering and dying, so that they can persevere through the dark valleys of every mental and bodily illness and resist the temptation to commit suicide, no matter what euphemism the doctor may use to describe it ("medical assistance in dying," "dying with dignity," and such like). "For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (Rom. 8:18).

5 Lauren Canterberry, "Illinois becomes latest state to legalize assisted suicide," *World* (December 12, 2025), https://wng.org/sift/illinois-becomes-latest-state-to-legalize-assisted-suicide.

6 Christina Grube, "New York governor green-lights assisted suicide bill," *World* (December 17, 2025), https://wng.org/sift/new-york-governor-green-lights-assisted-suicide-bill.



ROMANS: A SOTERIOLOGICAL TREATMENT OF THE GOSPEL

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THE WRITER

The apostle Paul was directed by the Holy Spirit to write thirteen of the twenty-seven books that constitute the New Testament Scripture. The book of Romans was one of them, as is specifically stated in Romans 1:1. He wrote this book during his missionary labors (along with 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Galatians, and 1 and 2 Corinthians), and not from prison as was the case for most of the others he wrote.

Romans itself indicates that Paul wrote this book during his third missionary journey, while he was in Corinth, and prior to his final travels to Jerusalem at the end of that third journey (Rom. 15:25ff.). That he wrote it from Corinth is indicated by his mention of certain believers from that area: Phebe (Rom. 16:1, 2), Gaius (Rom. 16:23), and Erastus (Rom. 16:23). And that he wrote it during his third journey is indicated by Paul stating he had for a long time desired to visit the church in Rome (Rom. 15:23), along with his mentioning that he was aware of the opposition that awaited him in Jerusalem (Rom. 15:30-32). These statements only make sense in connection with his third journey.

As stated, Paul wrote a good number of the books that are in the New Testament. These books are considered epistles, that is, letters written to specific churches or individuals. As such, they are characterized by a good measure of similarity in form, beginning with an address and greeting, then a body of doctrinal instruction, followed by a section of application, and finally concluded with a farewell. The book of Romans follows this pattern. In brief, therefore, chapters 1-11 cover the doctrinal section of the book, and chapters 12-16 the application of that doctrine.

But although similar in form, each of Paul's epistles has a unique theme and purpose. As regards their themes, the books are masterfully written. When reading and studying them, one notices that every part of each book (including even the unique address and greeting in each) points to and aims at getting across the main message in that book. No part of any epistle is arbitrary or insignificant. All this certainly serves as an added testimony of divine inspiration.

THE CHURCH IN ROME

The question is often raised concerning how the church in Rome was organized. It is obvious Paul himself was not involved in this, for he wrote to the church there after they were established and prior to his first visit to Rome. Nor was Peter the one who founded the church there, as the Roman Catholic Church argues, even claiming that Peter was the bishop in Rome for some 25 years. This cannot be, for Peter was mostly in Jerusalem (Acts 2, 11, 12, and 15). Besides this, if Peter had been instrumental in organizing the church in Rome, and if he were in Rome when Paul wrote this epistle, one would expect Paul to have included him in the greetings. Peter, however, is not mentioned.

Jews were present in Rome prior to the organizing of a Christian church there. Some were brought from Jerusalem to Rome as slaves during the first century before Christ.[1] These Jews were later set at liberty, but some of them remained in Rome (Acts 2:10). They built a synagogue there, which is called in Acts 6:9 the "synagogue of the Libertines" ("Libertines" referring here to those who were liberated, set free from slavery). It is true that all Jews were later expelled from Rome (Acts 18:2), but the government's opposition to them weakened and many returned.

1 This occurred under the Roman general, Pompey the Great (106-48 BC).

There are two possible explanations for the conversion of these Jews in Rome and for the establishment of a Christian church there. One is that Jews from Rome, who were in Jerusalem at the time of Pentecost and who were converted at that time (Acts 2:10), returned to Rome and were instrumental in bringing the gospel and organizing a church there. The other possibility is that a church was established by those who were converted under Paul's preaching in various other places and then went to Rome. The latter is a good possibility, for it is clear from the greetings at the end of the book (Rom. 16) that Paul was well acquainted with and close to many of the believers who were in the church there.[2]

THE PURPOSE

There are a variety of views as to why Paul wrote this letter, and that to a church he did not organize and to which he had never been. Some say the purpose was doctrinal: to set forth the true doctrines of salvation. Others say the purpose was conciliatory: to reconcile the Jews and Gentiles in the church in Rome. Another view is that Paul wrote this letter as a substitute for visiting the church and with a view to Rome becoming the new center for mission work to the west (comparable to what Antioch had been).[3] A fourth explanation is that the book was occasioned by Paul's interest in the church, and his understanding that the church needed instruction that would help ground her members in the faith over against the erroneous views of Judaizers who were in Rome.[4]

It is difficult to determine the specific purpose Paul had in mind, for Scripture itself does not definitively state what it was. We must therefore take the book at face value. When we do so, we learn that Paul wrote the church in Rome because of his love and concern for the saints there, and his desire to visit them (Rom. 1:13; 15:22-29; 16:1-24). His letter was mostly doctrinal, with a focus on salvation as it is applied to and experienced by the elect child of God. These doctrines (along with their application) were important for the saints in Rome so that they might stand firm in the faith. But the Spirit also inspired Paul to write what he did because these doctrines are equally important for the church of all ages.

The latter is affirmed by noting how significant this book has been in church history. Whenever reformation has taken place in the church, that reformation has frequently included a return to the truths of salvation as set forth in Romans. An outstanding example of this is Martin Luther, who preached and lectured on Romans from 1515 onwards and thus at the very start of his reformatory work. The same has happened many times since. The epistle to the Romans has always occupied an important place in the church, and in church reformation.

CANONICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Romans stands out in Scripture as a book that sets forth the gospel of God's saving work in Jesus Christ as that work is applied to the elect.[5] The various blessings earned by Christ (as summarized in the *ordo salutis,* or the "order of salvation") are all considered and treated in Romans: regeneration, calling, faith, justification, sanctification, preservation, and glorification.[6] And while it is true that regeneration (which is first in the order of salvation and is fundamental to all the others) is not specifically mentioned, it is nevertheless clearly implied when the other blessings of salvation are discussed. The book of Romans is therefore unique as a setting forth of the gospel in the area of *soteriology* (rather than Christology). The book provides a thorough and systematic treatment of the truths of salvation in Jesus Christ as applied to and experienced by the child of God by the work of the Spirit and through faith alone.

One of the prominent points in Romans is its teaching that the application of the blessings of salvation to the child of God is governed by the decree of election (Rom. 9). The truths of election and reprobation are treated in detail. It is interesting to note that they are treated from the viewpoint of the question concerning the place that Jews occupy in the New Testament church (Rom. 9-11).

As regards the various elements in the order of salvation, justification by faith alone occupies a

2 Louis Berkhof, *New Testament Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1915), 147-149.

3 Merrill C. Tenney, *New Testament Survey* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1968), 304.

4 Henry C. Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1954), 226.

5 The word "gospel" occurs already in Romans 1:1, then again in Romans 1:16. It occurs a total of 13 times in the book.

6 Romans 8:28-30 stands out in Scripture as a passage concerning the *ordo salutis,* mentioning most of the blessings in the order of salvation by name.

prominent place in the book of Romans. This doctrine is on the foreground. The book explains why justification is needed, defends it against error, and speaks of its application to the life of the child of God (Rom. 3-5). This accounts for the fact that this book (as mentioned earlier) has served a crucial role in church reformation, providing a solid defense against all attacks against the truths of sovereign, particular grace.

