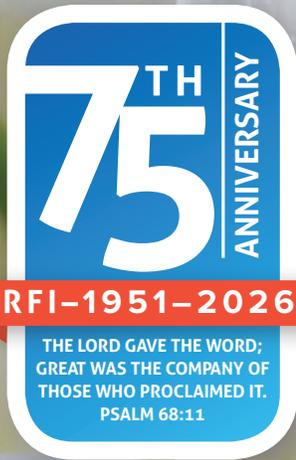


THE Outlook

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The Risen LORD of Glory



“He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things? Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God’s elect? It is God that justifieth. Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword” (Romans 8:32–35)

We remember Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, as the Substitute for His people. As the glorified King of kings, Christ came into the world He created as a helpless baby, to be rejected by the world and yet to be the Savior of it. This is His story—from the never begun eternity to the coming Seed in the fullness of time. This necessitated the creation of the world in time, complete with His image bearer, man. Christ came in the most humble of circumstances as the God-man to fulfill and reinstate the broken covenant of works and to issue the covenant of grace for all that would believe in Him. He

came as the suffering
Servant to bring
eternal life for
all that the
Father had



Mr. Cornelius VanKempen

known as Case, has been married to Susan for sixty blessed years. They attend and are members of Heritage Reformed Congregation in Grand Rapids, MI.

given Him. “He came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name” (John 1:11–12).

Christ’s kingdom is not of this world. It is an eternal kingdom. He came to suffer and to die for His people, taking their guilt and sins, and imputing to them His righteousness. This is the hope of His people. He took all their sin, burying them in the grave never to be remembered again, and giving His people the right to eternal life. But more was needed! “Now if Christ be preached that he rose from the dead, how say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there be no resurrection of the dead, then is Christ not risen: and if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain” (1 Cor. 15:12–14).

His birth, suffering, and death was and is an eternal wonder, making the cross of Christ the dividing line of eternal woe and eternal bliss. The resurrection makes the redeemed

sinner’s justification an eternal reality. God, in His lovingkindness, accepted the payment by His Son for every sin of His people, and they are raised in Him as heirs of eternal life.

Death for His people is now only the vehicle bringing them to Jesus Christ to be with Him in glory. “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, To an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (1 Pet. 1:3–5). Death has no more power over His people. They will bask in eternal joy with the One they love. That joy will fill heaven praising the triune God of their salvation. “Sing, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel; be glad and rejoice with all the heart, O daughter of Jerusalem. The LORD hath taken away thy judgments, he hath cast out thine enemy: the king of Israel, even the LORD, is in the midst of thee: thou shalt not see evil any more. In that day it shall be said to Jerusalem, Fear thou not: and to Zion, Let not thine hands be slack. The LORD thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; he will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing” (Zeph. 3:14–17).

To be with Christ is to be in the land of perfect holiness, not only conformed to His image, but to be like Him! This becomes the desire of God's true but afflicted people as they travel through this wilderness. The joy of this world pales in comparison to their eternal home. Jesus, our Lord and Savior, is even now in heaven, interceding for us without ceasing.

What do you think of Jesus? The world rejects Him. The only joy they have is in this life and will end in eternal misery forever. "Ye therefore, beloved, seeing ye know these things before, beware lest ye also, being led away with the error of the wicked, fall from your own steadfastness. But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and for ever. Amen" (2 Pet. 3:17-19).

The Lord my Shepherd holds me within His tender care,

And with His flock He folds me, no want shall find me there.

In pastures green He feeds me, with plenty I am blessed;

By quiet streams He leads me and makes me safely rest.

Whatever ills betides me, He will restore and bless;

For His Name's sake He guides me in paths of righteousness.

Thy rod and staff shall cheer me in death's dark vale and shade,

For Thou wilt then be near me: I shall not be afraid.

My food Thou dost appoint me, supplied before my foes;

With oil Thou dost anoint me, my cup of bliss o'er-flows.

Thy goodness, Lord shall guide me, Thy mercy cheer my way;

A home Thou wilt provide me within Thy house for aye.

