

May/June 2014

Dedicated to the Exposition and Defense of the Reformed Faith

# The Outlook

VOL 64 ISSUE 3

[www.reformedfellowship.net](http://www.reformedfellowship.net)



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(ISSN 8750-5754) (USPS 633-980)

*"Exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints."*

—Jude 3

**Journal of Reformed Fellowship, Inc.**

Send all copy to:

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Coalhurst, Alberta T0L 0V0

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The publishers of this journal express their adherence to the Calvinistic creeds as formulated in the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Canons of Dort, and the Westminster Confession and Catechisms.

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*The Outlook (USPS 633-980)* is published six times per year (bi-monthly) by Reformed Fellowship, Inc. Annual subscriptions are \$25.00 per year in the United States; outside the US, \$33 per year (foreign subscribers please remit payment in US Funds; Canada add GST). Unless a definite request for discontinuance is received, it is assumed that the subscriber wishes the subscription to continue without the formality of a renewal order and he will be billed for renewal. Anyone desiring a change of address should notify the business office as early as possible in order to avoid the inconvenience of delayed delivery.

Zip Code should be included. Periodicals postage paid at Grandville, MI.

**POSTMASTER:**

Send address changes to *The Outlook*, 3500 Danube Dr. SW, Grandville, MI 49418-8387

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Quarter page (non-bleed) 3.5 x 4.5"
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3500 Danube Dr. SW

Grandville, MI 49418-8387

(877) 532-8510 Phone Toll-free in US and Canada

**Business Mailing Address**

3500 Danube Dr. SW

Grandville, MI 49418-8387

Email: office@reformedfellowship.net

**About the cover:**

*"I shall give you rains in their season, so that the land will yield its produce and the trees of the field will bear their fruit."*

—Leviticus 26:4

**“These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them upon your children.”  
– Deuteronomy 6:6-7**

*My father* would frequently address a situation with a Friesian saying. Roughly translated, his favorite one seemed to be, “If it can’t be done the way it has to be done, it has to be done the way it can be done.” Since I grew up on a farm with well-used, old machinery, that quote seemed to fit a lot of occasions.

Whatever the situation, he had a quip that seemed to fit. Sometimes I would just shake my head and wonder how the Friesians knew about all those different situations we found ourselves in. Other times I would try to meet his with a comparable English saying. “The early bird gets the worm” was met with “better late than never.” “Absence makes the heart grow fonder” was met with “out of sight, out of mind.”

Now, I wish I had written some of his quips down. Still, every now and then one of them pops into my head—especially when one of my children can’t get something to work exactly the way it is supposed to work. I comment, “You know, my dad used to say . . .” Sometimes they smile. Sometimes they roll their eyes like I did when my father would say the same things.

## Primary Examples

Whether fathers admit it or not (and whether children admit it or not), they are role models in one way or another. This is true in either a positive or negative way. A father who refuses to

recognize that he is a role model for his children is one through his sheer lack of desire to teach his children or by his refusal to be involved with them. The lessons the children learn from him can be detrimental to their future.

Those who have the privilege of having fathers who were good role models are among the better adjusted people within society. If you can look back and say in a positive way, “My father used to say . . .”, then God has given you a priceless gift.

It should come as no surprise that the Bible gives us some instruction on how to be the type of fathers that God calls us to be. Our Father in heaven loves us and provided for us through his Son, Jesus Christ. He also shows us how we can have a positive relationship with our children.

In Deuteronomy 6, God gave his people a series of instructions before they were to enter the Promised Land. They were finally done roaming through the wilderness and were about to live in cities they did not build and on farms they had not tilled. They would move into homes, take on new businesses, and become a nation. God tells them that they are to love him and keep his commandments. They are to impress the law he had given them upon their children.

This exhortation was not limited to the nation about to enter Canaan. It is not just for fathers. It is for all

believers who long for the second coming of our Lord, when he brings us into the land he has promised us. However, if you read this as a father, you will notice three things that stand out. The first is that fathers are called to love. Fathers are called to love God with all their heart, with all their soul, and with all their mind.

Love for God is where the spiritual journey must begin. We must understand that we have been alienated from God and that he has reconciled us to himself through his Son. We are compelled to respond to the sacrifice of his Son in love and gratitude. Love for and gratitude to God go hand in hand. With a true love for God, everything else becomes secondary. Living a life of thanksgiving to God will make all other things fall into place.

Unfortunately, an ungodliness and lack of interest in God has risen in North America that has filtered into many families. Many fathers seem to have forgotten God. They think only of themselves and try to satisfy only their own desires. When God is taken out of the father/child relationship, anything can happen—seldom is it good.

Fathers must believe with all their heart and seek to serve God with all their strength. To do this, fathers must first of all believe in Jesus Christ. He is the great revelation of God. He is

the One who binds us to our Father in heaven. With hearts focused on Jesus Christ, we can go to the Father and ask him for anything in the name of Christ and be assured that the Father will hear us. One of the things that we are to bring to the Father is our need to be proper fathers ourselves.

If you have ever felt like a failure as a father, the way to turn that around is by turning to God. Stop wandering away from God by spending time at places you know you should not be or doing things that you know you should not do. Do not get so wrapped up in your work that you do not have time for your children at home.

I stress this because I am convinced that the Bible clearly teaches that in order for a person to be a loving parent, he must first love God, his Word, and his law. That advice will immediately turn some people away because no one likes to have anyone tell them what to do. Lots of people hate their jobs because they have to listen to their boss. But they listen, and then when they get home they vent their frustrations on their family.

We want to enjoy ourselves. Home is our castle. That is where we are the boss. Nobody better mess with us when we are at home.

God's laws, however, enable us to live our lives at home more joyfully and successfully. Moses told the people of Israel, "Take to heart all the words I have solemnly declared to you this day, so that you may command your children to obey carefully all the words of this law. They are not just idle words for you— they are your life" (Deut. 32:46–47). The Word of God is the Word of life. His Word gives us instruction for how to live life to its fullest.

It all comes down to this: you either live the right way or the wrong way, and the right way is God's way. Until you are willing to live God's way, you will run into all kinds of trouble.

You will have trouble at work. You will have trouble with your wife. You will have trouble with your children. Unless we live God's way, we will be troubled fathers.

### **Primary Teachers**

Fathers have to love God and His Word, and they have to love their children. That may sound rather obvious. It is only natural that we love our children. But if you really love your child, you will teach your child about God and his Word. The Israelites were charged to talk about God's Word with their children when they were at home, when they walked along the road, and when they tucked their children in at night (Deut. 6:7).

Instead of spending time watching television or sporting events, fathers are to talk to their children about God and his Word. We have to make our homes places that are filled with God's Word. The Bible must be a permanent fixture in our houses—not just with little plaques on the walls, but spoken about from our hearts. Fathers have to learn how to communicate the glorious message of the life-giving Word to their children.

Do you want your children to go to heaven? Well, of course you do! Then teach them about Jesus Christ!

That means, first of all, that fathers had better know about Jesus Christ themselves. That knowledge cannot be a casual knowledge. You have to love him with all your heart, mind, and soul. Fathers must live close to the Lord in prayer. They must live virtuous, pious, God-glorifying lives that are a positive example to their children.

The second thing required of fathers is that they love and take care of the mother of their children. Help your wife as she teaches your children about the things of God. It is necessary for the husband and wife to agree on the basic spiritual issues of life.

Husbands and wives are to remain faithful to one another and show their children what true married love is all about. If husbands do not love their wives, it shows. Children are a lot smarter than we often give them credit for. You cannot fool them. They will notice how your actions do not agree with your words.

In many marriages, husbands claim Ephesians 5:22 for themselves: "Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord." What they forget is the previous verse: "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" (v. 21). And they forget that they are to love their wives as Christ loved the church (Eph. 5:25). In my years of ministry I have met several wives who have been separated from their husbands who have told me they would run back to them if only they would love them as Christ loves the church.

A final thing fathers must make certain they keep as a priority in their home is to set aside times when they read the Bible and pray with their families. Devotions in the family are crucial as a means of bringing up the family with a love for the Lord and his Word. Fathers, it may not always be easy to find good devotional material. I would suggest a visit to a Christian bookstore. Do a little homework and find good authors. If you don't want to do the homework, ask your pastor for advice. I would recommend R. C. Sproul, John MacArthur, and Oswald Chambers. If you have a tight budget, I would suggest visiting a secondhand store where you can pick up good devotional material for only a couple of dollars.

Make sure your children know that Christ is at the center of your life and that God is the great Creator and sustainer of all things. That means getting involved in the education of your children. Don't leave it up to the school or your wife to figure things out. Get involved. Why do

you homeschool? Why do you send your children to the school they are going to? What kind of books are they reading? What ideas are being introduced to your children? What is Saxon Math? What is OBE teaching all about?

Fathers are called to be the primary teachers in their children's lives. Yes, you have other things to do, and life gets very busy at times. After all, there is the job, the lawn to mow, the hockey game, the baseball card collection. We are busy people. But if God has blessed you with children, your greatest responsibility is to them.

### Primary People

You may think some of these ideas are old-fashioned. You are probably right. But let us look at the new-fashioned fathers. Look at the broken homes, broken hearts, broken families, and

broken children in our society today. I don't think we can afford to trade the old-fashioned teachings of the Bible for the ideas that have become prevalent today.

Being a good father today comes with all kinds of responsibilities. It strikes me as being pretty near impossible. No father can completely measure up to what is required of him. Try as we might, we have to admit we fail a lot.

The good news is that we can ask God to forgive our failures. God gives us a wonderful illustration of what fatherhood is all about. The God who enables us to be what we should be as fathers is also the God who forgives us when we fail as fathers. We certainly need to be thankful to God for that!

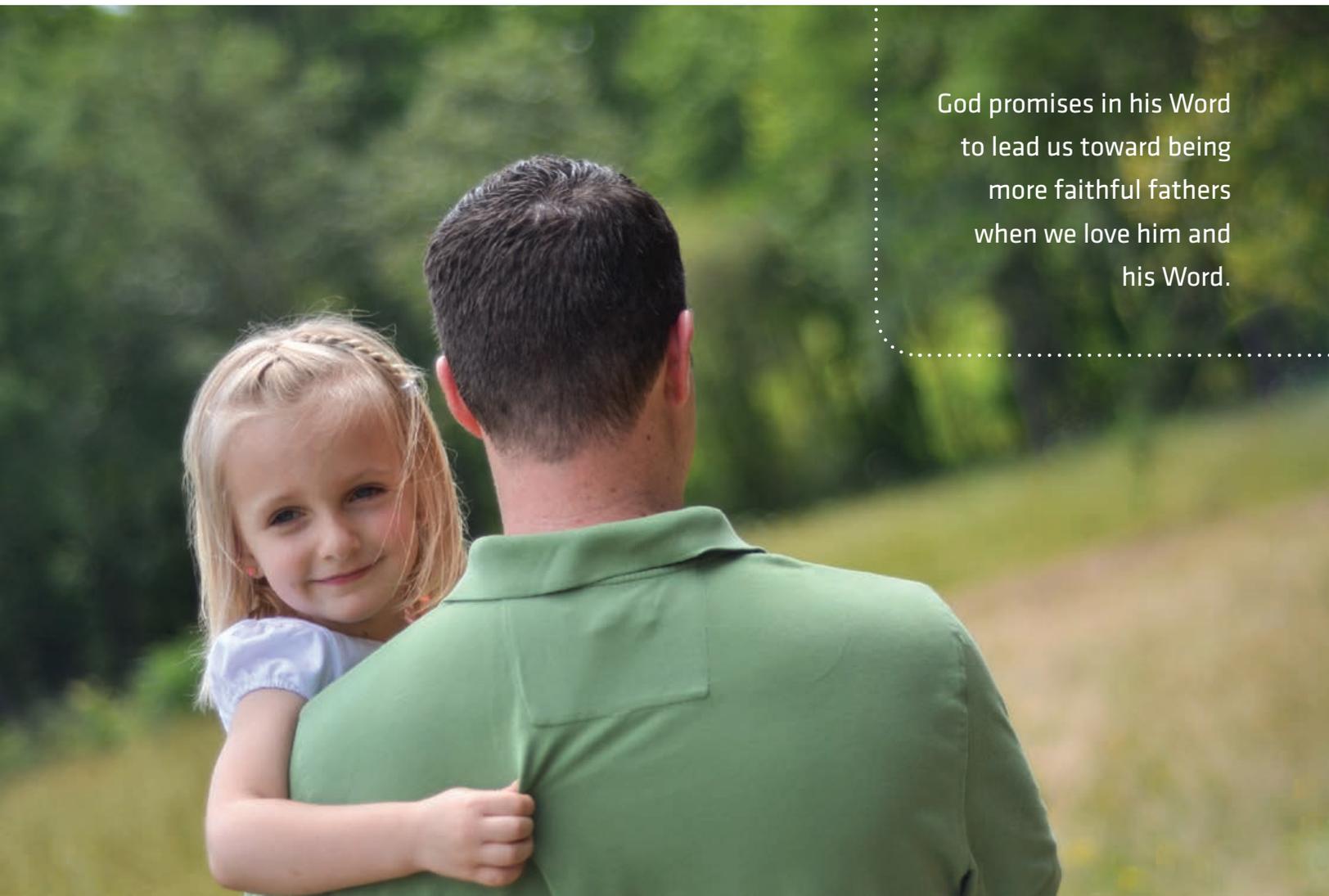
God promises in his Word to lead us toward being more faithful fathers when we love him and his Word. We certainly need his help! We also need

to encourage one another to be the kind of fathers God calls us to be in his Word—that is, fathers who love God, love his Word, love our wives, and love our children.

If you are a mother and wife, we need your help. Help your husbands become loving fathers to their children. If you are a child, be patient with us. Let us learn to serve God together. Together may husbands and wives and parents and children work to praise the name of our Father in heaven.

### Rev. Wybren Oord

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God promises in his Word to lead us toward being more faithful fathers when we love him and his Word.

# Behold Your Mother!: The Legacy of Jesus' Love for Moms

Rev. William  
Boekestein

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to have a perfect child? Can you imagine a child who never threw selfish tantrums or scowled at the meal you set before him? Can you conceive of a kid who never left his room trashed after he was told to pick it up or who never spent his allowance irresponsibly and then whined for more money?

Here's a reality check: If you *did* have a perfect child, life as a mother in this world would still be hard.

Mary had a perfect Son, but her life as a mother was filled with the sadness of life in the flesh. Like every mother, she still needed a Savior to rescue her from the demands, guilt, and worries of motherhood. In her case, her Savior was her Son.

I cannot think of a scene in Scripture that speaks more affectionately to a mother's heart than when Jesus uttered those few words from his parched lips, "Woman, behold your son!" (John 19:25–27). Whether you are a mother or not, this text unveils to us the love, lessons, and legacy of Jesus' last interaction with his mother before his death.

