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Right receiving of the word preached

Rev. Ron VanOverloop

The covenant and Dordt—Election

Prof. Russell Dykstra

The nature of good works as works

Prof. Brian Huizinga

Learning before reproofing: The practice of elenctics

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Main characters in the most elegant book— The mineral “nitre”

Mr. Joel Minderhoud



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Meditation

Rev. Ronald VanOverloop, pastor of Grace Protestant Reformed Church in Standale, Michigan

Right receiving of the word preached

“These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.”

Acts 17: 11

God is pleased to use the preaching of His Word to work faith (Rom. 10:17).

God is pleased to use weak, sinful men to preach, which calls the hearers to focus on the voice of their Shepherd and not so much on the Shepherd’s instrument, the preacher.

God declares that the preaching of Christ crucified is the power and the wisdom of God (I Cor. 1:23, 24).

The great importance of the preaching of the gospel requires a proper attitude when receiving this preaching. Acts 17:11 describes this correct attitude of receiving the preaching of the gospel.

This text is found in that portion of Scripture that is detailing Paul’s second missionary journey. According to the end of chapter 16, Paul and Silas were escorted out of Philippi. From Philippi they went to Thessalonica, but they were there for only three weeks. The unbelieving Jews hired “certain lewd fellows of the baser sort” to create a mob that forced the missionaries out of the city. They went to the nearby city of Berea.

Paul, “as his manner was,” went into the synagogue at Berea on the Sabbath and preached “out of the scriptures” (v. 2). The manner of Paul’s preaching is described: he “reasoned” (gave careful, logical argument) out of Scripture, “opening” (explaining) and “alleging” (expositing) the Scriptures of the Old Testament (v. 3a). The content of Paul’s preaching to the primarily Jewish audience focused on what the Scriptures said of the Messiah, specifically that the Messiah must suffer, die, and rise again. And Paul sought to make clear that the Jesus of whom he preached was the promised Messiah who accomplished forgiveness for worthless sinners.

The Bereans were outstanding Bible students: they “searched the scriptures daily.” This implies that they

believed the Bible to be the standard of all truth for faith and life. They searched daily, not to increase their intellectual grasp of the content of the Scriptures, but because they were driven by a hunger for the knowledge of the Savior they and their children desperately needed. They were like the parents who insisted on bringing their infants and little children to Jesus, in spite of the disciples’ interference, because it was so important to them that Jesus bless their children (Mark 10:13-16).

Notice that the Bereans’ daily searching of the Scriptures did not make them minimize or despise the preaching of the Word by a man sent from God. They were convicted by the Scriptures that faith is worked and strengthened by the preaching (Rom. 10:13-17). They knew that the preaching of Scripture has the effective power to make one wise unto salvation (I Cor. 1:18-24).

The Bereans “received” the message of the gospel of salvation by attending the preaching and by listening. They listened attentively (carefully and receptively). They assented to the truth of it and believed it (v. 12). And they embraced it. They loved the Word as a pearl of great price because they saw it as the Word of God Himself (v. 13) and because it gave them the knowledge and assurance that they were delivered from the dominion and slavery of sin. It was the voice of their beloved Shepherd!

How did the outstanding Bible students of the Berean Christian church receive the preaching of God’s Word through the apostle Paul?

First and foremost, they received the preached word “with all readiness of mind.” The word translated “readiness” refers to an eagerness or willingness. They had a zeal for the word preached. In other words, they received the preaching of the Word of God with enthusiasm. That means, negatively, that they did not receive the Word grudgingly; they did not listen looking for errors; they did not listen worried about the time.

Their eager and enthusiastic hearing was in all likelihood related to Paul’s preaching, which was equally enthusiastic. He was eager to demonstrate from the Old

Testament Scriptures that Jesus was the promised Messiah. The enthusiasm of the Berean Christians arose from their fervent desire to hear that in the Messiah there is forgiveness, that in Jesus there is salvation from sin. They were not looking for a Messiah who would establish an earthly kingdom. They were hungering and thirsting for the knowledge and assurance that they were forgiven and righteous through the work of the Messiah. Paul preached that Jesus was the Messiah whose suffering and rising from the dead accomplished complete salvation for them (v. 3).

Their enthusiastic reception led to faith, for “many believed” (v. 12). The Spirit gives this enthusiastic receiving of the preaching and then works faith, both for the first time, and continually in the souls of God’s children. The Berean Christians were sinners who were desperate to know forgiveness. It had to have been a great joy to know that their hope in the promised Messiah was realized and fulfilled in the Jesus whom Paul preached.

Secondly, the enthusiastic receiving of the Word by the Berean Christians was accompanied with a critical mind, for they “searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.”

There is a critical attendance of the preaching that is wrong. It is characterized by fault-finding and leads to “roast preacher.” For such a critical mindset the angels themselves would not be good enough preachers.

What made the critical reception of the Bereans proper?

First, notice the clear implication that they held the Old Testament writings to be truth, and to be the only way to identify what is truth. They did not investigate the Bible to see whether it was true. They obviously accepted it to be inerrant, reliable, and authoritative.

Second, it should be obvious that they did not believe what Paul preached just because he was an apostle and an excellent, powerful preacher. They could never be accused of following a man. Instead, they compared what Paul preached out of the Scriptures with Scripture. Paul consistently showed them what the Old Testament Scriptures said about the Messiah having to suffer and die and rise again. Paul’s exposition was similar to what Jesus did with the two travelers to Emmaus, namely, “beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:27). Paul’s preaching was a biblical exposition of an Old Testament passage, which he explained in light of other passages and in light of the whole of Scripture. The proper critical reception the Bereans had was that on the basis of the Scriptures they searched, they received the preached Word.

Such critical reception of the preaching is the only proper way to receive the preaching. It is not a threat to receiving God’s Word, but is the right way to receive the preaching. It shows that Scripture is the final authority and that it is perspicuous, that is, clear on its teachings concerning salvation in Jesus Christ. And it shows that the office of all believer enables them to judge all things by the Scriptures.

Such receiving of the preaching of God’s Word made the Bereans “noble.” This word means that they were “well born,” that they had the quality of excellence worthy of admiration.

True nobility is spiritual, and it arises from the enthusiastic reception of God’s Word. The nobility of a church is not in its size or its building, but in its enthusiastic receiving of the Word. Individual nobility is not in being born and baptized in a certain church, nor in one’s earthly riches, nor in one’s earthly accomplishments, but is found in one’s enthusiastic receiving of the preached Word.

The spiritually noble are those born into the royal family of God. They have the sovereign King as their Father. They receive the preached Word gladly and eagerly because their hearts have been opened (born again) by the Spirit of God; they are “well born” with regeneration. And they are excited and anxious to hear the truth of the Messiah crucified and risen, so that they might know and be assured of their forgiveness and salvation.

In conclusion, what are we to learn from these Bereans?

May the preacher preach exclusively out of the Scriptures, “opening and alleging.” May he set forth Scripture’s message of salvation by faith in Jesus Christ.

May the ones who gather under the preaching of God’s Word receive God’s Word willingly and eagerly. May they hold the Scriptures to be their faithful guide for what they believe and how they are to live. May they be searching the Scriptures daily so that they can knowledgeably receive the preaching of forgiveness and salvation in Jesus Christ. May they find in the Scriptures the knowledge of their worthlessness and the knowledge of Christ’s infinite riches. May they reject all that does not match with the Bible, and may they love all that does. May such hearers know that God would say of them that they are spiritually noble.



Editorial

Prof. Russell Dykstra, professor of Church History and New Testament in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary

The covenant and Dordt— Election continued

The Reformed, which is to say, biblical doctrine of salvation maintains that God sovereignly saves His *chosen* people. The Canons of Dordt set forth this truth beautifully. The Canons demonstrate that the race of man fell in Adam and every individual is born guilty and polluted with sin. Everyone is in fact dead in sin, hates God, and rejects His Son, Jesus. And yet, some out of this fallen race do come to love God and do believe in Jesus as Savior. What explains this difference? These are the people chosen (before time) by God unto salvation in Christ. Christ died for those only, and faith is worked in them alone, and they alone persevere unto eternal life.

In harmony with that Reformed teaching that grounds salvation in election, we have been demonstrating that God also grounds His *covenant* in election. He establishes His covenant of grace with the elect alone. In His love and mercy, God establishes His covenant with believers and their seed, as He promised Abraham in Genesis 17:7.¹ As we noted in the previous editorial, the word “seed” does not refer to all the natural children of believers. God does not promise to establish His covenant of love and friendship with every child of every believer. For the “seed” is Christ² and God establishes the covenant with Him and all those who are in Christ.³

Accordingly, believing parents can and do lay hold on God’s promise that He continues His covenant in the generations of believers. They rejoice in the evidence found in their children that God is pleased to gather His church from their generations. But parents do not—may not!—insist that God promises to establish His covenant with *every one* of their children. And all believers

are also—must also!—be mindful that God continues His covenant in the way of believers diligently teaching their children and rearing them in the fear of the Lord. A believer, being necessarily elect in Christ, will never lose his place in God’s covenant. However, believers in their generations can be cut off.

As we noted in the October 15 editorial, the truth that Christ is Head of God’s covenant is demonstrated by the teaching in Romans 5. The inspired apostle teaches that Adam, as covenant head of the race, brought sin and death on the entire race by his one sin. On the other hand, those in Christ are saved, justified in His blood. This Adam “is the figure of him that was to come” (Rom. 5:14), which is to say, Adam was a type of Christ. It follows then that since Adam *as covenant head* brought on the fall and condemnation of the race, Christ *as covenant head* saved the ‘race,’ that is, the elect race out of all nations.

In addition, Psalm 89 demonstrates that God established His covenant with *Christ*. The beauty of that truth is that the covenant cannot be broken (that is, destroyed or dissolved), for it is with Christ who will never fail in the covenant. Christ’s *people* sin and transgress against the covenant (in that sense, “break” the covenant), and God visits “their transgression with the rod” (v. 32). Yet God promises, “My covenant will I not break, nor alter the thing that is gone out of my lips” (v. 34).

Christ is the Head of God’s covenant people. He is both Mediator and Head of the covenant.