Berkhof mentions the prominence of this doctrine in Romans, stating that the book teaches that "man is justified by faith and not by the works of the law.... The apostle points out that both Gentiles and Jews need this justification; that it is the way of salvation provided by God Himself; that it yields the most blessed spiritual fruits; that it does not issue in the moral degradation of man, but in a life sanctified by the Spirit and culminating in everlasting glory."[7]

We note, finally, that also the treatment of the doctrine of justification in Romans is *soteriological* (to do with the application of this truth to the believer), rather than Christological (to do with the basis for justification in the cross of Christ). This does not mean Christ's work on the cross is ignored, but simply underscores the fact that the book emphasizes His saving work in us.

OUTLINE OF CONTENT

The book of Romans (as mentioned earlier) is divided into two parts. Though unequal in length, these two parts are clearly distinguished: the doctrinal part from Romans 1:1 to 11:36, and the practical part from Romans 12:1 to 16:27.

Here follows a brief outline of the book.[8]

- Romans 1:1-15—Address, greeting, and thanksgiving for the faith of the believers in Rome.
- Romans 1:16-3:20—Salvation is not found outside the gospel of Jesus Christ.
- Romans 3:21-4:25—God reveals His righteousness in Christ, which righteousness is ours by faith alone.
- Romans 5:1-8:39—Those justified by faith have peace with God, but their being justified does not give them liberty to sin.
- Romans 9:1-11:36—The salvation of the remnant of the Jews, and the salvation of Gentiles, with both governed by eternal election.
- Romans 12:1-21—Admonitions concerning the antithesis, humility, using gifts, love, and more.
- Romans 13:1-14—Admonitions regarding our relation to the civil magistrates, and more.
- Romans 14:1-15:7—Instruction and exhortations regarding things indifferent.
- Romans 15:8-23—Christ's salvation being also for Gentiles, including those in Rome.
- Romans 16:1-27—Greetings to the saints in Rome; closing blessing and doxology.

7 Berkhof, *New Testament Introduction* 145.

8 Summarized from Herman Hoeksema, *New Testament Introduction* (syllabus published by the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary), 14-17. See this syllabus for more details.



COMMON GRACE PROMISED TO THE NATURAL SEED?

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Did God make a gracious covenant with Abraham's natural descendants? There are many who say that He did.

We know that God said He would establish His everlasting covenant with Abraham. Often we quote God's covenant promise found in Genesis 17: "And I

will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee. And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God" (Gen. 17:7, 8).

Yet some say that God made a covenant in which He promised blessings to Abraham's natural descendants. Abraham and his spiritual seed were included in God's everlasting covenant of grace. Yet many say there was also a gracious, yet temporary, covenant of God with Abraham and his physical descendants.

Baptists who speak this way do so in an effort to explain why all the male descendants of Abraham were to be circumcised. Their thinking goes something like this: If all the males were to be circumcised, it must have been that all the natural children of Abraham were included in some covenant. Since the unbelieving children were not included in God's everlasting covenant of grace, it must have been a different covenant that included all the natural seed of Abraham.

The number of those who think this way is not small. Therefore, it is good for us to take a look at this in more detail.

A TWOFOLD SEED

Scripture clearly teaches that the children of Abraham are twofold. Only some of them believe in Christ. Those who truly belong to Jesus are referred to as Abraham's spiritual seed. The others are merely his physical descendants. The latter are of the blood line of Abraham, yet they are not at all like Abraham from a spiritual point of view.

This distinction between children who believe in Jesus and those who do not believe in Him goes all the way back to God's promise in the Garden of Eden. God said that Adam and Eve would have children who were in two antithetical groups. Some of their children would be of the seed of the woman. The seed of the woman refers to Christ and those who are in Christ. The other children would be the seed of the serpent. They would be children of the Devil (John 8:44).

Cain was one of the seed of the serpent. His father was the Devil. Abel was of the seed of the woman. He was a child of God. As it was for Adam and Eve, so it was for Abraham and Sarah, only some of their descendants were truly children of God.

So how does that apply to God's covenant? Scripture teaches that only those whom God has chosen in Christ are in God's covenant. As Galatians 3:16 makes clear, the covenant promises are all to Christ: "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."

The promises are to Christ, and thus are only to those who belong to Christ: "And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (v. 29).

A BAPTIST VIEW

Now let us turn to a Baptist argument against the practice of baptizing the children of believers. Pascal Denault is a Baptist who has written a book entitled *The Distinctiveness of Baptist Covenant Theology: A Comparison between Seventeenth Century Particular Baptist and Paedobaptist Federalism*.

In this book, Denault finds fault with what is actually an erroneous argument for the baptism of infants. The following quote serves to illustrate this:

> We have here a fundamental difference with the paedobaptist understanding of the Abrahamic covenant, which placed the natural and spiritual posterities of Abraham in the same covenant of grace—the first inheriting only the physical blessings of the covenant and the second benefiting also from the spiritual privileges.[1]

Denault here is writing against the position that both the elect and the reprobate children of Abraham were included in God's covenant of grace and were promised blessings, with the reprobate receiving only physical blessings. Yet this position with which he is disagreeing is not the Reformed position. The biblical and Reformed position, as set forth in the verses of Galatians 3 quoted earlier, is that only the elect were included in God's covenant of grace, and they alone received blessings.[2]

1 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), 121.

2 For more on this see David J. Engelsma, *Covenant and Election in the Reformed Tradition* (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Assoc., 2011).

Leaving that point for now, let us move on to consider Denault's explanation as to why the male Israelite infants were to be circumcised. Denault says it was because God made a covenant with the physical seed of Abraham and promised them an earthly inheritance. Although only the spiritual seed were promised a heavenly inheritance, Denault says the natural seed were promised an earthly inheritance. He writes,

> …not only did Baptist theology make the distinction between the physical and spiritual posterities of Abraham, but it also strictly separated them into two separate categories. The Baptists saw two posterities in Abraham, two inheritances, and consequently two covenants.[3]

According to this Baptist view of two covenants, a person could be in both covenants. Take, for example, the prophet Samuel. He was one of Abraham's spiritual seed, and he was also one of Abraham's blood descendants. So he would have been in both covenants and would have received both inheritances. The unbelieving physical seed, however, would have been only in the covenant that had to do with earthly things.

A COMMON-GRACE COVENANT

So if only some of Abraham's natural male descendants would be saved, why were they all to be circumcised?

Denault sets forth a common Baptist position that all the male Israelites were to be circumcised because they were all included in some covenant. The covenant they were in, however, was not God's everlasting covenant of grace. According to Nehemiah Coxe, they were all in "the covenant of circumcision" (Acts 7:8).[4] Coxe and many others distinguish the covenant of circumcision from God's everlasting covenant of grace. The covenant of circumcision, Coxe would say, included all the natural seed.[5] In contrast, God's everlasting covenant of grace included only the spiritual seed.

There were two covenants, they say, with two inheritances. All the spiritual seed were in God's everlasting covenant of grace and received a heavenly inheritance. All the natural seed were in the covenant of circumcision. The natural seed, they would say, received temporary, earthly blessings, such as the earthly land of Canaan.

This serves to bring out a very important point: This Baptist position is inseparably connected to the error of common grace. When many Baptists try to explain why all the male Israelites were to be circumcised, they turn to the erroneous doctrine of common grace. They say there was a covenant promise to all the natural seed. There were earthly covenant blessings promised to them. That, they say, explains why all the male infants were to be circumcised.

Yet that amounts to the teaching of common grace. Common, non-saving grace is said to be received by those who are not in Christ. Clearly these Baptists are speaking of gracious blessings to those outside of Christ. Today a number of Baptists refer to themselves as Reformed. It is important that we show them that this Baptist two-covenant view involves the error of common grace.

THERE WERE NO COMMON-GRACE BLESSINGS

The earthly land of Canaan was a picture of the heavenly land. The land was not a blessing in itself. There were many Israelites who dwelled in the land of Canaan who were not blessed by God. They may have had a plot of ground in Canaan on which to live, but they did not profit from it.