## The Love of a Son

Our dear Lord Jesus approached the moment of his death. After hanging on the cross for several hours, his strength was drained, his senses were numbed, and his sight was blurred. Not only was Jesus enduring great physical torment but he was also suffering from a sense of spiritual desertion as he drank the cup of God's wrath to the bottom. Yet he kept a compassionate eye upon the crowd that called for his death and,

with calloused indifference, lingered to witness it. His pitying eye fell on his mother.

## A Hurting Mother

It's hard to imagine the mixture of love and loss with which Mary's heart throbbed. This dear woman had labored for Jesus' birth. She had worried about him (Luke 2:48), prayed for him, loved him, followed him during his ministry, and supported him through severe opposition. No doubt she felt the guilt that resulted from her shortcomings in dealing with him and her other children. She knew the burden of motherhood, even as it related to the Son of God.

Mary is the only woman in the world who has ever raised a son who never sinned against her. Although she sinned against him, he never talked back, never disobeyed, never dishonored her. I love my children dearly, and you love yours, but they are hardly perfect! Our love for our children is hindered not only by our sins against them but by theirs against us. Imagine the love she must have had for *this* Son.

Now she watches as her precious boy bleeds away for the sins of his people. Thirty years earlier, as the prophet Simeon held Mary's new baby, he soberly told her, "A sword will pierce through your own soul also" (Luke 2:35). The sword had struck.

## No Greater Love

With a quick glance toward his disciple John, Jesus spoke to his mother: "Woman, behold your son!" To John he said: "Behold your mother!" (John 19:26–27). From that hour John took her to his home. Jesus was giving a new son to his mother to replace himself.

And he gave her the best son she could expect, the disciple Jesus loved. John, the only one of the disciples there now, indicates his loyalty, courage, and faith by his presence.

Jesus' love toward his mother proves his love for us, his believing brothers and sisters. When you and I are in trouble, our thoughts tend to turn inward. Jesus came not to be served but to serve. He directs his thoughts toward those whom he loves. He is mindful of our needs just as he was mindful of his mother's needs.

Still, he takes his time in meeting our needs. He could have made this arrangement between Mary and John at a more convenient time. But he waited until she needed to hear it most.

## Three Lessons from the Cross

From the cross Christ grandly demonstrates three lessons.

### *The Church Is God's Family*

Mary had other children who could have met her physical needs after Jesus' death. But Mary needed the kind of spiritual companionship found only in the family of God. Earlier, Jesus had said that his mother and brother and sister are those who do the will of God (Mark 3:35). In the church believers treat older men as fathers, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, with all purity (1 Tim. 5:1–2). We have no eternal ties to anyone who isn't united to Christ by a living faith. God's children are our family. When it comes to caring for those we love, we must learn to involve the covenant community.

*Everything that is demanded of mothers Christ supplies through his life. We experience the comfort of his provision through faith and an intimate walk with him.*



### ***Children Must Care for Their Mothers***

Being born under the law (Gal. 4:4), Jesus was obligated to honor his parents. How perfectly he fulfilled that law, providing for his mother even on his deathbed.

Jesus criticized the Pharisees for not honoring their fathers and mothers (Mark 7:8–13). Here is another example of Jesus practicing what he preached. The same John to whom Jesus speaks here later wrote: “He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked” (1 John 2:6). Do we follow Jesus in looking after the interests of our mothers? Or do we see them as our servants to make our meals, clean our rooms, and drive us everywhere we want? Mothers may do these things in service to Christ, but their children must not treat them as servants. Jesus honored his mom. He came to serve her, not to be served by her.

### ***Mothers Must Love Their Children***

In the shadow of the cross, Mary could do nothing for her Son. Still, in his darkest moment, Mary shows the commitment of a caring mother. She was there for him. She grieved with him. She cried with him. If she could have embraced him, she would have. Mothers miss the point if they see themselves strictly as disciplinarians and rule enforcers. Mothers are called to share their hearts with their kids. The swords that pierce your kids’ hearts must pierce yours as well.

### ***The Legacy of Jesus’ Actions***

The Bible was written for every child of God. That’s true of this text as well. But certain texts are written to a particular type or group of people. In

the events recorded in this verse, Jesus provided for his own mother. But as he hung and died on the cross, he was providing for every believing mother and woman (and man and child).

### ***Jesus Provides Pity for Motherhood’s Demands***

Motherhood can be a great burden. It places great demands on mothers’ emotional and physical resources. Jesus bore the heavy burden of the cross so that he could give us the light burden of the Christian life. Jesus said, “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28). Everything that is demanded of mothers Christ supplies through his life. We experience the comfort of his provision through faith and an intimate walk with him.

### ***Jesus Provides Pardon from Motherhood’s Guilt***

What mother can live up to the expectations placed upon her? Because of its demands, motherhood can produce much guilt. This guilt can be crippling spiritually, emotionally, relationally, and even physically. In his death Jesus graciously tells women (and men), “You don’t measure up. You *can’t* measure up. That’s why I died for you!” Only Christ can measure up to the demands of the law of motherhood. When we take hold of Christ by faith, *all* our guilt is banished to the grave. In God’s eyes, believers are now as innocent as Christ himself!

### ***Jesus Grants Peace for Motherhood’s Concerns***

A friend of mine writes about a recent brush with death: “I experienced steady peace regarding my own salvation . . . but . . . I felt tremendous anxiety about my . . . family and the

sorrow that would transform their lives [if I died]. . . . This spiritual schizophrenia has often plagued me. How can I have such assured faith in Christ’s salvation, and yet doubt His providence? How can I rest my soul entirely upon Him, yet think I need to carry my family myself? At times . . . I was able to leave my family in the Lord’s hands, but mostly I felt deep concern for them.”

What mother or father hasn’t thought like this? What is going to happen to my children? How will they possibly turn out well, considering my own failures and shortcomings? Jesus died on the cross to give us new life. The apostle Peter reminds us that “the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call” (Acts 2:39). God accomplished the salvation of his people through the treacherous acts of wicked men (Acts 4:27–28). God can bless our children through even our worst shortcomings. He can raise up children of faith from the stones of the earth (Luke 3:8). He doesn’t need our help.

Mary and John and the other believers followed Jesus to Golgotha and watched him until he died because they believed he went there to lay down his life for them. Through this experience they came to trust in Jesus for all their needs. For less-than-perfect mothers and fathers with less-than-perfect kids, that’s the only message that can give us real comfort.

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The familiar words of the Apostles' Creed have embedded themselves in the minds of many Christians: "The third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty." The orthodox faith has always affirmed Jesus' resurrection and ascension, so these truths are familiar to us. However, it is easy to overlook the significance of these critical events for the Christian life. Why does it matter that Christ rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of the Father? The Heidelberg Catechism of 1563 provides a helpful outline for this study, systematically asking and answering several key questions regarding the resurrection and ascension.

The Catechism offers a threefold answer to the question, "How does Christ's resurrection benefit us?" (Q&A 45). First, the resurrection proved Jesus' power over sin and the grave. Christian Reformed theologian M. J. Bosma notes in his *Exposition of Reformed Doctrine* that Christ's exaltation evidenced "that he had satisfied all the demands of the law, and could therefore now enter from under the wrath of God into his favor and pleasure" (167). The One who "was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification" (Rom. 4:25) had completed his work of salvation. Furthermore, in Jesus' resurrection, "we too are already now resurrected to a new life," as the Catechism says. The apostle Paul writes that "just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too" are enabled to "walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:4). Third, Christ's resurrection guarantees our own. We are, as Peter says, "born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you" (1 Peter 1:3-4). The ramifications of the resurrection are too great to be ignored, for if it did not occur, the Christian's faith is futile: "If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied" (1 Cor. 15:19).

Equally important to the Christian faith is the doctrine of Christ's ascension. At its most basic level, this event was Jesus' ultimate miracle; Bosma explains that it "proved that our Savior is supreme over the laws and forces of nature" (168). But the Catechism drives further into the benefits of the ascension for the church with three more application points. Seated at God's right hand, Jesus "pleads our cause in heaven in the presence of his Father" (Q&A 49) and "defends us and keeps us safe from all enemies" (Q&A 51). Bosma clarifies why Christ's position at God's right hand is significant: "This expression sets forth the supreme glorification of Christ in heaven, he is there exalted to supreme and universal glory, felicity and power over all principalities and every name that is named" (169). Second, because our own flesh now reigns in heaven, we are guaranteed that Jesus will return to take us to himself. He promises that he gives us, his sheep, "eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of [his] hand" (John 10:28). Finally, as a result of Christ's ascension, we are granted the guarantee of the Holy Spirit, who dwells in us to carry out our sanctification. As the Catechism puts it, "By the Spirit's power we make the goal of our lives, not earthly things, but the things above where Christ is, sitting at God's right hand" Q&A 49). We see even from this cursory study



“In all my distress and persecution I turn my eyes to the heavens and confidently await as judge the very One who has already stood trial in my place before God and so has removed the whole curse from me.”

that the implications of the ascension for the Christian life are clear. As the old hymn “See, the Conqueror Mounts in Triumph” says, “Mighty Lord, in Thine ascension / We by faith behold our own.”

Given the centrality of Christ’s resurrection and ascension to our faith, it is strange that so many churches celebrate Easter while neglecting Ascension Day. The raising of Jesus for our justification is no less important than his current seat at God’s right hand for our comfort and defense. Most significantly, Jesus’ ascension reminds us of the angels’ message to the astonished disciples on the Mount of Olives: “This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way

as you saw him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11). Remembering the ascension, we eagerly await Christ’s imminent return. Once again the Heidelberg Catechism beautifully applies this doctrine to the Christian life: “In all my distress and persecution I turn my eyes to the heavens and confidently await as judge the very One who has already stood trial in my place before God and so has removed the whole curse from me. All his enemies and mine he will condemn to everlasting punishment: but me and all his chosen ones he will take along with him into the joy and glory of heaven” (Q&A 52). The certain hope of a personal resurrection gives the Christian a reason to carry out his work in this

world joyfully: because of Christ’s resurrection and ascension, our labor in the Lord is not in vain (1 Cor. 15:58).

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\*All quotations in this article of Menno J. Bosma are from *Exposition of Reformed Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Smitten Book Company, 1927).

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**O**n Monday afternoon around 4:00, a tornado 200 to 300 yards wide tore down Beech Ridge Road in Beaufort County, North Carolina, a peaceful rural road where I spent the latter part of my youth and still consider home. My family and I moved into a solid, beautiful house about half a mile back from the road back in 1999. I spent several years and summers there and many more vacations and holidays, building treasured memories and enjoying the people dearest to me in this world. My sister Elyssa (now eighteen) has known no other home.

Not long after we moved to the Beech Ridge house, my sister Carla married her husband, Mark. They eventually purchased a dilapidated property about two miles down the same road. Over the years, and with a lot of work, Mark and Carla cleaned up the property and the house situated on it, rebuilt the barn, planted trees and a garden, and made for themselves a life. Over the years they had six children, including one set of twins, and have a seventh child on the way.

Tornado watches and warnings are relatively frequent in eastern North Carolina. We pay attention to them but don't let them upset our routine too much because nothing ever comes of them, or they are always somewhere else.

That afternoon my sister was homeschooling her son Daniel (age 7) when eleven-year-old Joshua, who loves watching and learning about weather, burst into the house and told her that he saw the tornado from the porch. Carla thought he was probably

exaggerating, but when he insisted, she followed his lead and gathered the children in the bathtub: Joshua, Josiah (9), Daniel, Hannah (4), Judah and Micah (2). Carla is due to have a baby next week.

While this was happening, Mark was in the barn. He heard a noise but didn't realize it was the tornado until he saw debris blowing. Looking outside, he saw the tornado coming from behind a wood, only a few minutes away. He quickly told the neighbor (who lives in a house on their property) and then ran to tell Carla and the kids. Mark made a snap judgment that this was a tornado his house—a doublewide—was not going to withstand. He yelled to everyone in the house to get out and run to a deep ditch about forty yards from the house (on the opposite side from the barn).

Carla told me she thought this probably wasn't a very good idea. "Isn't it better to be in here than to be outside, or even to be caught running when the tornado hits?" But the boys, she said, didn't hesitate, and she followed their lead. Mark grabbed one of the twins, and seven-year-old Daniel grabbed the other. As he ran out the door and across the front yard, Mark said he saw the tornado begin to chew up his barn, about a hundred yards from the house. It was about twenty seconds, he said, from when he told everyone to get out of the house, to the point the tornado swept over their heads and over the ditch.

Carla was following, but she realized that Hannah, still groggy from a nap, had gone back to her room, possibly to get her shoes. Carla went back and

told Hannah she had to run in bare feet. Holding Hannah, she climbed or jumped off the three-foot-high front porch—she doesn't remember how but she somehow injured her leg in the process. Being full-term, she had to put Hannah down. She took her hand and they began to run toward the ditch as fast as they could move.

About half-way to the ditch Carla felt the wind pick up and said she realized they wouldn't make it. She lay down and covered Hannah as the tornado swept over. Carla tries to describe what happened during the next few seconds but says she doesn't entirely know. What she does know is that she saw a large cedar tree crash to the ground and land only a few yards away from them. The tree then swept toward them and she felt it slam against her shoulders. The next few seconds, she says, she was thrown around like a little child caught in the ocean's waves, branches clutching and scraping her. All she could do was repeat the prayer "Lord save me!" She held on to Hannah, but the little girl was pulled from her arms.

Then it was over. Hannah was beside her and the wind was dying down. She saw a snake lying in the grass. They got up and moved toward the ditch just as Mark and the boys were getting out. This was the first moment Mark realized that not everyone had made it into the ditch. "Is everyone OK? Where is Joshua?" Joshua was still in the ditch, extricating himself from part of a tree that had landed on top of him when the tornado swept over the ditch. Everyone was alive.

But the house was gone. Literally gone. Most of the foundation was still there, but the rest of the house consisted of a pile of rubble several dozen yards away. The tree that had swept over Carla and Hannah was lying in an adjacent field. The top story of the barn was gone, and only one wall remained of the rest. The van was upside down and the car totaled. The entire property, including most of its beautiful trees, was entirely laid waste. In this picture you can see the bathtub in which Carla and the kids had taken shelter before Mark told them to get out.

The tornado didn't stop there, of course. My younger sister Elyssa



down everywhere, and a barn full of massive farm equipment a few hundred yards from the house was completely destroyed, but just about everything inside the house was fine. It was pouring rain, of course, so that would not last long. Mom and Elyssa could see the tornado moving down the field away from the house.

Almost immediately neighbors, friends, and folks from our church began to arrive. A pale-faced man with a quivering lip told Mom that Mark and Carla had lost everything, but that they were OK. They went to see Mark and Carla and found Carla in a brace with an ambulance getting ready to take her to the hospital. No words can describe the entirety of thoughts and emotions, of course. Only “Thank You Lord, a hundred times in the ditch,” Carla said. Carla had felt the baby move inside her, so that gave her great relief. Her face covered in grime, she said to my weeping mother, “We’re OK, Mom. Everyone’s OK.” Hannah

was reading in the living room of my parents’ house when she heard my Mom, who thankfully was not napping in her upstairs bedroom as she usually does in the afternoon, yell that a tornado was coming. Glancing up, she could see the tornado out the front window, sweeping towards the house. They took shelter in an interior bathroom.