This is also the teaching of the Canons of Dordt. Recall that the Canons assume the doctrine of the covenant, referring to it several times. However, the Canons have little direct teaching on the covenant. Nonetheless, the Canons, when speaking of the work Christ accomplished as Redeemer, indicate that He is the legal Head of God’s covenant established with the elect. Demonstrating this will require comparing various articles of the Canons, which we will now do. A warning in advance: The following demonstration of what the Canons teach includes some close argumenta-

1 Genesis 17:7, “And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee.”

2 Galatians 3:16, “Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ.”

3 Galatians 3:29, “And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.”

tion, and it will require not only a very *careful* reading but perhaps a *second* reading. This is not for casual reading on a sleepy Sunday afternoon.

The Second Head of the Canons concerns “The Death of Christ and the Redemption of Men Thereby.” In that Head, Article 8 is the central article on the atoning death of Christ. It reads:

For this was the sovereign counsel and most gracious will and purpose of God the Father, that the quickening and saving efficacy of the most precious death of His Son should extend to all the elect, for bestowing upon them alone the gift of justifying faith, thereby to bring them infallibly to salvation: that is, it was the will of God that Christ by the blood of the cross, whereby He confirmed the new covenant, should effectually redeem out of every people, tribe, nation, and language, all those, and those only, who were from eternity chosen to salvation and given to Him by the Father; that He should confer upon them faith, which, together with all the other saving gifts of the Holy Spirit, He purchased for them by His death; should purge them from all sin, both original and actual, whether committed before or after believing; and, having faithfully preserved them even to the end, should at last bring them free from every spot and blemish to the enjoyment of glory in His own presence forever.

Before we consider the place of the covenant in this article, notice a few of the main teachings of the article. First, election governs the atoning death of Christ. The article starts that way, asserting that God intended (His counsel, will, and purpose) that the saving efficacy of the death of Christ “should extend to all the elect.” And later, it states that God intended that Christ “should effectually redeem...all those, and those only, who were from eternity chosen to salvation, and given to Him by the Father....”

Second, the death of Christ is *efficacious*—it saves everyone for whom Christ died. You will find this in the previous paragraph, which quotes the words “saving efficacy” and “effectually redeem.”

Third, the article emphasizes “justifying faith” as the central blessing of Christ’s death. This is done not only because the Arminian doctrines denied justification by faith, but also because justification is the first and the primary blessing of salvation. If God justifies, declaring one to be righteous, He will surely follow that with *all* the blessings of salvation. And the article makes plain that this faith is not a condition, for it is “the gift” that is part of “the quickening and saving efficacy of the most precious death of His Son.” The article also states that “faith...together with all the other saving gifts of the

Holy Spirit, He purchased for them by His death.” Faith is *part* of the salvation that Christ earned, not a condition to salvation.

Finally, notice that the death of Christ gives *full* salvation, including not only faith, but also purging from sin, preserving to the end, and, finally, glory. When Christ died, He accomplished all this for the elect.

According to Article 8, Christ also *confirmed the new covenant by the blood of the cross*. What does that mean?

It means that Christ died as Head of the covenant and Head of His covenant people. Christ by His death actually merited for all the elect (and those only) all the benefits of salvation, which are all the benefits of the covenant. These benefits are given to the elect alone.

That this is what the Canons intended is made plain by the rejection of errors in the Second Head, especially Article 2. It reads:

The true doctrine having been explained, the Synod rejects the errors of those who teach: That it was not the purpose of the death of Christ that He should confirm the new covenant of grace through His blood, but only that He should acquire for the Father the mere right to establish with man such a covenant as He might please, whether of grace or of works. For this is repugnant to Scripture, which teaches that Christ has become the Surety and Mediator of a better, that is, the new covenant, and that a testament is of force where death has occurred (Heb. 7:22; 9:15, 17).

The Arminians ever sought to reduce the power of the death of Christ and to make salvation dependent on the choice of man. Accordingly, they maintained that God did not purpose (intend) that “the death of Christ should confirm the new covenant of grace.” Rather (said the Arminians), the purpose was that His death should give “the Father the mere right to establish with man such a covenant as He might please, whether of grace or of works.”

Not so, maintain the Canons. Rather, Christ confirmed the new covenant of grace. In the rejection of the Arminians’ error, this article refers to two passages in Hebrews that teach that Jesus became Surety of a better covenant or testament. Two aspects of these passages in Hebrews will prove how wrong the Arminians are.

First, the Article insists that Christ is a “Surety” of the covenant.⁴ A *surety* is a guarantee associated with payment of a debt. It is similar to a co-signer on a loan. A man who becomes a surety promises to be responsible

⁴ This is based on Hebrews 7:22, “By so much was Jesus made a surety of a better testament.”

for the debt if the borrower is not able to pay it.⁵ Christ became the surety of the covenant. He would stand for the debt of the covenant people. If they were not able to pay their debt, Christ would pay it. And, of course, they could not pay the infinite debt of their sin and guilt, nor bear the punishment that God's justice required. Christ did so in their place. He could do so *in their place* because He was their *representative Head*. By means of this substitutionary atonement, the covenant is confirmed, and the blessings of the covenant conferred to all the covenant people.

But there is more in this article. The covenant in Hebrews 7 and 9 is called a *testament*.⁶ That is, the covenant is like the last will and testament that a man writes for bestowing his inheritance to his children. Now, as everyone knows, the testament is of no force so long as

⁵ The wise father in Proverbs 6 warns his son against being surety, even for his friend. See also Proverbs 11, 17.

⁶ Hebrews 9:15, "And for this cause he is the mediator of the new testament, that by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first testament, they which are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance." And verse 17, "For a testament is of force after men are dead: otherwise it is of no strength at all while the testator liveth."

the man is alive. Similarly, says Hebrews 9, the testament of God with His people required a death. Christ made the testament of God to be in force when He died. In this way, to use the language of the Canons, He "confirmed the new covenant of grace."

Taking this with Head II, Article 8, it is obvious that Christ died as Head of the covenant. His death confirmed the covenant, making it to be in force for all who are named as 'children' in God's covenant. These children are the elect, "from eternity chosen to salvation, and given to [Christ] by the Father." With the death of Christ, these children receive the "promise of the eternal inheritance" (Heb. 7:15), God's promise of eternal life, which cannot fail. In addition, Christ's death was a payment for the debt of the covenant people. As surety, Christ truly paid their debt, earning their full salvation. And for whom? Once again, the elect. But Christ could only be the surety if He was also the legal head of the covenant people, representing them in the cross.

Christ is both the Mediator and the Head of God's covenant of grace. And that covenant is with the elect, and the elect alone.

This is what the Canons maintain.

Letters

Faith as a doing?

Having waited in vain for response to one of the editors' calling Herman Hoeksema's denial that faith is a work "nonsense," with an exclamation point (see the *Standard Bearer*, vol. 95, no. 12, p. 279), I am compelled to write in protest. (I confess that I hesitate still, even though my name has been raised, because the entire, ongoing debate over good works is a "red herring" among us. The debate over works in the Christian life was occasioned by a sermon on John 14:6 that was not in error on the matter of antinomism, indeed had nothing whatever to do with antinomism. By the judgment of the Synod of 2017, the error was a compromising of salvation by grace. Introduction of the error of antinomism into the debate was flagrant misleading of the PRC—a "red herring." Carrying on this debate, as though this were the issue in the sermon judged in 2017, is foolishness on our part. I now participate in the foolishness.) Nevertheless, since in the course of the mistaken, and completely unnecessary, debate about works and working Hoeksema's explanation of faith as our doing "nothing" has been dismissed and demeaned

as "nonsense," I call for an apology. I doubt that in all his public writing and speaking, much less *preaching*, Hoeksema ever uttered nonsense, much less nonsense deserving of an exclamation point. Undoubtedly, he was in error on occasion. But "nonsense," never. Not even his avowed foes accused him of nonsense.

What aggravates the offense of charging him with "nonsense" is that Hoeksema wrote the statement thus ridiculed in the heat of the controversy in the Protestant Reformed Churches over faith as the gift of God or faith as a condition that man must fulfill for salvation. The statement, therefore, would have represented his careful, studied conviction regarding the crucial issue in a controversy that concerned the grace of salvation. To dismiss such a statement as "nonsense" is at the very least to jeopardize Hoeksema's and the Protestant Reformed Churches' confession that faith is not a condition—a work of man—unto salvation, but the gracious gift of God.

What Hoeksema meant, what the statement means, and what I believe and defend is that faith is not a "doing" by the sinner that, as a "doing," contributes to his

righteousness or accomplishes his salvation along with the doing of Jesus Christ. Righteousness is not by faith and by faith's "doing." It is not by faith *as* man's doing. It is as gravely erroneous to make faith man's saving "doing," whether with or without the help of God, as it is to teach justification by faith and by the sinner's working ("doing").

In the matter of righteousness with God, any aspect of salvation, and the obtaining of eternal life, salvation is by faith alone—faith as the bond of union with Christ, faith that then becomes active in knowing Christ and resting upon Him by the working in the elect sinner of the Holy Ghost. A "working" of the sinner is excluded. His working follows, as *fruit* of faith (see Rom. 7:4; Eph. 2:10; Belgic Confession, Articles 22-24). Our working accomplishes nothing of our salvation, including our working the work of faith. Faith is the God-given *means* of our salvation. It is not a work of ours upon which salvation depends, or a work of ours that cooperates with grace, or *the means of salvation by virtue of its being a working of ours*.

Whatever the Philippian jailor had in mind with his question, "What must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:30), Paul's response, "Believe," meant: "Do not work for salvation. Man's working is not the way to be saved. The sole way to be saved is by believing." And this believing, although it is obviously spiritual activity by the believer, is, in reality and emphatically, a *not-working*.

It may count for something that I call attention to the fact that I confessed and explained faith as a not-working long ago in the pages of the *Standard Bearer*:

As the activity of the elect sinner, faith is not on his part the doing of a work alongside or along with the work of God in Christ, but the utter renunciation of all human work, *including believing as a human work*, and a relying on the work of God in Christ alone. It is of the essence of faith to renounce every work, and all working of the sinner himself, *including repenting and believing*, as earning, contributing to, conditioning, or making effectual the saving work of God in Christ, whether the saving work of God in Christ is viewed as justification, membership in the covenant, or the blessings of the covenant (*Standard Bearer*, vol. 79, no. 20, pp. 465, 466).

