THE STANDARD BEARER

FEBRUARY 2025
VOLUME 101, NUMBER 6

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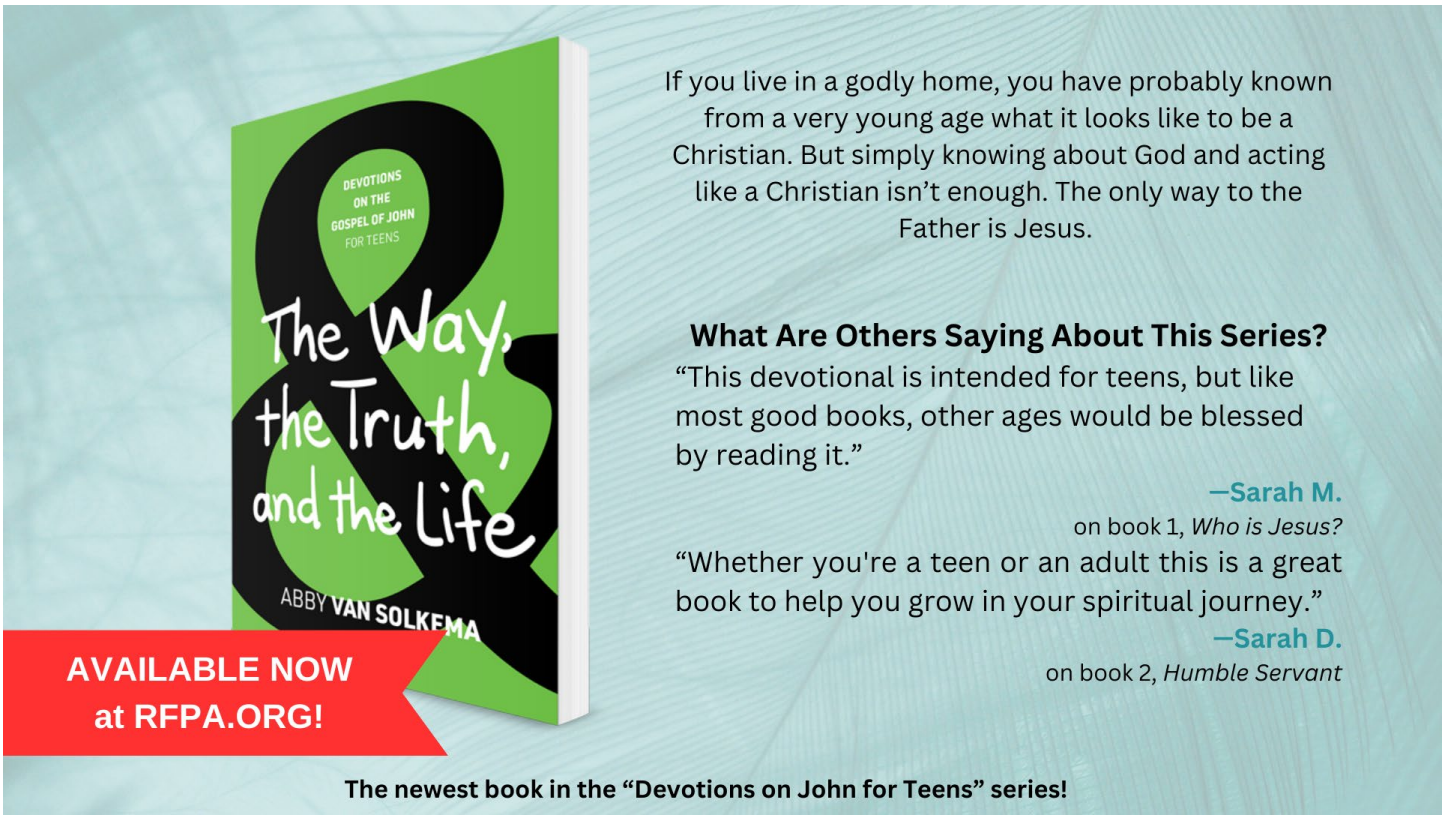
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A MONTHLY REFORMED MAGAZINE



REFORMED FREE PUBLISHING ASSOCIATION

The *Standard Bearer* (ISSN 0362-4692 [print], 2372-9813 [online]) is a monthly periodical with two special issues (Fall and Spring) published by the Reformed Free Publishing Association: 1894 Georgetown Center Dr., Jenison, MI 49428-7137.

Postmaster Send address changes to the *Standard Bearer*, 1894 Georgetown Center Dr., Jenison, MI 49428-7137.

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Annual subscription price
Print: $32 USA / $52 international
Digital: $22 / free to print subscribers

The Reformed Free Publishing Association maintains the privacy and trust of its subscribers by not sharing with any person, organization, or church any information regarding *Standard Bearer* subscribers.

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THE BLESSED WAY OF GOD'S CHILDREN

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Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the LORD. Blessed are they that keep his testimonies, and that seek him with the whole heart. They also do no iniquity: they walk in his ways. Thou hast commanded us to keep thy precepts diligently. O that my ways were directed to keep thy statutes! Then shall I not be ashamed, when I have respect unto all thy commandments. I will praise thee with uprightness of heart, when I shall have learned thy righteous judgments. I will keep thy statutes: O forsake me not utterly—Psalm 119:1-8

The text gives a striking description of God's children. We who are truly blessed are undefiled in the way and walk in the law of the LORD. The truly blessed children of God keep His testimonies and seek Him with the whole heart. Does that describe us? If we are truly blessed, that blessedness will manifest itself in our lives.

Psalm 119 is about the blessed way of God's children. Each of the twenty-two sections features a letter of the Hebrew alphabet, so that each of the eight verses in a particular section begins with that particular letter. As such, the psalm gives us the ABCs of a life of thankfulness that manifests itself in walking in God's ways. Throughout the psalm we are privileged to listen in on the psalmist's prayer for grace as he walks that blessed way.

Are we walking in that blessed way?

The term *blessed* implies that salvation is a precious gift of God to undeserving sinners. The first word of the first section of the psalm is "blessed," a term that points to happiness. That happiness is not about following a winning sports team, having a big house out in the countryside, having a good job, or being healthy. Rather, our blessedness consists of being on the path that leads to heaven. True blessedness is belonging to our faithful Savior Jesus Christ. "*Happy* [literally, *Blessed*] art thou, O Israel: who is like unto thee, O people *saved by the* LORD…" (Deut. 33:29).

That blessedness becomes all the more precious when we consider that by nature we were the opposite; by nature we were under God's curse. God placed Adam and Eve in the garden as His friend-servants. In that perfect state, they were truly blessed. But at the instigation of the Devil, Adam and Eve chose to walk in their own way and to reject God's way for them.

In Adam, we deserve to be cursed; but God blesses us anyway. He takes us into covenant fellowship with Himself on the basis of Christ's perfect obedience and atoning sacrifice. He sets us on the path that leads to glory and holds us by His right hand the whole way there. Our blessedness consists in belonging to Jesus Christ and being made again into God's friend-servants.

Having that blessedness, we will give evidence of it in our lives!

In the first place, we who are blessed by God will be "undefiled in the way" (v. 1). The word *undefiled* signifies being whole and without blemish. To be "undefiled in the way" is to be in the right way. According to the parallel phrase, when we are "undefiled in the way," we will "walk in the law of the LORD" (v. 1). We will conduct our lives in conformity to God's law. We will take heed to God's instruction. We will regard our walk of thankfulness as indispensible and exert ourselves to be holy.

Secondly, we who are blessed by God will "keep His testimonies" (v. 2). God's testimonies are His explicit witness regarding His will, righteousness, love, and grace. God has given explicit witness concerning Jesus Christ, our only Savior. He has given explicit

witness concerning our calling to live to His glory. When we "keep His testimonies," we will ponder those testimonies and practice them as we seek His glory.

Thirdly, we who are blessed by God will "seek Him with the whole heart" (v. 2). We will carefully follow after Him. We will ask Him to lead us to a greater knowledge of Himself. Our following after God must not be a mere outward exercise, simply going through the motions; our following must be from the heart. God does not want just part of our heart; He wants our *whole* heart. He wants service not just in one department, but in every department of life; not just on Sunday, but every day of the week; not just giving a few dollars, but giving ourselves to Him; not just loving our friends, but loving even our enemies. God wants us to serve Him with the whole heart, without hypocrisy.

We might get the impression that the psalmist has an unrealistic picture of the Christian life. Some might even charge the psalmist with the error of perfectionism. How can he imagine the child of God to be "undefiled in the way"? Does he not know that we still have the old man of sin and that our way is defiled by our sins every day?

However, the truth is, all who have been brought into fellowship with God by the blood and Spirit of Christ, are undefiled in the way *to a degree*. By God's grace, we do "walk in the law of the LORD" (v. 1). By His grace, we do "keep His testimonies and seek Him with the whole heart" (v. 2). By the power of grace, we do "walk in His ways" (v. 3). To say that no child of God is "undefiled in the way" would be to say no child of God is truly "blessed." However, when God gives us the blessedness of salvation, it cannot be otherwise but that the Holy Spirit will work by His powerful grace in our hearts so that we are in truth "undefiled in the way." Not perfectly undefiled; but truly undefiled.

By God's grace, we enjoy a degree of blessedness in this life; and yet we still fall far short. The psalmist understood that he was not completely "undefiled in the way." He knew that he did not "walk in the law of the LORD" with the zeal that he ought to have. He knew that he did not keep God's testimonies and seek Him with his whole heart the way he should.

Knowing his many shortcomings, God's command rang in his ears: "Thou has commanded us to keep thy precepts *diligently*" (v. 4). God's precepts are His particular instructions, which place weighty responsibilities upon us. Can we really hope in our own strength to keep God's precepts with the *diligence* that is due? Surely not.

Rather, when we see our weaknesses and sinfulness, we will pray to God with the psalmist, "O that my ways were directed to keep thy statutes!" (v. 5). We will pray for God's grace with an earnest desire that He would work in us by His Spirit, so that we might keep His statutes! Our prayer is born from a desire that God would work in us a greater regard for His written Word.

That is the prayer of someone who has been blessed by God. Those who are under God's curse have no desire at all to frame their lives according to God's Word. They do not want their lives to be pleasing to God and care nothing for His glory. The wicked think themselves blessed to be able to do what is right in their own eyes and to live for themselves.

Not so for the child of God. When the Holy Spirit works in our hearts and blesses us with the blessings earned for us by Jesus Christ, He also gives us to see that without Christ we are nothing. The desire that our "ways were directed to keep [God's] statutes" (v. 5) is born from the heart of one who is truly blessed.

Such a prayer expresses our blessed desire to fellowship with God. That prayer is uttered with the knowledge that our sins grieve the Spirit of God. By God's grace, we understand that great sins offend God and bring deadly guilt upon us. We understand that our sins interrupt the exercise of our faith and wound our consciences, so that we might even lose the sense of God's favor until God brings us again to repentance (cf. Canons of Dordtrecht, 5.5).

Psalm 119 is not the prayer of someone who hates God's ways and wants to be far from God; it is the prayer of someone who loves God and wants to be near Him in fellowship. The psalmist knew that walking with God means walking in His ways.

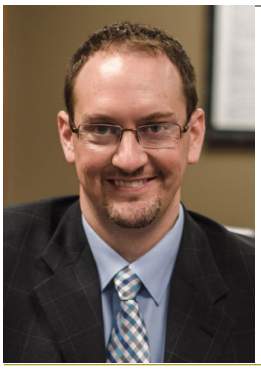
As it stood, the psalmist was ashamed of himself. But, if God would be gracious to him, he would not

be ashamed anymore. That is the connection between verses 5 and 6: "Then, shall I not be ashamed, when I have respect unto all thy commandments" (v. 6). He is asking God to work in his heart so that he would both will and do according to God's statutes so as not to be ashamed in God's presence. When we fall short of God's ways, we need to repent and call upon God for mercy.