Within two seconds the tornado hit the house. It tore off half the roof (above my parents’ room and my old bedroom) and sent the top of the massive chimney crashing through the back deck. Huge trees were



had blood coming out of her ear but seems to be fine. Carla's whole body still aches with pain, and she is covered with bruises and scrapes, but aside from that, the doctors determined, she and the baby are fine. She came home from the hospital on Tuesday.

Soon well over a hundred people were helping my parents (my Dad had come home) save their possessions from the rain, and were looking through the rubble of Mark and Carla's house to see what could be salvaged. There was little in the latter case, but there were some things to be saved. The boys found a precious piece of jewelry that both my older sisters wore at their weddings and that my younger sister wore as a bridesmaid at mine. With the help of the neighbors my parents have saved just about everything of value from their home, though it is clear that the house itself is finished.

I loved that house. But things are just things, and it is not the house that I can't stop thinking about, or that has left me in a daze over the past couple of days. I can't stop thinking about my precious sister, in the thirty-ninth week of her pregnancy, being thrown around on the ground by a tornado even as it utterly obliterates her home some twenty yards away. I can't stop thinking about the few seconds between the time when they were all in that bathtub and the moment when the tornado struck. We almost lost them—it was a matter of seconds and inches. I can't stop thanking God for his mercy.

There is no doubt my brother-in-law, Mark, saved his family. Thank you, Mark, for your wisdom and decisiveness. The boys were so courageous, taking care of themselves and helping their younger siblings at the same

time (seven-year-old Daniel was an absolute hero, carrying his two-year-old brother all the way from the house to the ditch!). And Carla no doubt saved little Hannah's life.

But our loving God, whose ways are mysterious and beyond understanding, saved them all. Our Lord, who did not think it too much to take on human flesh and pay the ultimate price for our sin, continues to show us mercy in ways that can only look to us like the miraculous.

God is our refuge and strength,

a very present help in trouble.

Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way,

though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea,

though its waters roar and foam,

though the mountains tremble at its swelling.

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,

the holy habitation of the Most High.

God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved;

God will help her when morning dawns.

The nations rage, the kingdoms totter;

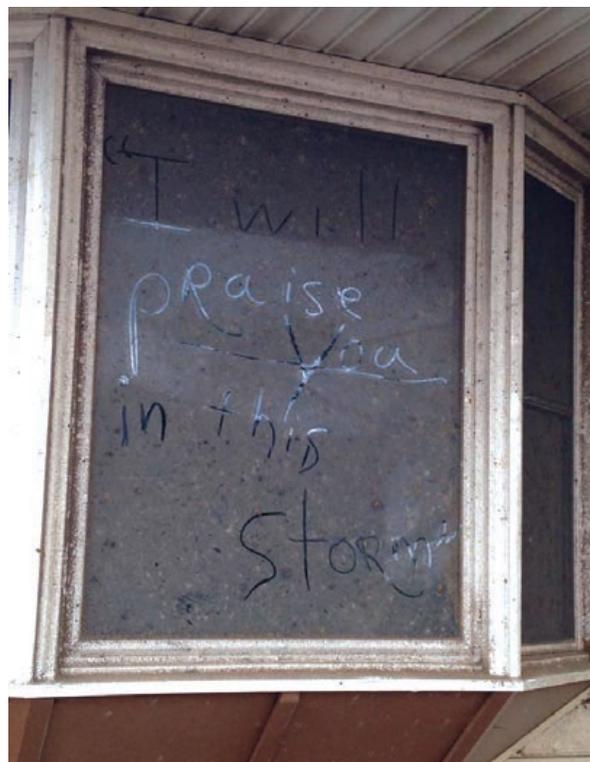
he utters his voice, the earth melts.

The LORD of hosts is with us;

the God of Jacob is our fortress.

(Psalm 46:1–7)

On my parents' living room window, where my sister Elyssa had been reading, Elyssa traced in the filth, "I will praise you in this storm." Yes, our gracious God, our Savior. We praise you and we thank you. The Sunday after the storm, Carla gave birth to a healthy baby boy. God is good!



*"I have now been informed these words were written by Elyssa."*

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# Bible Studies on Romans

## Lesson 34: Paul's Pictorial Directory

### Romans 16

Rev. Wybren  
Oord

**I**n the final chapter of Romans, Paul extends Christian greetings to his friends in Rome. After his greeting, Timothy, fellow worker with Paul, extends his greetings. Paul's mention of almost thirty people in the church that he had not yet visited testifies to his knowledge of the church, the problems they faced, and the desire he had to visit with them as soon as possible. They were not strangers to him. Through the greetings that Paul sends, the reader can sense that Paul was not in the business of sermons, epistle writing, or church work. He was in the business of people—telling them about Jesus Christ and working with them to advance the kingdom of God.

#### Paul's Women Friends

Although we know little about the individuals that Paul greets in this list, we do know something about a few of them. Included are several women who served the church with distinction. Priscilla, along with her husband, Aquila, for example, had a church in her house. Paul writes that this couple risked their lives for him. She, along with her husband, also instructed Apollos in the way of God. Many women showed Paul and the apostles hospitality by giving of their homes. In all of these examples, women played an important and necessary role in the church.

Jesus had started including women in his ministry, something that was quite remarkable for that time in history and something that Paul continued on his missionary journeys. Nowhere,

however, are the women Paul lists depicted as having authority over men or holding an ordained office in their tasks. The two restrictions that Paul applied to women elsewhere in his writings applied for the women in Rome as well (1 Cor. 14:34–35; 1 Tim. 2:11–14).

Romans 16:1–2, for example, lists Phoebe as a deaconess whom the church was supposed to help in whatever she needed. Early tradition says that Phoebe carried the epistle Paul had penned to the capital city and delivered it to the church. That Phoebe was called a deaconess has been used as an argument to allow women to serve in the office of deacon. However, the Greek word Paul uses can also be translated “servant.” First Peter 4:10 uses the same Greek word to exhort the Christians to “use whatever gift he has received to serve others.” The word used here does not mean that she held an ordained office in the church, but that she was a servant of the church. This does not make her less valuable. The passage shows the important role she played in the church. Phoebe supported Paul and, as expected of all Christians, worked hard in the church for the glory of God. She was a coheir in Christ.

Junia (v. 7) or, in some translations, Junias, is a feminine name, so it is assumed that Paul is writing about a woman. Those who promote women in ecclesiastical office point to this woman, who was “outstanding among the apostles.” We need to consider three things before we build a case on Junia. The first is that it must be proven that Junia is indeed a woman.

Second, the Greek is more aptly translated that Junia was “esteemed among the apostles,” which gives the verse an entirely different meaning. It could mean that the apostles spoke highly of Junia. The third thing that must be considered is the word *apostle*. Several commentaries that argue that Junia was both a woman and an apostle limit the meaning of the word *apostle* to those who had seen the risen Lord.

#### Other Friends

One other friend Paul mentions is Rufus (v. 13). The only other place Rufus is mentioned in the Bible is Mark 15:21. There, a man named Rufus is named as the son of Simon, the man who carried the cross for Jesus to Golgotha. Whether they are the same man, we can only speculate.

Paul also refers to some friends as family members, which can be understood as fellow Jews. The majority of people listed are received in love as Gentiles. They are former slaves who have been set free. How rich the words of Paul's letter must have been for them when he wrote that they have been “set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness” (6:18). Paul's affection for those who received this letter was not lessened because of their background.

While we may know some things about some of the people Paul greets, he describes all of his Roman friends either as fellow workers or as those loved by Christ. The workers performed their tasks as a labor of love to the Lord; those loved by

Christ expressed their love working in service to others.

A few married couples are included in the list as well as homes where the church members regularly met. The church maintained a healthy balance between groups and individuals. Jesus usually healed people one by one but preached to groups. Likewise, people receive justification individually, but in sanctification they need the communion of the saints. The individuals need the group, and the group needs the individuals.

After greeting several coworkers in Christ, Paul encourages them to greet one another with a holy kiss. In a city where a handshake was the customary greeting, this greeting would be a public symbol of unity and acceptance. It would encourage believers as they realized that they were not alone in a city where Christians were severely persecuted. Paul's greetings include five different house churches (vv. 5, 10, 11, 14, 15). How wonderful it must have been to be in the marketplace and find a fellow Christian with whom you could share the excitement of the gospel!

### **Final Exhortations**

Within Paul's ministry and within the church, times of danger and tribulation alternated with times of safety and fruitfulness. In his greetings, Paul recalls with fondness those who helped him, labored with him, and had been in prison with him. They were with him in times of suffering as well as when he witnessed great blessings from God.

While thinking of his dear friends, Paul reminds them of the physical and spiritual dangers that may befall them as Christians. He warns them especially against the troublemakers who work to divide the church with false teaching. Paul is keenly aware

*The Apostle Paul* by Rembrandt  
Harmenszoon van Rijn



that Satan is behind every attack upon the church of Jesus Christ. The attacks of Satan came upon Paul by means of Judaizers, who sought to add works to the saving work of Jesus Christ. For John, the attacks came from those who denied the deity of Jesus and the Gnostics. In every age these two streams of thought have attacked the church. There will always be those who believe and promote works righteousness. There will always be those who deny the deity of Jesus Christ. It is a never-ending battle. Paul urges the church to be on guard continually against those who cause strife in the church.

Paul brings his readers back to the garden of Eden as he reminds the church that God will crush Satan underfoot. Satan came offering the knowledge of good and evil to Eve, if only she would eat from the forbidden tree (Gen. 3:5). She ate, and her eyes were opened to the evil that she had done. Paul writes, “I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil” (v. 19).

Experienced bank tellers can quickly identify counterfeit currency. They are able to do so not because they have taken classes in identifying counterfeit bills. Rather, they handle enough real money that, for them, a counterfeit bill has a strange feel to it. So also, when a Christian is “wise about what is good,” he or she does not have to engage in all kinds of debates about what is right or wrong. Rev. Jelle Tuininga used to say, “A person’s Reformed antennae will start to tingle when he hears something wrong.” A person who has been properly trained and who has a love for the Lord—who is wise in what is good—will recognize false teaching as it filters into the church.

Then Paul adds, “The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet” (v. 20). Satan’s power was broken at the cross. When Christ died on the cross, he crushed Satan underfoot. While the devil may still be active, in the sight of God’s true angels he is completely defeated. Even the things he can accomplish on this earth are for the profit of those who believe (Rom. 8:28). We need no other knowledge

except that which is in Christ Jesus, in whom is the fullness of God (Col. 1:19). All questions in the spiritual realm are answered in Jesus Christ. Without him, there are no answers—only lies.

Salvation has been secured for us at the cross of Jesus Christ. It is for all who believe in the sufficiency of Christ’s sacrifice. In addition, the obedience that secures eternal life has been accomplished by the sinless Savior who gave his life. His righteousness has been imputed to those who trust in him.

After his greetings, Paul closes his letter with a third benediction, ending with a doxology that gives honor to the one true God alone. May our lives be a constant doxology of praise to God.

**Rev. Wybren Oord**

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## Points to Ponder and Discuss

1. How many people does Paul greet in his closing chapter?
2. How many were women? What was Phoebe’s role?
3. How are the greetings of Paul beneficial for us today?
4. Notice how often Paul uses the phrase “in Christ” and “in the Lord.” What is the significance of these phrases?
5. What was the significance of greeting one another with a holy kiss? Why has this practice stopped within most North American churches? How is it continued?
6. Why are warnings, greetings, and doxologies all natural ingredients for a farewell?
7. Who is/are the cause of divisions within the church?
8. How should the church respond to divisions?
9. What is the great mystery that has been revealed?

# Heritage Reformed Congregations (HRC) Korean American Presbyterian Church (KAPC)

Mr. Myron  
Rau

## Heritage Reformed Congregations (HRC)

### History

Although the Heritage Reformed Congregations have only recently been officially incorporated, their historical roots can be traced back 125 years to the original incorporation of the Christian Reformed Congregation of Grand Rapids (Michigan) in October 1870. Later, in 1877, the Grand Rapids consistory, along with the consistory of Lodi, New Jersey, agreed to unite under the name of Netherlands Reformed Church (NRC).

In December 1986, Rev. Joel Beeke became the pastor of the First Netherlands Reformed Church of Grand Rapids, which at that time was composed of more than one thousand souls. In 1993, the Heritage Reformed Congregations (HRC) were established after the Netherlands Reformed Church underwent a split related to church order and theological issues. The most substantive underlying issue relative to the HRC was Christ-centered preaching combined with the preaching of an unconditional offer of grace. The two denominations, although split, continue to cooperate with running Christian schools founded by the NRC.

The HRC subscribes to the Three Forms of Unity as well as the Westminster Standards. It places an emphasis on early Puritan teachings. The HRC also emphasizes experiential preaching, which it explains means, Christ-centered preaching which stresses that for salvation sinners must by faith have a personal, experiential (that is, experienced) Spirit-worked knowledge of Christ, and, by extension, of all the great truths of Scripture. Thus the HRC emphasizes, as the Puritans did, that the Holy Spirit causes the objective truths about Christ and his work to be experienced in the heart and life of sinners.

### Current Status

The HRC consists of eleven congregations with more than two thousand souls: six churches in the United States and five in Canada. Currently there are three classes. It is involved in mission work in Africa, South Africa, and Zambia. The HRC congregations continue to have close relations with their sister churches, the Gereformeerde Gemeenten, in the Netherlands.

The HRC owns and governs the Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, which was established in 1995 and is located in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

The HRC has been a member of NAPARC since 2007. Being a young federation of churches, it is taking its time in considering churches with which to engage in ecumenical relations.

Shortly after coming to Grand Rapids, Rev. Joel Beeke earned his doctorate. Dr. Beeke was the key figure in the establishment of the HRC and of Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary. In addition to being a pastor of the Heritage Reformed congregation in Grand Rapids, he is president and professor of systematic theology and homiletics at the seminary; editor of *Banner of Sovereign Grace Truth*; publisher of Reformation Heritage Books; president of Inheritance Publishers; and vice-president of the Dutch Reformed Translation Society. He has written, coauthored, or edited more than seventy books and has contributed more than two thousand articles to Reformed books, journals, periodicals, and encyclopedias. He is a frequent lecturer at seminaries and speaker at Reformed conferences around the world.

Complete information about the HRC can be found on its website at [www.heritagereformed.org](http://www.heritagereformed.org).

The website for Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary can be found at [www.puritanseminary.org](http://www.puritanseminary.org).

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### CORRECTION:

The March/April issue of *The Outlook*, which featured NAPARC member church the Free Reformed Churches of North America, contained an error. It was stated that the FRC's Puritan leanings have brought them into close fraternal relations with the Netherlands Reformed Congregations. It should have stated instead that their close relations are with the Heritage Reformed Congregations. *The Outlook* apologizes for any confusion that may have resulted from this error.