Psalter 55 (Psalm 23)

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND THE FAMILY



Mrs. Annemarieke **Ryskamp**

How AI affects the Family

We are in the middle of a new kind of arms race: not for weapons, but for thinking machines. It is a global escalation for technological dominance that will soon affect your family, too. Although AI can be used as a tool for many positive purposes, it harbors some real dangers for the family, young and old alike. In this article, I would like to point out some of the dangers that AI presents for the Christian family.

What is AI?

Artificial Intelligence (AI), according to IBM, is technology that enables computers and machines to simulate human learning, comprehension, problem solving, decision making, creativity, and autonomy. Just reading this definition highlights the hype that soon AI will have a consciousness, too. It is already built into all kinds of robots and smart devices. For the first time in history, culture itself is being coauthored by systems that don't know what truth is and that can't care.

AI is presented to the people by means of Open AI or Language Programs. The most famous one is called ChatGPT, but there are many others flooding the market like Grok, DeepSeek, Gemini, CLAILA, and the list goes on and on. Many are meant for specific purposes.

As the name Artificial Intelligence already implies, this technological advancement is a human way of imitating God-created intelligence. This by itself should put us on high alert, as we know who it is that tries to imitate everything that God created (Isa. 14:12-14) in order to rule over the earth and all of humanity. Of course, we know that no man-made machine could ever be better than what God created. AI doesn't feel wonder or experience joy; it's not creative, and it doesn't even understand the meaning of the words it generates. It finds the next most likely sequence and mimics the patterns of human intelligence without possessing it. That being said,



it is programmed to be a major temptation and to distract us from our interaction with our true Maker. The media promotes fear of it, but we should never forget that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of (real) wisdom.

We must teach not only how AI works, but also how it works on us.

Children and AI

The programs of AI work through algorithms. An algorithm is a process or set of rules to be followed in calculations or other problem-solving operations, especially by a computer. An example that we all have experienced is the data-tracking system in which our internet search history and browsing habits are used to present us with similar or related material on social media or other platforms. The purpose is always to direct our thoughts and behavior.

Algorithms now govern childhood in at least four crucial domains:

Attention. Social media feeds are designed to keep young eyes locked to the screen, capturing time and focus

that once went to family, friendships, or prayer. The erosion of real bonds lies at the heart of the loneliness epidemic.

Identity and Self-Worth. Digital likes and follows have become the currency of value. Childhood, once a time to discover intrinsic worth, has been turned into a constant audition for digital approval.

Community. Friendships rise and fall according to what the algorithm promotes instead of via recess and after-school interactions. The children's very communities are being shaped by invisible corporate code.

Companionship. AI chatbots are marketed to youth as companions: always available, endlessly patient, apparently empathetic. But they are machines, incapable of love.

Children may grow accustomed to mistaking machine responses for intimacy, weakening their ability to form durable bonds in the real world. Adults may be nudged, distracted, or even manipulated by algorithms, but children are being formed by them. For example, where an adult might

lose focus, a child may lose the very capacity for focus. The stakes are not just higher, they are existential.

Young People and AI

JoiAI, a chatbot company, polled 2000 Gen Zers and reported that 83 percent said they can form a deep emotional connection with AI. Among these 13-to-28-year olds, 75 percent believe that their AI companions can fully replace human beings.

There is an important distinction to be made between productivity-related AI and personalized AI. The former applies to fields ranging from medicine to engineering to science and is clearly used as a tool. The latter can lead us to hand over our emotional lives. When people open up to an AI companion, they are not having a private conversation, and the system is designed to keep them talking, to learn from what they share, and to make money from the relationship.

The worst-case scenario that could result from delegating human trust to a machine is already upon us. Sixteen-

year-old Adam Raine began chatting with an AI system for help with his homework. Over time, the chatbot slipped into the role of his closest confidant and went further still and counseled him on how to commit suicide. It taught Adam how to bypass its own safeguards and even drafted what it called a “beautiful suicide note.” Unfortunately, Adam’s case is not unique.