There are two conceivable ways of being saved: working (doing) and believing. Believing is not only a not-working (but a resting, a resting on the work and working of Jesus Christ). It is also the conscious, deliberate, total rejection and renunciation of working, including faith as a working.

To make this utter *renunciation* of working a novel

form of working is a complete, and dangerous, misunderstanding of faith and faith's activity, namely, the activity of not working.

Faith is not another human work that cooperates with the work of Christ in accomplishing the salvation of the sinner. Faith is not the means of salvation *as a human "doing."* The gospel of grace rejects all human working as contributing to salvation, including faith as a human "doing."

To contend that, because faith always "does," that is, works, salvation is by faith and faith's "doing," or that salvation is by faith *as* a "doing" is ominously similar to Rome's argument that, because faith loves, salvation is by faith and love. Faith does indeed love, but justification is by faith alone, without its loving (on our part). So also, faith always works (does), but salvation is by faith alone, without its works and working (by us).

The fear, or accusation, as the case may be, that Hoeksema, and we who stand with him on the issue, are hereby constrained to answer those who ask, "what shall I do to be saved?" (in any sense whatever) with the absurd words, "do nothing," displays ignorance of the truth of the matter. Perhaps then, this response to the fear, or accusation, may help to achieve unity among us: to everyone who asks, "what must I do to be saved?" the loud, clear, unembarrassed, urgent answer is, "repent of your sins and believe on Jesus Christ crucified and risen!" (with an exclamation point). And this answer is, in fact, the emphatic declaration, "*Do nothing!*" (with an exclamation point). "*Do nothing!*" "*Do absolutely nothing!*"

The issue of salvation by faith as a human "doing" or by faith as a not-doing was settled at the Synod of Dordt. The decision of Dordt was reaffirmed by the Protestant Reformed "Declaration of Principles" in the early 1950s.

Prof. David J. Engelsma

Response:

Brother Engelsma:

You are right, I should not have responded to Hoeksema's statement "We must do nothing" with the retort "Nonsense!" The retort was unbecoming and something on which HH's critics would pounce. In fact, after I submitted my response, and then read it later in the *SB*, I chided myself and wished I had written something along these lines instead, "With all due respect, I disagree with Hoeksema's explanation of the apostle's response to the Philippian jailor, namely, "you are to do nothing," as if that was the emphasis and what the apostle was seeking to convey." As I stated in a later response, I esteem HH highly and am in agreement all

down the line with his dogmatics and the theology he championed at great cost. He deserved better from my pen. My apologies to our readers.

That said, before I deal with the essence of your letter, a couple of other matters. First, let me state that I take exception to your statement that one of the editors (namely myself) was guilty of “calling Herman Hoeksema’s denial that *faith is a work* ‘nonsense.’” That I never did. Of course, faith is not a work. And to suggest it should be viewed as such would make one guilty of heresy. What I disagreed with was HH’s explanation that what the apostle required of the Philippian jailor in response to the gospel call was that he was to “do nothing.” And that is a different issue. Let us not forget that no less worthy than Calvin had a much different view than Hoeksema when it came to explaining the spirit behind the same question asked by Jews of the apostles on Pentecost and then the apostolic response informing them what they were to do. I refer all once again to Calvin’s sermon on Acts 2:36, 37, a passage with striking similarities to the Acts 16 passage. I trust we are not going to charge Calvin with being guilty of turning repentance and faith into works or a new works-righteousness after all.

The issue of antinomianism

Second, I take exception to the notion that the issue of antinomianism was extraneous to this controversy with its ensuing debate. Contrary to your assertion, it was not a “red herring.” It was plain from the outset that the orthodoxy of the phrase “in the way of” was part of what was being challenged, as in, “Is fellowship with God (its ongoing enjoyment), as well as reassuring one that he is a believer, to be found (experienced) in the way of obedience? And, is obedience unto godliness (that is, the ‘must’ of good works) to be preached and exhorted with that reality in mind?”

That the above assertion is true is clear from what is found in various documents treated by our broader assemblies over the past few years. Even after the 2018 synodical decisions declared the phrase “in the way of” to be orthodox and useful in explaining the necessary relation between the godly life and the blessings of salvation, the issue has not been laid to rest. A significant amount of time had to be spent by our most recent synod dealing with protests and appeals that continued in various ways to challenge the legitimate use of that phrase.

Simply put, to challenge the orthodoxy of the phrase “in the way of,” as it ties in with the benefits and necessity of good works in the life of the Christian, opens the door to antinomianism. And where that error is

present, hyper-Calvinism with its opposition to the Reformed truth of ‘duty faith’ rears its head as well.

My raising the issue of antinomianism in my first article in the *SB* on the Fourth Head of the Canons of Dordt was neither a “red-herring,” nor was it an implied disagreement with the decisions of the 2018 Synod, as some have insinuated.

I was assigned the Fourth Head (on Irresistible Grace) for the *SB* as we marked the 400th anniversary of the Canons. It cannot be denied that the Fourth Head was drawn up as it was, in part, to refute the Arminian charge that the rigorous Calvinism of the truly Reformed and its emphasis on election and sovereign grace would lead to antinomianism and what is now known as a ‘hyper-Calvinism.’ Claimed the Arminians, the fullness of the gospel call to faith and repentance would be truncated. Men would be viewed as mere incapable, unresponsive ‘stocks and blocks.’ Scriptural phrases such as “whosoever wills” and “Turn ye, turn ye, for why will ye die, O house of Israel” would be rendered suspect, either muted or altogether ignored in the gospel calls. Such declarations would, by the Calvinists, be judged to place too much emphasis on the calling and necessary response of man to these gospel exhortations and calls.

Not so, as the Fourth Head makes plain (III/IV, 17 and V, 14). Why not? Because the Holy Spirit, who sets free the will of the elect, is pleased to use these exhortations to weigh upon their hearts and consciences in order to bring about conversion and prompt the activity, the response of faith (believing).

And, it was with the Canons in mind, as I was writing my October 1, 2018 *SB* editorial, that I could agree with the doctrinal decisions drawn up by the 2018 Synod. I did not judge them to hinder or fetter the freedom of the gospel call with its command to all and sundry to repent and believe.

Nonetheless, if we learn anything from history, it is that the threat of the ‘hyper’ mentality has remained a very real threat to Reformed orthodoxy. And it has not been unknown in our own churches. In the mid-1980s, Classis West dealt exactly with that error in one of our churches, as some sought to mute the full gospel preaching with its exhortations and warnings. We both served as delegates at that Classis, as I recall. And others of our colleagues can tell us, they have had on occasion to deal with this same mentality in their pastoral ministries.

So, a reminder in my October 1, 2018 article that the Canons, though a 400-year-old document, have always been and still remain “in season.”

As to faith and doing

Now back to your letter and your contention that faith is not to be referred to as a ‘doing.’ You state, “[Faith] is not a work of ours upon which salvation depends, or a work of ours that cooperates with grace, or *the means of salvation by virtue of its being a working of ours.*”

Dominating that sentence is the word “work,” declaring that faith is not a work, our work, in any sense of the word. With that I agree. The activity of faith to which the gospel calls us is not to be confused with a work, our working, in any shape or form. Faith is certainly not some kind of a new, substitute work, a “doing” on which our salvation now *depends*. Such would smack of conditional theology. Neither have I used such language, as I have stated more than once.

But your point is that to refer to faith as a “doing” on our part in any sense would imply that faith is a work after all, and, therefore, the word “doing” in connection with faith must be erased from our vocabulary. Others in our circles have expressed the same conviction.

Having read the objections and fears of yourself and others, perhaps it is time to cease referring to faith as a “doing” lest it appear we have turned faith into a working. This in the interests of removing this as an issue creating division in our churches and bringing unity again. For my part, I am willing to do that.

However, that said, I note that you were compelled to refer to faith as an activity, in fact, as the believer’s activity. You state, “And this believing, although it is obviously spiritual activity by the believer [!], is, in reality and emphatically, a *not-working.*”

I note that you do not call believing an activity “in the believer,” nor even “of the believer” but “by the believer.” Precisely correct, the language that is to be maintained at all costs. Exactly my point and concern from the beginning.

It is that perspective, that believing is a spiritual activity *by* the believer, that brings us to what I am convinced is at stake in this whole controversy and resulting debate. In the interests of eliciting and calling forth that activity, namely, the response of one actively and consciously believing and laying hold upon Jesus as one’s only hope and righteousness, the question has become, what phrases will be countenanced and considered orthodox in our midst? I must admit I have begun to wonder whether even that phrase, “*laying hold* upon Jesus,” is not suspect with some these days. After all, it refers not just to the *eye* of faith and looking to Jesus, but to the *hand* of faith (cf. Belgic Conf., Art. 22) reaching out like the women with the issue of blood to touch the hem of Jesus’ garment—a gospel passage that is filled with practical applications to those sitting under

gospel preaching with its call. The use of such phrases in our preaching as they are found in Scripture, phrases formulated by a passage itself, ought not be, must not be, rendered suspect of being unorthodox, as if they somehow magnify man and make salvation dependent on man.

That said, my chief concern is the freedom of language in the call of the gospel on the mission fields.

Are missionaries, when approached by those who come with the same question as that of the Jews on Pentecost and of the Philippian jailor, asking “What must we do?” to have the boldness simply to say, “You *must* repent! You *must* believe!”

Early in his sermon on the Philippian jailor, Hoeksema states that members of his congregation would say, “But dominie, we *must* believe!” To whom he says he responded, “No! No, we mustn’t believe. Why don’t you say, we *do believe* (emphasis HH).” He said this, no doubt, due to a fear that some had a conditional covenant mentality.

To be sure, in a congregation of believers such might be an appropriate response due to certain misconceptions some have, though even there, surely, neither the “must” of repentance, nor the “must” of believing to this or that word of God must be thought out of place. But it is entirely another matter to respond that way on a mission field. For the apostle to have responded to the as yet *unbelieving* Philippian jailor in his perplexity with the words, “You *have* faith,” would have been completely improper.