## Korean American Presbyterian Church (KAPC)

The Korean American Presbyterian Church was formed in 1978 by Korean immigrants on the campus of Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia. On its founding date, the church consisted of five presbyteries. It joined NAPARC in 1983.

Currently KAPC has twenty-seven presbyteries and six hundred congregations with about seventy thousand communicant members and twelve hundred ministers. It has ninety-four missionaries supported by its own World Missionary Society, and it has eighteen men serving as chaplains in the US military.

KAPC adheres to the Westminster Standards. Its church office-bearers also must subscribe to the KAPC church creed, which can be found at <http://www.creeds.net/reformed/kapc.htm>.

KAPC maintains its own seminary in California, but it accepts other pastoral candidates who graduated from conservative seminaries upon examination.

The KAPC website is found at [www.kapc.org](http://www.kapc.org), with content only in Korean.

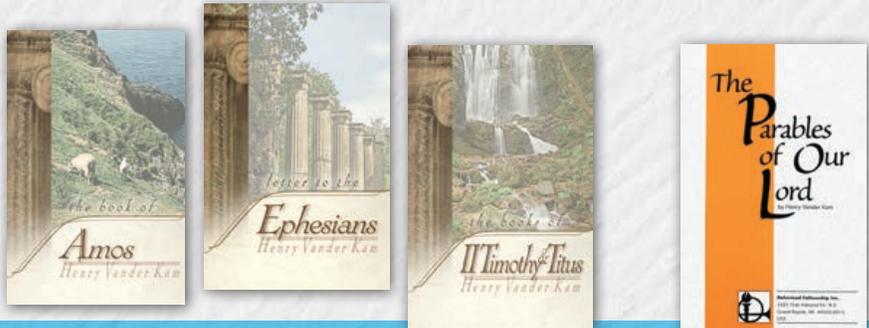
One of the KAPC presbyteries is the North American Presbytery (NAP). This presbytery was organized in 2002 and was formed to oversee English-speaking second-generation churches and pastors within the Korean American Presbyterian Church. That presbytery currently consists of eight congregations. The NAP website can be found at [www.napres.org](http://www.napres.org).

### Mr. Myron Rau

is the chairman of the board of Reformed Fellowship. He is a member of the Covenant United Reformed Church in Kalamazoo, Michigan.

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# Synod 2014 (Visalia) Provisional Agenda Highlights And Comments

*Revised edition May 28, 2014*

Compiled by:

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## **Introduction:**

This review of the 372 page agenda of the upcoming Synod is designed to drill down into the significant matters of Synod. There is a lot of content in the Agenda that serves as background material or helps to flesh out the discussion. This is necessary for a full understanding of the issues. This high-level overview is intended to provide quick access to the materials in the agenda.

The basic question many delegates get asked is, “*what’s on the agenda for Synod?*”

In short, many of the recommendations and proposals are standard “business items” that respective Synods undertake at every meeting. However there are some significant matters being brought before Synod Visalia:

## **Significant Matters:**

- Request to Study membership resignation and desertion of membership (Overtures 3 & 4, pp 43-46)
- Request to revise guidelines for missions coordinator to expand eligibility to include men who are elders/qualified godly men (Overture 5, pp. 47-48)
- Request to adopt one form per liturgical event (Overture 8 & 9, pp. 59-62)
- CERCU reports that they will recommend to Synod 2016 that we enter into Phase 3A (*Development of the Plan of Ecclesiastical Union*) with the Canadian Reformed Churches (CERCU Report, pp.76-79, 84-85).
- The Psalter Hymnal Committee recommends the adoption of the Psalm proposal to be the psalter portion of the new songbook and provides a list of the psalms that will make up this portion of the new songbook (Psalter Hymnal Committee Report, pp. 99-109)
- The Missions Committee recommends a new nomination procedure for the Missions Coordinator position that will involve the Synodical Pre-advice Committee (Missions Committee Report, pp. 341-342)
- The Compensation & Retirement Committee recommends a series of changes to current practices to ensure that ministers and their dependents are provided for in cases of disability, retirement, and death (Compensation & Retirement Committee Report, pp. 343, 347-353)

## **Administrative Matters, pg 134**

A collection of (necessary) reports from the convening consistory, stated clerk, US and CDN treasurers, and other misc. matters.

## **Report of the Stated Clerk (5-6)**

The Stated Clerk apologizes to the federation for not changing the a portion of the wording of Church Order Article 10 in the final published document. The first line should read, “Each church shall provide honorably [not ‘adequately’] for the minister of the Word.”

The Stated Clerk provides an attachment (pp. 7-10) suggesting updates to the Regulations for Synodical Procedure.

## **Overtures, pg 35-62**

*Only the overtures themselves are included here. Background and Ground(s) can be found in the Provisional Agenda itself.*

### **1. Editorially Revise Classical Credential (35-36)**

Classis Central US overtures Synod Visalia 2014 to editorially revise the classical credentials of the URCNA by replacing the term “council” with the term “Consistory” throughout the form.

**Comment:** This is interesting because Classis SWUS made these changes to their Classis Credentials in September 2004 and June 2005. Other classes have done the same (ex. Ontario East and Ontario South West)

### **2. Clarify the Status of Our Three Forms of Unity (37-41)**

Classis Central US overtures Synod Visalia 2014 to adopt the following two affirmations.

#### **Affirmation 1:**

That the United Reformed Churches in North America have accepted as confessionally binding the English-language translations of the Heidelberg Catechism, Belgic Confession of Faith, and Canons of Dort which are included in the 1976 version of the Psalter Hymnal.

#### **Affirmation 2:**

That the United Reformed Churches in North America recognize the 1958 revision of Belgic Confession Article 36, including the “substitute statement” placed in a footnote, as part of its confessional binding.

**Comment:** This overture asks the delegates to “pick an official version of the Three Forms of Unity” and they suggest that the versions found in the 1976 Psalter Hymnal has the all-but-official stamp of approval. The first affirmation is intended to settle the question of which version we have adopted in our history and in our current circumstances. The second affirmation picks up the status of the 2nd paragraph of Belgic Confession 36. There is a substitute version of the 2nd paragraph (in the footnote) that has been the adopted position of the CRCNA since 1958.

This overture forgets what Synod 2001 recognized (Acts of Synod 2001, Art. XXIII) in the grounds for denying an overture to adopt a particular translation of Belgic Confession, Article 4: 1) “A number of versions of the Three Forms of Unity are currently in use in the URCNA, none of which has ever been officially adopted.” 2) “The matter of versions of the confessions falls under the mandate of the Psalter Hymnal Committee” (and subsequently the Liturgical Forms Committee). Furthermore, the second affirmation incorporates two opposing positions of what was an ongoing debate in the CRCNA until 1985 when the CRCNA removed from Article 36 the portion of the body amended in 1910 and included in Article 36 what had been a footnote since 1958.

This overture might be answered by the Liturgical Forms Committee’s recommendation to adopt the 1985 CRC translation of the Belgic Confession.

### **3. Study the Matter of Resignation (43-44)**

Classis Central US overtures Synod Visalia 2014 to establish a study committee to evaluate the practice of resigning one’s church membership. We ask that this committee be called to develop and recommend pastoral advice to the churches concerning the following points:

1. How, according to Scripture and the testimony of our Reformed Confessions, we should regard the practice of resigning, or attempting to resign, one’s membership in the church;
2. How, according to Scripture and the testimony of our Reformed confessions, we should regard an individual who attempts to engage in this practice of resigning church membership; and
3. How the churches should respond when a member attempts to resign from the membership of the church, paying special attention to these questions:

- a. Under what circumstances, if any, should a Consistory ever *acquiesce* to a member's desire to resign his or her membership in the church?
- b. Under what circumstances, if any, should the Consistory ever *refuse to acquiesce* to a member's desire to resign his or her membership in the church?
- c. Should church discipline continue to be exercised in the case of a member who, in the midst of the discipline process, expresses the desire to resign from the church?

**Comment:** This overture and the overture following (#4) seek to give advice to the churches on matters of membership for those who wish to leave the church. These and similar questions are routinely asked of Classis to give advice since our Church Order does not contain these categories of ways a member can leave a local church. Overture 3 asks for a study committee to give advice to the churches when a member (either under discipline or not) asks to resign their membership.

#### 4. Study Committee Related to Desertion of Church Membership (45-46)

Classis Central US overtures Synod Visalia 2014 to empanel a study committee to give pastoral advice on the issue of desertion of church membership, as well as suggest appropriate changes to the church order.

The following should be addressed in the study committee report:

1. What are the parameters which, when met, would constitute an individual seeking to desert his church membership?
2. What options should be available to a consistory once a person has deserted his membership?
3. What changes/additions to the church order should codify an understanding of desertion of church membership?

**Comment:** This overture is similar to the previous overture in that it deals with an individual's membership in a local church. Whereas the previous was an active change in transfer by an individual, this overture seeks to resolve a seemingly passive change in membership for those who, for example, simply move to another church without transferring their membership or those for whom the Consistory no longer has any contact with.

#### 5. Revise Guidelines for Missions Coordinator (47-48)

Classis Michigan overtures Synod 2014 to change the missions policies (as printed in the Agenda for Synod Nyack, pages 376-379) as follows:

1. Change in b.3.f. ("Functions and Tasks of the Synodical Missions Committee," "Chairman-Coordinator"), from "He shall visit missionaries periodically for encouragement, exhortation, and *preaching*/teaching/counseling, in order to assist the calling churches and missionaries as requested by either party" to "He shall visit missionaries periodically for encouragement, exhortation, and teaching/counseling, in order to assist the calling churches and missionaries as requested by either party."
2. Change in c.2.a. ("Qualifications for Synodical Missions Committee Members," "Chairman-Coordinator"), from "The Chairman-coordinator must be an ordained minister of Word" to "The coordinator must be an ordained minister of the Word *or a qualified godly man recommended by his consistory.*"
3. Change in c.2.c., from "The Chairman-coordinator should show strength in both pastoral ministry and administrative skills" to "The coordinator should show strength in administrative skills as well as in pastoral ministry (*if an ordained minister.*)"
4. Change in d.2.a. ("Appointment of Members," "Chairman of committee") from "Each classis is encouraged to nominate a minister of the Word for the position of Chairman-coordinator of the Synodical Missions Committee." to "Each classis is encouraged to nominate a minister of the Word *or a qualified godly man* for the position of Missions Coordinator."

**Comment:** This overture seeks to allow for an elder or other godly man to be considered to fill the position of Missions Coordinator. This idea was discussed at length prior to Synod Nyack 2012, but the Missions Study Committee, the Advisory Committee, and the delegates of Synod Nyack decided to limit the position to only ordained Ministers of the Word. Seeing that no nominated minister was approved by a classis prior to Synod Visalia, an overture like this might gain traction to open the number of candidates available to fill this position.

## 6. Retain Doxological Ending of Lord's Prayer (49)

Classis Ontario-East overtures Synod Visalia 2014 to instruct the Liturgical Forms Committee to retain the longer, doxological ending (namely *For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.*) in every instance where the Lord's Prayer is included in our Liturgical Forms.

**Comment:** Given the widespread (universal?) use and even the Confessional use/explanation (HC Q&A 119, 128) of the "doxological ending" of the Lord's Prayer this overture seeks on liturgical and pastoral grounds to restore the conclusion of the prayer when it is used in our liturgical forms.

## 7. Enhancement of the Proposed Form for Baptism (51-58)

Classis Ontario-East overtures Synod Visalia 2014 to adopt provisionally the attached proposed enhancement of the form for the "*Baptism of Infants: Form 1*" for continued refinement by the *Liturgical Forms Committee*. Classis correspondingly overtures Synod to instruct the Committee to bring those components of the forms for *Adult Baptism*, *Reception of Families* and *Household Baptism* that overlap with the basic baptismal form into conformity with one another, as appropriate.

**Comment:** This overture provides an alternate to "Baptism of Infants: Form 1" that seeks to "enhance" its contemporary usefulness/character as well as to be in harmony with other baptismal forms prepared by the Liturgical Forms Committee. The language of the form has been updated and is more readable than its predecessor. A document follows the overture that contains three columns with the far right one containing the proposed revisions. The overture sensitively requests the committee to continue refining the form so as not to impede on the work of the committee.

## 8. Reduce the Number of Liturgical Forms (59-60)

Classis Ontario-East overtures Synod Visalia 2014 to instruct the Liturgical Forms Committee to limit the production of liturgical forms to one form per liturgical event<sup>1</sup> while maintaining the commitment to continuity with the historic Reformed forms.

<sup>1</sup> One form for each of the following liturgical events: Baptism of Infants, Public Profession of Faith, Baptism of Adults, Reception of Families, Household Baptism, Celebration of the Lord's Supper, Short Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper, Excommunication, Readmission, Ordination (or Installation) of Ministers of the Word, Ordination of Elders and Deacons, Solemnization of Marriage.

**Comment:** This overture seeks to limit the number of liturgical forms to one where there is a multiplicity of forms available in order to maintain consistency and give an expression to the unity of faith.

## 9. Remove Baptism Form 2 from Committee's Proposal (61-62)

Classis Ontario-East overtures Synod Visalia 2014 to instruct the Liturgical Forms Committee to remove *Baptism of Children—Form 2* (which is a slightly updated version of Form 3 in the Blue *Psalter Hymnal*) from the Liturgical Forms being proposed for inclusion in the new *Psalter Hymnal*.

**Comment:** This overture highlights perceived deficiencies in the second form for the baptism of children given to the churches by the Liturgical Forms Committee and would like to see it removed altogether. If Overture 8 is acceded to, and assuming Form 1 is the single liturgical form chosen, then this overture would be answered.

*Note: The report of the Stated Clerk mentioned two overtures that "did not meet the standards of admissibility" and were not included in the final agenda.*

## Reports of Committees:

(Only the recommendations from Committees are included here. The Provisional Agenda includes the entirety of reports. These are worth reading )

### 1. Committee for Ecumenical Relations and Church Unity (CERCU) (65-95)

1. That Synod grant the privilege of the floor to the committee chairman and secretary when committee matters are being considered (Regulations 5.4.2).
2. That Synod allow for a one hour Colloquium between two representatives of the URCNA and two representatives of the CanRC as arranged by CERCU.

**Comment:** Dr. Robert Godfrey and Dr. Cornel Venema will engage in a dialogue with Dr. Jason Van Vliet and Dr. Ted Van Raalte during Synod on matters of theological concern.

3. That synod ratify the changes to the Constitution of NAPARC as found in Appendix 2 below.

**Comment:** The changes to the Constitution of NAPARC largely involve cleaning up language and making the articles more readable. The additions to the Constitution relate in most cases to facilitating ecclesiastical cooperation amongst the member churches in matters of mutual concern.