That they did not profit from it needs to be stressed. Many look at earthly things that God gives to people as blessings. They fail to distinguish the earthly thing from God's blessing. Our Heidelberg Catechism rightly distinguishes the two. We see that in the Catechism's explanation of the petition: "Give us this day our daily bread." "Give us this day our daily bread; that is, be pleased to provide us with all things necessary for the body, that we may thereby acknowledge Thee to be the only fountain of all good, and that neither our care nor industry, nor even Thy gifts, can profit us without Thy blessing" (A. 125).

The Catechism rightly says that God's gifts do

3 Denault, *The Distinctiveness of Baptist Covenant Theology,* 120.

4 Ronald D. Miller, James M. Renihan, and Francisco Orozco, eds., *Covenant Theology: From Adam to Christ, Includes Coxe's Work Entitled: "A Discourse of the Covenants That God Made With Men Before the Law"* (Macclesfield, UK: Broken Wharfe, 2025), 105-154.

5 Miller, Renihan, and Orozco, eds., *Covenant Theology: From Adam to Christ,* 115.

not profit us without God's blessing. In other words, God's gifts and His blessings are distinguished from one another. Some receive only the former, and do not profit. The only ones who profit are the ones who receive not only God's gifts, but also His blessing.

That is the Reformed position. Yet many equate a gift of God with His blessing. When God gave Israel the gift of the land of Canaan, many Baptists say that was a blessing to the natural seed. The truth is that it was a blessing only to those who were in Christ.

THE COVENANT AND POSSESSION ARE EVERLASTING

Another key point to note here are the two places in Genesis 17:7-8 where we come across the word "everlasting." First, the covenant that God made with Abraham is said to be everlasting. Secondly, the land that God gave to His people is said to be an everlasting possession. The fact that the land would be an everlasting possession is clear proof that the promised land referred to is the heavenly land that God's people will receive after this life.

This also, then, serves to explain how Abraham himself could be said to receive the land forever. Abraham did not receive the promised land in this life. Yet he is one of God's people who will "inherit the earth" (Ps. 37:9). This was explained in more detail in the previous article (*SB*, Nov. 2025, p. 75-77).

Any believer who reads Genesis 17, without already having false notions about this, will easily come away with the conclusion that the land God promised to Abraham was promised to him and to his seed forever. Abraham himself would receive it, and so would his seed. Those to whom God promised the land would dwell forever with God. Quite clearly, then, this refers to the promised new earth where God's people in Christ will forever enjoy communion with their God.

The fact that the land would be an everlasting possession is clear proof that the promised land referred to is the heavenly land that God's people will receive after this life.

THE GOD ONLY OF HIS ELECT PEOPLE

There is yet another important point that can be drawn from Genesis 17:7-8. The true God is the God of all those with whom He makes His covenant. When God makes His covenant with His people He says, "I will be your God, and you will be my people." That is what He said in Genesis 17. He promised Abraham, and He promises all His people, that He will "be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee" (Gen. 17:7).

When Baptists say there was a promise here also to the unbelieving natural descendants of Abraham, they run into difficulty. Did God promise that He would be the God of all the natural descendants of Abraham? To put it another way, did all the natural descendants of Abraham have the true God as their God?

Denault gave this as an explanation of how God could be said to be the God of natural (not spiritual) Israel:

> By committing to being the God of Israel, the Lord was promising her superiority over other nations, protection, the possession of Canaan, the blessing of her land....[6]

According to this view, God said to the physical descendants of Abraham, "I promise to be your God and give you common-grace blessings." Notice how unbelieving Israelites who are promised common-grace blessings are said to have the true God as their God.

There is quite a bit more to consider regarding this Baptist view of covenant theology. For now I would like to conclude by pointing out that if we can show Baptists the error of common grace, we may find that more of them come to see and confess that also today the children of believers are to receive the sign of God's everlasting covenant that is with believers and their spiritual seed in Jesus Christ.

6 Denault, *The Distinctiveness of Baptist Covenant Theology*, 111.



THE PROPER METHOD OF BIBLE INTERPRETATION: THE GRAMMATICAL-HISTORICAL-SPIRITUAL METHOD (5) HELPFUL BOOKS

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This article concludes the series on the Grammatical-Historical-Spiritual (GHS) method of Bible interpretation by referring the reader to two other books for further reading. Both books are good books, and recommended—although if a person could buy or read only one of the two, I prefer the second, and will explain why. But I restate: both books are good, and recommended.

The two books are:

How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth, 4th ed. by Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014. 301 pages. Softcover.

Understanding God's Word: An Introduction to Interpreting the Bible, by Jon Nielson. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2025. 127 pages. Hardcover.

COMPLEMENTING BOOKS

One reason to survey these two books is that, as already indicated, both are good. For our purposes, there is no point in reviewing books that are unhelpful.

A second reason is that one book is newly published (*Understanding God's Word),* while the other is a classic. The first edition of *How to Read the Bible* was published in 1981, and the book has been a well-known resource since then, even used as a textbook in one of my college classes.

A third reason to survey these two books is that they complement each other in their approach. *How to Read the Bible* devotes separate chapters to different genres (kinds of literature) of Bible books: epistles, Old Testament history, the gospel accounts, Acts, parables, law, prophets, Psalms, wisdom books, and Revelation. The chapters explain how these various genres differ from each other, and how the process of interpreting them differs from genre to genre. Within each chapter, Fee and Stuart state the need to do several basic exegetical tasks such as noting the book's historical and literary context. They illustrate their "How To" principles by examining a broad selection of passages within that genre. The approach to the different kinds of literature in the Bible is helpful; it is a strength of the book.

By contrast, *Understanding God's Word* sets forth six specific tools to use when interpreting any Bible passage. Nielson's summary of these six tools is worth quoting (119-20):

With every passage of Scripture:

- Use the context tool—noting the historical, literary, and canonical context of the biblical passage you are studying.
- Use the courtroom tool—committing to say neither more nor less than what Scripture says.
- Use the crux tool—making sure that you are studying the passage in light of the purpose—and main theme—of the book in which it is contained.
- Use the construction tool—carefully discerning the intentional structure and shape the author has given to the passage.
- Use the clarity tool—seeking to leave behind your personal perspectives and agendas, and allowing the biblical text to speak for itself.
- Use the cross tool—always studying the Bible in light of its central climax: the person and work of Jesus Christ, the Savior and Lord.

Every chapter includes an explanation of that particular tool, a list of problems that one avoids when using the tool, a list of benefits received by using the tool, and five or six passages in which the author applies the tool.

These two approaches are complementary, and both approaches are good.

THEIR STRENGTHS

Both books share certain strengths. Both proceed from a high view of Scripture as the inspired revelation of God to His people. Both set forth a method that is essentially the "Grammatical-Historical-Spiritual" method. Neither book uses this term, but the method that they present accords with the GHS method. Both agree that the meaning of a Bible passage cannot be different today from the meaning that the original reader or hearer understood. *How to Read the Bible* states this point negatively, to emphasize the positive: "A text cannot mean what it could never have meant for its original readers/hearers.... The true meaning of the biblical text for us is what God originally intended it to mean when it was first spoken or written. This is the starting point" (34-35).

How to Read the Bible is certainly the more detailed of the two. It posits that Old Testament narrative was not intended merely to teach moral lessons (96); sets forth the distinction between law and gospel, especially in exegesis (148-150), and the role of law in Israel (175-176); notes that by speaking in parables Jesus was being clear, not making truth harder to understand (156); and emphasizes that biblical prophecy is not entirely about the future. Rather, biblical prophets were applying the commands, promises, and threats of God's law to the present moment in Israel's life (188-95). All these are good points. In these very areas some Bible scholars go wrong.