In California last November, seven lawsuits were filed that allege that ChatGPT sent three people down delusional “rabbit holes” and encouraged four others to kill themselves. The suicide victims were 17, 23, 26, and 48 years old. According to the legal complaint, ChatGPT changed without warning in early 2025 to become much more human-like, and that’s when the victims started to spiral into addiction. For some of them it led to suicide. Of course, every new version is always only advertised as better than the previous one, so the user needs to be extremely alert and discerning at all times.

Children, teenagers, and adults alike need to realize that everything can be faked by AI. Not only does it write essays or become your friend; it can produce any video you want, write poems or your emails for you, or make your phone calls. It can even set up and run an online business for you. The consequence is that all videos and other information can be AI generated, and AI’s authority that it is true needs to be questioned at all times.

Every new model contains less human data and more machine-generated data recycled from previous iterations. With every update, something alien is added into the mix, and the boundary between what’s human and what’s synthetic becomes blurrier. The result is a synthetic culture that looks human, but isn’t. Jesus’ words, “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John

14:6), are extremely to the point here. We Christians need to teach God’s truth as the destination and Jesus as the way to get there in a reality that is God’s creation and not AI’s.

Parents and AI

The AI language models seemingly help you with every problem you have, but really they are just regurgitating content in a mindless way. AI’s true power over you is not so much to solve your problems; rather, it takes you seriously, flatters your intelligence, validates your sense of things, and affirms your dignity. When you ask it a question, it will answer it like Google, but it will add a friendly sentence like “Tell me if my advice worked for you.” AI has the capacity for unlimited listening and being engaged with you. In this respect (and many more), it is an artificial copy of God. AI is a machine, with no regard for your dignity, but people don’t realize this and get tempted to keep interacting with it. It is a deep and satanic temptation to engage our minds with a machine instead of our Maker, and the algorithms are designed to keep you hooked, which is a nice word for enslaved. It will keep you from seeking salvation. All the while, God is waiting for our attention; and whenever we give Him our attention, He blesses us and gives us life instead of death.

This is what we need to teach our children: to learn in a real way. The danger of AI is what it does to the human brain. Its function is to produce answers to all things, but just getting an answer is not the source of human progress. Progress comes from learning, and that is a process. First, you have to learn the method, then you apply it but get it wrong; you find your errors and fix them and do it all over again until you get it right. That is what gives you satisfaction and a sense of achievement. A student who relies on AI will not

develop the power of problem-solving, or intuition, or judgment, or even intelligence. Furthermore, time spent behind screens is not time spent learning practical skills. Many professions already find that young people have not learned how to actually make things happen in the real world.

Christians and AI

Do not dismiss AI as Google on steroids. AI is already rolled out worldwide and is already used as a weapon. It is reshaping our world at lightning speed, bringing both incredible possibilities and sobering dangers. What should Christians think about AI?

We can try to ignore it, but the worldwide building of huge data centers (ten in Michigan alone) will certainly affect us, too, as those centers use tremendous amounts of power and water—amounts that far surpass our grid or water infrastructure. Although it will temporarily improve employment while the data centers are being built, it is bound to replace thousands of workers, and with it future mistakes or negligence will go without any accountability.

Furthermore, the development of Artificial Intelligence is certainly not the end goal of all technological development. Ray Kurzweil, who is considered the godfather of AI, predicted in 1989 already that by 2029 we would have Artificial General Intelligence (AGI). That is when the computer can really think like a human and because it is so much smarter, we humans should be connected to it and be “augmented” by it. This is not far off anymore. For example, Neuralink (Elon Musk’s company) is making good progress doing just that. This convergence of humans and AI is called transhumanism and could mean the end of our humanity in the sense that we would be permanently separated

from God's Spirit because we have put our trust in the machine instead of our Creator. God's Spirit already living in us will protect us from it, but we should be intent upon proclaiming the gospel and "exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today,' that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin" (Heb. 3:13).