Our desire to walk in God's ways may rightly be for the spiritual benefits that we will experience in those ways. But the main purpose, which ought to color every other purpose, is expressed in verse 7: "*I will praise thee* with uprightness of heart, when I shall have learned thy righteous judgments." A mark of true thankfulness to God is the desire that He would be honored and praised in the whole of our lives.

That desire to praise God is implied in the psalmist's resolution: "I will keep thy statutes" (v. 8). But to do that God must go with us every step of the way. That is why the psalmist prays, "O forsake me not utterly" (v. 8). We cannot walk those ways in our own strength. So we pray that God would not leave us to ourselves. Thankfully, Christ was forsaken utterly by God on the cross, so that we will never be forsaken by God. And, He who has begun a good work in us will continue with us even to the end of our pilgrimage.

What a wonder that God has put us on that blessed way that leads to glory!



ONCE MORE, SYNOD 2024

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INTRODUCTION

Beginning in August and running through the October 2024 issue, Rev. J. Engelsma, one of the co-editors of the *Standard Bearer,* ably explained the doctrinal decisions of Synod 2024 of the PRCA regarding three controversial statements made in articles found in the same magazine. I join many others in thanking Rev. Engelsma for his careful, clear, and helpful explanation.

In the introduction to his fourth installment of that explanation (vol. 100, #1, p. 6) Rev. Engelsma stated that he was not going to treat "the matter of good works being the necessary pathway along which God leads His people to final salvation in glory," since one of his "fellow editors has intentions of touching on the subject in an upcoming editorial, God willing."

This is that editorial.

PRCA SYNOD 2024

I do not intend to treat the subject of the relation of good works to heaven in a general manner, but in light of the first and second disputed statements that came to Synod 2024. Statement 1 that came to Synod reads: "Scripture teaches that something must be done [works] that we might be saved."[1] Statement 2 says: "We must accurately distinguish between a right to life and the possession of life. The former must be assigned to the obedience of Christ, that all the values of our holiness may be entirely excluded. But certainly, our works, or rather these, which the Spirit of Christ worketh in us, and by us, contribute something to the latter."[2]

These statements were drawn from a book by Herman Witsius, a Dutch theologian who lived from 1636-1708, titled *Animadversions*….[3] As such, the statements concern two matters. First, they concern a distinction between salvation as we have it now, and

1 *PRCA Acts of Synod 2024*, 80.

2 *PRCA Acts 2024*, 84.

3 The quotations may be found in chapter XVI, sections II. and III. of the book. I am using the version produced by Logos.

salvation as we will have it finally in glory.[4] Second, the quotations concern a distinction between "right" and "possession." "Right" indicates that one legally owns something even if one does not have it in his hands. "Possession" indicates that one now has what one legally owns. The idea is that Christ has earned the legal right to heaven for His people. The pathway of good works is the pathway upon which believers walk, eventually to possess heaven. "Christian piety is the way to life, because thereby we go to the possession of the right obtained by Christ."[5]

The PRCA Synod 2024 decided that these two statements *on their own without explanation or qualification* "convey the idea that good works have the same necessity, place, and function in salvation as faith."[6] Rev. Engelsma explained why synod drew this conclusion, and I am in complete agreement with his explanation.

But what concerns us now is that synod added this in its decision:

> While Reformed theologians hundreds of years ago used language similar to this and carefully clarified and explained it in an orthodox manner (i.e. in explaining the biblical truth that a life of good works is the necessary pathway along which God leads his people to final salvation [Matt 7:14; Heb. 12:14]), the statement as such without explanation and qualification should be rejected and not used.[7]

What lies behind this portion of synod's decision?

REFORMED WRITERS

Reformed writers did indeed use this kind of language to speak of the relation of works to final salvation in glory. In addition to what is quoted above, Witsius himself stated that "Scripture teacheth that man must do something, that he may obtain the possession of the [final] salvation purchased by Christ."[8] We can find similar language in Turretin (1623-1687) the defender of the Canons of Dordt in Geneva: "For since good works have the relation of the means to the end…of the 'sowing' to the harvest…of the 'firstfruits' to the mass…of labor to the reward…everyone sees that there is the highest and indispensable necessity of good works for obtaining glory."[9] Add to that the writing of the Dutch theologian Petrus Van Mastricht (1630-1706) who, making a similar distinction to that of Witsius concerning the right to life and the possession of life, says, "We received once before the right unto eternal life through the merit of Christ alone. But God does not want to grant the possession of eternal life, unless there are, next to faith, also good works which precede this possession (Heb. 12:14; Matt. 7:21; 25:34-36; Rom. 2:7, 10)."[10]

Yet take note of the fact that the Reformed always carefully clarified what they meant and did not mean by this language. They explained that these good works of holiness are not the ground or basis for final salvation, nor are they co-instrumental along with faith. Turretin explains that "the question here does not concern the necessity of merit, causality and efficiency—whether good works are necessary to effect salvation or acquire it of right…. Rather the question concerns the necessity of means, of presence, and of connection or order."[11] The point is that holiness is the necessary pathway the Christian treads to heaven. Thus, Bavinck, likely referencing Turretin, summarizes the Reformed view this way, "The Reformed had no objection to calling good works necessary to salvation provided this did not imply a 'necessity of causality or merit or effectiveness' but implied a necessity of presence of the means and

4 Perhaps Witsius would apply the "that we might be saved" of the first statement and "possession of life" of the second statement to more than final salvation. Even if he would, the relation between works and heaven is the main emphasis. The heading over section IV, "That holiness is the way to life," is all about holiness as the pathway to heaven. In addition, section VI states, "But we must also act in the same manner, that the life may be preserved in us, may increase, and at last terminate in an uninterrupted and eternal life."

5 Witsius, xvi.iv.

6 *PRCA Acts* 2024, "c" on page 81 regarding the first statement. Synod said the same thing regarding the second statement on page 84 in "d."

7 *PRCA Acts 2024*, p. 82, "e."

8 Witsius, xvi.iii.

9 Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology, Vol. 2: Eleventh Through Seventeenth Topics*, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1994), 705. (2.17.3.12.)

10 *Theoretica-Practica Theologia*, new ed. (Amsterdam, 1724), 704-705.

11 Turretin, *Institutes*, 2, 702.

ways to obtain eternal salvation."[12] Prof. D. Engelsma, helpfully steering clear of the language of *obtain* and the like, lends a clear voice by explaining:

> The importance of hearing this instruction and heeding this admonition is that a holy life is a necessity. It is a necessity for final salvation, according to the text itself [1 Cor 6:9-11]: The unholy person will not inherit the kingdom of God. There is the danger that this necessity is explained wrongly, even heretically. This would be the explanation that by our holiness we ourselves earn final salvation. Or… that our holiness is a condition…in order to obtain final salvation…. But we may not question or deny the necessity of holiness.[13]

The Reformed never taught that the believer's holiness was necessary as the ground or instrument that brought about heaven, but they did teach that holiness (while always imperfect in this life) was the necessary way in which the Spirit takes the regenerated child of God to heaven.

This truth is reflected in the Reformed and Presbyterian creeds. The Canons of Dordt teach that God's eternal and unconditional election of His children is an election to heaven and to holiness as the way to heaven: "There are not various decrees of election, but one and the same decree respecting all those, who shall be saved…according to which He hath chosen us from eternity, both to grace and glory, to salvation and the way of salvation, which He hath ordained that we should walk therein" (Canons, 1.8). The way of salvation that He has ordained we should walk in is the way of good works (Eph 2:10). The Westminster Standards are more explicit, "The grace of God is… to enable them unto all holy obedience, as the evidence of the truth of their faith and thankfulness to God, and as the way which He has appointed them to [final] salvation" (Westminster Larger Catechism, A. 32).[14]

SCRIPTURE

These writers, and the creeds themselves, make the connection between holiness and heaven because the Scriptures do. "Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord" (Heb 12:14). And, "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven" (Matt. 7:21). In Matthew 25:34-36, the Lord speaks of heaven being opened to those who helped fellow saints in need: "Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For I was an hungered, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me." Psalm 50:23 makes the same connection between holiness and future glory: "Whoso offereth praise glorifieth me: and to him that ordereth his conversation aright will I shew the salvation of God." The Lord thus gives this admonition, "Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide *is* the gate, and broad *is* the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it (Matt 7:13-14).[15] Holiness is the pathway to heaven.

It is important to maintain this truth without compromise or embarrassment. No one will see the Lord without holiness. All need to be admonished concerning this. And we need to be taught that every true believer will, however imperfectly, walk the straight and narrow pathway that leads to glory because the Christ who justified that believer also sanctifies those united to Him (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 64).

THREAT OF THE FEDERAL VISION

We ought to be careful how we speak of the relation

12 Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics : Volume 4: Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), 255.

13 David Engelsma and Herman Hanko, *Be Ye Holy: The Reformed Doctrine of Sanctification,* (British Reformed Fellowship, 2016), 102. See also p. 109.

14 Also, Westminster Confession of Faith, 16.2. "These good works, done in obedience to God's commandments, are the fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith: and by them believers manifest their thankfulness, strengthen their assurance, edify their brethren, adorn the profession of the gospel, stop the mouths of the adversaries, and glorify God, whose workmanship they are, created in Christ Jesus thereunto, that, having their fruit unto holiness, they may have the end, eternal life."

15 Add to this the passages that speak of judgment in the end being "according to works" (for example, Matt. 16:27; Rev. 20:12-13), but not on the basis of good works.

between works and heaven, however, and we ought to be careful about how we make use of the statements of the orthodox theologians of the past in this regard. This is true especially in light of the contemporary threat of the Federal Vision movement. It is important for us all to recognize that Federal Vision writers have co-opted the statements made by orthodox theologians of the past concerning the relation between works and heaven and have put them to a wicked use. Especially, they have made much of the distinction between "right" and "possession" and the terms "obtain," "possess," and "attain," in an effort to destroy the gospel of grace itself.

Federal Vision reasoning is that since the older writers spoke of works "obtaining" or "contributing" to our "possession" of heaven, Reformed people must understand the doctrine of justification differently from the way they have understood it in the past. That is, they must go back to understanding final justification the same way Rome understands it.

There is such a thing as *initial* justification and there is such a thing as *final* justification at the end. Our initial justification is when God gives His child faith and by that faith imputes the righteousness of Christ to him, declaring to him in his conscience that he is righteous. But there is also a future aspect to that justification. On the judgment day God will publicly declare who is righteous and who is not, and thus who may enter heaven and who will be barred from heaven. According to the Federal Visionists, this final justification is by both faith and works. Thus, our works contribute in the end as part of the ground and instrument of our justification before God.[16]

Let me quote one Federal Visionist, Rich Lusk, to prove this is in fact Federal Vision teaching. Speaking of the relation of works to final salvation (justification), Lusk says,

> They [works] are not merely evidential…but even causal or instrumental…in our final salvation. Faith is the sole instrument of initial justification, but faith comes to be perfected by good works. At the last day, faith, as the solitary instrument of union with Christ, and obedience, as the fruit of our union with Christ, will be one and the same.[17]

Note well this heresy! *Initial* justification is by faith alone. But in *final* justification faith and works are one and the same and are both instruments. Notice too, that Lusk *explicitly denies* that works in the end are only evidential, but rather says "they are…even causal or instrumental…in our final salvation." In opposition to the writers of the past who so carefully qualify their statements by saying good works are *not* causal or instrumental, Lusk says, yes, *they are* causal and instrumental in the end.

Now, understand that Lusk is teaching all this in explanation of the phrase, "Works are the means through which we come into possession of eternal life."[18] In other words, Lusk is appealing to the old writers and their distinction between the "right to life" and the "possession of life," in an attempt to validate his erroneous view that works and faith combine together to become the ground and instrument for justification in the end.

This cannot pass by our notice!