4. That synod ratify the membership of the Korean Presbyterian Church in America—Kosin (KPCA) in NAPARC. See Appendix 3 for a report on the KPCA.

**Comment:** The KPCA is not to be confused with the Korean American Presbyterian Church (KAPC) which is already a member of NAPARC. This church seems to really be an extension of her mother church in Korea which seeks to remain faithful to the Westminster Standards. Much of their history reminds one of the 19th Century Dutch Reformed churches in the Netherlands!

5. That Synod appoint or re-appoint three members-at-large. Rev. Richard Miller, Rev. Bill Pols and Rev. Peter Vellenga are eligible for reappointment.
6. That synod appoint an alternate member-at-large. There is no current alternate. Rev. Brian Vos, who last served in that position before it became vacant is eligible for reappointment.
7. That Synod set the budget for CERCU at \$10,000 US per annum.

**Comment:** This is an increase from \$6,500.

8. That Synod remind the churches of our mutual responsibility to engage one another in our ecumenical task through prayer, classical dialogue, local efforts and the expression of concerns.
9. That Synod approve the work of the committee in its reporting of our interaction with the Interchurch relations committee of the Free Reformed Churches on the *Conclusions of Utrecht*, that without binding ourselves to any formulations beyond our Confessions, the report gives faithful expression to what lives in the thinking and practice of our churches. The committee welcomes any additional feedback from the churches.

**Comment:** Pages 71-74 helpfully include reflections on dialogues that a sub-committee of CERCU had with the FRC on the matters taken up by the Synod of Utrecht. There was definite agreement on the conclusions of Utrecht, but the FRC are really concerned that within the URC there is in practice the notion of “presumed regeneration” for our baptized children even if we do deny it in proclamation. The sub-committee directs attention to Recommendation 15 concerning the conclusions made in this report. (Herman Bavinck’s book *Saved By Grace* goes through these matters in a very concise and clarifying way—as does Mark Beach’s article: <http://www.midamerica.edu/resources/journal/19/beach19.pdf>)

10. That Synod receive for information the announcement of CERCU that it plans to recommend to Synod 2016 that we proceed to Phase Three A of church unity with the Canadian Reformed Churches that, should the churches approve of this recommendation in 2016, we would begin the *Development of a Plan of Union*

**Comment:** CERCU is providing notice of its intended direction as an early heads up. The churches will have plenty of time to weigh the merits of this idea and CERCU will present a fully-developed argument for moving to Phase 3A in its 2016 Report to Synod. This plan includes recommendations 11-13 below.

11. That Synod urge the churches to seriously consider which, if any specific articles or stipulations of the PJCO they believe should be changed before it can be adopted for a united federation, and seek to bring such concerns to Synod 2016 by way of overture to their classis.
12. That Synod approve the cooperation of the PJCO Committee with CERCU for the working on as yet unresolved difficulties that will be encountered in formulating a plan of union.
13. That Synod continue to encourage each classis and consistory to continue to engage the issue of an eventual merger between the CanRC and the URCNA by inviting Canadian Reformed ministers to fill our pulpits, inviting Canadian Reformed representatives to our classis meetings, seeking open dialogue with Canadian Reformed brothers regarding any outstanding areas of concern, organizing joint events with Canadian Reformed congregations, attending joint conferences, and writing columns to foster our mutual understanding and affection. *Grounds not included in this document*
14. That the classes be reminded of their continuing responsibility to appoint or reappoint classical representatives (and alternates) to CERCU in the manner the classes deem appropriate.
15. That Synod approve the work of the committee without adopting every formulation in its dialogue.

**Comment:** This recommendation is important because the Committee is indicating that the materials in its report are not definitive and therefore Synod is not being asked to make a wholesale adoption of the Committee's findings/formulations.

## 2. Proposed Joint Church Order Committee (97)

If it pleases synod to continue our committee to perfect the PJCO, Synodical Regulations and related documents previously assigned to us, we recommend the appointment of an alternate member who can familiarize himself with our work, be kept up to date on our work, and be ready to step in should one of our members no longer be able to serve.

**Comment:** This Committee was kept by Synod Nyack, but was not given any work to do by the churches. Given CERCU's recommendation to pursue an eventual merger with the CanRC, this committee is ready to serve in its mandate to process information brought by URCNA churches and serve as liaison to the Church Order Sub-Committee of the CanRC (cf. CERCU Recommendations 11-12 above).

## 3. Psalter Hymnal Committee

1. That synod receive the work of the committee to date.
2. That synod grant the privilege of the floor to members of the URC Psalter Hymnal Committee when this report is being discussed.
3. That synod express the churches' appreciation and gratitude for the faithful service of Dr. Scott Finch and Mr. Daniel Zylstra.

4. That synod adopt the submitted Psalm Proposal to be the psalter portion of the new songbook. *Grounds not included in this document*

**Comment:** The churches have had opportunity to provide feedback on the psalter portion and the committee has already made a number of changes in response to that feedback. Unlike the hymnal portion, this process has been quite straightforward and less emotionally-charged. In adopting this psalter portion, the URC will be essentially rediscovering what it is to give the Psalms “principal place” in our worship services. The Psalms in the BPH are mostly rough paraphrases and this psalter marks a return to an older/traditional model of psalm singing that involves the entire text of a psalm (instead of snippets).

5. That synod grant the privilege of the floor to the OPC member(s) serving on their Psalter Hymnal Special Committee when recommendation 4 is being discussed.
6. That synod mandate the Liturgical Forms Committee to determine what liturgical forms, confessions, prayers, etc. ought to be included in the songbook, and submit these to Synod 2016 for approval. *Grounds not included in this document*
7. That synod appoint a person or persons with authority to sign contractual agreements with the OPC regarding this project. *Grounds not included in this document*

**Comment:** This recommendation marks a milestone in the development of the Psalter Hymnal project because it involves laying the groundwork for publication. The OPC’s connections to Great Commissions Publications will allow the URC to engage professional assistance in bringing its final book to print. The hymns portion of the new songbook has gone through substantive revision and it will be presented to the churches in the coming year(s) in the same way that the psalter portion was presented.

#### 4. Liturgical Forms Committee (111-209)

1. To allow Rev. Al Bezuyen and Rev. Dr. Brian Lee to report on behalf of the committee as needed.
2. To encourage the churches to review the Forms and prayers, ecumenical creeds and versions of the Belgic Confession and Canons of Dort with emendation and encourage communication with concerns to the committee by way of the Chairman Rev. Danny Hyde: pastor@oceansideurc.org or secretary Rev. Al Bezuyen at aabezuyen@gmail.com.
3. To keep the committee as presently constituted.
4. To set aside \$6,000.00 USD for a face to face meetings (this was approximate cost of the last meeting).

**Comment:** This report brings updated and streamlined versions of the Lord’s Prayer, the Apostle’s Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed, the Belgic Confession (the 1985 CRC Psalter Hymnal edition), the Canons of Dort (the 1986 CRC Psalter Hymnal Edition), and prayers and forms for review in the churches. A translation of the Heidelberg Catechism is still underway along with introductions to various documents. In selecting the 1985 edition of the Belgic Confession, the Committee recognized that it is prudent to modify Article 30 to reflect the original Latin text’s reference to *men* in the phrase “when faithful *men* are elected [to offices of the church]” in contrast with the more ambiguous “when such *persons* are elected.” While the latter is an acceptable translation of the earliest Dutch and French versions of the Belgic Confessions, the term ‘person’ has been anachronistically stretched in recent decades to accommodate an egalitarian view of office.

#### 5. Committee for Ecumenical Contact with Churches Abroad (CECCA) (211-254)

1. that the URCNA remain in Ecumenical Contact (phase one) with the Reformed Churches of South Africa (GKSA);
2. that the URCNA remain in Ecumenical Contact (phase one) with the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (GKv);

**Comment:** the GKv Synod was scheduled to consider a proposal to welcome women in office at their Synod (dates unclear) and their reaction to this report may present new difficulties for our churches in deciding to remain in phase one with them.

3. that the URCNA **enter** into Ecumenical Fellowship (phase two) with the United Reformed Churches of Congo (URCC);
4. that the URCNA remain in Ecclesiastical Contact (phase one) with the Calvinistic Reformed Church in Indonesia (GGRT-NTT);
5. that the URCNA remain in Ecumenical Contact (phase one) with the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) (FCC);
6. that Synod encourage that a congregation of the URCNA be located to cooperate with, assist and maintain regular contact with the house congregation of Rev. Podesta (cf. Free Protestant Church of Argentina);
7. that the URCNA **enter** into Ecumenical Contact (phase one) with the Evangelical Reformed Church in Latvia (ERCLAT);
8. that the URCNA **enter** into Ecumenical Contact (phase one) with the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in England and Wales (EPCEW);
9. that Synod appoint Rev. Dick Moes to replace Rev. Ray Sikkema as member-at-large of CECCA;
10. that Synod welcome the fraternal delegates present at Synod, extending to them the opportunity to address Synod on behalf of the sending church;
11. that Synod welcome the fraternal observers who may be present, extending to them the opportunity to greet Synod on behalf of the sending church;
12. that Synod grant the privilege of the floor to the following members of CECCA to answer Synod's questions regarding this report: Rev. Ray Sikkema, chairman and Rev. Dick Moes, secretary.

**Comment:** The committee recommends three denominations for Ecumenical contact. This means that these churches meet a certain benchmark that has been laid out in the committee's mandate. This committee's work has resulted in very descriptive updates on our brothers and sisters around the world who share a common confession of the faith and teach a common doctrine that are worth reading through.

## 6. URCNA Web Oversight Committee (255-258)

1. That Synod thank Mr. Gary Fisher for his work as Webmaster, and reappoint him for another term.
2. Synod 2012 directed the Web Oversight Committee to recommend an appropriate honorarium for the Webmaster. Our recommendation is that the current amount (\$4500/year) not be changed.
3. That Synod thank the Consistory of the Grace United Reformed Church of Waupun for their oversight of the Committee, and request that its oversight continue until at least the next Synod.
4. That Synod direct the Classes to immediately stop collecting funds for the Web Oversight Committee (the amount is currently \$100 per year per Classis).

**Comment:** the committee notes that there is plenty of money in the fund to cover costs until the next Synod

5. That Synod approve the following guidelines regarding posting of material to the website. *Guidelines not included in this document*
6. That Synod approve the following job description for the Webmaster: *Job description of Webmaster not included in this document*

**Comment:** This recommendation proposes new guidelines for the material that is posted on the website and for the role of the webmaster. In addition, there are indications that a website overhaul is underway.

## 7. Oversight Consistory for the Web Oversight Committee (259)

That synod appoint a Consistory to serve as the Oversight Consistory for the WOC until the next synod. *Ground not included in this document*

**Comment:** This recommendation is a routine that each Synod takes up to make sure that the webmaster has suitable oversight and a sounding board for day to day decisions that need to be made.

## 8. Missions (261-342)

1. That synod grant the privilege of the floor to Rev. Michael Brown (chair) and Rev. Kevin Efflandt (clerk) as well as any other members of the interim Missions Committee present during the discussion of this report.
2. That synod adopt this report.
3. That synod authorize the Committee to publish the manual, *“How to Plant a Reformed Church”* in electronic format for free distribution and in printed format for purchase.
4. That synod consider the nominations received by the classes for the position of the missions coordinator and elect a missions coordinator accordingly.
5. That synod continue to grant the committee an annual budget of \$7,000. In the event that no coordinator is elected, the committee would request an annual budget of \$14,000 in order to compensate for the work still mandated to the committee to be done without a coordinator.
6. That synod adopt the following amendment to policy II.A.3.d.2.a from “Fulfilling the Great Commission: A Proposed Shared Strategy in URCNA Missions,” by adding the following:
  - iii. In the following manner, nominations for the missions coordinator may also be made by the synodical pre-advice committee which considers the missions report.
    - A. In its synodical report, the Missions Committee will recommend qualified men who have been nominated by their respective Consistories. Recommendations will be preceded by committee interviews regarding credentials, history, office and salary requirements. All of this information regarding each nominee will be included in the committee report to synod as a “calling plan.”
    - B. Synod will vote on the nominations which are presented by the pre-advice committee.

The number of votes received by the top three nominees shall be recorded.
    - C. The nominee with the most votes will be eligible to be called by his respective Consistory to assume the position of synodical missions coordinator. If the nominee declines the opportunity, the privilege will be extended to the nominee with the next highest number of synodical votes.
    - D. If a man accepts, he will begin serving immediately in the capacity of synodical missions coordinator under the authority of his Consistory, though employed and paid by the federation as outlined in his calling plan. The basic budget should be approved by Synod with some leeway for cost of living differences associated with housing and insurance, etc. .

**Comment:** This recommendation is made in order to address the fact that no nominations were forthcoming from the Classes (as originally outlined in the Missions Committee Policy II.A.3.d.2.a). As a consequence, this recommendation appears to create an opportunity for a nomination to emerge in the weeks preceding Synod. These nominations would be vetted by the pre-advice committee. This may become complicated by the fact that the pre-advice committee must first seek modification of the policy and authorization by Synod to carry out the nominating procedures described in the recommendations. This might become procedurally tricky as the report asks Synod to modify its policy and then tasks the pre-advice committee (which is reviewing the report and its recommendations) with carrying out one of the recommendations before Synod concludes.

7. That synod encourage the churches to support through synodical asking the salary of a future missions coordinator with the goal to have funds in place for his first year of work by Synod 2016.

## 9. Compensation and Retirement Assessment (343-364)

1. That all churches should, as part of the annual remuneration and benefit package for their minister, make provision for a government approved retirement plan or equivalent in an amount ranging from 10% to 20% of gross remuneration, which remuneration includes any housing allowance or the equivalent thereof and medical benefits. This percentage amount should be designated by the church to the minister's personal retirement plan or equivalent thereof. *Grounds not included in this document.*

**Comment:** The report's findings show "every indication is that ministers are running far short of funding for their retirement."(pg 347)

2. That the following questions be included for both the church visitors and on the Classical Credentials:
  - a) As part of the annual remuneration and benefit package for your minister, are you making provision for a government approved retirement plan or equivalent in amount ranging from 10%—20% of gross, which remuneration includes any housing allowance or equivalent value thereof, and medical benefits?
  - b) Are you currently providing disability insurance for your minister, in an amount equivalent to at least 50% of the gross remuneration, which remuneration includes any housing allowance or equivalent value thereof, and medical benefits?
  - c) Does your minister have adequate life insurance coverage to provide for his dependents?
  - d) Does your church provide assistance to a retired pastors or widows?
  - e) Does your church need assistance to comply with Synod's retirement provision guidelines?
  - f) Does your church need assistance to support a retired pastor or a widow in need of financial assistance?"

*Grounds not included in this document.*

3. That the Minister's Assistance Fund be discontinued in any Classis that might still operate such a fund. *Grounds not included in this document.*

**Comment:** The report states that the CRA and the IRS have regulations preventing this type of fund from fulfilling the purpose it was established for.