The calling actively to believe, confessing Jesus as God’s Christ and one’s own Savior, had to be laid upon the jailor. In similar fashion, the repentance unto faith had to be called forth in the Jews who in Acts 2 asked that same question. In neither instance did the apostles say, “Do nothing” or, “There is nothing you are called to do.”

In their preaching the apostles certainly would have made the point that for salvation there was nothing that a man could do or imagine he should do to make himself *worthy* of salvation and righteousness. Not even one’s faith. It is in and of and by Christ and His work alone. That is gospel truth. Either this truth would have been brought home to the hearers previous to the command to repent (as in the Acts 2 account), or it would have to be brought home following the gospel imperative, “Believe” (as in the Acts 16 account). But faced with that question “Sirs, what must we do?” by inquirers not yet believers, “Do nothing” was not the apostolic response or words.

Why not?

Because the impression must not be left with the in-

quirers that not only was there nothing they could do to make themselves *worthy* of salvation, but neither was there anything *further required* of them. “What must you do, you ask. Nothing, nothing further is *required* of you.” As if it was enough that they realized they were guilty sinners and worthy of God’s wrath for their past lives and deeds.

Not so. Something was yet required of them, namely, a response, the proper response to the call of the gospel, which is to say, heart-felt repentance to be expressed in the one instance and faith as believing in the other (two sides of the same coin). And such a response is not a nothing, it is something.

Who can deny that faith, faith as believing in the Jesus as Lord and Savior, is the proper *response* to the gospel call, or is what the command of the gospel *requires* of the hearer? It is urgent, while it is yet “to-day if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts” (Heb. 4:7), lest one be charged in the day of days with not obeying the command of the gospel (Rom. 10:16). It is what the Holy Spirit by the call of gospel and its command draws out of the regenerated person whose heart He has pricked by the gospel truth proclaimed (Acts 2:37). It is the solemn responsibility to be laid by

the gospel preacher upon everyone who comes under the gospel call. And until one is willing to express this faith and believing under the promiscuous call of the gospel, one cannot consider himself to be saved. Without this response, it is evident that the Spirit has not yet made one willing in the day of His power.

This is the freedom of the call of the gospel which gospel preachers must have. For my part I am convinced we can do that without referring to faith and believing as a “doing.” But we cannot do that if we deny the calling of the gospel preacher to make plain to the troubled inquirer that there is a proper, necessary response required of (by) him, namely, believing on the Lord Jesus Christ as the one only ground of and hope for salvation with God.

Faith as believing: a spiritual activity *by* the believer. With that I am in complete agreement. If we agree on that, as apparently we do, we are in basic agreement both as to faith and the preaching that the Holy Spirit is pleased to use to draw His gift of faith into proper activity and expression.

Yours in Christ’s service,
Rev. Kenneth Koole



All around us

Rev. Martyn McGeown, missionary-pastor of the Covenant Protestant Reformed Church in Northern Ireland, stationed in Limerick, Republic of Ireland

Madness in British Columbia; Pope Francis and Al Azhar el-Tayeb

Madness in British Columbia

We live in an age in which there is a new hierarchy of rights, with transgender rights currently at the apex. Because of the perceived rights of “sexual minorities,” more and more small business owners feel the pressure. We have already seen Christian bakers, florists, and photographers harassed for declining to service same-sex weddings. Transgender activists are now targeting small businesses also to demand official recognition of their “gender identity.” One controversial case came to light recently, and although Christians will not be affected in this case, for they would not practice such a profession, a disturbing story from Canada shows the direction in which transgender activism is heading.

Jonathan Yaniv calls himself Jessica Yaniv and is seeking a female aesthetician to wax the hair around his private parts. (I am trying to make this report as family-friendly as possible, and I deliberately avoid links to articles because they usually include a picture of Yaniv.) In 2018 Yaniv filed sixteen human rights complaints with the British Columbia Human Rights Tribunal because the business owners in question declined to provide the service that he demanded. Many of these aestheticians are immigrants from a non-Canadian culture, they work from home, they are married, and they have small children at home. Moreover, as they attempted to explain, they provide their services *only to women*. Yaniv booked appointments through social

media with sixteen of them, using the name “Jessica.” When the aestheticians discovered that Yaniv is, in fact, a biological male, and does not have female genitalia, they cancelled his appointment. They argued that they did not have the training or equipment to perform male beauty treatments, and that their husbands were uncomfortable with them servicing male clients, whereupon Yaniv sued them for “transphobic discrimination.”

I am not making this up! Time will tell whether the British Columbia Human Rights Tribunal will agree with Yaniv, who argues that businesses should not be allowed to refuse service to transgender people simply because they have religiously or culturally based misgivings about providing beauty treatments to biological males, even if those biological males identify as females.

This is utter madness. If the issue was whether or not a transgender person should be served in a restaurant, there would be no problem: one does not necessarily have to approve of a person’s lifestyle to serve him or her; but when the service is as intimate as this one is, the right to refuse should be enshrined in law. If the Equality Act, which I recently highlighted in this rubric, becomes federal law in the USA, expect situations like this in the USA also.

Pope Francis and Al Azhar el-Tayeb sign “Document on Human Fraternity”

On February 4, 2019, Pope Francis, the self-proclaimed head of Christendom (in reality, the head of the false church of Rome), and Al Azhar el-Tayeb, the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar (Cairo, Egypt), a leading figure in Islam, signed a joint declaration in Abu Dhabi, the United Arab Emirates: “Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together.”¹ The document is not a religious text, although it does decry the increasing secularization and materialism of the modern world, but it is a call to action, akin to the manifesto of a left-wing political party.

The theological basis for this document is the universal fatherhood of God and brotherhood of men, as well as the common grace of God to all men. Since all men are the offspring of one Creator, they are brothers.

¹ The text of the document is available here, <https://www.vatican-news.va/en/pope/news/2019-02/pope-francis-uae-declaration-with-al-azhar-grand-imam.html>.

“Faith,” begins the document, “leads a believer to see in the other a brother or sister to be supported and loved. Through faith in God, who has created the universe, creatures, and all human beings (equal on account of his mercy), believers are called to express this human fraternity.” Believers do this, continues the document, “by safeguarding creation and the entire universe and supporting all persons, especially the poorest and those most in need.”

The document gives examples of the kinds of needy, vulnerable people who should be the objects of believers’ (by which the document means Christians and Muslims) compassion, and whom governments should be encouraged to protect and help: “the poor, the destitute, the marginalized...orphans, widows, refugees... victims of war, persecution, and injustice...prisoners of war, and those tortured.” The signatories “call upon... the leaders of the world, as well as the architects of international policy and world economy, to work strenuously to spread the culture of tolerance and of living together in peace, to intervene at the earliest opportunity to stop the shedding of innocent blood, and to bring an end to wars, conflicts, environmental decay, and the moral and cultural decline that the world is presently experiencing.”

The document also identifies what Pope Francis and Al Azhar el-Tayeb view as the causes of the world’s ills: “a desensitized human conscience, a distancing from religious values, and a prevailing individualism accompanied by materialistic philosophies that defy the human person and introduce worldly and material values in place of supreme and transcendental principles.” The encroaching secularism—that is, departure from faith in the living God (although the true and living God of Holy Scripture is absent from this document, and is replaced by a deity supposedly common to Romanists and Muslims)—“contributes to a general feeling of frustration, isolation, and desperation, leading many to fall into a vortex of atheistic, agnostic, or religious extremism, or into blind and fanatic extremism.”

While the document refers to God, the deity is referenced in the most general terms to avoid offending the religious sensibilities of the pope or the Grand Imam. The “God” of this document is merely the Creator: “The first and most important aim of religions is to believe in

The “God” confessed in this document, therefore, is not the God of Holy Scripture, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the triune God, but a “god” into which both the pope and the Muslim can pour their ideas of the divine without unnecessarily alienating one another.

God, to honour him, and to invite all men and women to believe that this universe depends on a God who governs it.” The “God” confessed in this document, therefore, is not the God of Holy Scripture, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the triune God, but a “god” into which both the pope and the Muslim can pour their ideas of the divine without unnecessarily alienating one another. After all, Pope Francis is supposed to confess that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and is supposedly trinitarian in his theology, while Al-Azhar el-Tayeb rejects the divinity of Christ and views trinitarian theology as blasphemy against Allah and his prophet, Mohammed. These differences are, of course, ignored in the document, lest the whole ecumenical, syncretistic endeavour should unravel. In fact, the document, for all its talk of religion, does not mention Christ—not even once.

The document even celebrates diversity as a gift of God grounded in human freedom: “Freedom is a right of every person; each individual enjoys the freedom of belief, thought, expression, and action. The pluralism and the diversity of religions, colour, sex, race, and language are willed by God in his wisdom, through which he created human beings.” Therefore, forced adherence to religion or culture must be rejected. When the document teaches that God “willed” religious pluralism (that is, the coexistence of different beliefs and religions), it appears to be referring not to God’s sovereign decree (something the pope would view as incompatible with human freedom), but to God’s *approval* of such divergent beliefs. The “god” of “The Document on Human Fraternity” is tolerant, inclusive, and does not appear to condemn idolatry, seemingly content that his children reach him in different ways, through Romanism, Islam, or through any other belief system, whether or not it is in harmony with his revealed Word. Indeed, religious fanaticism is condemned in the document: “Terrorism...is not due to religion, even when terrorists instrumentalize it. It is due, rather, to an accumulation of incorrect interpretations of religious texts.” “We thus call upon all concerned to stop using religions to incite hatred, violence, extremism, and blind fanaticism, and to refrain from using the name of God to justify acts of murder, exile, terrorism, and oppression...God, the Almighty,

has no need to be defended by anyone, and does not want his name to be used to terrorize people.”