Even if these Federal Vision writers do not correctly explain what the old writers meant, it behooves us to be careful with our language and to explain the older writers carefully, and to be willing to critique the old writers, especially in light of subsequent development, even as we stand on their shoulders. For this reason, Synod 2024 said the statements in question ought not be used without right explanation and qualification. The statements by themselves mislead God's people into thinking good works are the ground or instrument of their final salvation. They do not distinguish Reformed gospel truth from the Romish and Federal Vision heresy. Besides, the proper and important teaching of Scripture that without holiness no man shall see the Lord does

16 This is Roman Catholic theology under a different name. The Roman Catholic theologians at the time of the Reformation and beyond, argued that justification at the end was on the basis of faith and works, and therefore, justification now in our conscience must be the same.

17 Quoted in Guy Prentiss Waters, *The Federal Vision and Covenant Theology: A Comparative Analysis,* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2006), 89. Lusk, while advocating a wrong interpretation of James 2 as referring to final justification at the end, again says, "James is speaking of a justification in which faith and works combine together to justify. Future justification is according to one's life pattern" (p. 90).

18 Waters, *Federal Vision,* 89.

not need this language. Ministers living in the context of the Federal Vision movement ought to be aware of this and lead the church wisely.

THE PROPER TEACHING

As quoted earlier, the Canons of Dordt are helpful: "There are not various decrees of election, but one and the same decree respecting all those, who shall be saved…according to which He hath chosen us from eternity, both to grace and glory, to salvation and the way of salvation, which He hath ordained that we should walk therein" (Canons, 1.8). Good works are the necessary way of salvation in which God has ordained that we walk through this life to glory. Or as Ursinus states, "Good works are necessary to salvation, or, to speak more properly, in them that are to be [finally] saved (for it is better thus to speak for the sake of avoiding ambiguity) as a part of salvation itself; or, as an antecedent of [final] salvation, but not as a cause or merit of salvation."[19]

The kingdom is one of saved people and part of salvation is sanctification. Thus, without sanctification that results in (imperfect) holiness, no man shall see the Lord in the end. If you are entirely unholy, you are not a Christian and will not see God.

Only, in the end there is no grand reveal that makes this holiness the ground or instrument of justification after all. While there is, in fact, a proper distinction between justification now and justification at the end, it must be carefully understood. The declaration "justified!" that we know in our conscience by faith under the preaching of the Word, *is* the final declaration we will hear at the end, only brought back in time and declared to us in the present. The distinction between the two is not one of essence, but one of time, and one of audience. In the future that declaration made concerning ourselves will be voiced publicly. Now, we hear it privately. But these are not two entirely separate declarations. The one is the echo of the other. Thus, they cannot be different from one another, nor can they be made on different grounds. When the declaration is made to a private audience now and a public audience then, it is made on the basis of Christ's merits alone, which merits we possess by faith, our works giving evidence that what has been given is rightfully ours.

19 Zacharias Ursinus. *The Commentary of Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism,* G. W. Williard, transl. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1954), 485.

RESPONSE TO "A REACTIONARY BODY"

I would like to respond to Professor Cory Griess' articles, "A Reactionary Body" in the *Standard Bearer* (December 2024, p. 105). The editor does not specifically identify the cause of the reactionary state found in the PRC, so that if I am mistaken in my response I would apologize in advance.

I would like to model the editor's approach by comparing this state to a person who receives the diagnosis of cancer. There is evidence of cancer in the body that must be addressed. Compared to the whole body, the cancerous parts are relatively small: some of the tumors are determined to be dead and some may have even been removed, but there is still evidence that the cancer is present and may be growing. The person is upset and confused, and his body may be in a reactionary state; and difficult choices must be made. On the one hand, the person may opt to take no action because the danger seems minimal compared to the state of the body as a whole. The patient may experience some aches and pains, but life could seemingly go on as normal. On the other hand, the patient may have an emotional, some might even say, "overblown," reaction to the diagnosis, so that he is desperate to try anything to save his life. Either way, choices must be made and pros and cons must be considered.

With cancer treatment there is also the issue of possible side effects compared to the disease itself. Possible treatments include surgery (removal of the diseased parts), radiation therapy, chemotherapy, and

immunotherapy, all of which have positive and negative effects. Negative effects include damage to good cells as well as the cancer cells, side effects, and general discomfort, not to mention the cost. In addition, treatments may vary in their effectiveness.

In my opinion the same questions may be asked about the PRC body: Are we overreacting and reactionary, or are we underreacting and minimizing the problems that our churches are facing? Opinions will differ, and difficult decisions will need to be made, which will probably result in further stress and even unforeseen problems or consequences.

We look to our leaders for guidance in these areas and I appreciate Professor Griess' approach in part 3 of his article, "The Way of Healing." I would, however, urge a more detailed and specific response from our leaders. I submit this also in the hopes of prompting more dialogue and perhaps actionable responses in our churches.

Thank you, in Christ's love,
Doug Boone
Hudsonville, Michigan



AN INTERVIEW WITH PROF. BARRY GRITTERS, FORMER *SB* EDITOR (1)

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

With the recent retirement of Prof. B. Gritters as one of the co-editors of the *Standard Bearer* (*SB*), we thought the readers would appreciate reading an interview with him. Such an interview has been done in the past and brings out a wealth of knowledge, history, and experience.

As to the recent history of the position of *SB* editor, recall that Prof. D. Engelsma served as the sole editor of the *SB* for 16 years, writing his final editorial in the September 15, 2004 issue, bringing the 80th volume to a close. Volume 81 began something new for the magazine: three co-editors, with the position of editor-in-chief rotating between two of them. The three new editors who began working together were Prof. R. Dykstra, Prof. Gritters, and Rev. K. Koole, and they maintained the magazine together for eighteen years, through volume year 97. The next significant change occurred in volume 98 in the fall of 2021, as Rev. J. Engelsma and the undersigned were appointed to replace Prof. Dykstra and Rev. Koole. Prof. Gritters continued serving for three more years until the end of volume year 100. He has since been replaced by Prof. C. Griess. This means that two of the three new editors (Huizinga and Engelsma) labored together for three years with one of the previous three editors (Gritters). Since Prof. Gritters helped bridge the transition to the new editors, I have decided to interview him.

Below you will find the first half of the interview (questions 1-7); be sure to look for the second half (questions 8-15) in the next issue. Next time, among other things, Prof. Gritters will reflect on the joys and challenges he faced as editor, the change from one to three editors, and the content of his own editorials. Enjoy.

B. Huizinga

1. What factors were involved in your decision to accept appointment as one of the editors of the *SB* in 2004?

2004 was only one year after I had been appointed to serve as professor in our seminary. Accepting the privilege to serve as an editor of the *SB* at that point probably indicates a little naiveté, because I certainly was not aware of everything required to prepare to teach my courses and, at the same time, take on the editorship. But the magazine needed editors, I no longer had the responsibility of the pastorate, and I was committed to serving the churches to the best of my ability. So it was hard to imagine declining the request. In addition, the weight of editorial responsibility was being spread out among three men, which seemed more reasonable than the former practice of one editor. And I was convinced that the three of us would be able to work well together, which we did for 18 years. In the back of my mind also was the advice I once received—that the discipline of writing is very healthy for a man's development as a minister.

2. What made you decide it was time to retire as editor?

Twenty years as editor of a magazine is a long time. My time in the seminary is coming to a close. I will be 70 years old this year if the Lord tarries and He is pleased to let me live, and I felt it time to allow other voices to be heard in the editorial department. I was convinced that younger men, very capable, would be willing and able to carry the ball, which you men have done. Stepping down was certainly not because I was tired of writing, which I hope to continue to do if the staff asks. And it was not because I wearied of editing the magazine, for reading every word of every page—often more than once—was usually edifying for me. I already miss the discipline of that task every two weeks, and it will be a while before I become accustomed to reading the magazine when it comes in the mail, rather than when brother Terpstra, with a smile, hand-delivers it to my office in his (actually Don Doezema's!) tell-tale old green folder. I miss working with him, and you editors will miss him when you need to find his replacement one of these years, too!

3. Is there anything about the *SB* that you think the average reader might not know but ought to? If so, what?

Quite a few things, actually. Let me mention three that I think are interesting.

As with most large endeavors like producing a magazine, the average person probably has little idea of the massive amount of work needed to get the paper out, both with regularity and on time. It begins with our annual staff meeting each June to plan for the 21 (now 14) issues of the following year. The staff consists of over 40 writers—men and women, ministers and laymen. As many of these as can (some by Zoom) meet to determine the writers and rubrics for the next volume year. Actually, long before this June staff meeting, the editorial staff (the three editors and managing editor) spend many hours creating this master plan to propose to the staff. They take into consideration suggestions for improvement that were offered at the previous staff meeting, and lay out who they will ask to write, what rubrics (categories of article) will be included or eliminated, and how many articles will appear in each category (a meditation in every issue, an editorial in every issue, and so on). This plan is sent to the staff in advance of the June meeting, so that the writers can prepare to approve or disapprove. After the staff modifies and approves the master plan, the managing editor (Charles Terpstra) goes to work. He asks each writer to submit their articles by certain dates, receives (or does not!) these articles from the writers, reads and reads and re-reads—for spelling, punctuation, grammar, and clarity. Then he sends the articles to the typesetter (Judi Doezema, for the past 33 years!) who formats the magazine in its first draft and returns it to him. Then, to the editors for their oversight. We also correct any errors that slipped by, but especially read the articles to make sure that they are as clear as possible and are not open to misunderstanding. Here is where the editors needed to exercise wisdom. Every writer is responsible for his own writing, but the editors have a certain responsibility for the *SB*'s quality and reputation (of the writers, too). Then, the copy returns to the managing editor who incorporates suggestions, maybe communicates with the authors if significant changes are suggested, and then back to Mrs. Doezema for final edits. Then Chuck checks those once more and sends it off to the RFPA for their final read. And off to the printer and mailer. That's for every issue. Whew!

And this does not say anything yet about all the

work—prayer, research, outlining, writing, and re-writing—that took place in the homes and offices of the writers. It would be interesting to estimate how many man-hours are required to produce each issue. Maybe it would be best to leave that to the Lord. But I think it is good that the average reader thinks a little about this, like it is good that children realize how much work mom puts into a good meal.

Another interesting feature of the *Standard Bearer* is that it is probably one of the only magazines in the world that is not controlled by its publisher. By design, from the earliest years, the RFPA publishes the *SB* but does not appoint the editors or writers, and does not determine the content of the magazine. These matters are determined by the staff—all the writers. The staff and the RFPA have an excellent working relationship; I am very thankful for the RFPA.

4. What do you believe is the standard that this magazine must bear to remain faithful to its purpose?

I like this question's ambiguity. Our magazine's name—*The Standard Bearer*—indicates that we want to *bear* a *standard*. That is, we want to raise a *flag* or *banner* that clearly represents an important cause—in this case, the cause of Jesus Christ and His church in the world. We pray that we writers can make it a rallying point in the battle for our Lord, and a clear sign of where the cause of God and truth is, over against causes that do not honor Christ.

To carry that out, we want to hold to certain *standards*. In this sense, the word *standard* refers to *criteria* for excellence, *rules* for quality, that must be met. The *Standard Bearer's* website explains that the magazine is "devoted to explaining and defending Reformed doctrine, promoting the Reformed life of the church and believer, and combating old and new errors that threaten to disrupt the Reformed faith and life." So all our writers are committed to *teaching* (doctrine) from the *Scripture*, according to the *Reformed* creeds, about the Christian's *faith* and *life*. We aim to *edify* believers, but always in connection with their life in the *church*. And because the truth is always threatened by the lie, our writers keep their eyes out for errors that will damage God's church and dishonor His Son. Unless we maintain these standards, the hundreds of hours spent producing the magazine are in vain.

5. What do you see as some potential threats to the *SB* as it seeks to maintain its purpose in its second century of existence?