Understanding God's Word has its unique strengths too. It is more concise and down-to-earth, so that a younger audience (highschoolers) could benefit from it. The examples that Nielson uses to illustrate the point of each chapter are more focused, pointed, and helpful. Reading *How to Read the Bible,* I sometimes sensed that the illustrations were not showing the reader how to apply the principles, but were showing how the authors applied them—leaving the reader to disagree at times. This was not true of *Understanding God's Word*. The book's seventh chapter is itself a strength. It gives more instruction on how to find Christ and the gospel in the Old Testament passages that contain typology, that set forth the sins and failures of God's covenant people, and that are prophetic.

HOW TO READ'S WEAKNESSES

If I could buy and read only one of the two books, it would be *Understanding God's Word*. *How to Read the Bible* is a good book, but it has some distinct weaknesses.

To my mind, the greatest weakness is that it does not indicate that an essential part of understanding a text is finding the gospel of Christ crucified and risen in it. To be clear, the book does not deny the need to do this, and occasionally the reader who is looking for it finds hints that Bible interpretation requires one to find the gospel. But the point is not emphasized. The book's emphasis is on knowing what a text meant in its day, and what it means today. In this regard *Understanding God's Word* does better, setting forth "the cross tool."

A second weakness is that the authors of *How to Read the Bible* appear to have a different view of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments than Reformed believers have. Of this, some illustrations. One is when the authors made the point (fair enough, in itself) that some doctrinal statements are primary and some are secondary (124), but then included as secondary matters whether Saturday or Sunday is the New Testament day of worship (125) and whether infants of believing parents should be baptized (127-28).

A second instance of a "Wait—did I read that correctly?" moment was when the authors referred to the application of the Old Testament laws to the New Testament believer. We are to assume, they say, "that none of its stipulations (laws) are binding on us unless they are renewed in the new covenant" (172). Of course, some of the Old Testament laws are no longer in force. That is not the point of dispute. But were all abolished, and some renewed? Or do all remain in force, except those that are abolished? How one answers these questions indicates how one views the relationship between the Old and New Testaments.

In each of these three instances, the authors' presentation of the matter is consistent with a Baptist view of the difference between the Old and New Testaments and a sharp distinction between Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church as both being God's one covenant people. This is a crucial point in understanding what a passage meant and means.

A third weakness of Fee and Stuart's book is the assumptions that the authors make about Bible translations and textual criticism. In chapter two, they emphasize the need to use a good Bible translation. None can dispute

that need. But people will disagree how to determine which translation is "good." When the authors "venture to suggest that the current NIV (2011), a committee translation by the best scholarship in the evangelical tradition is as good a translation as you can get" (56), the reader is unaware of several significant details.

1. Why the NIV? The authors give one reason, to which I will return momentarily. But far more criteria than one should be factors in choosing a Bible version. It is no coincidence that Zondervan, the publisher of *How to Read the Bible*, has exclusive rights to print and distribute the NIV in the United States.
2. Why the 2011 NIV? Does the reader realize that the NIV went through various versions? And has different readings (42)? And that the 2011 NIV is a gender-inclusive translation? So why is the 2011 better? And where its reading differs from the 1984 (42), what does that say about the "best Greek manuscripts" that are part of the basis of the NIV?
3. The reason why the NIV is "as good a translation as you can get" regards its textual basis, according to the authors. Again, the authors make statements with which the reader can hardly disagree, not knowing any better, but the statements are undemonstrated assertions: "For the New Testament, the better external evidence was preserved in Egypt" (40); "The text of the NIV is found in all the best early Greek manuscripts" (41); and the "worst" feature of the KJV is "its flawed text" (43). For now, my denial of these assertions must also be undemonstrated, but I have made them in prior articles in this rubric: these statements are based on wrong assumptions about Greek manuscripts. Most scholars today make these wrong assumptions, so Fee and Stuart are in large company. But they are wrong.

CONCLUSION

Both books are good; one is better.

Either could be read by an individual. *How to Read the Bible* is better suited to be a textbook, used, if not in a college classroom, in a church education setting. *Understanding God's Word* is an easier read in a popular style.

Either could be used for group discussion, although here *Understanding God's Word* is better suited. A group could discuss the book's main point and how to apply these tools in about six sessions. More expansively, a group of believers could discuss not only the six tools, but also the passages that Nielson uses to apply these tools.

Do you want to read a good book about Bible interpretation? Both are good; but start with *Understanding God's Word*. And in either case, read with discretion. These books are *about* the Bible, not the Bible itself.



CHOOSING KINDNESS

MRS. SHERRY KOOLE
wife, mother, and grandmother in Hope PRC in Walker, Michigan

And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you—Ephesians 4:32

As simple as the instruction given in this passage may seem to be, the mere act of being kind is something we all need to be taught and then strive to do. However, being unkind, rude, and even downright cruel at times comes quite naturally for many of us. It begins at a very young age. Some of the first words our children learn to speak are often "Mine!" "It belongs to me!" "You can't have it! I had it first!" Sad as it is, sharing and being kind to others are difficult virtues for our children (as well as ourselves) to learn and develop. Difficult because we live in world of

entitlement, pride, affluence, and self-indulgence. We live in a so-called *me world* where things need to go *my way or else* and *whatever I want, I get*. Such thinking leaves little room for being genuinely kind to others.

Unkindness, on the other hand, being a strong component of our fallen human nature, comes much easier for us, and we often find enjoyment while dishing it out in numerous hurtful ways. To state just a few examples: a group of students ostracizing another at break time by telling him/her to go away…leaving one all alone and hurting on the playground; while working on a group project, one student is mocked and called "dumb" by others for making an honest mistake; a child struggles with simple tasks to the frustration—and therefore, taunting—of his peers; siblings are given shared household responsibilities and some feel (and are angry) that the others are not doing their fair share… causing a contentious atmosphere within the home; a co-worker or fellow student spreads gossip about another resulting in strained relationships at work or school; or there may even be one who loves helping others but, because of his eagerness and willingness to help, is easily taken advantage of by others who give themselves over to selfishness. And the list could go on and on, I am sure. These scenarios portray the sinful human nature in all of us. Our pride, our self-indulgences, our thoughts of entitlement—they all get in the way of our being kind to others.

The question we face as children of God is how ought we to respond to these various scenarios and how ought we to instruct our children to respond when they witness such cruel behavior? Our human nature wants to retaliate in kind—giving the bullies or oppressors a taste of their own medicine, rendering insult for insult, giving tit for tat, or maybe even seeking a little revenge of our own. But, as much as our old man of sin would love to strike back, we, as children of God living out of the new man in us, are told to *choose kindness*. We are not to retaliate or try to get even. First Thessalonians 5:15 gives strict instruction, "See that none render evil for evil unto any man; but ever follow that which is good, both among yourselves, and to all men."

Even in the darkest of circumstances, when it is easier said than done, we are called—commanded really—to *choose kindness*. For when God calls, He commands. And Scripture calls us often to be kind. Colossians 3:12 says, "Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, *kindness,* humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering;" (emphasis added). And in Zechariah 7:9 we read, "Thus speaketh the Lord of hosts, saying, Execute true judgment, and shew mercy and compassions every man to his brother:" Mercy and compassion are synonymous with kindness according to my Bible dictionary and these texts call everyone to show such to his brother. And Scripture is full of more passages such as these exhorting us to be kind.

We also have the commandments themselves. In Matthew 22 the Lord instructs His disciples that to love the Lord with all their heart, soul and mind is the first and great commandment, followed by, "And the second is like unto it, *thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself*" (v. 39). Given that love is patient, *kind,* envies not, seeks not self, thinks no evil, and more (1 Cor. 13:4ff.), it can be stated that living a life of kindness and obeying the second table of the law are one and the same.