Moreover, the document promotes “human dignity,” and is sharply critical of dehumanizing public policy, such as exploitation of the poor, human trafficking, terrorism, the abuse of women and children, and other evils, but it ignores the real source of human misery, namely sin. Obviously, too, the document cannot bring the only comfort and the only deliverance from human misery, which is the perfect satisfaction of Jesus Christ

on the cross for sin. The document cannot proclaim the forgiveness of sins to the believer in Jesus Christ, for the signatories do not believe the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Christians certainly oppose the social ills decried in this document, but we do not expect the church to address them in any official capacity. The church

is not called to eradicate poverty, improve living conditions in the Third World, promote equal rights under the law or preserve the environment, which things have their place, but not as the official work of the church. The church, which is the pillar and ground of the truth, has her own work to do: preach the gospel, administer the sacraments, and exercise Christian discipline. When the church neglects her calling, she is tempted to adopt other this-worldly projects that have nothing to do with the mission of her Lord.

The document shows what the pope’s priorities are: not the preaching of the gospel, of which pope Francis, the purveyor of the false gospel of justification by faith and works, and the promoter of idolatry, knows nothing, but the establishment of a one-world government and one-world religion with the Roman Church playing a leading role. If Pope Francis can reconcile the religious factions of this world by appealing to their common humanity, he hopes to achieve world peace, that is, an earthly kingdom in which humans flourish, which is, however, not the kingdom of Christ but the kingdom of Antichrist, which will come crashing down when the Lord Jesus returns.

Obviously, too, the document cannot bring the only comfort and the only deliverance from human misery, which is the perfect satisfaction of Jesus Christ on the cross for sin. The document cannot proclaim the forgiveness of sins to the believer in Jesus Christ, for the signatories do not believe the gospel of Jesus Christ.



Taking heed to the doctrine

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As to our good works (3)

The nature of good works as works (concluded)

Previous article in this series: August 2019, p. 475.

Scripture is a book of works, the works of God and the works of many other creatures that the sovereign God works together to serve His glorious purpose in Jesus Christ throughout history. In understanding our good works as *works*, it is helpful to survey the whole Bible in its presentation of works and then relate our good works to all other kinds of works.

1. The works of God

In briefly outlining the vast biblical category of works, we begin with the works of God. The entire Bible, beginning with its opening words, “In the beginning God created,” tells of God’s works. The Bible is God’s revelation to us of His works: His marvelous works of *creation*—for example, building Eve out of Adam’s rib (Gen. 2:21); His ongoing, all-controlling, powerful works of *providence*—for example, feeding young lions with meat (Ps. 104:21) or moving the heart of the king (Prov. 21:1); and His great work of *salvation* in quickening us dead sinners (Eph. 2:1-5) in the Lord Jesus whom He raised from the dead (Eph. 1:20). One biblical book in particular, the Book of Psalms, exhorts us to extol the matchless worth of God for His mighty acts of fame. Just think of Psalter 197, a familiar doxology commonly sung at the close of public worship, “Now blessed be Jehovah God, the God of Israel, who only doeth wondrous works, in glory that excel.”

All the works of God proceed from the counsel of His own will as He does whatsoever He pleases (Ps. 115:3; Acts 2:23; Eph. 1:11). All His works are verity (Ps. 111:7) so that whether He rains fire from heaven upon Sodom in judgment (Gen. 19:24) or comforts His prophet Elijah in a still small voice (I Kings 19:12), each work is in perfect harmony with His holy being, and therefore morally perfect in conception, commencement, performance, and accomplishment. All of God’s works are completed with perfect delight, so

that even when God rests from His works (Gen. 2:3), it is not because He seeks relief from toil and fatigue but because He is enjoying His perfect accomplishments as the ever-blessed I AM. God’s works are beheld by all and everything that has breath is commanded to praise Jehovah (Ps. 150:6) for His works in which His “power, wisdom, goodness, justice, mercy, and truth, are clearly displayed,” (Heidelberg Catechism, LD 47). What great works our God does!

2. The works of Christ

The Son of God incarnate in human flesh said, “My Father worketh hitherto, and I work,” (John 5:17). Are not the four Gospels of the New Testament thrilling to read as they tell of the wonderful works our Mediator performed during His earthly ministry as the servant of Jehovah? To Israel John the Baptist introduced Jesus and His outstanding work when John declared, “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world,” (John 1:29). Each of the four Gospels then relates the history of this great work of Jesus in offering His body and soul unto God as a once-for-all propitiatory sacrifice on the cross—a morally perfect sacrifice of grueling labor, consciously and willingly offered out of a heart of perfect love for God and the whole world of elect humanity. Then the book of works called “The Acts of the Apostles” tells of the wonderful acts of the ascended Lord from heaven, working in His church by His Spirit and through the apostles. The Bible concludes with the book of Revelation teaching us that the Lamb worthy to open the book (Rev. 5) is busy right now in heaven controlling all those things that the apostle John was told would shortly come to pass in order to bring to fulfillment the word of the angel, “The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever,” (Rev. 11:15). What great works Christ does!

3. The works of angels

Angelic works are of two kinds, even as the angels themselves: wicked and holy. First, the devil and all of his demons are fallen angels who willingly exert themselves unto the performance of desperately wicked works. The works of the Tempter (Matt. 4:3) include all “lies and deceit” (HC, LD 43), “deceiving the whole world” (Rev. 12:9), the persecution of the woman (church) after he (the dragon), failed to devour the Christ-child brought forth by the woman (Rev. 12:13), taking from hearts the preached word (Mark 4:15), taking sinners captive (II Tim. 2:26), and buffeting believers in their thorny afflictions (II Cor. 12:7). How comforting is the conclusion of I John 3:8, “For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil.”

Secondly, the holy angels willingly exert themselves unto the performance of holy works as “ministering spirits sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation” (Heb. 1:14). They steadfastly behold the face of God in heaven (Matt. 18:10), and soon they shall come with the Son of Man in glory from heaven (Matt. 25:31, II Thess. 1:7). In former days their great work was to deliver messages from God as is indicated by the name “angel” which means “messenger.” What great works the angels are capable of, for once there was “war in heaven, Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon fought and his angels,” (Rev. 12:7)!

4. The sinful works of men

Unregenerate men consciously and willingly exert themselves unto the performance of works that are inherently sinful because “the heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live” (Eccl. 9:3). There is no grace of God toward the wicked enabling them to perform good works. Of the ungodly, Scripture declares, “but in works they deny him, being abominable, and disobedient, and unto every good work reprobate” (Titus 1:16); and that “men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil” (John 3:19).

Some works of the wicked are more abominable to God than others. For example, God’s wrath is more hotly kindled against the act of despising and rejecting the gospel of the mighty works of Jesus than it is against the perverse works of pagan sodomites who work that which is unseemly (Matt. 11:20-24). Nevertheless, all the works of the wicked are sinful, whether those works appear to have no moral character—like plowing the field (Prov. 21:4), or whether they appear to be good

and done with seemingly good intentions—like Saul’s offering burnt offerings or sparing of the chief things of the Amalekites for sacrifices (I Sam. 13:13; 15:17-23), or whether they are atrocious crimes against the God-fearing—like the murder of Stephen (Acts 7:54-60). How wicked are the works of the sons of men!

5. The sinful works of believers

The mark of a believing Christian is that he “crucifies the flesh with the works thereof,” (Belgic Confession, Art. 29). The elect believer still has a sinful flesh that is sold as a slave unto sin and in which there dwells no good thing (Rom. 7:18); therefore, the believer is capable of performing both good deeds that arise out of a heart made new by the Holy Spirit but are tainted by the flesh, and *completely evil deeds* that are the works of the flesh. We confess as much in Lord’s Day 38 when we pray, “that all the days of my life I cease from my evil works and yield myself to the Lord to work by His Spirit in me.” Galatians 5:19-21 teaches that “the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these, adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like.”

Our sinful deeds of the flesh are not of a qualitatively higher moral degree than the similar sinful deeds of the unregenerate, as if the presence of the Holy Spirit in us somehow mitigates the evil character of our sinful deeds. In fact, our sinful works of the flesh bear a greater moral repugnance to God than the same works performed by unbelievers. David’s adultery with Bathsheba was worse than Ahasuerus’ pleasing of himself with a fair young virgin in the absence of Vashti. Aaron’s leadership in making the golden calf was worse than the most shameless act of any unregenerate reprobate Israelite who may have been dancing naked around that calf. The taking of God’s name in vain by a believer on the jobsite or on the ballfield is worse than the same profanity that proceeds from an unbeliever. For the believer sins against grace and greater knowledge, grieving the Spirit and demonstrating ingratitude for all that God has done for him in Christ. How repugnant are the evil deeds of the believer! The believer knows this. He knows he is the chief of sinners, and it humbles him in the dust at the foot of the cross.

6. The good works of believers

The good works of a believer are yet another kind of work to be distinguished from all of the foregoing works. The believer consciously and willingly exerts himself in

the performance of works that are commanded by God. For example, Hebrews 13 begins by exhorting us, “Let brotherly love continue” (v. 1), and then illustrates what these acts produced by a heart of brotherly love are: acts of hospitality toward strangers (v. 2); acts of Christian care toward those in chains for the gospel (v. 3); acts of respect and love in the honorable marriage bed (v. 4); acts demonstrating contentment with our possessions (vv. 5-6); acts of obedience to our officebearers in the church (v. 7); and the defense of the gospel in resisting apostasy and the divers and strange doctrines that carry souls away in apostasy (v. 9). How wonderful that the believer is able to work that which is good!

7. Relating the believer’s good works to all other works

There is a relation between God’s works and our good works, and the Canons of Dordt expresses it beautifully, calling God, “the admirable author of every good work wrought in us.” God’s operation of grace in our hearts does not treat us “as senseless stocks and blocks, nor take away [our] will and its properties, neither does violence thereto.” Rather, God “spiritually quickens, heals, corrects, and at the same time sweetly and powerfully bends [our will] that where carnal rebellion and resistance formerly prevailed, a ready and sincere spiritual obedience begins to reign” (III/IV, Art. 16). Thus we are “beholden to God for the good works that we do” (BC, Art. 24). All our good works are wrought in God (John 3:21), who works in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure (Phil. 2:13), so that by the grace of God that works in us (I Cor. 15:10) we do good works.