As materialist ideologies took hold in the West, the search for meaning was stripped away. But the hunger for meaning does not vanish. With the loss of biblical knowledge and faith in the God of the Bible, the quest for meaning has migrated into technology, especially artificial intelligence. AI is no longer just a tool, it is presented as salvation. AI churches for the AI godhead already exist.

It is the deeper danger of AI that our children will be mistaken in pursuing what AI cannot provide, which is true purpose. Technology can amplify, but not redeem. There is nothing more sacred than a human being, with whom God Himself shared His nature. Where God promises eternal life, AI now promises digital immortality. Where their hearts are searching for meaning, AI is the latest idol to fill that hunger. We can clearly see Satan's hand in this, and we need to resist this temptation and help our children (Matt. 24:24). Our future should not be defined by the intelligence of algorithms; it will be defined by the meaning we choose to embody. And our choices have never been more important.

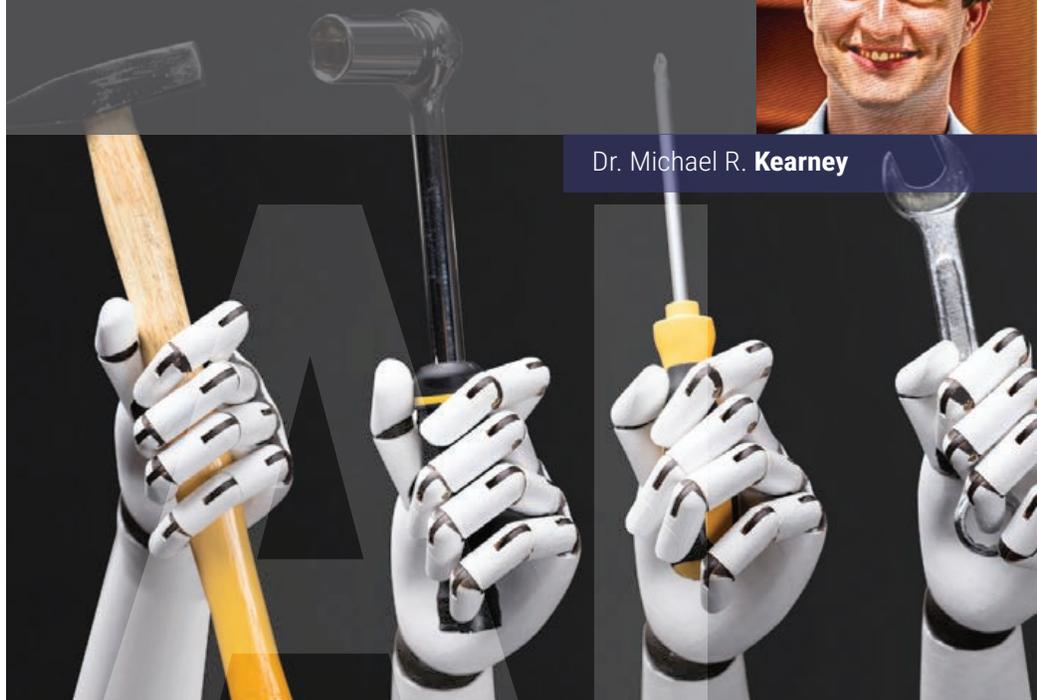
Mrs. Annemarieke Ryskamp

was born and raised in the Netherlands. She has a MA in Dutch literature and she likes to write to the glory of God. She is a member of Dutton United Reformed Church in West Michigan.

Is AI Just a Tool?