Although many of the commandments composing the second table of the law begin with "Thou shalt not" and give strict instruction as to how the child of God ought not to behave toward his neighbor, commands for positive action are also included. We need only to turn to the Heidelberg Catechism for further explanation. Many of these Lord's Days begin by asking what God *requires* in each commandment. Lord's Day 40, Q&A 107, dealing with the command not to kill, says, "But is it enough that we do not kill any man in the manner mentioned above? No: for when God forbids envy, hatred, and anger, He commands us to *love our neighbor as ourselves; to show* patience, peace, meekness, mercy and *all kindness, towards him,* and prevent his hurt as much as in us lies; and that we do good, even to our enemies" (emphasis added). We have a definite call to action here, even to the specifics of this article—*show all kindness*. And other commandments, as well, call for conscious actions of loving the neighbor—defending his honor and character, promoting his advantage in every instance we are able, and the like.

"KINDNESS IS THE LANGUAGE WHICH THE DEAF CAN HEAR AND BLIND CAN SEE"

With the hope of giving some profitable ideas as to how to teach kindness, I searched for some famous or not so famous quotes about kindness itself. I found the one

above, attributing authorship to Mark Twain, to be rather interesting. Though I found only the quote and not the when or why it was written, I thought it might go quite nicely with the thoughts I wish to convey. Kindness is a *language* (deed) that everyone can *speak* (perform) and/or *see and hear* (be the recipient of).

I chose this quote because of its reference to hearing and seeing. I have taught all my children and at times enjoy singing with my grandchildren the childlike song "O Be Careful Little Eyes What You See." The children point to the proper body part while singing, "O be careful little eyes what you see, ears what you hear, tongue what you say, hands what you do, feet where you go, heart whom you trust and mind what you think." As children of God who place our heartfelt hope and trust in Him, we ought not let our minds think more highly of ourselves than we ought to think. But rather, we ought to be humble, benevolent and kind.

The song speaks of being careful in all things. Somewhat like issuing warnings as what not to see, hear, speak, or do. I would love to be able to put positive words to the music encouraging our children as how to live a godly walk of kindness towards others. God gave us eyes. When we see the needs and wounds of others, do we act accordingly? Do we stand up for the hurting by standing up to the cruel? Or do we turn a blind eye? God gave us ears. Do we hear the cries of the hurting and listen—really listen—when a listening ear is what is so desperately needed? Do we let them know that we are here for them—not only in times of joy and gladness but also in times of grief and hardships? Or are our ears deaf to their cries? God gave us tongues. Are we quick to speak words of kindness to others? Do we take the opportunity to speak words of comfort and encouragement when fellow saints are grieving or struggling with the circumstances of life? Or are we more inclined to backbite, slander, and gossip? God gave us hands. Are we pleased and eager to be helpful and assist others when opportunities arise? Do we give cheerfully and generously to needy causes? Or are we miserly and stingy, withholding generosity toward others in exchange for the purchasing of goods that will satisfy our own lustful and covetous nature? God gave us feet. Are we zealous for the house of God and the communion of the saints—eager to worship twice each Sunday and attend weekly Bible societies? Or do we allow our pleasure-seeking selves to have our feet take us to more self-entertaining places and time-consuming activities; thus, crowding out the spiritually enriching opportunities we are so graciously given in our lives?

There is another song that comes to mind also. One not so childlike, yet one the young children can most definitely sing. I share, however, more with our young people in mind. I do so because the sin of cyberbullying is very real and our young people are not immune to it. Social media makes the sin of being unkind even easy for one to disguise. Online users have at their fingertips the ability to anonymously post, send, and share negative and/or harmful content (whether true or false) with the intended and often successful result of discrediting and blackening the good name of others. The ability to humiliate, intimidate, spread lies and rumors, harass, torment, and threaten is made easy for them. And they can do so anonymously, with little fear of consequence. So very sad. But true.

The song I share is Psalm 15A in the new Psalter and Psalter #24 in the older edition, which is entitled "Tests of Christian Character." I ask that you sing this song as a family and then discuss the characteristics of the Christian. Are these characteristics of doing that which is right—speaking the truth with sincerity, refusing to participate in the slandering of others, freely giving of our time and resources when there is need—becoming of us? Do we make conscious choices to be kind? Do we pass the tests of Christian character?

Let us go back now to an earlier question that was not fully answered. How ought we and our children to respond when we witness cruel behavior? The golden rule of kindness that we begin teaching our children early on in the home, and which is reinforced in the schools as they interact with other students, and which they are to further develop as the years go on is *do unto others as you would have them do unto you* based on the well-known passages of Scripture found in Matthew 7:12 and Luke 6:31. It is a very simple rule. Very easily understood. In essence—treat others with the same kindness, respect, and consideration that you would want for yourself.

Easily understood. Yes. But not so easily put into practice. Our sinful natures fight against it. That is why we need to teach our children that this golden rule, along with all of God's commandments, calls for *action* over against passivity. The rule begins with ***do*** *unto*

others. Action is called for. If/When a child witnesses a classmate being belittled or bullied, or cyberbullied, by others, he should not feel he is doing the right thing by simply not taking part in such cruel behavior. But rather, by putting himself in his classmate's shoes, and thinking, "How would I want to be treated?" he is called to action. It may be difficult. And I would dare say even frightening at times. But children need to be taught that, as much as it is a good thing for them to wish to avoid altercations, conflict and controversy, sometimes the kindest (and bravest?) thing they can do is to be kind by standing up for someone who is being treated unkindly—and/or by standing up to the person(s) being unkind.

THIS IS MY COMMANDMENT, THAT YE LOVE ONE ANOTHER, AS I HAVE LOVED YOU." JOHN 15:12

The Lord not only gives us the command ***to*** love, but He also gives direction as **how** we are to love. We are to love as He has loved. Jesus gave the whole of His life as an example for His disciples and us to follow. In His lowly birth, His miracles of healing, His raising of the dead, His feeding of thousands, His dining with sinners, His washing of feet, His suffering little children to come unto Him, His weeping with mourners, His teachings—both directly and indirectly through parables, and in His sacrificial death, we find a huge inventory of loving deeds of kindness that we, as disciples of Him, are to emulate. We are to love one another with the love of Christ. Our kindness to others should mirror the goodness and kindness of God toward us.

The opportunities we are given to be kind are virtually endless. And the different scenarios pictured earlier in this article and the examples of Christ given above show that our deeds of kindness do not have to come in grand and glorious gestures. But rather, just listening, comforting, befriending, giving assistance, squashing gossip, being there—holding a hand or giving a hug, or even a very simple *please or thank-you* may be just the antidote needed to brighten someone's day.

We need to encourage each other in our endeavor to obey this spiritual command to exercise kindness. There are choices we must make. Whether we are at work or at play—how will we act? What will we say? I encourage you, dear reader, to do that which is right. *Choose kindness. Choose kindness!* We are commanded to do so.

As we spend our days together giving and receiving kindness, we will find joy. For being kind, not out of duty or obligation, but out of genuine love for the neighbor, will bring nothing but joy, true joy, to both the giver and the receiver of such kindness. I am sure of it! Our Savior tells us it is so. He gives these comforting and encouraging words in John 15:11, "These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full."

Pray that God graciously enables us to be the kind and loving people we are called to be and that He blesses us with a joy that is full beyond measure.

STRENGTH OF YOUTH



CONFESSION OF FAITH

REV. JONATHAN MAHTANI
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When reading the title of this article, what came to your mind? For many young people in our Protestant Reformed denomination, confession of faith brings to mind that nerve-racking experience of demonstrating your faith by answering questions before the elders. Some of you are anxiously anticipating this and others have already passed through the consistory room with relief. Closely connected to this exercise is your public profession of faith. During

a worship service, you swear before God and His church your commitment to Christ as it relates to sound doctrine, godly living, and church government. This solemn activity is your confession of faith.

The term "confession of faith" may also make young people think about reciting the Apostles' Creed in unison during Sunday evening worship services. With understanding hearts, we worship God by confessing our faith.