The first threat I see is the threat that all print media face—Christians generally are reading less and listening more. They listen to podcasts and watch vlogs more than picking up good books or magazines. I'm thankful if the podcasts and vlogs they imbibe are biblical, but I worry that even those that are biblical do not exercise our minds as good reading does. God's people need to read, read slowly, and think carefully. The father of lies is developing in his abilities to deceive God's people; believers must develop their abilities to discern truth from error. "Bring the *books*," Paul encouraged Timothy (2 Tim. 4:13). And, although "give attendance to *reading*" (1 Tim. 4:13) may not refer *first* of all to private reading of books, it certainly includes it. I hope we keep reading, teach our children to read, and teach them the love of reading.

Second, God's people will not read the *Standard Bearer* if we writers do not work hard to write well—what is interesting, provocative, fresh, helpful. So the second threat involves us writers, and implies a call to us to put much time and work into what we write. It is a task to fill five pages with about 2,000 words, but if the 2,000 words are not important and interesting, it would be better just to have more white space in the magazine. The words will "cumber the ground" and discourage readers from reading the *SB*. But writing well takes hard work, and most of our writers are pressed. I pray that elders will help their ministers budget time to write, but first budget time to read so that they have something worthwhile to write. Bottom line: writing will be good for their own souls and will show in their sermons. I am thankful for the men and women who write and show that they have put much care into their effort.

Third, there is always a threat to the balance between being positive and negative, between peaceful edification and warfare. A few readers like war too much. We ought to have the sentiment of Robert E. Lee, who said, "It is well that war is so terrible, or we should grow too fond of it." David complained about these who were always "for war" (Ps. 120). The church suffers during uninterrupted warfare, and more so when battles are manufactured. But the other threat is to ignore the need for battle, and our writers always

need to be on guard against error and be willing to be polemical. Writers must have courage to expose the unfruitful works of darkness (Eph. 5:11).

6. Is there anything about the *SB* that you think we could improve?

I've spent 20 years feeling the responsibility of this question and have done what the Lord allowed with the abilities He gave. The new editors and the current staff will face this question every year. I pray that we always have the humility to examine the magazine critically—both as to form and content—to listen to others who may give advice, and then to implement changes that show that the staff is able to adapt to the times. 2025 is not 1925.

7. Although the *SB* is free from any ecclesiastical control, how do you see the *SB* relating to the Protestant Reformed Churches?

The *SB* is not owned and controlled by the Protestant Reformed Churches officially, but practically speaking it is a magazine of and for these churches. The editors, writers, and publisher are almost all Protestant Reformed or members of the PRC's sisters. I'm thankful that there are many readers outside the PRC who can profit from it—it is intended to serve all Reformed Christians. The PRCA speaks *officially* through her consistories and broader assemblies—classis and synod, but her *unofficial* voice is in her magazines and books. In a very real way, they not only *express* the mind of the churches, but they *form* that mind over the decades. My own mind has been shaped—to a great degree—by what our men have written in the *SB*. This makes me want to write as carefully as I possibly can.



FRACTURING OF THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH ASSISTED SUICIDE IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

REV. DANIEL HOLSTEGE
pastor of the Wingham PRC in Wingham, Ontario, Canada

FRACTURING OF THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH

"At least two dozen churches in the Christian Reformed Church of North America are in the process of severing their ties with the denomination over their disagreements with its increasingly rigid stance on sexuality."[1] Four of those churches are located in Classis Grand Rapids East: Calvin Church, Grace Church, Church of the Servant, and Sherman Street, churches with many professors, staff, and students of Calvin University.

On the Canadian side of the border, a new group that I have mentioned before, called "Toward CRC Canada," has been further emboldened by the decisions of Synod 2024 in its goal of leading Canadian CRCs out of the denomination. After the last synod, they put out a statement on their website that says in no uncertain terms, "It's time for a Canadian Christian Reformed Church." On the same webpage, the chairman of the group, Pastor Everett Vander Horst, is quoted as saying, "Church leaders are contacting me...because they see that we need a different way of being church in Canada."[2]

1 Yonat Shimron, "After a crackdown on sexuality, two dozen CRC churches head for the exits," *Religion News Service*, Sept. 25, 2024, https://religionnews.com/2024/09/25/after-a-crackdown-on-sexuality-two-dozen-crc-churches-head-for-the-exits.

2 "Post-Synod 2024 Statement, July 12, 2024" and "Post-Synod Statement, June 26, 2024," https://www.towardcrccanada.net.

The churches most eager to get out of the CRC are those that want to affirm and welcome LGBTQ people into their membership just as they are. Where will these churches go? They could become independent. They could join a different denomination, such as the Reformed Church in America, the Presbyterian Church in the USA, the Presbyterian Church in Canada, or the United Methodist Church, all of which are LGBTQ-affirming. "Toward CRC Canada" is worried that the Canadian CRCs that are unhappy with synod will splinter and go separate ways. That explains their urgency to form a new Canadian CRC to hold them together sooner rather than later.

Many in the CRC, in both the affirming and non-affirming camps, think their synod was heavy handed in requiring every congregation to view homosexual behavior as a sin and by calling affirming congregations to repent or disaffiliate. They say it is a "rigid confessionalism" to require that "all officebearers in the CRC fully agree to the denomination's creeds and confessions, without room for exceptions." According to Pastor Nate DeJong-McCarron of Fuller Ave. CRC in Grand Rapids, director of "Better Together," the direction of the denomination implies that "elders, deacons, and pastors who disagree with the CRC's official positions on infant baptism, predestination and eternal security (doctrines laid out in the CRC's confessions) are also now deemed ineligible to serve."[3]

If you read what CRC folks are saying online today, you hear many pining for the good old days when leaders had more flexibility to teach the Bible as they saw fit, when there was plenty of room for higher critics of Scripture *and* those who believe the Bible to be infallible, for those who love and teach the Reformed confessions *and* those who despise and mock them, for convinced Calvinists *and* passionate Arminians, for those who will baptize infants of believers *and* those who will not, for those who will ordain female officebearers *and* those who will not, for amillennialists *and* postmillennialists, creationists *and* evolutionists. But alas, in the minds of some, those days are slipping away.

A couple things come to my mind as I reflect on these developments. On the one hand, I am struck by the wisdom of what God revealed to Paul when he wrote that the more excellent way of life in the church is the way of love (1 Cor. 12-13). Love suffers long and is kind. Love is not rude or easily provoked to wrath. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. It is incredibly important for denominational unity that we walk in love with each other. When we disagree on controversial issues, we must practice the kind of love that is patient with those who disagree with us and that will agree to disagree on matters that are not essential to our faith.

But, on the other hand, we must love God above all, remembering that true love rejoices not in iniquity but in the truth. True love does not tolerate wickedness in the church, but knows that a little leaven will leaven the whole lump. We *should* jealously guard the unity of the church through a rigid confessionalism that admonishes and disciplines those who fail to teach Scripture in harmony with the creeds that faithfully summarize Scripture. Confessionalism is not a bad word. The confessional unity of churches who all hold fast to the core truths of God's Word together is a great blessing. So, may God grant that in the PRCA we strive to maintain *unity* in essentials, embrace *liberty* in non-essentials, and practice *charity* in all things.

ASSISTED SUICIDE IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

Last November, the British House of Commons approved a bill that will give people in England and Wales the option of assistance in dying if they have a terminal illness and are not expected to live more than six months. Currently, assistance in dying (a euphemism for assistance in committing suicide) is still illegal in the United Kingdom, and one could go to prison for up to fourteen years for committing the crime. But if this bill becomes law, terminally sick people in the UK who want to commit suicide will no longer have to travel abroad, because England will have joined the Netherlands, Switzerland, Canada, the states of Oregon, California, and Washington, and several other countries in allowing doctors to help people kill themselves.[4]

3 Meghan Kort, "The CRC Fractures: Pastors and churches troubled by new limits on church leadership," *Christian Courier*, Nov. 13, 2024, https://www.christiancourier.ca/crc-fractures.

4 Juliana Kim, "British lawmakers push forward a divisive

How is helping a terminally ill person die any different from the kind of hospice care that has always been approved and given to the dying? The difference is massive! Hospice care leaves the cause and moment of death in the hands of God where it belongs. Hospice aims to alleviate the suffering of people with deadly diseases after serious attempts to restore their health have failed. But when it comes to assisted suicide, like all forms of murder, one seizes from God the right to cause one's own death or to help others cause their own death. The doctor who helps people commit suicide is not making people comfortable as God takes them out of this life, but he is putting himself in the place of God and putting them to death.

The UK's House of Commons has voted to legalize assisted suicide. Proponents argue that it is an act of mercy to give people who are suffering from horrible diseases the right to die if they so choose. But it does not stop there. Once the nose of the camel is in the tent, the rest of the beast soon follows. In the Netherlands, the first country to decriminalize euthanasia back in 1981 and to legalize it in 2002, physically healthy young people can choose to die with assistance from a doctor if they are struggling with a mental illness like depression. A young Dutch woman of 28 years old was scheduled to be euthanized and cremated last May. She decided to die after her psychiatrist told her that there was nothing more they could do to help her overcome her depression, autism, and personality disorder. The Netherlands allowed her to get help with her suicide.[5]

When assisted suicide was originally legalized in Canada, it was only intended to be used in very rare cases and with stringent limitations. But "Canada's adoption of MAiD [medical assistance in dying] has dramatically exceeded expectations, with a much higher number of deaths than expected. This number has continued to increase year after year. Even critics could barely imagine the consequences of the legalization of MAiD."[6] Canada has the world's fastest growing program of assisted suicide. The UK has now started down the same path.

When King Saul was mortally wounded by a Philistine arrow in battle, he sought assistance in dying from his armorbearer. He was not just in a lot of pain. He was not just quite sure that he was going to die. He was not in a state of delirium due to severe depression. But in pride and unbelief, he refused to let God be God. God had told him the day before that he and his sons would die in battle. Once Saul was mortally hit, he saw his life slipping away, and he hardened himself against God. He commanded his armorbearer to put him out of his misery. But his armorbearer could not bring himself to do what so many secular doctors today have no problem doing. So Saul fell upon his own sword (1 Sam. 28, 31).

Compare Saul to Hezekiah. At one point in his life, Hezekiah was so sick that certain death was imminent. God sent Isaiah to tell him, "Set thine house in order: for thou shalt die, and not live." What did Hezekiah do? He did not take his life into his own hands and ask his servants to give him a lethal injection of something. But with tears streaming from his eyes, "He turned his face toward the wall, and prayed unto the Lord, and said, Remember now, O Lord, I beseech thee, how I have walked before thee in truth and with a perfect heart, and have done that which is good in thy sight." God sent Isaiah back to him to say, "I have heard thy prayer, I have seen thy tears: behold, I will add unto thy days fifteen years" (Is. 38:1-5).

May God grant us the same faith to pray for healing mercies when we are sick, so that we may live. May He also grant us great courage to submit ourselves to His perfect will in life and death, fully persuaded that neither life nor death can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

bill to legalize assisted dying," *National Public Radio*, Nov. 29, 2024, https://www.npr.org/2024/11/29/nx-s1-5210453/britain-uk-votes-assisted-dying-bill.

5 Rupa Subramanya, "I'm 28. And I'm Scheduled to Die in May," *The Free Press*, April 1, 2024, https://www.thefp.com/p/im-28-and-im-scheduled-to-die.

6 Alexander Raikin, "From Exceptional to Routine: The Rise of Euthanasia in Canada," *Cardus*, August 7, 2024, https://www.cardus.ca/research/health/reports/from-exceptional-to-routine.



NAHUM (8)
THE COMING OF THE BABYLONIANS ANNOUNCED

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Previous article in this series: December 2024, p. 109.