The relation between the works of Jesus Christ and our good works is taught in the Belgic Confession, Article 22: “But Jesus Christ, imputing to us all His merits and so many holy works which He has done for us, and in our stead, is our Righteousness.” There are meritorious works that accomplish salvation for elect sinners—Christ’s works! Having the righteousness of Christ, we are the legally adopted children of God who have a right to the operations of the Spirit of Christ; therefore, God sheds forth the Spirit into our hearts so that we are sincerely willing and ready (HC, LD 1) to walk in the Spirit, bearing the fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-25).

There is a relation between the works of angels and our good works. “The devil and evil spirits are so

depraved that they are enemies of God and every good thing” (BC, Art. 12). They are opposed to us and our good works, so we must be empowered by God to do good over against the constant opposition of these spiritual murderers. In what ways the works of holy angels relate to our good works is mysterious. Scripture does say that the angels are given charge over us to keep us in all our ways (Ps. 91:11). Most importantly, the holy angels’ absolute devotion to God is a model of obedience for the believer so that he might “attend to, and perform the duties of his station and calling, as willingly and faithfully as the angels do in heaven” (HC, LD 49).

The evil works of unbelievers relate to the good works of believers in that those evil works can be a temptation and snare to us and a hindrance to our good works (Ps. 141:9; Prov. 13:20; II Cor. 6:14-18); or they serve as an occasion for us to produce good works in witnessing against their evil works (Eph. 5:7-11); or they are an occasion for us to vex our righteous souls (II Pet. 2:7) and plead with God to keep us separate, distinguishing us by working good works in us more powerfully that we may be a bright light in this world of darkness; or they serve as an occasion to move us to gratitude for the cross that has delivered us

from the evil in which the world is swallowed up (Gal. 1:4).

There is a relation between our good works and our evil works, and the relationship is that our evil works are the indisputable evidence that we have yet only a small beginning of obedience and must “constantly endeavor and pray to God for the grace of the Holy Spirit, that we may become more and more conformable to the image of God, till we arrive at the perfection proposed to us, in a life to come” (HC, LD 44). There is then, yet another kind of work—the perfect works of glorified saints in a life to come!

Next time we will continue our examination of the *nature* of good works by looking at what makes them *good*.

There is a relation between God’s works and our good works, and the Canons of Dordt expresses it beautifully, calling God, “the admirable author of every good work wrought in us.”



Go ye into all the world

Rev. Daniel Holstege, missionary of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America, stationed in Manila, Philippines

Learning before reproof: The practice of elenctics (2)

Previous article in this series: May 15, 2019, p. 382.

The zealous Christian witness who would reprove the man of this world, with the desire that he might be gained to Christ, must learn about that man and his religion before reproofing him.

“It is clear,” writes the Reformed missiologist J. H. Bavinck, “that elenctics must first of all begin with the precise and calm knowledge of the nature of the religion with which it is concerned.”¹ The Presbyterian missionary John Young writes, “Such a refutation [of a false religion] will of course entail a knowledge of the native religion, not only its surface manifestations but its basic principles, motives, and aims.”²

You, dear brother or sister in Christ, are a witness of the one true God and Jesus Christ our Lord in the midst of this world (Is. 43:10). You encounter the man and woman of this world in your life, as I do in mine, sometimes only in passing but sometimes on a regular basis. You and I are called to love that neighbor as ourselves, which means above all that we desire his salvation. Therefore, we desire an opportunity to speak to him about our salvation in Christ. Part of that witness is elenctics. Elenctics is not the only aspect of our witness, nor is it the most important aspect. For if we only rebuke the man of this world for the sinful things he is doing with God, we have not yet spoken of the wonderful works of God in Christ. Yet elenctics *is* an essential aspect of our witness, notwithstanding the spirit of our age which calls us to be “affirming” of every religion and lifestyle. Moreover, my dear fellow witnesses, before we utter a single word of reproof to that man of the world, we already know that he knows something about God and has been doing something with God. We already know that there are no real atheists, but only fools who say in their hearts, “There is no God,” and men who suppress the knowledge of God and change the truth into a lie. For God has revealed Himself in the

immensity and complexity of the cosmos and imprinted His “thou shalt” and “thou shalt not” on the conscience of every man. But there are many things that we do not know about that man: what exactly he has been doing with God, the specific lies he has been taught, and the specific idols he worships. Therefore, we must learn as much as we can about that man and his religion before reproofing him.

For us missionaries in the Philippines, there are things that we need to learn before we can reprove the unbelieving man whom we might encounter here. The Foreign Mission Committee (FMC) of the Protestant Reformed Churches required us to spend several months studying the language and culture of the Philippines before moving here. We were already prepared by our Protestant Reformed Seminary to refute Roman Catholicism, the religion of the vast majority of Filipinos. But there was more for us to learn before we would be ready to contend with the specific kind of Roman Catholicism here, which has been called “folk Catholicism.”³ Before the Spanish conquered the Philippines in the sixteenth century, the native people believed and practiced animism (a religion centered on spirits). There was a belief in a supreme god, but people tended to focus on the lower spirits who controlled the affairs of daily life, such as relationships, pregnancy, sickness, weather, housing, travel, farming, hunting, fishing, and so on. Roman Catholicism replaced the belief in that supreme god, bringing an emphasis on the ultimate concern of salvation and imposing its corrupt sacramental system. But it tolerated the pagan beliefs and practices of everyday life, which centered on the spirit world. It even embraced many of those pagan beliefs and practices and simply put new ‘Christian’ clothing on them.

¹ J. H. Bavinck, *Introduction to the Science of Missions* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1977), 240-241.

² John M. L. Young, *Missions: The Biblical Motive and Aim* (Pittsburgh, PA: Crown and Covenant Publications, 1962), 51.

³ Rodney L. Henry, *Filipino Spirit World: A Challenge to the Church* (Manila, Philippines: OMF Literature, Inc., 1986), 4-35. This book is a very helpful study of the beliefs and practices of many Filipinos in regard to the world of spirits. My Tagalog language teachers and some of the pastors and elders of the Protestant Reformed Churches in the Philippines (PRCP) also provided significant insights on this subject.

But even Protestantism, which began to enter around 1900, often simply replaced Catholicism and unwittingly left the animism of daily life untouched. Thus, in my witness to a lost Filipino man, I must not only refute the errors of Roman Catholicism (the mass, Mariolatry, etc.), but I might also have to contend with his pagan beliefs and practices concerning the everyday concerns of sickness, business, travel, and so forth. I must also give a positive witness concerning the sovereignty of God and dominion of Christ over every single concern of life, both ultimate and daily concerns. According to our Reformed brethren here, we must watch out for the Filipino superstitions especially among those who live in the rural provinces outside of Metro Manila.

Thus, when seeking to refute ‘folk Catholicism’ and to preach the gospel to Filipinos, especially in the provinces, there are things we Western missionaries need to know. There is the fearful belief of many Filipinos in the *aswang* that might take the form of a pig, a dog, or some other animal, which seeks to devour its victims at night, even plucking babies out of their mother’s womb. There is the belief in the *manananggal*, which can detach the top part of its body and fly around at night seeking to satisfy its hunger for human flesh.⁴ One who would protect himself from these evil spirits must have salt available or obtain special amulets called *anting-anting*. One might use a crucifix instead or put over the door of his house specially blessed palm leaves in the shape of a cross. Or he might have the priest sprinkle holy water on his vehicle and keep an image of the Virgin Mary or the Holy Child inside.

When someone gets sick, he might explain it with physical or spiritual causes. He might believe his sickness was caused by germs, bad food, or harsh weather. In that case, he will go to the doctor for medicine. But if the ailment seems inexplicable, he might believe it was caused by a *mangkukulam* (sorcerer) who was hired by someone to put a curse on him out of revenge. In that case, he might go to an *albulario* (witch doctor or medicine man) who would prescribe a mixture of physical and spiritual remedies to counteract the curse.⁵ Or he

might make a *panata* (vow) to do something extremely difficult, such as allowing himself to be nailed to a cross or walking many miles uphill from Manila to Antipolo (*alay-lakad*), if only the Lord will take away his or his loved one’s sickness.

As a missionary in the Philippines, these are some of the things we need to learn before reproving the lost whom we might encounter. In fact, before I can reprove that man, I need to know whether he personally believes such things and practices such superstitions. Bavinck writes, “In practice I am never concerned with Buddhism, but with a living person and *his* Buddhism, I am never in contact with Islam but with a Moslem and *his* Mohammedanism.”⁶ I might read many books about the superstitions of the Philippines and fill my head with knowledge. Then I might encounter a man here in Manila in the course of my labors and begin reproving him for his supposed superstitions. But I might then be quite embarrassed to learn that he does not even believe or practice any of those things, for through higher education he has adopted a modern scientific worldview! I need to learn the specific beliefs of the specific man to whom I desire to witness.

Furthermore, before I can reprove that man and teach him the truth, according to Bavinck,

I must feel a community or a fellowship with this man; I must know myself to be one with him. As long as I laugh at his foolish superstition, I look down upon him; I have not yet found the key to his soul. As soon as I understand that what he does in a noticeably naïve and childish manner, I also do and continue to do again and again, although in a different form; as soon as I actually stand next to him, I can in the name of Christ stand in opposition to him and convince him of sin, as Christ did with me and still does each day.⁷

I must not try to pull the mote out of my brother’s eye until I have first cast the beam out of my own eye (Matt. 7:1-5). Similarly, I must not try to reprove the man of the world until I first humble myself and admit that I am no better than he by nature. I must marvel with Paul that, “Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ” (Eph. 3:8) and confess, “This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to

4 We believe, according to Scripture, that there are in this world many spiritual beings, angels and demons. We know that angels are mighty spirits sent by God to minister to the heirs of salvation (Heb. 1:14) and demons are spiritual powers in high places which blind the minds of the lost and seek to destroy the servants of God (II Cor. 4:4; Eph. 6:12). Some believers here in the Philippines report that they have seen phenomena that can only be explained as the work of demons among the lost.

5 God forbid the children of Israel to practice sorcery: “There shall not be found among you any one that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, or that useth divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch, or a charmer, or

a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard, or a necromancer. For all that do these things are an abomination unto the LORD” (Deut. 18:10-12). Paul on his missionary journeys rebuked and contended with such evils too (cf. Acts 13:8-11; 19:13-19).