While not diminishing the importance of making confession of faith in the consistory room or in the worship service, it is exceedingly important for every young believer to recognize that when the Bible speaks about confession of faith, it often does *not* refer to an activity that takes place in the formal church setting. What the Christian confesses in the church is supposed to resound again and again outside the walls of the church. The Christian is insufficiently confessing his faith if he does not speak of Christ outside the closed doors of a consistory room or a sanctuary.

Confession of faith is what every Christian does. The Heidelberg Catechism (Lord's Day 12, Q&A 32) asks, "But why art thou called a Christian?" Here's the answer: "Because I am a member of Christ by faith, and thus am partaker of His anointing; that so I may *confess His name*" (emphasis mine). On the basis of Scripture, the Catechism is expounding on the name "Christ" which means "Anointed One." Those who are joined by faith to Christ are called "Christian" because they have been anointed with the same Spirit of Christ. Every Christian, true to that name, therefore, is chosen and empowered by the Spirit to be a prophet, as Christ was a prophet. Every Christian, according to that name, will bubble forth and overflow with regular confessions of faith. So, are you merely a "Sunday Christian"? If so, you will only confess your faith once a week in the formal setting of church. Instead, strive to be a true Christian who seeks to confess his faith in every sphere of life.

Confession of faith is what Christians do before men who might oppose. Jesus says in Matthew 10:32, "Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven." Jesus is not teaching that we earn salvation through our confession, but He *is* teaching that all genuine believers on the way to heaven will confess Him before men. What kind of men are these? The context makes clear that these are antagonistic men who "kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul" (v. 28) and who are "foes…of his own household" (v. 37). To confess your faith is to witness to others who may attack you. The Greek translation for "witness" is where we get the word "martyr," precisely because of the violent hatred of those before whom we are called to confess our faith.

Sadly, the source of that opposition is too often family and friends—yes, even those within the same Christian school and church denomination. When a young person dares to speak openly about Christ and His Word, how do his fellow young people respond? Whether imagined or real, he anticipates awkward stares, annoyed eye-rolls, abrupt changes of topics, a mocking smirk, or a derisive remark—all of which communicate, "You should be ashamed about your faith as a Christian." Yet this is exactly the kind of context in which Jesus would have Christians confess their faith—before men who might oppose.

The biblical illustration of an echo is helpful. Confession of faith is supposed to be an echo of the preaching of the gospel. First Thessalonians 1:8 describes the example of the young Thessalonian church this way: "For from you sounded out (literally, "echoed") the word of the Lord not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to God-ward is spread abroad…." An echo is the resounding of the same word. This illustration matches the word for "confess," which means literally "to say the same thing." To confess your faith is to say the same thing that you heard in the preaching of the Word. It is to say the same thing as God says in His Word. It is to say the same thing as what Christ has worked in His church to testify through the ages and in the midst of controversy, recorded in confessions and creeds. It is to echo this forth beyond the doors of your church.

This means, of course, that you must first work at *listening* to sermons well. Young people cannot echo what they have not first received with their hearts. Getting enough sleep the night before will help. Jotting down just one or two sentences on a notepad might help. Meditating on and applying the truth preached to your own heart is essential.

You must then begin *speaking* to those who are nearby first of all. Think of an echo; it first resounds nearby before it resounds far away. Young people filled

with the gospel cry out with the psalmist: "Come and hear, all ye that fear God, and I will declare what he hath done for my soul" (Ps. 66:16). Before witnessing to the unbelieving neighbor, co-worker, or college classmate, young people ought to practice confessing their faith to fellow church members in the narthex, to family members at dinner, and to believing friends with whom they hang out. This Christian culture of echoing our faith needs to develop among the young and old so that it might resound in evangelism beyond even the Protestant Reformed community.

I appeal to the younger generation in particular—that you, with the strength of youth and the courage of Christ, develop this culture of *open* confession of faith in our community. "Why tell young people this?" you may ask. "Why not remind the more mature adults of their duty?" While adult Christians also need to become more intentional and diligent in confessing their faith, echoing the word is a godly habit that must be instilled at a young age and normalized in the social settings of young people. May the Holy Spirit move among Protestant Reformed young people to help one another in confessing their faith, and even to set a Christian example for the adults.

I write on this topic with more conviction than ever before. Having pastored congregations in the Chicago-area and the Grand Rapids-area, God has called me to live and labor in Pittsburgh, where He has taught me and my family many good lessons. He has especially impressed upon us the need for Protestant Reformed young people to improve in confession of faith. Because of where we live, my children presently attend (for the first time in their lives) a Christian school that is not made up mainly of Protestant Reformed people. When you plop a Protestant Reformed young person in such a community filled with Christians who hail from a variety of church denominations, confession of faith becomes almost unavoidable. There is an immediate inquisitiveness that arises regarding what others believe. Countless discussions are had about doctrine and life. My teenage children have been forced not only to confess *what* they believe but also to explain *why* they believe it. They have also learned from examples set by other confessing Christians. Are there challenges and dangers? Yes. But God has used this environment to develop in my family both the Christian activity of confession of faith and the conviction that comes with it.

This soul-stirring experience is what has prompted me to write this article. I want young people from a close-knit Protestant Reformed community to enjoy the refreshing atmosphere where open confession of faith is normal. It *should* be normal for a Christian. Let young people grow in "speaking the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15), both within and without the walls of a church building. Confess. Witness. Echo. This is the activity of every Christian.

REFORMED FREE PUBLISHING ASSOCIATION

INTELLIGENCE OR ILLUSION? CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVES ON AI (1)*

DR. BRENDAN LOOYENGA AND MR. BEN RAU
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INTRODUCTION

If you have been keeping track of the world of technology over the past several years, you know that artificial intelligence (AI) is everywhere around us. Whether it is through media coverage, day-to-day online work, or conversations with other people, you cannot avoid running into AI. Given the increasingly large impact it is having on our lives, AI is a topic that must be considered by the church and its individual members.

* A version of this speech was given to the Reformed Free Publishing Association (RFPA), which gathered for its annual meeting at Southwest PRC on the evening of September 25, 2025. The version printed here has been condensed for clarity, but the full speech can be viewed via the RFPA YouTube channel at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pbtJO—b_zo.

Digital readers can can access a reading list prepared by the authors by using the link here; print readers will have to wait for this issue to be posted on the RFPA-*SB* website.

Like many transformative technologies, AI has generated strong opinions both for and against its implementation. Some will tell you that we are approaching an "existential crisis" in which AI will bring an end to our world. Others are lauding it as one of the greatest inventions of all time, a technology as significant as fire to human history. What we need to understand, of course, is that the truth is somewhere in the middle. AI is everywhere—so how should you and I respond?

As believers, our first impulse should always be to ask what God's Word says about an issue, even something as recent as AI. Although we will not find direct statements about modern technology in the Bible, what we can discern are principles that transcend time and culture. Throughout Scripture, and especially in the book of Proverbs, we find recurring references to the themes of *knowledge*, *understanding*, and *wisdom*. These three terms are not just synonyms. Rather, they form a continuum in the Christian life that can be applied to any technology with which we might engage.

The first thing that we need to do with any new technology is to gain *knowledge* about it. We should try to get at least a basic idea of how it works, what it does, and some of the concerns that specialists who know the technology well have expressed about it. The calling here is not necessarily to become a specialist, but to know enough to be able to apply principles from God's Word.

Once we have an informed *knowledge* of the technology, we can seek to apply biblical *understanding* to it. Understanding is distinct from knowledge because it seeks to answer the deeper question, "What is God's perspective?" This means that we are looking for biblical principles to guide our own perspective on the uses—and potential misuses—of the technology.

Knowledge and understanding naturally flow into *wisdom*, which asks the question, "How should I conduct my life knowing the principles God has laid out in His Word?" Wisdom involves the application of spiritual principles to concrete, real-world questions. One who is wise directs his or her life in such a way that God's good gifts, including technology, are directed for good rather than evil. In an ultimate sense, wise living based on true knowledge and understanding directs all things to God's glory.