He that dasheth in pieces is come up before thy face: keep the munition, watch the way, make thy loins strong, fortify thy power mightily. For the LORD hath turned away the excellency of Jacob, as the excellency of Israel: for the emptiers have emptied them out, and marred their vine branches—Nahum 2:1-2

Nahum 2:1 is an announcement of the coming of the Babylonian and Median armies and a call to arms to the Ninevites. At the time of the prophecy there were no enemies coming. Assyria and Nineveh dominated all the surrounding nations and there had been no enemy on the horizon for many years; but that would soon change.

The call to arms must be ironic, since God was sending the Babylonians and He had already decided the outcome of their uprising against Assyria. The words, "keep the munition, watch the way, make thy loins strong, fortify thy power mightily," have the force then of, "do whatever you can to prepare for the coming of the Babylonians; they come, but nothing will be of any help to you." Nothing can stand against God's purpose and good pleasure. His weakness is always stronger than men (1 Cor. 1:25).

"He that dasheth in pieces" is the Babylonian-Median confederacy, which God would use for Assyria's downfall. The words translated "dasheth in pieces" do not refer to Assyria being destroyed but scattered, and is used deliberately, for Assyria had scattered and dispersed many nations and peoples, including the northern kingdom of Israel. Of this we read in 2 Kings 18:9-12:

> And it came to pass in the fourth year of king Hezekiah, which was the seventh year of Hoshea son of Elah king of Israel, that Shalmaneser king of Assyria came up against Samaria, and besieged it. And at the end of three years they took it: even in the sixth year of Hezekiah, that is the ninth year of Hoshea king of Israel, Samaria was taken. And the king of Assyria did carry away Israel unto Assyria, and put them in Halah and in Habor by the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes: Because they obeyed not the voice of the LORD their God, but transgressed his covenant, and all that Moses the servant of the LORD commanded, and would not hear them, nor do them.

Assyria's scattering, then, is God doing to Assyria what it had done to others, an example of God's perfect justice. That scattering of Assyria was so complete that there is no people today who can be identified as the descendants of the Assyrians. God's Word is never in vain.

God then shows in verse 2 why He was implacably committed to Assyria's destruction. In scattering Israel and making war against Judah, they had been the chief oppressors of God's people. The first cause of Assyria's downfall is not its cruelty and brutality toward others, but God's love and care for His people and Assyria's oppression of them.

The verse mentions both Jacob and Israel. It would seem that Jacob here refers to Judah, the southern kingdom, and Israel to the northern kingdom, and that the verse is speaking of God doing in Judah what He had done in the northern kingdom of Israel, both through the Assyrians.

Most modern translations understand the first part of verse 2 to be a promise of the restoration of Israel.

The New King James Version, for example, has, "For the LORD will restore the excellence of Jacob like the excellence of Israel, for the emptiers have emptied them out and ruined their vine branches."

The word translated "turned away" can also be translated "turned back," and it is in this sense that the passage is usually understood by commentators. Whether a promise of restoration or a reference to God's chastising of Israel and Judah, as the King James Version has it, the passage is saying that though God used Assyria against Israel and Judah, He would punish them for what they had done, a remarkable instance of God's sovereignty over evil and the rightness of what He does when He uses evil for His own purposes. Isaiah speaks of God's sovereign use of Assyria and His punishment of them for their evil, comparing Assyria and Nineveh to an ax with which God hewed His people and a rod with which He beat them:

> Wherefore it shall come to pass, that when the Lord hath performed his whole work upon mount Zion and on Jerusalem, I will punish the fruit of the stout heart of the king of Assyria, and the glory of his high looks. For he saith, By the strength of my hand I have done it, and by my wisdom; for I am prudent: and I have removed the bounds of the people, and have robbed their treasures, and I have put down the inhabitants like a valiant man: And my hand hath found as a nest the riches of the people: and as one gathereth eggs that are left, have I gathered all the earth; and there was none that moved the wing, or opened the mouth, or peeped. Shall the axe boast itself against him that heweth therewith? or shall the saw magnify itself against him that shaketh it? as if the rod should shake itself against them that lift it up, or as if the staff should lift up itself, as if it were no wood. Therefore shall the Lord, the Lord of hosts, send among his fat ones leanness; and under his glory he shall kindle a burning like the burning of a fire. And the light of Israel shall be for a fire, and his Holy One for a flame: and it shall burn and devour his thorns and his briers in one day; And shall consume the glory of his forest, and of his fruitful field, both soul and body: and they shall be as when a standardbearer fainteth. And the rest of the trees of his forest shall be few, that a child may write them (Is. 10:12-19).

...though God used Assyria against Israel and Judah, He would punish them for what they had done, a remarkable instance of God's sovereignty over evil and the rightness of what He does when He uses evil for His own purposes.

The last part of Nahum 2:2 unquestionably refers to what Assyria had done to Israel and Judah. Both had been emptied by the Assyrian emptiers. Israel had been conquered and dispersed by the Assyrians: their land truly had been emptied. Judah was left with a few fortified cities. They were God's vine, but Assyria had left them neither "root nor branch," and had "marred their vine branches."

The comparison of God's people to a vine is found in Psalm 80 and Isaiah 5. Isaiah 5, written at the time of Assyria's dominance, echoes what Nahum is saying:

> And now go to; I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard: I will take away the hedge thereof, and it shall be eaten up; and break down the wall thereof, and it shall be trodden down: And I will lay it waste: it shall not be pruned, nor digged; but there shall come up briers and thorns: I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah his pleasant plant: and he looked for judgment, but behold oppression; for righteousness, but behold a cry (Is. 5:5-8).

Thus God often deals with His church and with His people, and always because of their sin. He often uses wicked men, as cruel and uncaring as the Assyrians, to chastise His people; but the end will always be the destruction of their enemies and their own salvation and deliverance. This we sing in Psalm 80:

> Return, we beseech thee, O God of hosts: look down from heaven, and behold, and visit this vine; and the vineyard which thy right hand hath planted, and the branch that thou madest strong for thyself. It is burned with fire, it is cut down: they perish at the rebuke of thy countenance. Let thy hand be upon the man of thy right hand, upon the son of man whom thou madest strong for thyself. So will not we go back from thee: quicken us, and we will call upon thy name. Turn us again, O LORD God of hosts, cause thy face to shine; and we shall be saved (Ps. 80:14-19).



LAUGH

REV. JOSEPH HOLSTEGE
pastor of First PRC in Grand Rapids, Michigan

Laughter is a sound we usually hope to hear as we make our way to gatherings of family or friends over the holidays. The table set with saucers and plates, the full glasses, the piles of food, and the light hearts are all designed with this very purpose in mind. "A feast," the wise preacher tells us, "is made for laughter" (Eccl. 10:19).

Living in a fallen world, seeing lined and weary faces on the people around us, we need little reminding that life will be marked by times of weeping and mourning. We do well not to forget, however, that there is also "a time to laugh" (Eccl. 3:4). A spirit that is always broken dries the bones, but a joyful heart does "good like a medicine" (Prov. 17:22), a medicine very often administered by the ringing music of laughter.

Laughter is sometimes the incredulous snort of the cynical. Laughter is other times the amazed but believing response of the blessed. Well known is the story of Sarah scoffing in her heart as she overhears the assertion that her aged body is at last to bring forth a child. This inner laughter may reflect the skepticism of a broken heart, of one who has waited long past the point of reason for a promise that now seems impossible to fulfill. Yet it was ultimately the laughter of unbelief. And so, the Lord called Sarah out for it, notwithstanding her frightened denials: "Then Sarah denied, saying, I laughed not; for she was afraid. And he said, Nay; but thou didst laugh" (Gen. 18:15).

Yet prior to the sarcastic laughing of Sarah is the overwhelmed but happy laughing of Abraham, who believed without seeing when the promise was restated and reaffirmed even in his old age. "Then Abraham fell upon his face, and laughed, and said in his heart, shall a child be born unto him that is an hundred years old?" (Gen. 17:17). And then there is the new and infectious laughter that arises out of Sarah's soul as she holds a precious baby boy in her very old arms. "And Sarah said, God hath made me to laugh, so that all that hear will laugh with me" (Gen. 21:6). And, of course, that precious baby boy was given the name Isaac, which, as many a Christian child has learned from Bible story books and catechism lessons, means, "he laughs."

As with every good thing in life, however, laughter also is a gift that must come with a warning label. Pop, pop, pop go the firecrackers on the fourth of July. Crackle, crackle go the burning thorns under a pot, and they fizzle out before bringing the water to boil. Such is "the laughter of the fool" who prefers to glance over the substantive issues of life with jokes and endless songs for easy listening (Eccl. 7:6). Such vain laughter can be heard aplenty in the nightclubs, casinos, and drinking halls of the world, rising into the night before fading away into everlasting silence. And this is why the wise man will finally come to the conclusion that "sorrow," after all, "is better than laughter," and that a wise heart spends more time in the "house of mourning" than in the "house of mirth" (Eccl. 7:3, 4).

Sometimes laughter is less an expression of pure joy for its own sake, and more an assertion of strength. This can look rather ugly, or lead to surprising reversals, if the strength asserted is not truly present in the one who laughs. It was intended as a firm put down of Jesus, for example, when the people "laughed him to scorn" at His (to them, anyway) naïve statement that the girl they were weeping over was not dead, but merely sleeping (Mark 5:40; Luke 8:53). This contemptuous laughter stuck in their throats, however, when they heard the words that came next out of Jesus' mouth (*Talitha cumi*) and saw the young girl stand upright on her feet. Something similar, yet even more dramatic, will happen with respect to all the laughing of the wicked,

with which they intend to scorn the righteous God and His people. Those who lived in the northern kingdom of Israel may have laughed at the messengers sent by Hezekiah inviting them to the Passover in Jerusalem (2 Chron. 30:10); those who gazed on the crucified form of Christ on His cross may have shot out the lip, shook the head, and laughed Him to scorn (Ps. 22:7); those who persecute the people of God and break down His vineyard may "laugh among themselves" (Ps. 80:6); laugh while you can, Jesus warns, "for ye shall mourn and weep" (Luke 6:25). Better yet, "let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to heaviness. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up" (Jam. 4:9, 10).

When the very real strength of the one who laughs justifies the laughter, however, few things are more satisfying to those who benefit from that same strength. Just think of the horse as he charges into the fray, smells the battle afar off, and says among the trumpets, "Ha, ha!" (Job 39:25). Think of the daughter of Zion laughing in the face of mighty king Sennacherib and shaking her head with scorn knowing that the presumptuous king is soon to be dealt with by the God of heaven (2 Kings 19:21; Is. 37:22). Think of the Lord Himself, exalted on His holy hill, listening to the raging of the heathen, knowing the rebellious counsels forming in their vain imaginations. "He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh: the Lord shall have them in derision" (Ps. 2:4).

And so will laugh all who are on the Lord's side, who mourn for their sins, yet trust in the Lord to turn again their captivity, and to take them into His blessed abode. "Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing: then said they among the heathen, The Lord hath done great things for them" (Ps. 126:2).



IF MY BROTHER SIN...THE POTENT MEDICINE OF MATTHEW 18 (4)

PROF. BARRETT GRITTERS

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Previous article in this series: December 2024, p. 124.

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

I have just done one of the most difficult things in my life. After fervent prayer and careful planning, I went to my fellow church member to "tell him his fault." But my sinning brother did not repent. I pleaded with him, but my words had no apparent effect. Even when I reminded him of the damage he was doing to others and the dishonor he would bring on God's name if he continued, the warnings did not move him. I know I was not flawless in my efforts, but I did my best to speak in a spirit of meekness. Still, he remained hard.

I even went alone once more, since I remembered the (Heidelberg) Catechism's language, "having been *often* brotherly admonished" (Q&A 85). Still, he was unmoved.

So I now face the second step in Jesus' "Directions for Use" for Matthew 18's medicine: Go again, and this time one or two witnesses must accompany you "…that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may

be established." If I take one witness, the rebuke is in the presence of two; and if I take two, there are three.