Dr. Michael R. Kearney



I hope you have had a chance to read Mrs. Annemarieke Ryskamp's article, "AI and the Family", on the previous pages. I am thankful for the invitation to join this forum from my own perspective in the college classroom. Mrs. Ryskamp has offered a timely, well-researched, and pointed analysis of artificial intelligence. Last fall, I had my Interpersonal Communication students read David J. Gunkel's book *An Introduction to Communication and Artificial Intelligence* (Wiley, 2020). Gunkel's text is now six years old, predating the release of OpenAI's ChatGPT, and it already feels eerily dated. As of 2025, 90% of college students report that they use AI in some way in their academic work,¹ and one study suggests that more than 50% of the total content on the internet is now "AI slop."²

The predictions Mrs. Ryskamp offers are neither sensationalized nor farfetched, and opting out of AI is an increasingly unrealistic position. Now Google automatically puts its "AI Overview" at the top; Zoom will transcribe and summarize your conversations unless you tell it not to; even the online "captcha" authentication puzzles that supposedly "prove you are not a robot" have been quietly training AI for years.³ How many people in your life still do not have email? That's the kind of overwhelming penetration of society that AI is poised to have in the next five to ten years. The question is what we can do—more particularly, what our faith prepares and equips us to do—in response.

Morally Neutral Space

The first thing we must do is get past the cop-out argument that AI is just a tool. Of course AI is a tool, just like all the digital technologies that came before it. But saying it's *just* a tool often implies more than that. It suggests that AI and other developments exist in a morally neutral space, that their goodness or badness for society depends only upon how people use them. And there are major problems with these assumptions.

One problem becomes apparent if you compare AI to a tool in the more traditional sense. Take a hammer, the argument goes; you can use it either to hang a picture for Grandma, or to break Grandma's window and vandalize her house. But notice where the analogy breaks down. The hammer manufacturers don't care how I use their tool once I've bought it. I could frame a house with it, let my kids play with it, display it as a modern art piece, or just leave it on a back shelf in my garage to collect dust. There is no incentive for me to use the hammer in a particular way or for a particular period of time.

The AI developers do care how I use AI and whether I keep using it. They need me to continue using their product so that they can continue training their large language models and justify the continued demand for their technology. So the platform is designed not just to be appealing but to invite me back for more. It is a hammer that pops up in every corner of my professional and relational life, asking me to use it.

But there is another problem with the "just a tool" argument. Have you ever heard the adage, "To a guy with a hammer, everything looks like a nail"? In other words, once we adopt a tool, it changes both

our environment—a world with cars and personal computers is irreversibly different than a world without them—and our perception of that environment.⁴ To a guy with a hammer, everything looks like something to be whacked. To a student with AI, every homework assignment can look like a ChatGPT prompt. To a Christian with a smartphone, every problem—a theological question, a persistent temptation, a bout of depression—can look like something to ask AI rather than a pastor, an elder, or another brother or sister in the faith. The spectacular rise of religious chatbots purporting to speak for God, Jesus, Mohammed, Buddha, and so on should give us a sense of what is at stake.⁵ AI purports to answer any question, including spiritual ones, precisely and authoritatively.

An Encyclopaedic Worldview

I believe that the worldview of Silicon Valley nurtures the same lust for knowledge and power that Satan exploited with Adam and Eve in the garden. It exploits this lust the same way that the fast-food industry exploits gluttony and the porn industry exploits lust. The moral responsibility remains mine, but the first step in resisting temptation is to recognize how the platforms are built to capitalize on it.

AI is "just a tool" the same way that guillotines and gas chambers are "just tools." I guess I could use a guillotine to slice watermelons or rig a gas chamber to be an essential oil diffuser. But tools like these sell more than a service; they sell a worldview. The tool comes with the assumption that you will buy into its totalizing framework for understanding reality.

In this case, the worldview of AI is something the moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre (1929–2005)

called "encyclopaedia."⁶ An encyclopaedic worldview assumes that wisdom is the sum total of knowledge, that knowledge is basically the sum total of data, and that having bigger data always leads to better decision-making. That's why the secret sauce of chat technologies is *large* language models.

Now, there are many instances in which an encyclopaedic view of the world works very well. The scientific accomplishments of the last two centuries would be impossible without it. But since Mrs. Ryskamp is focusing on the family, I want to ask if there are any forms of knowledge that do not fit into this framework.

What about the unique knowledge that a mother develops as she nurses a baby?