Our interest here is to apply this threefold biblical approach to a discussion about artificial intelligence. This article and the next will seek to accomplish this through the following goals: (1) provide a framework for thinking about AI as an emerging technology; (2) identify key biblical principles than can deepen our understanding of AI; and (3) explore some of the issues that might be associated with use of AI in different spheres of life.

FOUR KEY QUESTIONS

When considering any new technology, four basic questions need to be asked. For the sake of making these questions easier to remember, we can frame each of them with a single word starting with the letter "P."

- *Purpose*: Why was this technology created and what was it intended to do?
- *Provenance*: Where did this technology come from, and what are the underlying foundations upon which it is built?
- *Potential*: How can this technology be used, and what is the magnitude of its impact?
- *Pitfalls*: What are the consequences (both intended and unintended) that this technology will have on us as individuals and as a society?

As you read this article, keep the four P's in mind. Ask yourself, "What is the *purpose* behind artificial intelligence? What is its *provenance*? What kind of *potential* does it have to shape our society? And finally, what are some of the *pitfalls* that we need to be aware of?"

KNOWLEDGE: THE EMERGING TECHNOLOGY OF AI

If we want to understand AI, it is important to begin with definitions, clear terminology, and a sense of history regarding how this technology emerged.

A broad, working definition of AI is *technology where a machine exhibits characteristics that we typically would attribute to a human*. For example, if you see a device that seems to be able to reason, to learn, or to give guidance, you are effectively seeing AI in action. With this definition, it becomes clear that AI is somewhat of an umbrella term which describes a broad category of things. When you hear that AI is part of a certain technology, follow up by diving deeper and seeking to understand the *kind* of AI in use and the *purpose* it is serving.

Why does AI seem to be everywhere right now? First, there has been incredible technological *progress* in the last three years, with great advancements in capabilities. A second reason would be its *potential*. There is a strong degree of potential impact as AI continues to roll out and advance in education, the workplace, and other areas of life. Third, *investment* of both time and energy, as well as media coverage, has increased as firms dedicate financial resources to winning the AI race. These are only a few of the reasons that you are hearing a lot about AI in the world right now. It is not just smoke and mirrors and not just a parlor trick, but a substantial technological change.

Let's develop our knowledge a little further by distinguishing between two types of AI: *traditional* and *generative*.

Traditional AI

Traditional AI shows up in technologies like Google Translate, where we now see the ability for translation to be done by a machine when in the past this would have been a human job. AI language recognition powers digital voice assistants like Alexa and Siri, to the point where they understand what you are saying and can respond appropriately. Traditional AI also enables product recommendations, visible when you are shopping online and are offered a list of recommended products for comparison or consideration. In this context, traditional AI looks at your browsing history and any other demographic information it can ascertain about you and then uses it to give you recommendations. Finally, and perhaps the best example of traditional AI, is your social media feed, where the content that is pushed to you is driven by a personalized algorithm that knows your browsing habits.

The word "algorithm" is important as it is the best way to conceptualize how traditional AI works. Think of it as a complex set of mathematical concepts that have been trained with a specific logic to optimize success in a very narrow job. For example, readers may remember the chess-playing computer called "Deep Blue" in the 80s and 90s, which IBM trained to play against world grandmaster Gary Kasparov. It was specifically optimized for playing chess by analyzing years of championship chess matches. A good analogy for traditional AI would be driving through a field hundreds of times and wearing deep grooves into the ground, which eventually become a rough road. Great time, preparation, cost, and knowledge are required to train traditional AI algorithms, but they can be used in highly effective ways.

When we consider these examples of traditional AI, it is clear that this technology did not emerge in just the last three to five years. These technologies came into existence over decades, whether we have realized it or not. As the internet, cell phones, and other digital technologies advanced, AI has been there. It has been taking on new forms and growing in different ways but doing so in a less obtrusive way than in recent years.

Generative AI

If someone has mentioned AI in the last three years, however, they were probably talking about a newer form called generative AI. This includes platforms like ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude, Grok, and many more. All of these are chat-based AI tools with which you can hold conversations, ask questions, or seek specific guidance.

On recent Apple iPhones, you now see Apple Intelligence or text message summaries: both features are examples of a generative AI model integrated into your phone. Or, if you have used Google search in the last few months, you have started to see AI summaries at the top of the search results. This is Google saying, "Yes, I *could* search, and I *could* give you results, and you'll get to those if you keep scrolling, but here's what you really need to know," with the summary coming from their AI model, Gemini. Even if you are not trying to use generative AI, it is being integrated into the devices and technologies you likely already use.

So, what is different about generative AI? A key concept for generative AI is the use of a *large language model* (LLM). While traditional AI is trained to optimize its capabilities for very specific purposes, think of LLMs as broadly capable *generalists*. These models are trained on massive data sets that have been curated from the internet: and not just text from websites, but also images and videos. Generative AI models can generate an amazing breadth of content because of the huge data sets that have been used to train them. In some cases, the makers of these LLMs are now being sued for the things their models have incorporated into their set of knowledge, such as copyrighted news and magazine articles.

The advent of LLMs is why there have been such significant advances in the power of AI over the last few years. If you have experimented with one of these tools, you have probably been surprised to see it give a pretty good response to a question you asked. It may seem to know things that you would not have expected an AI tool to know. Generative AI platforms are now able to pull things off the internet, make predictions, and be right more often than wrong. And these models have advanced to the point now where they may include the ability to *appear* to reason and think. Reasoning models do not just immediately try to answer complex questions or requests, but "think" about how to approach and then "reason" its way through to pulling together the right information.

The distinction between traditional and generative AI matters because many current AI conversations focus on the latter category. That is where recent advancements have been, and that is where a lot of additional investment will be made as we look ahead to coming years.

History

Looking back at the history of AI accentuates just how rapid AI progress has been. The term "artificial intelligence" first came to be in the 1950s. This was a time when futurists were looking ahead and thinking, "What if I could interface with a computer? What if that computer could talk back?" Computers were a fairly new development, however, and the power of computers was limited, so this vision was restricted to futurists' dreams. This early era, sometimes called the "AI winter," lasted all the way up to the 1990s.

As the internet launched and digital technology advanced in the first decade of the twenty-first century, a period of ubiquitous high-speed internet began. Smartphones emerged, and the online ecosystem began to develop without the need to be hardwired into a physical network. Together, these technologies paved the way for the traditional AI applications that were mentioned earlier. Further development of "cloud technologies," which store massive volumes of information online, began to power the internet and make broad training datasets available for the next phase of AI evolution.

Then, in 2017, Google pioneered a foundational technology approach called the "Transformer," which revolutionized how AI models were built and trained. This paved the way for others to use this approach—OpenAI for example—in their products. The 2020–2025 timeframe is when the foundations for current AI tools were built, rolled out, and have since rapidly advanced. Since November 2022, when ChatGPT first launched, there have been incredible leaps in technology, with many new companies and models introducing and expanding upon AI capabilities.

There is obviously a wide variety of projections for the future. There are some who say, "This is the future. Soon, we may not even need to work; AI will handle everything for us." Others view it as all hype. The truth, most likely, falls in the middle. What is certain is that we are quickly arriving at a new phase after the period of rapid advancement and adoption in which things like regulation, legislation, accountability, and governance will start to apply more to AI tools.

How Generative AI Works

Interacting with AI starts with input from a user. Typically, as with ChatGPT, that is through typing. If you are using a tool like Siri or Alexa, your input might come through voice, but it all translates to text in terms of how the input reaches the AI model.