WHO ARE THE "WITNESSES"?

The identity of these witnesses is the second somewhat difficult question we face in exegeting Matthew 18. (The first was, "Must I go to the brother whose sins were not *directly* against *me*?") There are two possible answers to this question. The witnesses are witnesses of the brother's original *wrongdoing*; or, the witnesses are witnesses of my *rebuke*.

The reason Jesus gives for taking witnesses is "that every word may be established." "Word" in the Greek has a variety of meanings, as various English translations show. *Word*, *fact*, *matter*, and *charge* are four different ways it is translated. The first three are very similar and somewhat vague; the fourth—*charge*—very specific, but incorrect. For if Jesus required that the "charge" be established by eyewitnesses, that is, that the charge of sin be verified by those who *saw* the sin, there are other Greek words Jesus would have used for "accusation" or "charge." In 1 Timothy 5:19 Paul uses one of these when he warns not to receive an *accusation* against an elder without two or three witnesses. These are witnesses of the elder's sin.

But in Matthew 18 Jesus is not requiring witnesses of the original wrongdoing, but of the accuser's attempts to reconcile, and of the response given by the accused. "They will certify that the one has honestly tried to bring the other to a better mind, and that the other has or has not yielded to his efforts."[1]

That this is the right interpretation is seen in two ways. First, Jesus' first step was a one-on-one visit because there was only one who was aware of the sin. If there had been more than one witness of the original wrongdoing, Jesus would not have required the offended brother to go *alone*. Second, in the case of a sin where there *is* only one witness, and the accused does not repent, the matter would have to be dropped after the one-on-one meeting. But the principles underlying Matthew 18 will not allow such a conclusion. Love for the brother will compel you to pursue the matter even when there are no other eyewitnesses. You will go to him again to seek his salvation. And love for the *church* and care for her preservation will constrain you to protect the church from the man's sinful influences—a lack of other eyewitnesses notwithstanding.

Now, a short but necessary diversion.

Proper as this interpretation is, it presents a difficulty. Jesus is making pretty clear reference to Deuteronomy 19:15, where Moses absolutely prohibited any capital charge to stick without two or three *eyewitnesses* of the sin, and Jesus might seem to be making the same requirement here. But He is not. Calvin is correct when he says that Jesus is *alluding* to Moses, but has turned the words of Moses "to a slightly different meaning." Two or three are required in Matthew 18's process, but not two or three direct witnesses of the sin, for the reasons I already explained.

Nevertheless (and this is why this little diversion is important), the law of Deuteronomy 19 does have application when there is only one eyewitness. Just as no one in the Old Testament could be subjected to capital punishment ("your life in the kingdom has ended") without multiple eyewitnesses, no one in the New Testament may be excommunicated ("in God's name, we declare you outside the kingdom") without more than one witness. To make this concrete: if an accuser comes to a consistory as the only eyewitness, and the accused denies any guilt, the consistory may not press the case to excommunication unless there is evidence of guilt from other sources that the elders judge legitimate. Lacking this evidence, the old advice is wise: "Take an oath of the accuser and the accused, and drop the matter."

In other words, Matthew 18's witnesses are not eyewitnesses of the alleged sin, but of the work of rebuking the sinner.

Choosing the right witnesses requires wisdom. Avoided, if possible, would be anyone thought to be biased because of blood relations or a difficult history with the accused. Preferrable are unbiased, mature, wise members of the same church, respected by all and with a reputation for godliness. It may be unwise to seek a currently serving elder, because he will be one to whom the case later comes when the offended brother

1 Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Matthew* (London: Robert Scott, 1915).

must "tell the church." That is, he will have to *judge* what has been done in the first two steps, and he would then have to judge himself. Wisdom will be to seek witnesses from outside of the consistory.[2]

THE TASK OF THE WITNESSES

Likely, the work of these witnesses will be twofold: both to approbate the actions of the offended party, and to help with the admonition if they judge it to be appropriate.

But now we all must prepare spiritually and intellectually. I envision myself back home in my chair. With me in my living room are the witnesses. After I explain to them what I ask them to do, we pray for meek spirits, loving hearts, proper motives, and clear minds. We want to present Christ to the brother, and do not want to stand between the brother and Christ. So we pray carefully, agree on the parts each will play, consider various responses—what to do if there is repentance and what to do if not. And then we go.

The role of these witnesses is significant enough that both tasks should be made clear.

First, they observe. They "witness" my actions. Do I bring Scripture? Is my explanation of the sin proper? Is my call to repentance biblical? Is my offer of forgiveness sincere? They also witness the response of the accused. I had told them that the accused would not hear me. Now, they must judge whether this "not hearing" is impenitence or whether perhaps there is an explanation that justifies him? They listen to the accused. It would be wrong for them to judge the case without properly listening to the accused, lest they be guilty of rashness. For this reason the witnesses must be wise, balanced, objective, and not merely "yes-men" for a good friend. If they find that I, the accuser, have in some way misbehaved, they can correct *me*, turn me from my efforts, and maybe even require me to apologize to the accused.

It is for this reason that two witnesses are better than one. Even though one is permitted and, at times the best, choosing two witnesses may be wisest. If there is only one, and he finds that he disagrees with the brother who asked him to help, they are in a pickle. Here also, two are better than one, and a *three*fold cord may be even better.

If, having heard both the accuser and the accused, these witnesses judge that the accused is guilty—both of the sin and impenitence—they can join in the call to repentance. Calvin sounds a bit harsh: "two or three witnesses shall rise up to condemn the obstinacy of the man." Plummer softens it: "…they may help to persuade the erring brother to yield." With the love and kindness of three, the case is pressed upon him. With the entire beings of all three—body language, facial expressions, pleading eyes, and even tears—they seek his everlasting good.

"Brother, we love you! Will you come to the cross with us? Do you *hear* us?"

THE END OF THE MATTER

Just as in the first step, there are two possible outcomes: either he is impenitent (may God forbid!), and the matter must proceed to "the church"; or he repents and the matter is finished (God be praised!).

Judging that the matter is finished, however, may not be so easy. I have learned by hard experience that being naïve is a real possibility when I fervently want to forgive. When emotions are high, being objective is challenged.[3] For example, if there are signs that the sin has a deep root, or that the nature of the sin means that repentance may be a long process (addiction, for example), the three witnesses should not quickly forgive and (greatly relieved!) leave the brother to himself, but should walk with him to help him along the difficult path of daily crucifying his desires. He may be as sincerely sorry as it is possible to be at the moment, but very naïve about what repentance will require of him. We must not be ignorant of Satan's devices, nor of our ability to return to sin. You love the brother; you love the church. Help him.

If the brother is truly penitent, he will recognize his sin. "Brothers, I am so sorry! I am sorry for my sin! And I am sorry for not hearing my brother when he first came to me! I was hard of heart. Please, by the mercies of God, forgive me! I lean on the cross and blood of Christ to cover my sin, and on the Spirit of Christ to

2 In 1985, Classis West of the PRCA judged that it was wrong for a consistory to appoint one of its members to be involved in the second step of Matthew 18.

3 See my editorial "When Discipline Is Naïve" (Dec. 15, 2023).

turn me." (Depending on the nature of the sin, he may also ask for help to break from his evil way, or ask what he can do to make restitution.)

As God delights in mercy (Mic. 7:18), our hearts are filled with joy to be able to say to a wounded sinner, "We forgive you, and please hear what we mean by that. Your sin no longer stands as a barrier between us. We will not judge or think of you in light of it. No one else will ever hear of it from us. By the grace of God, we will forget it. And you may know that if we ever speak to others about it, we will be guilty of sin, because we told you now, 'we forgive you.' If you need us to walk with you in the future, we are here to help you."

Angels in heaven rejoice. Can you picture it? They shout for joy. Can you hear it? Maybe they sing Psalm 133:

How good and pleasant is the sight
When brethren make it their delight
To dwell in blest accord;
Such love is like anointing oil
That consecrates for holy toil
The servants of the Lord.

Such love in peace and joy distils,
As o'er the slopes of Hermon's hills
Refreshing dew descends;
The Lord commands His blessing there,
And they that walk in love shall share
In life that never ends.



RAISING TABITHA

MRS. SHERRY KOOLE
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But Peter put them all forth, and kneeled down, and prayed; and turning him to the body said, Tabitha, arise. And she opened her eyes: and when she saw Peter, she sat up—Acts 9:40

After reading the title of this article along with the passage from which the above quote is taken (Acts 9:36-43), it would be understandable if you were to think the contents of this article would hold the details and importance of Peter raising Tabitha from the dead.

But, as relevant as that event may be to this passage of Scripture, you would be mistaken in your thinking. Rather, I would like to take the opportunity to write about the raising—or *rearing*—of Tabitha instead. Listening to a message on the Reformed Witness Hour (July 21, 2024) given by Rev. W. Bruinsma on the raising of Tabitha from the dead, brought to mind the frequent repeating of a phrase I heard in a sermon preached many years ago. That memory sparked the idea for this article. Sad to say, I cannot remember the title, the divisions, or even much of the content of that sermon. And try as I might, I was unable to pull it up on the PRCA SermonAudio website. Nevertheless, I clearly recall the emphatic repeating of the phrase "*The church needs more Tabithas!*" And as we take a closer look at what the Scriptures tell us about the life of Tabitha, I believe we all will agree that the phrase is indeed very true.

For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also—James 2:26

The account we have of Tabitha is but a mere eight verses in Scripture, the majority of which we see her as inactive, lifeless—and dead. And yet these verses speak very highly of her life. Already in the opening verse of

the account (Acts 9:36), she is given the distinguishing honor of being named as a disciple of the Lord. Webster's definition of a disciple is "a pupil or follower of any teacher or school." A true disciple then is not just a student, but a follower. One might better describe a disciple as somewhat of an apprentice—applying what he or she has learned under the tutelage of his or her instructor. And Tabitha is given the noteworthy description of being such a disciple. Her life exemplified the fact that she was a follower of Christ. She was Christ-like in the fact that she devoted her time and abilities to a life of serving others. For that reason, I wholeheartedly echo the phrase, and am quite confident you all will agree, *the church does indeed need more Tabithas!*

Tabitha was a woman of great faith who loved the Lord dearly. Scripture bestows on her the beautiful description of being a woman "full of good works and almsdeeds." We all know what good works are. They are "only those which proceed from a true faith, are performed according to the law of God, and to His glory" (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 91). Tabitha's love for the Lord was evident by the life that she lived. She was a doer as well as a hearer of the Word. She was not only a learner, but a follower of her Lord. She lived her faith! She was a true disciple! And I say again, *the church indeed needs more Tabithas!*

Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself—Matthew 22:27b

The Scriptures tell us very little about the person of Tabitha. Was she married? Single? Widowed? Was she old? Young? Did she have family members living nearby? Children of her own? And although her name means "female gazelle," which holds connotations of beauty and grace, we know nothing really as to whether she was fair to look upon or not. None of these things are of any real importance to us, or the Lord would have made them known in His Word. Rather, what we are to glean from this passage, and then make application to our own lives, comes from what we know about the inward beauty of Tabitha. She was a woman who loved the Lord. And as His disciple, her love for Him was demonstrated in her dealings with others. Her love for God was observed by others as they witnessed the many ways she showed love for her neighbor. Scripture's way of telling us that she was a very charitable, generous, and giving person is to say she was "full of almsdeeds," that is, charitable works and acts of kindness.

If we read the description of the virtuous woman in Proverbs 31, Tabitha can easily come to mind. Although the passage describes a married woman caring for the needs of her husband and children as well as the needs of others, verses 19 and 20 say, "She layeth her hands to the spindle, and her hands hold the distaff. She stretcheth out her hand to the poor; yea, she reacheth forth her hands to the needy." And the chapter ends with, "Favour is deceitful, and beauty is vain: but a woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be praised. Give her of the fruit of her hands: and let her own works praise her in the gates." (vv. 30, 31) This is Tabitha. These verses are an explicit and clear-cut description of her.