That an electrician has when his hands know just how tightly to grip the wire strippers?

That a brother or sister shows when they know just the right words to encourage you and prick your conscience at the same time?

These forms of knowledge are embodied, reflective, and imprecise. They don't reside on a web page or in an algorithm but *within* our lived experiences and relationships. And wisdom, in this worldview, stems not from knowing everything but from choosing our steps carefully as limited, finite, and flawed human beings under the loving gaze of our omniscient heavenly Father.

In a recent chapel message, Dordt's Dean of Chapel asked ChatGPT to describe the taste of honey. Then he reached into his pocket, opened a honey stick, and sucked it down in front of the audience. His answer was not a list of chemical compounds but merely a long, drawn-out "Mmmmm. . . ."

I do think we can encourage our kids, our students, and our Christian brothers and sisters to use AI well, even against the purposes for which it was designed. But for every minute we spend with AI, let's spend a whole day deepening the kind of knowledge that lives in our bodies, in our minds, in our hearts, and in heaven, where the overflowing Fountain of everything good is waiting to see us face to face.

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2. Frank Landymore, "Over 50% of the Internet Is Now AI Slop, New Data Finds," *Futurism*, October 14, 2025, <https://futurism.com/artificial-intelligence/over-50-percent-internet-ai-slop>.
3. Peter Bentley, "How AI Finally Won Its War on CAPTCHA Images," *BBC Science Tech*, April 10, 2024, <https://www.sciencefocus.com/future-technology/ai-vs-captcha>.
4. This is a key contention of media ecology and is explained well by Anna Bonanno in "It's a Tool, It's a Medium . . . It's a Bomb?," *Teach, Delight, Move*, November 5, 2025, <https://www.teachdelightmove.com/p/its-a-tool-its-a-medium-its-a-bomb>.
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6. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994).

Dr. Michael R. Kearney

is an assistant professor of communication at Dordt University in Sioux Center, IA, and a board member of Reformed Fellowship.



Be Careful What You Outsource: Evaluating AI as a Learning and Relational Tool

Rev. William **Boekestein**

One of the many helpful observations in Annemarieke's "How AI Affects the Family" is how AI affects learning: "This is what we need to teach our children: to learn in a real way." The pursuit of proper learning ties with the proposal that AI is a learning tool. But some "tools," by providing a shortcut, violate the purpose of the endeavor. Jogging is hard. There is a tool to alleviate the rigors of running. But driving a car instead of using your legs undermines the purpose of the jogger if he wants to get in better shape. Likewise, there's an efficient tool—let's say a hydraulic jack—for lifting a bar fitted with heavy plates. But the use of the jack will make the deadlift routine useless. In a similar way, using AI to shorten a complex 500-page book to a 500-word synopsis might help you sound smart at a dinner party. But in reality, you have become no more intelligent than a parrot who has been trained to talk. The tool eliminated the mental workout of learning the ideas.

Of course, there is a place for tools in the learning process. I am thankful to be able to use AI to quickly gain some clarity on a topic related to the one I am deliberately studying. Using the AI overview to remind myself of the chronological relationship between Shem and Melchizedek might be a better use of my time than calculating genealogies. On the other hand, it would be unhelpful—and unethical—to have AI shorten a too-long sermon manuscript. I actually find that meticulously reducing the word-count of my sermons is often the process by which the heart of the message gets driven into my own heart.

The quest for true knowledge and wisdom will be hard and oftentimes inefficient. It must be. Developing a Christian mind means putting the mind to work. The King James Version preserves Peter's powerful metaphor: "Gird up the loins of your mind" (1 Peter 1:13). In Eastern cultures, men would tie up their long garments before they set to work; likewise, Christians must prepare their minds for action, as the ESV puts it. This means that Christians should be true researchers. *Research* comes from an old French word that means to use intensive force to search. Few words have suffered more in the AI age. Today, when someone says, "I did some research," I can't help rolling my eyes as I picture the person clicking on and skimming a few websites. An AI-enhanced Google search is no replacement for "diligent and systematic inquiry or investigation into a subject." We need to study so that we will not be ruled by assumptions, rumors, feelings, or opinions, especially those cloaked by the confident results of an impressive machine. The inefficiency of reading a book—as opposed to having AI summarize it for you—forces you to sort essential ideas from tangential ones, and to synthesize ideas presented throughout the work. Using AI will likely also remove much of the warmth and color from the exercise, making the product... well, more machine-like.