6 Bavinck, *Introduction*, 240.

7 Bavinck, 242-3.

save sinners; of whom I am chief” (I Tim. 1:15). When I was the pastor of First PRC in Holland, Michigan, an old believer who is now in glory used to say to me that he could only witness to his neighbor if he first made abundantly clear to that neighbor that he was not one whit better than he—an indispensable requirement for all witnessing.

The Christian witness must learn before reproof. Then he may discover a “point of attack.”⁸ When the apostle Paul went to Athens, having already a great deal of knowledge about Greek religion and philosophy, he discovered a point of attack on Mars Hill, an altar TO THE UNKNOWN GOD (Acts 17:23). That was not what some call a “point of contact” in the sense of a common area of truth between Christianity and paganism by virtue of a common grace of God. But it was a point of attack from which Paul could launch into his elenctic message against the idolatry and superstitions to which the city was wholly given over. There are no points of contact in heathen religions, ancient or modern, from which we can easily and gently guide the man of this world into the pleasant pastures of Christian faith. There are no bridges from the darkness into the light. There are no areas of common belief upon which we can build the structure of Christian and Reformed theology. For even the glimmerings of natural light that man still has are changed into darkness and twisted into lies. There must always be a call to repentance, a reproof of sin, and a turning to the living God from idols. The Roman Catholic Church tolerated the superstitions of the Philippines, rather than reproofing them. Modern man would have us affirm and celebrate the religions of all, refuting nothing, and allow their god Science to bring eventual enlightenment. But all true Christian missions and witnessing *must* reprove the world of sin.

There are points of attack that we can discover by way of listening, learning, studying, and observing. Paul said to the Athenians, “Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious. For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD.” He discovered there an acknowledgement of ignorance on their part. He did not build on that acknowledgement, but he used it as a point of departure for his message in which he rebuked their worship of other gods and declared, “The times of this ignorance God winked at; *but now commandeth all men everywhere to repent*” (Acts 17:30).

You too should listen, learn, and observe the man of

the world in your life who is doing something with God. What is he doing with God? What does he believe and where does he seek comfort and why? What kind of religious practices does he have and why? Some actions of our neighbors require swift reproof, such as blasphemy on the jobsite or drunkenness in the neighborhood. But even then, if we would desire the man to be gained to Christ, our humble rebuke must be followed by words of the free forgiveness and amazing hope that we have in Christ. For we seek not only to rebuke the man of the world for taking the name of God in vain, but to refute his deepest beliefs and point him to Christ. Therefore, there is a need for conversation and interaction with the man of the world whom you encounter day by day. Rev. J. Kortering writes,

If we snub him, look the other way, avoid him, refuse to talk to him, we are sending out clear signals that we don’t want anything to do with him. If the neighbor picks up on this, he will conclude that we don’t care about him at all, about what he does, about what are his values, about what are his struggles in life—nothing. Even if our reason for this attitude is our judgment of him that he is evil and a great sinner before God, such response at this point is wrong because it is premature. We have not attempted to deal with him and his faults in a proper way.

Another action toward the neighbor might be that we jump on him with severe criticism every time we notice that he is doing something we see to be wrong. There is, of course, an important place for correction in the process of evangelism, but we do well to remember that in our initial contacts we ought to hold our mouth until we can build some trust. This is not compromise or unfaithfulness; this is wisdom, as we learn the art of communication and influence.⁹

In other words, we need to take the time to listen to our neighbor and learn about him before reproofing him and bearing witness to the truth. We must be “swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath” also in our witness to the man of this world (James 1:19). As we listen, observe, and learn, let us pray and wait on the Lord to give us an opportunity, to show us an “altar to an unknown god,” so to speak, in that man’s life.

When that time comes, what should we say? How do we perform the hard task of confronting and refuting the most personal beliefs of our neighbor? Let us consider this further in another article.

⁹ Jason Kortering, *Evangelism in the Established Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Evangelism Committee of First PRC), 24.

⁸ Bavinck, *Introduction*, 140.



All Thy works shall praise Thee

Mr. Joel Minderhoud, science teacher in Covenant Christian High School and a member of Hope Protestant Reformed Church in Walker, Michigan

Main characters in the most elegant book— The mineral “nitre”

“As he that taketh away a garment in cold weather, and as vinegar upon nitre, so is he that singeth songs to a heavy heart.”

Proverbs 25:20

“For though thou wash thee with nitre, and take thee much soap, yet thine iniquity is marked before me, saith the Lord God.”

Jeremiah 2:22

Vinegar upon nitre?? Washing with nitre?? Too often, I fear, we read over such texts, without giving due attention to their Spirit-inspired symbolism. And in this case we will not understand the symbolism without some knowledge of what nitre is (also spelled niter). It is a mineral, yes, but what exactly are its pertinent features? To that question we now turn our attention.

Minerals

Water, air, fire, and earth were considered by the Greeks as the four basic building blocks (elements) of the ancient world. Today, however, we understand the elements that make up our world to have greater complexity and detail than as described by the ancients. What the Greeks termed “earth”—defining the actual composition of our world—is made up of more than 3,000 minerals, each with its own unique characteristics.

The earth’s crust is composed of minerals—naturally occurring solids that have a distinct crystal structure and chemical composition. From their aesthetically beautiful and orderly crystal structure to their many and varied uses, minerals are a fascinating and significant “character” in, what our Belgic Confession calls, God’s “most elegant book” of creation. According to their unique structure and chemical composition, minerals are generally classified into the following eight categories:

1) Native elements—a group of approximately twenty “un-reactive” elements generally found unbonded to other elements. Native elements include the precious metals of copper, silver, gold, and platinum.

2) Sulfides—of which the vast majority of our “ores” are composed.

3) Oxides (and hydroxides)—of which many “ores” and natural gemstones are composed.

4) Halides—from which we obtain our natural salts.

5) Carbonates (including nitrates and borates)—from which we obtain the materials to make our cement. Carbonates include natural substances such as marble and limestone rocks.

6) Phosphates—from which we obtain phosphorus to make fertilizers.

7) Sulfates—from which we obtain the materials to make plaster.

8) Silicates—comprise 96% of the earth’s crust. Dominant minerals in this group are quartz (abundant component of sand), mica, and talc.

To examine each of these groups in detail would be a worthwhile study of the beauty and power found within the creation. They testify of the beauty, wisdom, and power of our Creator. The Lord willing, we plan to look more closely at some of these groups, but for the remainder of this article, we will consider the carbonate group, examining particularly the mineral nitre, which we have seen is specifically mentioned in the Scriptures.

Nitre

The texts quoted earlier are the only two places the word “nitre” is used in all of Scripture. An understanding of the word “nitre” helps us understand the teaching of Proverbs 25:20. Following the hermeneutical principle of using other passages of Scripture to help interpret a passage, we find that Jeremiah 2:22 provides good direction in ascertaining the meaning of the word “nitre” and, therefore, sheds light on Proverbs 25:20. Let us see how this is so.

One might be inclined to assume that the nitre mentioned in Holy Scripture is a common mineral, namely, saltpeter (potassium nitrate) or Chile saltpeter (sodium nitrate). The word “niter” today refers to saltpeter—a

substance that has been mined in large quantities in the arid deserts of Chile and is useful in making fertilizer and explosives. Interestingly, however, the word “niter” did not always refer to saltpeter. It was only as compounds used in explosives became more widely used and known among Europeans during the Middle Ages that the word “niter” began to refer to saltpeter—the important nitrate mineral used in making explosives. This is borne out by the following word study:

C. 1400: “native sodium carbonate” (a sense now obsolete), from Old French *nitre* (13c.), from Latin *nitrum*, from Greek *nitron*, which is possibly of Eastern origin (compare Hebrew *nether* “carbonate of soda;” Egyptian *ntr*). *Originally a word for native soda, but also associated since the Middle Ages with saltpeter (potassium nitrate)* [emphasis mine] for obscure reasons; this became the predominant sense by late 16c.¹

Apart from the word origin, an understanding of the chemical properties of niter and the chemical properties of the common minerals found in the earth help us understand the symbolism of the text. Distinguishing between the properties of the carbonates [soda] and nitrates [saltpeter] will be helpful.

Carbonates are widely found in the earth’s crust as limestone. The mineral name for pure deposits of calcium carbonate is calcite. Other familiar forms of calcite are the stalactite and stalagmite deposits found in caves and the travertine deposits along the mouths of spring waters in places like Mammoth Hot Springs of Yellowstone National Park. Calcite is used primarily in the manufacturing of cement and lime for mortar. Carbonates are known for their intense and vivid reaction with acids. When acids are combined with carbonates, the carbonate compound breaks down, releasing a molecule of one carbon and two oxygen atoms (carbon dioxide gas). The rapid escape of the carbon dioxide from the slurry of acid and mineral deposit produces a bubbling and foaming mass.

Nitrates, on the other hand, are less commonly found in the earth’s crust. Common forms of nitrates are either soda niter (sodium nitrate; also known as Chile

saltpeter) or plain niter (potassium nitrate; also known as saltpeter). Both forms of niter are used in fertilizers and explosives (gunpowder, for example, is made from a mix of sulfur, charcoal, and saltpeter). Because of the strength of the nitrogen-oxygen bond, nitrates are less easily decomposed by acids than are carbonates—and consequently, nitrates have little reaction in the presence of acids.

While the word “niter” today refers to saltpeter, it does not make much sense to understand the biblical reference to niter as a reference to saltpeter. One reason for this is that there is no significant reaction between saltpeter and vinegar, as suggested by the text. Therefore, we are led to believe that niter, as used in Proverbs 25:20, does not refer to a nitrate compound.

Biblical scholars agree that the Hebrew word “niter” used in these passages refers to common substances found in Israel and in Egypt. In Egypt “neter” referred to the mineral compound sodium carbonate (which came from the Egyptian salt lakes), whereas in

Israel “neter” more likely referred to potash or potassium carbonate (made from the ashes of plants).² Neter, as sodium carbonate, was extracted from watery beds in the Middle East and was commonly used to make laundry soap—thus the reference in Jeremiah 2:22 to nitre and the attempt to wash oneself thoroughly with it.