4. That an Ad Hoc Committee be appointed to study and make recommendations on specific feasible retirement plan options so the churches may consider whether to establish a federation-wide retirement fund/plan. *Grounds not included in this document.*
5. That congregations verify that ministers have adequate life, disability, and health insurance so as to minimize a potential financial burden upon the surviving spouse and church. *Grounds not included in this document.*
6. That Synod approve an increase in the minimum annual retirement contribution for ministers who live in a parsonage. Churches must ensure that ministers in this category are at the 15-20% range of the guidelines established by Synod. *Grounds not included in this document.*

7. That the first sentence of Article 10 be amended to read (*italicized language added*):

Each church is to provide honorably for its minister and his family while he is serving that church *to meet all his financial needs including ensuring the minister obtains his own sufficient life insurance*, and shall provide for the retirement and disability needs of its minister. In the event of a minister's death, adequate provision shall be made for the support of his dependent wife and children.

*Grounds not included in this document.*

8. That Synod receive the report of this committee with thanks and discharges the committee as having completed its mandate.

**Comment:** This report should be reviewed by the council and any of its sub-committees that handle personnel issues (Committee of Administration, Personnel Committee, etc.) because there are a significant number of changes being proposed for the churches of the federation in an effort to address substantial shortcomings in current practice.

### **10. Report of Presbyterian and Reformed Joint Commission on Chaplains and Military Personnel (PRCC) (365-367)**

The Consistory of Faith URC (Beecher, IL) is willing to continue as a liaison to the PRCC. It perceives no need for any recommendations to be brought to Synod 2014.

### **11. Canadian Board of Directors (369)**

*No recommendations given.*

### **12. United States Board of Directors (372)**

1. Synod 2014 encourage pastors, elders and other church leaders be trained in biblical conflict resolution as an aid in maintaining harmony and unity within our federation. By so doing our federation would also enhance the prevention of legal action among the brothers and sisters of the federation.
2. Synod 2014 encourage the Acts of Synod 2007 be followed in respect to overseeing the U.S. and Canadian Board of Directors and advise the member consistories of the federation to deal directly with the Convening Consistory of Synod when questioning the decisions and actions of the Board of Directors of our Federation.
3. The US Board of Directors requests that Synod appoint four new members of the US Board at Synod 2014.

**Comment:** These recommendations appear to arise from specific difficulties that have arisen between unspecified consistories and the US Board. As a consequence, the Vice Chairman resigned in November 2013 and three of the remaining four board members are resigning effective June 2014 (Synod). Actions taken at the Synod Nyack appear to have contributed to the state of affairs that is being reported on here (one reappointment was blocked). References are made to this matter on pg 3 of the Convening Consistory's Report.

## **Conclusion**

If you have any suggestions for ways to improve this guide to the 2014 Synod Agenda, please contact us at [donovan@escondidourc.org](mailto:donovan@escondidourc.org), [markvanderpol@christurc.org](mailto:markvanderpol@christurc.org) or [pastor@adorationurc.ca](mailto:pastor@adorationurc.ca) and we will gladly make the changes. We will distribute this document as a pdf and we will host (and update) this document as a Google Doc. It can be accessed by copying and pasting this link into your browser: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1frgrdeC5AYpsKGfCSgQjo4nZhgDoEGWsdz08QLA1pvQ/edit?usp=sharing>

*In* one of his debates, now-deceased atheist Christopher Hitchens said that *if* God existed, the God of the Old Testament was unworthy of the name God. Why? Because, according to Hitchens and so many other critics and skeptics, the God depicted in the Old Testament is a genocidal maniac. (See “Christopher Hitchens vs. Douglas Wilson at Westminster,” <http://www.youtube.com>.) Have you heard anything like that before?

One classic biblical example that leads to this objection is 1 Samuel 15, where the Lord commanded Israel’s King Saul to “devote to destruction” the people known as the Amalekites. We can readily agree with even the most strident atheist that these are difficult and severe words. Of course the Christian looks at these words through a different worldview from the non-Christian. The non-Christian uses words like those in 1 Samuel as a reason to blaspheme the God who spoke them—the God who gave the oxygen and the vocal cords to the atheist to do so!

As you read 1 Samuel 15 you should ask yourself, “How am I to understand such words? How could God speak so harshly?” Is God a genocidal maniac? is the question.

## **A Word about Defending God**

Let me first offer a word about defending God. Christian, you don’t need to defend God. This is the Word of the Lord—thanks be to God—and he doesn’t need you or me to defend him. When Hitchens or your friend says what they so often say about God in light of this story, we are reminded that

those outside of Jesus Christ are going to suppress the truth by using every excuse including the kitchen sink to justify their unbelief and rebellion against the God who gave them life (Rom. 1:18–32). This should not take us by surprise. As Paul says in Romans 8:5, “Those who live according to the flesh”—in contrast to the Spirit—“set their minds on the things of the flesh.” To do this is “death” because it evidences their hostility and lack of submission to God (Rom. 8:6–7). Elsewhere, in 1 Corinthians 2:14, Paul says that “the natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.” You cannot defend spiritual realities to unregenerate, unspiritual minds and hearts.

A passage like 1 Samuel 15 is part of the reality and worldview that the Bible proclaims. To understand that worldview, one must enter into that world. How? The only way is by repenting of your own wisdom and trusting in God’s wisdom in the person of Jesus Christ. Many Christians, though, don’t really understand this and think that they need to apologize for God and try to make him seem more reasonable and palatable to unbelieving people. For example, some Christian commentators have said that this story is just part of the provisional ethics of the Old Testament that would come to an end with Jesus Christ. What does that really mean? “Well, that was the Old Testament and the Old Testament God of wrath, but we live in the New Testament with a God of love.” Others

have said that those Israelites who participated in such atrocities needed to understand the character of God better. What does that really mean? Does it mean that the Old Testament is not the Word of God, or the God of the Old Testament allowed things to happen that were contrary to his character that he really didn’t want to happen? Of course the problem with all this is that it was precisely God who issued the terrible command in 1 Samuel 15.

All this is to say that Christians need to stop trying to defend God and instead proclaim the God of the Word to the world.

## **A Witness to God’s Justice**

Getting to the heart of the matter, the story in 1 Samuel 15 is a witness to God’s justice. It is just like all the other stories similar to it in both the Old and New Testaments. In reading 1 Samuel 15 you may be tempted by the world’s wisdom and by the deceit of the devil to read it as a skeptic. You may be thinking, “How could my God command genocide and ethnic cleansing?” Or, “How could my God say, ‘Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey’” (1 Sam. 15:3)?

The Hebrew term translated here as “devote to destruction” is *herem*. It is used eight times in this chapter (vv. 3, 8, 9 [twice], 15, 18, 20, 21). This meant that certain people, places, and property were off limits for Israel’s use and were to be devoted to the Lord alone.

Why does God command this? Not only is God the Creator of all things

in heaven and earth (Gen. 1:1) and the Lord of all who does “all that he pleases” (Ps. 115:3), the God of the Bible is a God of absolute and perfect justice. The Amalekites who were to be devoted to the Lord were the descendants of Esau’s grandson. These were the same Amalekites who, unprovoked, once attacked Israel as they made their way out of Egypt and into the desert of Sinai (Ex. 17:8–16). Because of this the Lord spoke to Moses: “I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven,” to which Moses responded with an altar, saying, “The LORD will have war with Amalek from generation to generation” (Ex. 17:14–16). We read later that the Amalakites attacked Israel again (Num. 14:45). That’s why we read in 1 Samuel 15:2–3: “Thus says the LORD of hosts, ‘I have noted what Amalek did to Israel in opposing them on the way when they came up out of Egypt. Now go and strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have’” (1 Sam. 15:2–3). Moses recounted that the initial encounter with Amalek was an unjust attack (Deut. 25:17–19). During the days of the judges, the Amalekites joined with the Moabites in attacking Israel (Judg. 3:13). They invaded Israel and sought to wipe out their crops to starve them to death (Judg. 6:3–4). In Judges 6 and 7 they invaded again in the days of Gideon. In 1 Samuel 15 the Amalekites had still not repented of their acts. This means that the Lord had actually shown tremendous patience with them—hundreds of years, in fact. And even after this patience and Saul’s disobedience in not carrying out the Lord’s command, we read that six hundred years later, when the Persians ruled the Promised Land, a man called Haman, an Agagite, had much power over Israel (Est. 3:1–6). Generation after generation, this nation that was once close to the Lord’s people was continually at war with the Lord’s people and with their God.

All this is to say that the Amalekites were not innocent bystanders the Lord unjustly or sadistically wanted dead.

The Amalekites are called “sinners” (1 Sam. 15:18), and, like all humanity, they “have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). Their king, Agag, was known for his war crimes: “As your sword has made women childless, so shall your mother be childless among women.” We read that old Samuel the prophet did what Saul refused to do and “hacked Agag to pieces before the LORD” (1 Sam. 15:33). Thus, everything God commanded in 1 Samuel 15 is consistent with what Scripture says about God being just (Gen. 18:25) and having no injustice in him (Rom. 9:14).

Some people might ask, “But how could God command ethnic cleansing?” He didn’t. In his law were two types of wars: those *outside* the Promised Land, which allowed for mercy (Deut. 20:10–15), and those *inside* the Promised Land, which did not allow for mercy (Deut. 20:16–18). The reason for this total destruction of enemies was not based on ethnicity or bigotry but upon rebellion against God’s laws.

This all sounds so severe to us today, doesn’t it? One of the reasons is that we Christians are guilty of portraying God to the world merely as all-loving. We preachers are guilty of proclaiming the Word merely as an offer of grace—take it or leave it. And how many of us have turned the stories of Scripture into merely a collection of nice fairytales and good moral lessons like Aesop’s Fables or, worse, Veggie Tales? The other side of the good news proclaimed in the Word of God, though, is often missing. Is God love? Absolutely! But he is also “holy, holy, holy.” And if he is not holy and just, how can we say he is merciful? The God of Scripture is both.

Again, because God is holy and just, every violation of his holy and just law deserves a holy and just punishment. And this justice is not discriminatory anger or bitterness. God is not like you when you “lose it.” God’s justice is purely executed on the truly guilty. This justice was illustrated not only in the treatment of the sinful Amalekites

and their unjust king, Agag, but also in the command to the Israelites to slay everything equally and not benefit from their possessions. This was not a raid, but an execution of justice.

This is the God of the Bible. What is described here in prose was later inscribed in poetry in the songs of worship of God’s people in the Psalms. There are certain psalms we call imprecatory. The word *imprecatory* comes from the Latin *imprecatio*, which is an invoking of a curse. The Psalms include prayers of the godly for the destruction of the ungodly. For example, most famous are the words of Psalm 137:8–9, which have been versified for singing in *The Book of Psalms for Worship*:

O daughter of Babylon—destined to ruin—

He’s blessed who repays as you’ve done.

How blessed is the one who will seize on your infants

And hurl them to smash on the stone.

How could a holy God inspire his holy people to sing such “unholy” words, as they seem to us? What our forefathers sang of was in recognition of the holy justice of the true God. And his holy justice was true not only in their time, but also ultimately in eternity. Therefore, the justice that God executed in the Old Testament upon his enemies was a small picture of his eternal justice that will be unleashed upon sin at the second coming of Jesus Christ, the judge of the living and the dead (Acts 10:42; 2 Tim. 4:1; 1 Peter 4:5).

### **A Warning to the World**

This means that this Old Testament story is *a warning to the world*. If you are reading this article and trying to hide out among your parents or friends who believe in Jesus Christ while you really don’t, or if you are reading this and have never given your life to Jesus Christ by turning away from your



sins (repentance) and trusting in him (faith), hear God's warning in this biblical story. God is not some unjust judge whom you can bribe so easily; he's not a God who looks the other way. God is a perfect judge who must punish those who violate his laws. God must punish your sins.

And if you think this story sounds harsh, he warns you of an even greater judgment not upon one nation, but upon all peoples. When Jesus Christ returns from heaven he will judge both the living and the dead. In 2 Thessalonians 1:5–9, the apostle Paul wrote to comfort Christians who were being persecuted, mocked, and ostracized from society:

This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering—since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.

There is only one way to escape this warning: Jesus Christ. Cry out to him now with all your sins. Tell him you are sorry for your sins. Tell him you do not want to be judged for them.

Tell him that you believe that he alone can forgive your sins because he alone suffered your judgment in your place on the cross.

### **A Way to Respond**

I would like to conclude by offering a way for God's people to respond to those who question passages such as 1 Samuel 15. I will adapt for our purpose William Ames's (1576–1633) helpful words on how we as Christians can sing imprecatory psalms in *Conscience with the Power and Cases Thereof*, 4.19.8–10:

First, respond in sheer awe and wonder that this judgment of God upon the Amalekites that you also justly deserve has not fallen on you, but Jesus Christ on the cross!

Second, respond in godly fear and trembling for the reality of the just judgment of God against the sins of impenitent persons: "Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations! Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship you, for your righteous acts have been revealed" (Rev. 15:3–4).

Third, respond in prayer, in deeds, and in words towards your unbelieving neighbors. Since we do not desire their eternal death we need to call the world to repentance in light of Jesus Christ's soon coming in judgment.

Fourth, engage in biblical spiritual warfare (Eph. 6:10–18). Don't do

so against your private and personal enemies but against the spiritual forces of wickedness, which are enemies of Christ's Church.

Fifth, and finally, respond in hopeful confidence. This story teaches us that God will ultimately throw down all our enemies. This is the prayer of heaven: "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" (Rev. 6:9). God's answer was to "rest a little longer" (Rev. 6:10). God didn't answer immediately the beheaded martyr's prayer for justice, and he may not ours. Yet we wait with hope our full vindication.

### **Conclusion**

Is God a genocidal maniac? No, God is a supremely merciful and supremely just God, and those aspects of God's character are supremely revealed in Jesus Christ. We who are Amalekites by nature and deserve his justice are offered the mercy of God because Jesus became an Amalekite for us and suffered our judgment.

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**T**he question, “What happens to our souls when we die?” is one which often has concerned believers when their loved ones have died. Where are our souls after death? This subject has also received the attention of theologians for centuries. The upshot of their cogitations may be summed up into several main views as follows.

## The Main Views

### *Soul Sleep*

This view maintains that at the time of the death of the body, the soul becomes unconscious, and, therefore, the soul is likened to being asleep until the resurrection. In this state, the soul experiences neither joy nor pain. It simply remains unconscious and awaits the resurrection at the return of Christ when soul and body will be reunited and raised incorruptible. Protestants reject soul sleep because of the testimony of many Scriptures, including our Savior’s dying words on the cross—“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46)—and Paul’s words, “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21 NIV).