Tabitha used her time and talents sewing garments for the widows and needy in the city of Joppa. I, being a woman of no sewing abilities whatsoever, yet aware of how modern advancement and technology in sewing machines can aid even the most experienced of seamstresses, can only imagine how tedious and exhausting the sewing of garments by hand must have been. Painstakingly laborious work I am sure. Yet Scripture portrays Tabitha as stitching each garment with loving and caring thoughts for each of her recipients. She loved her church family and lovingly cared for many of their needs. Oh, how *the church needs more Tabithas today!*

…and let her own works praise her in the gates—Proverbs 31:31b

Tabitha's good works and almsdeeds spoke for themselves. Her hard work and benevolent affection for the people of Joppa were well known among the community. She was publicly known and praised for her acts of kindness by the widows and other recipients of her love and affection. Their love and appreciation for her were expressed by deep sorrow and weeping at her death. In their anguish and grief they lovingly showed Peter the coats and garments that Tabitha had made for them while she was alive. I do not know how little or much Peter knew about Tabitha and her status among the people before he was summoned to Joppa, but the event of the widows showing Peter all that Tabitha had done for them revealed much to him about who she was. She was not only their benefactor.

She was their dear friend. She loved them. And they loved her.

After Peter raised Tabitha from the dead and presented her alive to the widows and saints of Joppa, can you imagine the rejoicing that must have taken place in the upper chamber that day? The joy of the widows and others? For their benefactor was alive and well! As the miracle was celebrated, the news of her being raised from the dead was made known throughout all of Joppa and many more believed. And although we read really nothing of Tabitha's own reaction to being raised from the dead, knowing what we do know about the life she had lived, we can be quite certain that she returned to her life as it once was—a life full of good works and almsdeeds. A life of discipleship. The life of a servant—for God and for others. Won't you agree then that *the church could indeed use more Tabithas?*

Come, ye children, hearken unto me: I will teach you the fear of the LORD—Psalm 34:11

We read nothing in Scripture about the actual rearing of Tabitha. We are not told whether she was raised by God-fearing parents who, by instruction and godly example, taught her to live a life of serving others, or if she was a new convert to the truth and learned by the example of fellow believers. And we need not know or the Bible would have told us. What we do know is that she was a disciple and follower of the Lord. She was Christ-like in her dealings with others. She was kind-hearted, humble, and selfless. She was (and is) an example for all women (and others) of the church to follow. For *the church does indeed need more Tabithas!*

As children of the King, we are called to be servants also, living lives of service to our God and to all others whenever and wherever He gives opportunity for us to do so. So much so that I believe it would be proper to say that the opportunities given should be viewed by us as *responsibilities* to serve. Galatians 6:10 gives this exhortation, "As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto those who are of the household of faith." Yet, how often do we not shy away from the opportunities we are given? And why do we do that? Is it lack of confidence or fear of failure—feeling we are inadequately qualified or equipped to help others? Is it self-centeredness, placing our own personal comforts and conveniences above the needs of others? Both these excuses are wrong and sinful. For there are no excuses. Serving others is one of the leading directives (commands) of the Christian faith. And the *church indeed needs more Tabithas.*

Although we can confirm nothing as to how Tabitha was brought up, we know it is our calling as mothers (and parents) to raise our daughters (children) to be as active in doing good works as she was. We took vows when baptizing our children, promising to raise them in the doctrines and truths of the church. Our children need be taught then that as they bear the mark of baptism, they are "by God, through baptism, admonished of and obliged unto new obedience, namely, that we [they] cleave to this one God...that we [they] forsake the world, crucify our (their) old nature, *and walk in a new and holy life*" (Baptism Form—emphasis added). At a very young age, our children are to be encouraged and instructed to do good works and charitable deeds for others. As soon as they have mastered the art of playing with their own toys, they should be taught to share, enabling them to experience the joy that can be found in playing with others.

Knowing that children learn by example as well as by verbal instruction, benevolent deeds should accompany our words of instruction, and a loving attitude should accompany our deeds. Mothers, let your daughters help in the preparing of a meal for a first-time or recently new mom. Allow them to fold the laundry or help with some other *light* household chores while visiting an elderly or homebound saint. Fathers, have your sons accompany you when assisting an elderly or shut-in saint with yard work or some other needed chores. As families, visit the sick and dying, singing to them the comforting words of the Psalms. And it is important that our children also see that our emulating the love of Christ extends beyond family and friends so that when the opportunity arises, we are also willing to help and assist a stranger that is in need. They need to be taught by example as well as by word, that we are to be doers as well as hearers of the Word. For *the church indeed needs more Tabithas!*

Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another—Romans 12:10

Dear reader, be not discouraged in your calling to serve. But rather, read the words of Ephesians 2:10

and be encouraged in your work: "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them." Is it not encouraging to know that each and every day we will be given opportunities to serve? Opportunities that have been determined by God as to how we in some way will be of a service and a blessing to others. Opportunities in the home, the church, the school, and workplace. Opportunities at work and at play. And even opportunities in public places such as supermarkets, restaurants, places of recreation, and so on. Our calling then is to take these opportunities and respond in a positive way. We are to be aware of the needs of others and look for ways to be of help. We are to be as kind-hearted, humble, and selfless as Tabitha of old. We are to be kind and compassionate toward others, putting the needs of others before our own, and doing so while expecting nothing in return. Our serving others need not be in big and noticeable ways; no act of service is ever too small. A simple kind and encouraging word to a friend, the befriending of a sad or lonely classmate on the playground, a night of free child care for a busy young couple, the making of a meal for a blessed busy mother—and the list goes on of many other deeds that put the needs of others first. *The church could definitely use more Tabithas*.

So I encourage you, dear reader, to be a Tabitha! Be an example just as she was.

May your lives—and mine—reflect the life of our Lord and Saviour—and Teacher—Jesus Christ. And as we tend to the needs of others, may it be done with a genuine love for God and the neighbor and not to seek the praise and approval of men. As we invest time and energy into helping those who are in need, may our charitable deeds and acts of kindness motivate and inspire others to do likewise.

The church indeed needs more Tabithas! Pray that the Lord permits and enables us to raise them.



SCRIPTURE ON ANIMAL GROUPS: THE WHALE AND THE BAT

REV. JAMES LANING
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In his 1851 classic, *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville had this to say about the whale:

> In his System of Nature, A.D. 1776, Linnaeus declares, "I hereby separate the whales from the fish." But of my own knowledge, I know that down to the year 1850, sharks and shad, alewives and herring, against Linnaeus's express edict, were still found dividing the possession of the same seas with the Leviathan....
>
> Be it known that, waiving all argument, I take the good old fashioned ground that the whale is a fish, and call upon holy Jonah to back me....
>
> Next: how shall we define the whale, by his obvious externals, so as conspicuously to label him for all time to come. To be short, then, a whale is *a spouting fish with a horizontal tail*.... Almost any one must have noticed that all the fish familiar to landsmen have not a flat, but a vertical, or up-and-down tail. Whereas, among spouting fish the tail, though it may be similarly shaped, invariably assumes a horizontal position."[1]

Melville here makes an interesting point.

Today it is commonly taught that the whale is not a fish and that the bat is not a bird. Both the whale and

1 Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (New York: The Modern Library Publishers, 1926), 131-132.

the bat are said to be mammals. If they are mammals, people will say, the whale must not be a fish, and the bat must not be a bird.

So what does God's Word say? God speaks not only about the creation of the animals, but also about different groups of animals. So let us look to God's inspired Word to see what He says.

In this regard, we consider first what is said about the bat, and then we will move on to the whale.

MODERN VIEW: "A BAT IS NOT A BIRD"

So who came up with the classification "mammal"? What was the reason for dividing the animals this way?

As Melville mentioned, the current system to classify animals (known as taxonomy) goes back to the Swedish naturalist, Carolus Linnaeus (1707-1778). In fact, he is said to be the one who moved the whales from the fish category and the bats from the bird category:

> Before Linnaeus, whales were classified with fishes (they possessed fins), and bats with birds (they had wings). To his credit, Linnaeus shifted both bats and whales into the class he invented for all creatures that suckled their young Mammalia.[2]

So Linnaeus invented the group called *mammalia*, shifted the whale and the bat to the group he had created, and people have been saying "a bat is not a bird" and "a whale is not a fish" ever since.

WHAT SCRIPTURE SAYS

In two places in Scripture the bat is listed as a bird. In both places it is found in a list of the unclean birds. Here is the beginning and the end of the first list:

> Lev. 11:13 And these are they which ye shall have in abomination among the fowls; they shall not be eaten, they are an abomination: the eagle, and the ossifrage, and the ospray,
>
> Lev. 11:19 And the stork, the heron after her kind, and the lapwing, and the bat.

There is a passage in Deuteronomy that also lists the bat last in the list of birds that were not to be eaten:

> Deut. 14:11 Of all clean birds ye shall eat.
>
> 12 But these are they of which ye shall not eat: the eagle, and the ossifrage, and the ospray,
>
> 18 And the stork, and the heron after her kind, and the lapwing, and the bat.

In both of these passages we find what is undeniably a list of birds. The word translated "fowls" in Leviticus 11:13 and the word translated "birds" in Deuteronomy 14:11 are the two main Hebrew words for birds. Furthermore, the lists themselves make clear that they are lists of birds.

Yet someone might question whether the word translated "bat" is actually a bat. But if you check the standard Hebrew lexicons, you will find that they agree that this Hebrew word refers to a bat. That it is indeed a bat does not appear to be called into question.

So the answer of Scripture is clear: The bat is a bird. These two passages state that decisively.

AN ATTEMPT TO GET AROUND THIS

Some try to get around this by essentially saying, "Well, back then people thought the bat was a bird." Some Bible reference books say the same thing.

A person researching what the Bible says about bats might decide to check *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (*ISBE*), a standard reference work. One using the older 1915 edition would come across this statement:

> Bats are the most widely distributed of mammals, reaching even the oceanic islands, and modern science has revealed the existence of an astonishing number of species, nearly twenty being recorded from Pal.... It has not always been realized that they are mammals, and so it is not surprising that they should be mentioned at the end of the list of unclean birds in Lev 11:19 and Deut 14:18.[3]

So according to the one who wrote this entry in the *ISBE*, Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 list the bat as a bird because people at that time did not know any better.

Carl F. Keil, a widely respected commentator on the Old Testament, has this to say in his commentary on Leviticus 11:19, one of the verses that lists the bat as a bird:

2 Kennedy Warne, *New Zealand Geographic,* Issue 86, July-Aug. 2007 (https://www.nzgeo.com/stories/carl-linnaeus/) accessed 9/20/24.

3 Alfred Ely Day, "Bat," ed. James Orr et al., *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* (Chicago: The Howard-Severance Company, 1915), 414.

> Lastly, the Hebrew word in the text is the bat (Is. 2:20), which the Arabs also classified among the birds.[4]

So Keil appears to be saying that the bat is listed as a bird because, like the Arabs, the Hebrews classified it as a bird.

Yet we must say more than this. It is not just the Hebrews, but Jehovah God, the Creator Himself, who puts the bat in the same class with other birds.

FUNDAMENTAL CHARACTERISTIC OF BIRDS

It is also good for us to consider what the fundamental characteristics are of this or that group of animals. Scripture's description of the main animal divisions gives us some instruction about this.

It has often been said that when Adam named the animals he did so as one who could see their distinguishing characteristics. Although it may be somewhat speculative to say what Adam was or was not able to see prior to the Fall, there certainly is some value in being able to note what distinguishes one group of animals from the others.

So what does God say about birds? What is a fundamental characteristic that indicates that an animal is a bird?

Genesis 1:20 says that birds are characterized by having wings, and by flying above the earth in the open firmament.