At bottom, AI's job is *prediction*. Predicting the best response to your specific question. In some cases, the AI model may immediately be able to respond to your question because it is content the model is confident in and has been trained to know. For example, a factual question—"How tall is Mount Sinai?" At other times, a question you ask demands a more sophisticated, real-time answer that goes beyond simple facts. For example, "What's the current stock price for Microsoft?" AI now knows to search the open internet for that question. It does not *know* the answer itself, but it does know how to connect you to the answer by curating the correct information from the internet in real time. You might also ask AI to work more strategically, perhaps to create a plan involving a multi-step process, which will require AI to take more of a reasoning-based approach. It will "decide" on the right strategy to take to perform the specific task you have asked.

Your interaction with AI is heavily shaped by context, which is something like digital footprints. When you engage with an online platform like a search engine, it "learns" things about you. These platforms have access to your past conversations and demographic

details about who you are. You might intentionally include added context about your role in a given task, such as that you may be working for a nonprofit that supports a school's fundraising efforts, which in turn will allow AI to give better responses tuned to that context. Based on your specific request and all of the context available, AI then responds to you, the user, and stores the conversation history for future use and training. When you have had a conversation with an AI assistant, it is storing that conversation history so that your future interactions can be improved.

It is important to realize that something called "mediation" happens in the background before AI responds to your input. AI tools have guardrails that are programmed into them to control what they can and cannot do. For example, AI tools will not tell users how to build a bomb, nor will they answer questions that are recognized as prejudiced in a way that the makers of these tools do not support. There is not a direct line between what you ask and the LLM; a level of control has been intentionally built into the platform to mediate the process. Mediation can also include the level of personability that an AI tool displays when answering your question. Will it call you by your name? Will it be kind and warm to you, or will it be more factual and sterile in its response? Be aware that these are all features that can be tuned by the makers of these technologies, often to best fit their goals and worldview.

Reflections

With this brief overview of how AI works, let's pause for a couple of reflection questions.

First, does AI truly "know" things? The important thing to realize is that these LLMs are *prediction engines*. An AI does not "know" things. It is a very sophisticated prediction engine. "I *predict* the answer is this. I *predict* the answer is that." It is looking across the datasets it has been trained on and saying, "I *predict* this is the answer," which answer is then put forward as truth. Or perhaps better put, "truth" as determined by an algorithm. In contrast to Google, where you must review results and synthesize them yourself, AI tools are happy to handle that synthesis and direct you to their recommended answer with confidence.

It is also important to ask, "Will AI tell you when it does not know something?" These tools are optimized to keep you using them, and for that purpose, AI tools are trained to project confidence. It is only in the rarest of circumstances that AI will admit that it does not know something. You have likely seen humorous examples of AI getting very basic math problems and questions wrong, such as "How many R's are in the word strawberry?"—a question to which ChatGPT's answer for months was a firm "two." When you interact with AI today, what you will see most frequently is bold proclamations that, "This is the answer." If you confront it and say, "That's not the answer, because I happen to know," it will apologize profusely and self-correct. The takeaway is that it is on *the user of these tools* to hold AI accountable. AI will not typically be transparent with you in terms of what it does and does not "know" unless very directly asked.

Lastly, an important question is, "Are AI responses neutral?" We have talked about how mediation happens and how the makers of these platforms control how they respond. For example, consider a recent article from *The Gospel Coalition* detailing a project in which Christian theologians were asked to judge the responses of seven different AI chatbots to basic questions about the Christian faith.[1] The article illustrates the rather alarming degree of influence that platform developers have in shaping responses about questions of faith. AI tools ought to be used with the assumption that neutrality is not built in, but that the creator's particular leanings or agendas will be influencing your experience.

CONCLUSION

This first article has provided a broad overview of AI as a technology starting with definitions, moving into a contrast between types of AI, and then diving a touch deeper into how the technologies work. It also outlined a framework that can be used to evaluate technologies—*purpose, provenance, potential,* and *pitfalls*. As we close out this section, we hope that the knowledge you have just absorbed gives you a more informed look at the question of "How do I think about AI tools?" In the next article, we will move on to some guiding principles for understanding and using AI.

1 Mike Graham / AI Christian Benchmark, "Evaluating 7 Top LLMs for Theological Reliability," *The Gospel Coalition* (September 2025), https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/ai-christian-benchmark.

REPORT FROM MYANMAR

REV. TITUS

Dear brethren,

Greetings in His most precious name. I believe that you all are doing well in this winter and Christmas time.

I have some good news to report you. The first one is I am now starting to translate into Burmese the book *Saved by Grace: A Study of the Five Points of Calvinism* by Ronald Cammenga and Ronald Hanko. I had done this last time in my weekly Sunday Digest but did not finish, so, I collected all the documents that I already had, put them in one file, and edited them. With our Burmese computer fonts, whenever I change my computer, I have to change all the files to match the computer, not like English font. We can still do very basic, but so very time consuming, and I will finish the book soon, if the Lord wills.

The second good news is that, our Burmese KJV translation has become standard in some tribal Bible translation projects. Our country has so many different languages in mountainous areas, some of the people want the Bible in their own languages, some tribes are very small yet they want it anyway, so some of their leaders translate the Bible into their small communities; in checking whether their translations are true, some groups are using our Burmese KJV as standard. How I know is one of our regular church visitors belongs to Korean Presbyterian Church, and he is one of their teachers and leaders; he is asked by those Bible translator groups to testify that their translation is good, so he used our Burmese KJV and they like it very much. His name is Mr. Hla Phym, and he is very much interested in our Reformed truth. Actually, he wants me to sit with him and instruct him in our Reformed truth. One day when all the projects that I am translating and need to translate are finished, I will do it, but my Consistory does not allow me to do it yet. The Consistory told me that I need to translate all the foundational truths into books then it will be better to do the teaching. After finishing *Five Points of Calvinism,* I have to do our view on the covenant. So in my mind, the Lord willing, I will do on *God's Everlasting Covenant of Grace* by the late Prof. H. Hanko.

The third good news is that the publishing house reports to me that our Bible checking and putting into book form is two-thirds finished, within a few weeks they will finish. Since civil war and military government's blockage of importing unnecessary things, which they think, thin paper for Bible printing cannot be imported, so the thinnest paper we can get is sixty gram photo paper only, so our Bible will be a little bit thicker than normal. We have to be happy with what we can get here; if we print in another country and import, the army government will also not be happy.

For His mercy and providence care, we can worship two times every Sunday, for which we are so much thankful. And we have always regular visitors; last Sunday, November 12, 2025, we have 15 visitors.

Civil war is still continued on everywhere, though military government is trying very hard to make election; no freedom fighter groups want to participate in that election. For His protection, none of our young people are recruited into army. And for His wonderful controls, civil war did not reach us yet. Thank you for all your prayers.

All church members express their thanks to you and our covenant Father for your help and prayers.

All the students express their thanks to you and our heavenly Father for helping them to go back to school, so that they escape from cruelty of civil war of force conscription.

My father, elder Kyaw, also expresses his thanks to you all for your help.

Thank you very much for your help and prayers. Only through them we can survive in these difficult times. May the Lord bless you with all His covenant blessing.

Your brother,
Rev. Titus

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ANNOUNCEMENTS

CALL TO ASPIRANTS TO THE MINISTRY

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

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

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

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

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

Joel Minderhoud, Secretary

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

TEACHER NEEDED

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

CLASSIS WEST

Classis West of the Protestant Reformed Churches will meet in Heritage PRC, in Sioux Falls, SD, on Wednesday, March 4, 2026, at 8:30 A.M. the Lord willing. All delegates in need of lodging or transportation from the airport should notify the clerk of Heritage's consistory.

Rev. J. Engelsma, Stated Clerk

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2/1 God's Wise Leading of His Church, Ex. 13:17-22
2/8 I Will Give You Rest, Matt. 11:28
2/15 Fearfully and Wonderfully Made, Ps. 139:14
2/22 Trusting and Not Fearing, Ps. 56:3, 4