### *Purgatory*

Those who teach that there is a purgatory claim that purgatory is the place where the souls of those who die in Christ must go after death to be purged of any remaining evil. These souls must “suffer for a time a purging which prepares the soul to enter heaven and appear in the presence of the beatific vision. The purpose of purgatory is to cleanse one of imperfections . . . and to remit or do away with the temporal punishment due to mortal sins which have been forgiven in the sacrament of penance. . . . Purgatory will last only until the general judgment” (*Catholic Concise Encyclopedia*, Page 284). This is the official view of the Roman Catholic Church. The Bible says nothing about purgatory. Therefore, Protestantism, from its beginning, has rejected purgatory, due to a lack of a biblical basis.

### *Annihilation*

This view states that when people die, both body and soul cease to exist. Death is the final state at the end of our life’s journey. One becomes forever nonexistent. In other words, one ceases to exist forever; we die just as the animals do. Protestants reject this view for the same reason as it rejects purgatory. There is nothing in Scripture to warrant such a position. The Bible consistently teaches that the soul lives on after the death of the body.

There is a kind of annihilation that seems to be gaining in popularity these days. This view teaches that the souls of the wicked are annihilated at death, and become forever nonexistent. In contrast, the souls of the righteous are given immortality as part of their salvation. Since they have become immortal, the souls of the righteous continue to exist after death in heaven. So the souls of the wicked are annihilated, but the souls of the righteous live forever. However, the Bible teaches that the souls of all who die, both wicked and righteous, continue after death. For example, “Then they [the wicked] will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life” (Matt. 25:46 NIV).

### *Hades*

Some hold to the view that at death all souls go to a place called Hades. This view teaches that Hades is divided into two areas, namely, one part where the damned dwell, and the other part where the saved dwell. Those who advocate this view are likely to refer to this Scripture, “He [Christ] was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit, through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison (1 Peter 3:18–19) NIV). Admittedly, this 1 Peter text is hard to understand, but by comparing scripture with scripture it seems to say that Christ, at the time of his resurrection or afterward, announced his victory also to hell dwellers. In the Reformed view, as W. G. T. Shedd states it, “There is no intermediate Hades between

Heaven and Hell, which the good and evil inhabit in common. When this earthly existence is ended, the only specific places and states are Heaven and Hell. Paradise is a part of Heaven; Hades is a part of Hell. A pagan underworld containing both Paradise and Hades, both the happy and the miserable, like the pagan idol, is 'nothing in the world.' There is no such place" (*Dogmatic Theology*, vol. 2, pages 594–95).

### **Universalism\***

Finally, the ancient view known as universalism seems to be coming back into vogue. Universalism is the view that all who die go to heaven. Universalism is unbiblical in many ways. It trivializes the seriousness of sin. It also ignores the work of Jesus Christ, who said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6 NIV). It also contradicts another scripture which states, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12 NIV). It also flies in the face of the Heidelberg Catechism's teaching in Lord's Day 7, Q&A 20. Such universalism, advocated by some, such as Rob Bell in a recent popular book entitled *Love Wins*, argues that God loves too much to send any souls to hell. Sadly, universalism is pure human sentiment on the part of proud interpreters who seem to think they know more than God and the Bible. The Scripture agrees, of course, that God loves. And yes, love wins—not by ignoring sin—but by forgiving sin by way of the atoning blood of Jesus Christ. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16 NIV).

\*This paragraph, as well as some other emendations, has been contributed by Dr. Joseph A. Brinks of Menno, South Dakota.

### **The Biblical View**

Generally speaking, the majority of Protestants believe in what is called the intermediate state. In this view the soul of a believer in Christ "goes immediately to be with Christ to enjoy a continuous conscious, personal existence while awaiting their final resurrection of the body" (R. C. Sproul, "The Intermediate State," *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith*, Page 205). Thus, the soul of a believer in Christ remains conscious and can enjoy the presence of God and the glories of heaven, though without a body, while awaiting the resurrection and a new glorified body. Therefore, when death strikes one of our family members, we often comfort them with the assurance that their believing loved one is now "absent from the body and present with the Lord" (2 Cor. 5:8).

This comfort accords with the words of Jesus to the dying thief at his right on the cross: "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43 NKJV). Thus, the conscious existence of the soul is presented as continuing in God's presence, while the body is committed to the grave. And Jesus himself, as he breathed his last on the cross, committed his own soul to the Father (Luke 23:46). Since Jesus firmly believed in the continued conscious existence of the soul after the death of the body, he could comfort his disciples—before leaving them—with the promise, "In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to

Myself; that where I am there you may be also" (John 14:2–3 NKJV). Thus, Jesus assured his disciples that their relationship with him would continue beyond the grave.

Some theologians believe that God gives temporary bodies in the intermediate state in order for the inhabitants to enjoy communion with each other in heaven. Dr. Donald B. Bloesch, for example, states the following on this subject: "It was a common understanding in biblical times that the dead are clothed in some kind of body (1 Cor. 15:35). The inward man who persists after death includes the somatic as well as the psychic" (*Essential of Evangelical Theology*, vol. 2, Page 187). He cites several examples of biblical instances which portray the dead as being clothed in some bodily form and easily recognizable, including Samuel (1 Sam. 28:13–14); Elijah and Moses on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt. 17: 1–4; Mark 9:2–5); and the saints in paradise who are clothed in white robes (Rev. 7:6–11; see esp. 7).

There is, however, no clear and explicit expression of such a teaching in Holy Writ. Therefore, we find no such mention of temporary bodies of those whose bodies lie in the grave. Further, to argue that the souls in heaven must have a body "as a means of fellowship, communication, and identification" (Bloesch, page 184) is to ignore the fact that God is spirit and has perfect fellowship within the Trinity of persons in the Godhead. Thus, the spirit of man can have conscious fellowship with God, and others present in heaven, even without a body. Moreover, the standard Reformed confessions maintain a conscious spiritual existence of the believer with Christ after death, though in a bodiless state.

## The Reformed Confessional View

The Westminster Confession of Faith proclaims the following in article 32.1, “Of the State of Men after Death, and of the Resurrection of the Dead”:

The bodies of men, after death, return to dust, and see corruption, but their souls, which neither die nor sleep, having an immortal subsistence immediately return to God who gave them; the souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God, in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies. And the souls of the wicked are cast into hell, where they remain in torments and utter darkness, reserved to the judgment of the great day. Beside these two places, for souls separated from their bodies, the Scripture acknowledgeth none. (Article xxxii,1).

The Second Helvetic Confession, some eighty years earlier, had already clearly expressed the Reformed view regarding the state of the dead. It is quite obvious that both views express similar positions about the destination of believers at death:

For we believe that the faithful, after bodily death, do go directly unto Christ, and, therefore, do not stand in need of helps or prayers for the dead, or any other such duty of them that are alive. In like manner, we believe that the unbelievers are cast headlong into hell, from whence there is no return opened to the wicked by any offices of those who live. (art. 26.3)

The Heidelberg Catechism of the Reformed Churches, written in 1563, also expresses the truth that to be present with Christ after death is part

of the comfort of confessing belief in “the resurrection of the body.” It poses the question: “How does ‘the Resurrection of the Body’ comfort you?” And the answer is clear and forthright:

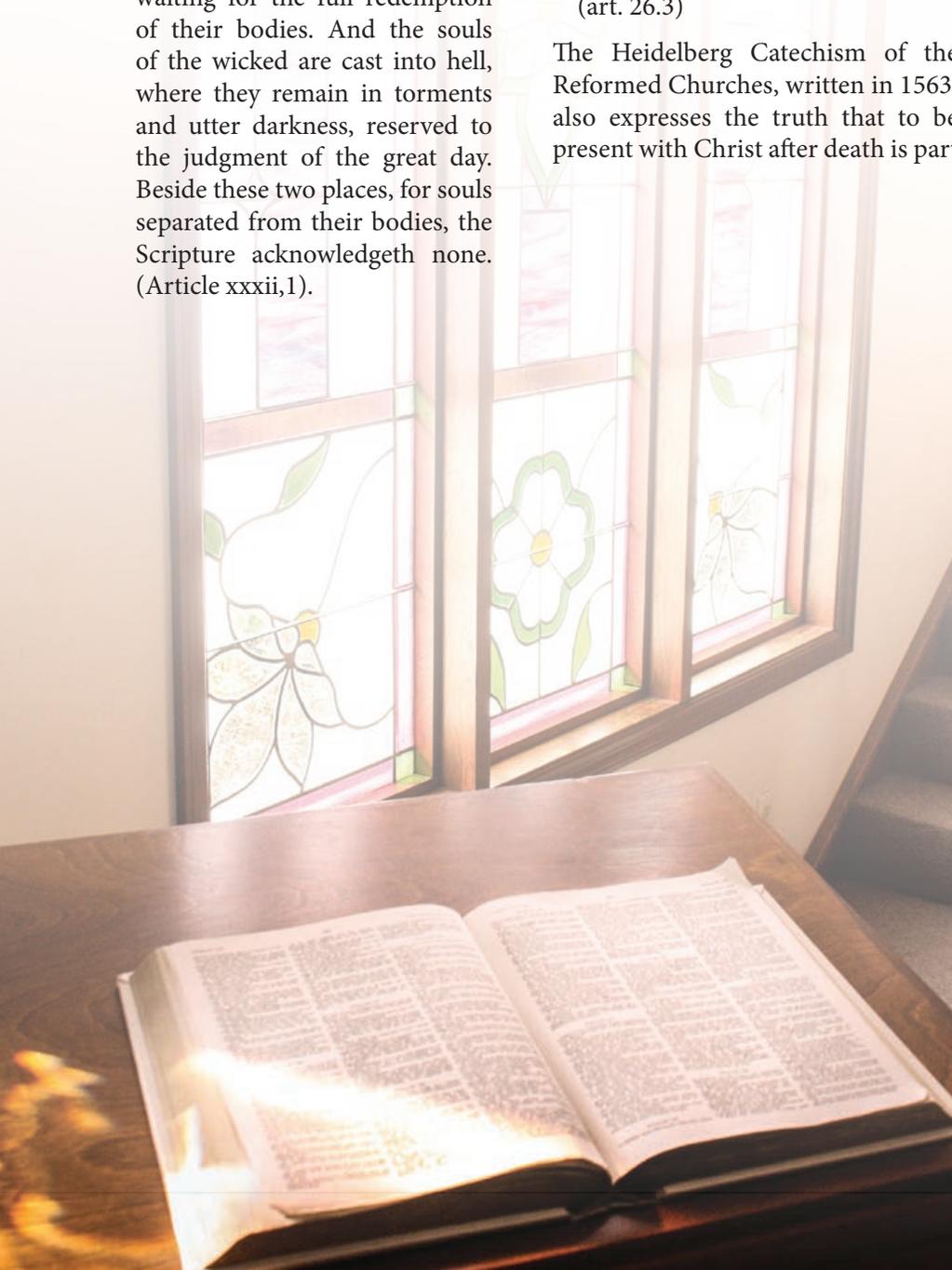
Not only my soul will be taken immediately after this life to Christ its head, but even my very flesh, raised by the power of Christ, will be reunited with my soul and made like Christ’s glorious body. (Q&A 57)

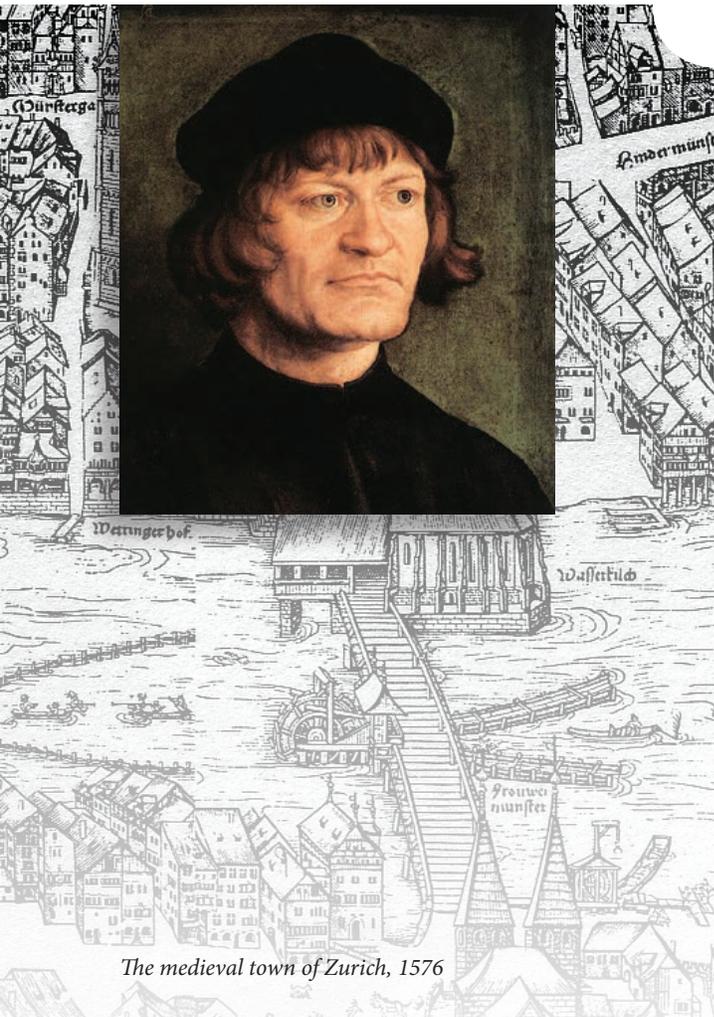
### Conclusion of the Matter

In conclusion, we believe the Reformed spiritual forebears properly understood the Scripture to teach that the soul of a believer in Christ, when separated from the body at death, goes immediately to be “with the Lord.” That is, it continues to live a conscious existence without a body and free from sin. It therefore, participates in the joy and realities of the heavenly life. Its fellowship is pure and perfect with God and the redeemed church, though not yet complete. It, too, awaits the final return of Christ and the resurrection of the body, which, in a glorified state, will be reunited with its soul. And, according to the Bible, The dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words” (1 Thess. 4:16–18 NIV).

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The medieval town of Zurich, 1576



Huldrych Zwingli (1484–1531) was the first of the Reformed theologians. He was born on New Year's Day 1484, a little more than seven weeks after the birth of Martin Luther. He is remembered primarily for his reforming work as the leading pastor in the Swiss city of Zurich.

He addressed major theological topics in *An Exposition of the Articles* (1523), a work that developed the sixty-seven articles that Zwingli had set forth at the first disputation. He presented teaching on church and state, minister and magistrate in ten of the articles (Art. 34–43).

## Doctrine of the Church

Zwingli labored in a setting in which church and society were identical. The church was not a distinct entity in the larger society. The church and Zurich were one and the same thing. Zwingli nevertheless distinguished between minister and magistrate. The office of the minister is to teach the Word of God (art. 36). Rulers, on the other hand, “look after the office of the sword” (art. 41). In this connection, Zwingli addressed the pope, who wanted to take up arms against the Ottoman Turks who were threatening Europe. Zwingli exhorted, “Listen to Christ, oh pope, ‘Put it away’”—referring here to the sword. “The secular princes,” he said, “are undoubtedly quite capable of protecting their own land.” He then added, “Take no other sword into your hand than the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God” (art. 36).