> Gen. 1:20, 21 And God said, Let the waters bring forth abundantly the moving creature that hath life, and fowl that may fly above the earth in the open firmament of heaven. And God created great whales, and every living creature that moveth, which the waters brought forth abundantly, after their kind, and every winged fowl after his kind: and God saw that it was good.

It is true that some birds do not fly, at least not in the sense of being completely airborne. Some of the large flightless birds like the ostriches do use their wings for balance while running. The wings are said to act like a rudder when the ostrich changes directions. So they do use their wings when moving from place to place. Yet they remain on the ground.

The more central characteristic of birds is that they have wings. All birds have wings. In fact, when God spoke to Noah about the birds, He told Noah to gather the birds "of every sort," "and every fowl after his kind, every bird of every sort" (Gen. 7:14b). The last phrase could be translated literally, "every bird of every wing."

So if it is a bird, it has wings. Some birds do not go airborne, but every bird has wings.

Having wings is a central characteristic. Since the days of Linnaeas people have said, "the bat is a mammal because it nourishes its young with milk." Yet nourishing the young with milk is not listed as a central characteristic that distinguishes a group of animals. What we are to note first of all is that a bat has wings, and since it has wings it belongs among the birds.

It is one thing to say that man has invented a group called *mammal* for animals that nurse their young, and that the bat is one of those animals that nurses its young. Yet it is important that we confess that Scripture is correct when it lists the bat among the birds.

HOW ABOUT WHALES?

So what about the whale? Admittedly, it is a bit more difficult to find a definitive answer here.

On the fifth day God created the birds and the fish. Genesis 1:21 says, "and God created great whales," speaking of some large sea creatures that God made on that day. Hebrew lexicons say that the Hebrew word translated "whales" refers to a sea monster or serpent. The KJV translators concluded that in this passage God was referring to whales.

In the New Testament we read that our Lord said, "For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matt. 12:40).

Here Greek lexicons say that the word translated "whale's" refers to a sea monster, whale, or huge fish. In the book of Jonah we read that a huge fish swallowed Jonah: 'Now the LORD had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights" (Jon. 1:17).

In this verse the Hebrew word translated "fish" is the normal word for fish. Putting this all together, can we say that a whale is a fish, as Melville did? Perhaps. In any case, it should be evident that the whales belong

4 Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 563.

with the other creatures who constantly live in the water.

Leaving aside the precise definitions of the words translated "whale" in the Bible, it should be clear that the whales were created on the fifth day, not the sixth. On the fifth day God created the fish and the birds. The land animals, including those commonly referred to as mammals, were created on the sixth. In my judgment, in would be a mistake to group the whale with creatures created on an entirely different day.

The point, here, is that God's Word has much to teach us about the creation. That includes instruction on the groups of animals (and plants) that God created. Some say, "The Bible is not a science book," and mean by that statement that we should look to modern science and not the Bible for the most accurate answers to questions having to do with the creation. Yet it is in the Scriptures that we find answers about the creation that are perfectly accurate in every respect.

We all know that what modern science teaches about the age of the universe and about creatures evolving from one kind to another is false. Yet those are not the only areas in which the theories of modern science would lead us in a wrong direction.

It is very good for us to spend time studying the wide array of Scripture passages that speak about the creation. As has often been said, it is "through the spectacles of Scripture" that we are to look at God's creation.

In that regard, I am thankful for this rubric in the *Standard Bearer*. I also very much appreciate the emphasis in our churches, homes, and schools to provide instruction on a variety of subjects on the basis of what God has told us in His infallibly inspired Word.



THE GRIESS FAMILY: GOD'S COVENANT FAITHFULNESS (2)

SUTTON, NEBRASKA

MR. JAMES HOLSTEGE

member of Southeast PRC in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and administrator at Eastside Christian School in Grand Rapids, Michigan

Previous article in this series: January 2025, p. 157.

Submitted by Carmen Griess, member of Loveland PRC in Loveland, Colorado.

Recall from the previous article that we have followed the pioneer families of Johann Henrich Griess and Johann Nicolaus Ochsner from Germany to Odessa, Russia. God had mercifully provided them pastors when they experienced famine of the Word. Now it is 1871, and Russia, feeling threatened by the ever-growing population of Germans, has overturned the manifestos that had given great freedoms and privileges. "The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will" (Prov. 21:1). Note that 1871 was also the beginning of the German Reich. God's hand is evident in the leading of thousands of Germans out of the region, as those who had remained were persecuted during World War II. For this part of my research, Tom DeVries' book, *An Inheritance Preserved: The Life Story of Henry Schwarz*, was of great value.[1]

LEAVING RUSSIA FOR AMERICA

God had prepared a land for these Germans. Heinrich

1 DeVries' book (written around 2017) was dedicated to all the descendants of Henry Schwarz by one who himself married a Schwarz, one of Henry's granddaughters, Marilyn.

Griess, Sr., 54, and Michael Griess, 52, the youngest two children of Johann Henrich Griess, were part of 55 families who left Worms and Rohrbach in 1873. These two Griess brothers and Johann Friedrich Grosshans, along with others, led the first German colonists to Nebraska. Henrich's sister, Anna Maria Elisabetha (Griess) Ochsner, 57, joined them in 1874 along with children, grandchildren, and many nephews and nieces. Her husband was the son of Johann Nicolaus Ochsner. He arrived in Russia with his widowed mother when he was just seven years old and was now in Nebraska at age 73.

Johann Grosshans is mentioned above because he had married Christina, the widow of their beloved pastor Johannes Bonekemper. In the process of waiting for their ships to arrive in Hamburg, her son Wilhelm Bonekemper met up with her. He was studying to be a minister as well. The group made an agreement with him that they would pay his travel expenses if he would come to America and be their pastor once his studies were completed. Once again, God provided for their spiritual needs! In fact, over a period of 30 years, three Reformed churches would be established in Sutton, NE, all in existence today.

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The group of 500 that arrived in the United States in 1873 took a 36-hour train ride to Chicago. After finding a reference to it, I searched the Library of Congress to locate a *Chicago Daily Tribune* article called "Going West."[2] The newspaper recorded the wealth of these men, with Heinrich Griess, Sr. (Henry's grandfather) worth $60,000 and a Mr. Philip Jossman worth $100,000. As DeVries notes rather incredulously, why did these men tell how much gold they were carrying?! Regardless, this wealth would ultimately buy 16,000 acres of land around Sutton, NE which would provide for the settlers and their families for years to come. Once more they would be pioneers, as this land of good soil was a vast area of unbroken prairie.

CHURCH IN NEBRASKA

Being gifted with religious freedoms in this country, these German families established a German Reformed Church in Sutton, NE. Wilhelm Bonekemper was ordained in February 1877 and quickly established the Emmanual Reformed Church. Theodore C. Wenzlaff reports that in 1896, their membership peaked at 180 families.[3] Bonekemper served for 32 years and officiated the first marriage of Henry Schwarz in 1896 to Margaretha Griess, who later died with complications in birthing their tenth child. Henry and Margaretha were both great-grandchildren of the two pioneers that we followed from Germany to Russia, Johann Henrich Griess and Johann Nicolaus Ochsner. These two families became intertwined through many marriages between the children.

According to T. DeVries, 45 families left Emmanuel in 1897 and started the Free German Reformed Salem Church, independent of any denomination. DeVries reports that a possible reason was that Pastor Bonekemper had become rather authoritarian in the church. That first year they received their only pastor ever to grace her pulpits, Michael Hofer, who came from a Reformed church in South Dakota. He

2 On page 3, column 5 of the August 5, 1873 *Chicago Daily Tribune*. Accessed July 2024 at https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn84031492/1873-08-05.

3 Found in *Pioneers on Two Continents: The Ochsner-Griess History and Genealogy.*

served in Sutton for 31 years before his death. He also originated in a German colony in Ukraine. DeVries points out that rules of order in the church mandated the use of the German language. He surmises that the church members had the same idea in the United States as they did in Russia, to stay isolated and purely German. Henry Schwarz and family and many of the Griess family had their membership in this church. (Later, in 1908, due to disagreements, 72 families again left Emmanuel and started a third church, Hope Reformed Church. Both of these churches now belong to the Reformed Churches in the United States.)

Interestingly, this Free German Reformed Salem Church still exists today, with only aging members. Having never found a suitable pastor, the elders read Hofer's sermons every Sunday…*in German*. Attending a family reunion in 2023 in Sutton, NE, my husband, Tim Griess, and I, along with all his brothers and wives,



visited the original church building pictured here, still in use by them today. Their graveyard on the property, reserved only for members of the church, has a very large gravestone for their one beloved pastor. Over half of the last names on the 200+ gravestones are "Griess." The younger families left this church for the spiritual well-being of their children, who did not understand any of the service.

But, back to the history. Henry Schwarz became an elder in the Free German church as a young man, seemingly in office most of his time in the church. This included teaching Sunday school for decades, teaching in their German school that met for three months each year, and even performing and signing confirmation certificates (Tom DeVries' mother-in-law, Elizabeth [Ehly] Schwarz, had hers to prove it). Prior to Hofer's death in 1929, he appointed Henry to the teaching work. All sermons delivered by Henry were from six volumes containing 275 of Hofer's 800 sermons that he had left them. DeVries discusses that all five points of Calvinism can be found in Hofer's sermons. However, the Heidelberg Catechism was seldom used, and only the Lord's Prayer was used in the worship service. Tom discusses their antinomian ways, having the idea that prayer and the law were of none effect in the life of one who was saved by grace alone.

One other interesting tidbit that DeVries brings out is that Hofer might not have been ordained. He quotes George Rath, who tells a story of Hofer, who could not produce any documents of ordination.[4] It was confirmed that no record of his ordination existed in Russia. The congregations in South Dakota were willing to examine, license, and ordain him, but he refused. He caused great controversary in those churches and ended up starting his own independent church with his supporters. This may very well be the reason for one other rule of order mandated by the Sutton church: it must remain independent. One wonders if the Sutton members knew any of this history. DeVries points out that Hofer was held in high regard by Henry's children, who had grown up under his preaching.

Troubles were brewing in 1939. Henry's teaching did not conform to the members' antinomian perspectives. He taught that prayer and a proper walk in life were part of walking in gratitude to God, as the Heidelberg Catechism states in Q&A 116. During a Sunday service, another elder made the announcement of Henry's excommunication. A son and son-in-law stood up to protest, but to no avail. The entire family, including the children's spouses, walked out.

The family was shunned in Sutton. DeVries points out that this would be a great blessing to the family as they were now a remnant, taking a stance for the truth of God's Word. Tillie (Griess) Nelson recalls that her father, Albert Griess, and my husband's father, Gilbert Griess, were forsaken by their families who had stayed in the Hofer church. Tillie still remembers how her grandfather Henry Schwarz continued as an elder and teacher, establishing their own church at Henry's house.

4 According to T. DeVries' bibliography, this information was obtained from George Rath. *The Black Sea Germans in the Dakotas* (Freeman, SD: Pine Hill Press, 1977).

Her father, Albert Griess, and uncle, Fritz Schwarz, were appointed as elders, even baptizing a couple of children when Henry was ill and after his 1943 death.

In the next article we will follow the Griess-Ochsner-Schwarz families to Loveland, CO, where we see God's promise in Psalm 105:8 fulfilled, "He hath remembered his covenant for ever, the word which he commanded to a thousand generations."

CLASSIS WEST

Classis West of the Protestant Reformed Churches will meet in Calvary PRC on Wednesday, March 5, 2025, at 8:30 A.M. the Lord willing. All material for the agenda is to be in the hands of the stated clerk by February 3 (30 days before classis convenes). All delegates in need of lodging or transportation from the airport should notify the clerk of Calvary's consistory.

Rev. J. Engelsma,
Stated Clerk

CALL TO ASPIRANTS TO THE MINISTRY

All young men desiring to begin studies in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary in the 2025-2026 academic year should make application at the March 20, 2025 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 20 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

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