If one mixes vinegar and niter, a chemical reaction occurs. Niter, or soda

ash (sodium carbonate), is not likely available in your home, but a similar compound, sodium bicarbonate (baking soda), is. As long as you are willing to clean up the mess, it would be entertaining to mix a cup of baking soda (sodium bicarbonate) and a cup of vinegar in a bowl in your kitchen and observe the reaction. The sodium bicarbonate will violently effervesce (fizz or bubble) as carbon dioxide is released in the reaction. Niter, when mixed with vinegar, will effervesce in a similar fashion to your household baking soda.

Niter (sodium carbonate), as mentioned in Jeremiah 2:22, is used in making laundry soap. But pouring vinegar on sodium carbonate (niter), while making a fizzing display similar to that of the reaction of baking soda

If I pour vinegar on nitre, I will have a violent fizzing display, but no profitable products. The nitre that could have served as an effective laundry detergent or soap (see Jer. 2:22) is now a ruined mess. The final mixture of vinegar and nitre is nothing more than a salt-watery substance that has no profit at all, but to be thrown out. Thus, do Solomon and Jeremiah, under the inspiration of the Spirit, use this fascinating little creation of God to make a real spiritual truth come alive before our eyes.

¹ <https://www.etymonline.com/word/nitre>.

² <http://www.balashon.com/2008/07/neter-and-nitrogen.html>.

and vinegar, would ruin the niter as an agent to make laundry soap.

With these things in mind, the proverb makes more sense. “*As he that taketh away a garment in cold weather, and as vinegar upon nitre, so is he that singeth songs to a heavy heart*” (Prov. 25:20). If I take away a garment from my friend in cold weather, I am not helping him stay warm and comfortable. In fact, I am making things worse by removing the very thing that could have helped him. If I pour vinegar on nitre, I will have a violent fizzing display, but no profitable products. The nitre that could have served as an effective laundry detergent or soap (see Jer. 2:22) is now a ruined mess. The final mixture of vinegar and nitre is nothing more than a salt-watery substance that has no profit at all, but to be thrown out. Thus, do Solomon and Jeremiah, under the inspiration of the Spirit, use this fascinating little creation of God to make a real spiritual truth come alive before our eyes.

Think for example of attempts to comfort the heavy-hearted, grief-stricken saint with silly jokes, mundane stories, or frivolous jesting. Such “singing songs” only worsens the pain (similar to making my friend from whom I took the garment colder—which, in turn, is like the violent but useless reaction of mixing the vinegar and niter). With such carnal mirth (singing songs) there is no comfort to the hurting saint. With such attempts, it may be said of us “what miserable comforters” we are!

May we learn from such figures in Scripture to be true and blessed comforters. A simple gesture of godly compassion brings true comfort—comfort void of car-

nal mirth or empty speech. And so, let us mourn with those who mourn (shed a tear with them, empathize with them). For it is better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasting (Eccl. 7:2). And let us bring an appropriate Word of God to the grieving saint, as God’s Word is profitable in every situation of life. For God’s Word is the means that He has ordained to comfort and soothe those who experience difficult trials. It is essentially the only word that I can bring to uplift a fellow saint. Regardless if I have gone through a similar experience myself or not, when I bring God’s Word it comforts the soul of God’s people. This is because God’s Word, though despised and considered foolishness to the world, is the power of God to comfort His people. “Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned” (Is. 40:1, 2a). Thanks be to God for His unfailing Word—for Christ and the certain victory that is declared therein!

And thanks be to God for His Word in the psalms, from which we may sing comforting words to the heavy-hearted. These precious psalms address the many struggles of the child of God and bring blessed comfort. “Many are the afflictions of the righteous: but the LORD delivereth him out of them all” (Ps. 34:19). May God, therefore, preserve faithful psalm-singing in our midst—to the edification of God’s people and the glory of His blessed name! And may God bless us with the grace and wisdom to truly comfort those who mourn and to be a blessing to our grieving brothers and sisters in Christ.



News from our churches

Mr. Perry Van Egdome, member of the Protestant Reformed Church of Doon, Iowa

Trivia question

To our knowledge, there are only three Protestant Reformed ministers who are now deceased and who were born after 1924. Can you name them? Answer later in this column.

Minister activities

Pastor-elect Matthew Kortus (a Loveland, CO native)

sustained his examination at the meeting of Classis West in September. He was ordained as our newest minister of the Word and sacraments in Hope PRC (Redlands) congregation on October 6. We thank our God for this gift and pray that he will have a long and fruitful ministry.

The Council of Grandville PRC announced a new trio for calling a minister on loan to labor in Covenant ERC in Singapore: Revs. Garrett Eriks (Hudsonville

PRC), Rodney Kleyn (Covenant of Grace PRC), and Jon Mahtani (Cornerstone PRC). Rev. Mahtani received this call on October 6.

Rev. Rodney Kleyn had received the call from Immanuel PRC in Lacombe, AB. On October 13 he declined this call. The Consistory then published a new trio: Revs. R. Barnhill, H. Bleyenbergh, and M. VanderWal.

Professor Herman Hanko turned 89 in the Lord's care on October 10th. I remember him as minister in Doon in the early 1960's when I was a young boy.

Evangelism activities

The Reformed Witness Committee of the Siouxland area churches presented the following lecture by Prof. Barry Gritters: "The Sabbath Command: The Law Christians Love to Keep." The lecture was presented at Hull, IA PRC on November 1. Of the Ten Commandments, the fourth ("Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy") has always faced unique threats. Recent moves by churches—Reformed and others—to downgrade the official call to worship on Sunday are not new. Already in the Old Testament, the God-appointed day of rest was often threatened, and weakness in observing the day became cause for the church's chastening and even downfall. Why do we sometimes fail to see the importance of the day? To see the importance of complete devotion of one of seven days to the Lord? And the vital importance of frequent public worship on that day? A speech like this one should leave us all with a renewed desire to keep the Sabbath day holy in thanksgiving!

Young people's activities

The Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Australia would love to invite any young people and young adults, aged 13 and up, to their biennial youth camp. This youth camp will be held in Brisbane, Australia, from the 28th of December 2019-3rd January 2020. Rev. Martyn McGeown from the Limerick Reformed Fellowship of the Republic of Ireland will be guest speaker, addressing the campers on the topic of "The Christian's Armour" (from Ephesians 6). Amongst other activities, the theme night will be the "Australian Bush." The cost for the camp is \$250 AUD (approx. \$170 USD). This is a great time to meet other young people, fellowship with them, and learn about our Saviour. You can contact Megan at meggyhiggs@gmail.com for the full flyer/registration form, or for any additional questions/information.

The Doon, IA Young People held their annual fall Survival Run in October. This is a highlight of their many

organized activities, and I don't believe any injuries occurred. They also held their third annual Car Challenge in early November. This is patterned after the famous Edmonton Car Rally. The competition is friendly, yet spirited. Some say the challenges are becoming more difficult. I'm not sure who has more fun—those attempting to complete the Challenge or the creator of the event!

School activities

The 65th annual Protestant Reformed Teacher's Convention was held Thursday and Friday, October 17 and 18, at Trinity Christian High School in Hull, Iowa. Approximately 150 teachers descended on northwest Iowa! Rev. Joshua Engelsma gave the keynote speech on the convention's theme of "Teaching Wisdom" from Proverbs 9:9. Retired teachers and prospective teachers currently attending college were invited to join the teachers for this profitable gathering. The list of sectionals and their descriptions was really impressive!

Hope PR Christian School conducted a special society meeting on Monday, November 11, to consider the purchase of an adjacent piece of property as well as a building project. More on this in the next report.

Missionary activities

We are glad that the parents of missionary-pastor Rev. Daniel Holstege could visit the Holstege family in the Philippines recently!

Congregational activities

The choirs of Faith, Georgetown, Grace, Hudsonville, and Byron Center Michigan churches are planning two Mass Choir concerts in mid to late February of 2020, the Lord willing. All interested participants are invited to join one of the five choirs to practice as individual choirs. They plan to continue with mass practices after the New Year. "Make a joyful noise all ye lands...come before His presence with singing!"

On October 31, the congregation of First PRC of Edmonton, AB gathered to enjoy a delicious potluck meal together. Then they entered the sanctuary for a singspiration. A delicious time of fellowship and praise!

The organization of Byron Center PRC's daughter congregation, Unity PRC, took place on Wednesday, October 30 at Byron Center PRC. We thank God for His providential guidance of the Byron congregation in leading them to this significant event. The organization service was a call to worship with an offering taken for Unity PRC's Building Fund. All members of Unity PRC were asked to sit in the front half of the sanctuary in order to facilitate the congregational meeting that was to be held during the wor-

ship service. Those men who were elected and installed as elders and deacons during the service were asked to remain behind for the first council meeting of Unity PRC. God grants the increase!

Something new

Decades ago the *SB News* published profiles of our churches. One church was featured in each issue of the magazine. This served well to inform the other congregations of the specific, interesting details of our churches. We hope to do that again soon. The clerk of each congregation is being contacted with the hope he can recruit someone there to supply us with a short snippet to publish. Stay tuned and see what happens!

Trivia answer

The three deceased Protestant Reformed ministers born post 1924 that we know of are: Rev. Wayne Bekkering, Rev. Dale Kuiper, and Rev. Gise Van Baren. Are there others? More trivia next time.

“To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven.” Ecclesiastes 3:3.

Announcements

Resolution of sympathy

The Council and congregation of Hope PRC, Walker, Michigan extend Christian sympathy to Deacon Dan and wife Tamara Kalsbeek in the death of their sister **Jory Mulder**. “And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also” (John 14:3).

Rev. David Overway, President
David Moelker, Clerk

Resolution of Sympathy

The congregation and Council of Hope PRC, Walker, Michigan express Christian sympathy to Deacon Jon and wife Cori Hop in the death of their brother **Leroy DeVries**. “For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands eternal in the heavens” (II Corinthians 5:1).

Rev. David Overway, President
David Moelker, Clerk

Teacher needed

The **Edmonton PR Christian School** is in need of a full-time teacher for the 2020–2021 school year. The school will be starting with grades 1–5 minus grade 4. Please contact Gord Tolsma at gr.tolsma@gmail.com / 780-777-5780.

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