Bishops, in addition, were not to rule temporal domains. “Priests should not govern at all, not even in the office which God has given them.” “They are to govern,” he contended, “even less extensively in worldly matters” (art. 34). Here it should be pointed out that there is a disconnect between what Zwingli taught and what he did as a minister. He actually did become involved in the political affairs of Zurich. After his early death, the Zurich Council determined that his successors would not participate in civic affairs in the way that Zwingli had done.

The Murder of Zwingli by Karl Jauslin (1842–1904)

## Doctrine of the State

Zwingli preferred an aristocracy—the kind of government reflected in the Zurich Council—to democracy or monarchy. Monarchies were particularly dangerous because they tended to degenerate into tyranny. Where monarchies existed there needed to be a constitutional provision for deposition. The tyrant “may be deposed in the name of God.” “It is not to be done,” however, “with killing, war and rioting.” He reasoned that the individuals who installed the king had the right to remove him. If the common people elected him, “then the people are also to depose him.” If the princes elevated him, they had the authority to “order him to be deposed” (art. 42).

The magistrates were to rule in accordance with the divine law. They were to see to it that “all laws ought to be brought into harmony with the law of God” (art. 39). In this general sense, Zurich became somewhat theocratic under Zwingli’s reform program. It was not, however, a theocracy in the strict definition of a state that is ruled by ministers or the church. This is underscored, for example, in the elimination of church courts. Zwingli wrote, “All judicial authority and the administration of justice which the so-called priestly estate appropriates to itself, really belongs to the temporal authority” (art. 36).

## Discipline in the Church

This position corresponds with Zwingli’s view that the sins of Christians should be punished by the state, not the church (this position would later be designated Erastianism, named after Thomas Erastus, who embraced the Zwinglian position on discipline in the church). Zwingli gave to the magistrate the authority to excommunicate, to remove members from the church for the good of the church. The problem in the church, Zwingli noted, was that “there are still some rams among the

flock of Christ who are so bold as to give no heed either to teaching or ban.” In such a case, the “government has to see to it that the strong, well-fed rams do not destroy the poor, weak sheep.” This means that “they ought to see to it that they protect and punish” (art. 39). Zwingli noted that there are people in the visible church who are “insolent and hostile,” who “have no faith.” It is because of this reality that “there arises the need of government for the punishment of flagrant sinners, whether it be the government of princes or that of nobility” (The Library of Christian Classics, vol. 24, 266).

## Capital Punishment and War

In addition to his care of the church, the magistrate in Zwingli’s thought held the office of the sword. He alone in the domestic sphere had the authority to “impose the death penalty” (art. 40). He also was to use the sword against foreign aggressors. With respect to this issue, Zwingli alluded to the classical just war concerns of medieval theology, the justice of war (*jus ad bellum*) and justice in war (*jus in bello*) categories.

His most intense concern related to the tradition of Swiss mercenary service.<sup>1</sup> The soldiers of the Swiss cantons had developed a reputation as skilled combatants and were in high demand as paid soldiers in foreign governments. They were renowned for attacks in huge columns with the long pike. From the very beginning of his ministry as a parish priest at Glarus, Zwingli attacked the mercenary trade as immoral and preached against it. He asserted later that “professional warfare is inhuman, shameless and sinful” (art. 40).

A major problem with the mercenary system was that Swiss soldiers ended up participating in campaigns that were initiated without a just cause. “If in war one only injured the disobedient,” Zwingli reasoned, “we could put up with it.” He then asked,

“But how do you explain the fact that you take money from a foreign lord to aid him wantonly destroy, damage, and ravage countries innocent of all guilt?” Works, vol. 1, 142.

## Tragedy at Kappel

Five Roman Catholic cantons declared war on Zurich in 1531. A small Zurich army of two thousand men confronted a larger Catholic force of eight thousand near Kappel on October 11. Zwingli joined the Zurich forces as a chaplain. He had taught that ministers ought not to wield the sword, but he decided in the emergency of the moment to take up the sword and to fight alongside his soldiers. He died in the ensuing engagement that lasted less than an hour. The Catholic soldiers desecrated his body, quartering and burning it and then mixing it with cow dung.

Interpretations are varied on the tragedy at Kappel. Luther regarded Zwingli’s death on the field of battle as the judgment of God upon him. From another perspective, Zwingli can be seen as a brave patriot who gave his life in defense of the gospel and the church in Zurich.

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1. His teaching on war was also informed by his experience. He witnessed the devastation of war at the Battle of Marignano in 1515, which pitted the French army led by Francis I against the Old Swiss Confederacy. The battle was a decisive French victory—the Swiss were heavily outnumbered and outgunned. Six thousand Swiss soldiers lost their lives. The carnage was a turning point in Swiss history. It was the last battle fought by a Swiss army on foreign soil. The Swiss Confederacy never again mounted a military offensive against an external enemy. The bloodshed no doubt had a sobering effect on Zwingli as well.

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In my previous article, which introduced Bavinck's treatment of the person of Christ, I offered a summary of the way Bavinck locates the doctrine of Christ's person within the course of the history of redemption. In his coming in the fullness of time, the Son of God assumed our humanity into unity with his person in order to accomplish, as Mediator of the covenant of grace, all that was needed to obtain the redemption of his people. I also summarized some of the debates regarding Christ's person that arose in the early period of church history after the closing of the New Testament canon.

In this article, I will consider Bavinck's more systematic treatment of the doctrine of Christ's person in the face of some important developments in modern theology, especially those that deviate from the historic consensus of the Christian church. In the modern period, the classic formulation of the doctrine of Christ's person—that he is both true God and true man, the incarnate Son of God, the two natures of deity and humanity concurring in his one person—has often been compromised or abandoned in ways that imperil the gospel of Jesus Christ in the most fundamental way. Such departures from the historic Christian confession of Christ's person represent a denial of the centrality of the incarnation in biblical revelation.

The doctrine of the person and work of Christ lies at the heart of the whole system of doctrine that may be derived from Scripture, which finds its classic formulation in the confessions of the church. Even though the usual order of treating topics in doctrinal studies does not begin with the reality of the incarnation, all of these topics find

their center and focus in the person of Jesus Christ. As Bavinck observes, "The incarnation is the central fact of the entire history of the world; then, too, it must have been prepared from before the ages and have its effects throughout eternity" (RD 3:274). At no point in Christian doctrine may Christ's person and work be regarded as an afterthought or postscript in God's plan of redemption, for all of the triune God's works in creation and redemption find their beginning and their ending in Jesus Christ. For this reason, Christian theology must always guard against any suggestion that the incarnation of the Son of God was not the central event in all of history under God's sovereign administration. In order to demonstrate the centrality of the incarnation in biblical teaching, Bavinck considers four ways in which it is expressed.

## Incarnation and Trinity

First, the incarnation in its biblical meaning has its "presupposition and foundation in the trinitarian being of God" (RD 3:274). In Deism and pantheism, there can be no place for the incarnation of the Son of God, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. In Deism, God always remains removed and separated from the world and the human race. The "god" of Deism is not triune and does not exercise any direct influence upon the course of events in history. Deism is unable to speak of God's coming to dwell with us through the incarnation of the eternal Word, or Son. On the other hand, pantheism, as its name suggests ("god is all" or "all is god"), simply identifies God's being with the history of the world. In a pantheistic worldview, "god" has no distinct being or independence

in relation to the creation that comes to be through his decision to call it into being out of nothing (*creation ex nihilo*). The Christian doctrine of the Trinity, however, is able to explain how God can remain who he is as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and yet determine to create the world and glorify himself in the works of his hands. Within the Godhead, the persons of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit enjoy the fullness of love in the communion they enjoy in their mutual relations with one another. The triune God does not need the world in order to be perfected or to express his love and overflowing goodness. And yet, because God enjoys the fullness of being and the perfection of love within himself, he is able to communicate that love freely when he determines to create the world and to create human beings, with whom he wills to enjoy covenant communion, after his own image and likeness.

It is no accident, therefore, that the reality of the incarnation stimulated the Christian church to formulate more fully the doctrine of the Trinity. Over against the heresy of patripassianism (literally, "Father-suffering"), which taught that the person of the Son who suffered upon the cross was identical with the person of the Father, the church recognized that scriptural teaching could only be understood within the framework of a clear distinction between the three persons of the Trinity. The history of redemption recounted in Scripture requires that a distinction be drawn between the person of the Father who sends the Son in the fullness of time, the person of the Son who voluntarily condescends to assume our humanity, and the person of the Holy Spirit who equips the incarnate Son for his

mediatorial work and communicates the benefits of it to believers. It is simply impossible to do justice to the data of biblical revelation without acknowledging the distinction of the three persons of the Holy Trinity, who remain one in being, purpose, and love in all of their respective works.

Furthermore, even though the church has always insisted that all of the works of the triune God are indivisibly the works of the holy Trinity, the church also taught that the economy of redemption distinguishes the three persons in their respective works. As Bavinck notes,

The Father could not be sent, for he is the first in order and is self-existent; the Spirit proceeds from the Son, succeeds him, and is sent by him. But the Son was the one suited for the incarnation. In the divine being he occupies the place between the Father and the Spirit, is by nature the son and image of God, was mediator already in the first creation, and as Son could restore us to our position as children of God. (RD 3:276)

This is also the basis for the Reformed doctrine of a covenant of redemption (*pactum salutis*). In the covenant of redemption, the three persons of the Trinity concur in their purpose to redeem an elect people, but also concur in their purpose to accomplish redemption through the appropriate works of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, respectively. “In the Son, the Father is from all eternity the Father of his children; the Son is eternally their guarantor and mediator; the Holy Spirit is eternally their Comforter. Not just after the fall, not even first at the creation, but in eternity the foundations of the covenant of grace were laid” (RD 3:276).

The centrality of the incarnation rests upon the biblical doctrine that God eternally exists in three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. And it rests upon the biblical doctrine

that the incarnation was specifically an act whereby God, in the person of the Word, or Son, assumed our human nature.

### **Incarnation and Creation**

Second, the centrality of the incarnation is also presupposed and prepared for in the way the triune God created the world, and especially human beings as his image-bearers. Even though there is a great distance between the infinite, triune God and the finite creature whom he calls into being, the creation of the world provides a context within which God can relate to his creatures, or the works of his hands. This is especially true in respect to the one creature whom God created uniquely to bear his image and reflect something of his likeness. Precisely because God created man in his own image, there is the possibility of God entering into communion with the human race, not only in the original order of creation before the fall but also in the renewal of creation after the fall. Because God created human beings to be like him, to bear his image and enjoy fellowship with him, it is not impossible for God to enter into union with them through the incarnation of the eternal Son of God. The doctrine of the creation of man as the one creature who properly reflects God’s likeness provides a basis for the possibility of the incarnation. The uniqueness of man as God’s image-bearer also explains why “the question whether God can take on the nature of a stone, a plant, or an animal . . . is out of order” (RD 3:277).

The relation between the biblical doctrine of creation and the central reality of the incarnation includes a further consideration. From the beginning, the triune God ordered his work of creation in a way that would ultimately serve his purposes for the redemption and perfection of the world in Christ. Even the “first things” of creation must be viewed in relation to the “last things,” especially Christ’s work in realizing through redemption

God’s purpose for human life in the state of glory. Bavinck explains:

Creation itself already must be conceived in infralapsarian fashion, and Adam was already a type of Christ. This view is unacceptable from the standpoint of those who think that God proceeded to the work of creation without a plan or decree and at the creation passively awaited to see what humans would do. But Scripture teaches us otherwise. In the act of creation, God already had Christ in mind. In that sense creation itself served as preparation for the incarnation. The world was so created that when it fell, it could again be restored: humanity was organized under a single head in such a way that, sinning, it could again be gathered together under another head. Adam was so appointed as head that Christ could immediately take his place; and the covenant of works was so set up that, broken, it could be restored in the covenant of grace. (RD 3:278)

In this wonderful summary, Bavinck does not mean to say that the incarnation would have taken place whether or not Adam (and the human race in him) sinned. Nor does he mean to say that the fall into sin should be viewed, somehow, as a blessed event, since it served within God’s all-encompassing purpose to be the occasion for the incarnation of the Redeemer. In the history of the church, such sentiments have doubtless been expressed. However, we do not need to speculate about such matters, but only remember that nothing takes place in creation, the fall, or redemption, apart from God’s eternal counsel and will. And within his counsel “there is no room for any reality other than the existing one. Accordingly, however much sin entered the world by the will of the creature, it was nevertheless included in God’s counsel from

eternity and to him was not contingent or unforeseen” (RD 3:279).

Viewed from the perspective of what we know of God’s eternal counsel in Scripture, we may properly affirm that creation itself was “infralapsarian”: God designed the creation and placed Adam in his position as the covenant head of the human race in a manner that would serve his ultimate purposes in redemption. Christ is the fulfillment of what was typified in the person and office of Adam, namely, the blessedness of living in communion with God and obtaining eternal life in the way of perfect obedience. Only in Christ—and surely, that was God’s ultimate intention from the first—are human beings, the elect people of God, brought to their God-appointed destiny. Creation itself must be viewed through the lens of re-creation or, more specifically, through the truth as it is in Jesus Christ. Christ is, as the apostle Paul says in Colossians 1:15–17, “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”

## Looking Out and About



The consistory of Redeemer United Reformed Church in Dyer, Indiana, is pleased to announce that Mr. Albert Couperus has been licensed to exhort as part of a renewal of the license granted to him in May 2013. Albert is a student at Mid-America Reformed Seminary and is highly recommended to the churches for pulpit supply. Albert can be contacted at [ahcouperus@gmail.com](mailto:ahcouperus@gmail.com).

The consistory of the First United Reformed Church of Chino, California, examined Mr. Bryan Punter for licensure. They are happy to announce that Bryan has sustained his exam, and they have licensed him to exhort. Bryan can be reached at (616) 318-7480 or [bryan.punter@providencecc.edu](mailto:bryan.punter@providencecc.edu).

The council of Cornerstone URC (Sanborn, IA) is pleased to announce that Rev. Larry Johnson has accepted a call from Cedar OPC (Hudsonville, MI) to be a teacher of the Word as he continues to teach Bible at Zion Christian School (Byron Center, MI).

With concurring advice from Classis Southwest of the URCNA in its March 11, 2014, meeting, the CoramDeo consistory has deposed Rev. Alex Garleb from his office of minister of the Word in their March 19, 2014, meeting according to articles 61 and 62 of the Church Order.

Rev. Martin Overgaauw was installed as the pastor at the Grace United Reformed Church of Simcoe County, Oro-Medonte, Ontario, on Friday, May 16, 2014.

The consistory at Redeemer United Reformed Church in Dyer, Indiana is pleased to announce that Joel Worries has been licensed to exhort, having successfully sustained his renewal exam. Joel is a student at Mid-America Reformed Seminary, and we highly recommend him for pulpit supply. He can be contacted at [Wuryz44@comcast.net](mailto:Wuryz44@comcast.net).



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