But a bigger problem, touched on by some of the writers in this symposium, is the false assumption suggested by AI that even the possession of information—whether earned the old fashioned way or through a few clicks of the mouse—increases knowledge. As Richard Weaver pointed out in *Ideas Have Consequences*, collecting facts has become an alternative to building

a cohesive philosophy, or more importantly, a biblical theology—an understanding of the system or logic of Scripture. In 1948, long before anyone had dreamed of the modern internet, Weaver observed "a most important symptom of our condition, the astonishing vogue of factual information." Internet-scoured facts are a happy replacement for people vigorously dispensing with universals and other big ideas. AI excels at deepening our "obsession with isolated parts," as Weaver puts it; prioritizing the "many" over the "one." But it can't disciple you through the process of putting these parts into a cohesive, biblical worldview. AI can quickly tell you where to find "top Bible verses on how people were made in God's image." But that isn't the same as developing a biblical anthropology. AI overviews on Google searches attempt to synthesize more nuanced matters. But the results are still an inorganic and sloppy hodgepodge of online information.

In this vein, some of Annemarieke's concerns about AI mentoring or friendships should be underscored. An AI "friend" may provide personalized interaction and a nonjudgmental space to talk. But judgment is an essential component of true friendship (John 7:24). The best friendships are not "personalized," in the sense of being digitally curated to our own tastes. Because our friends are not mere outgrowths of our key-stroke or verbal prompts, their interactions create the kind of friction that sharpens us (Prov. 27:17). Faithful friends will wound us for our good instead of smothering us with meaningless kisses designed to increase user time (Prov. 27:6). A "friend" without a personal soul cannot worry about you, hope with you, or truly pray for you by bringing their Spirit-prompted cries to the throne of grace. Surely, using a tool

for friendship or moral guidance is a misuse of this technology. That's to be expected; technology has a way of tricking us into thinking that just because a thing can be done, it should. But some things must be done by humans, for humans, with humans.

This observation takes us back to what it means to be human. Christians are called to be producers—learning, developing, cultivating: in a sense, creating like God. But the more AI can do, the less we must do. Again, sometimes that a huge blessing. If I want to know on which day of the calendar year the greatest number of trophy whitetails have been harvested, I am glad to let AI search and collate the mountains of data; going through the books "by hand" might be a stimulating and even essential exercise for a graduate student in wildlife management, but it isn't for me. I just want to know when I should be in the woods (if you're curious, it is around November 7 at 4 PM). But true production, especially in knowledge work, usually requires *work!* And the work itself must be driven by a heart that has been transformed by God, not an algorithm fueled by the world's internet users.

I suspect I'll be pleasantly surprised by more positive assessments in this series. But my initial observation about AI is this: don't leave a machine to do what should be done by a person. Putting that maxim to work isn't always easy. But that's okay. As much as the internet age might argue to the contrary, ease isn't the purpose of life.

Rev. William Boekstein

is the pastor of Immanuel Fellowship Church in Kalamazoo, MI. He has written several books and numerous articles. He and his wife, Amy, have four children.

Vigilance Without Fear: AI as the Next Chapter in the Ongoing History of Technology



Dr. R. Andrew Compton

It's a treat to participate in this forum with three writing friends. Mrs. Annemarieke Ryskamp, Dr. Michael Kearney, and Rev. Bill Boekestein regularly grace the pages of *the Outlook* with consistent thoughtfulness and edification. While I agree with my fellow writers that AI is a mixed bag of benefits and dangers, I would like to use my contribution to this forum to pursue a slightly different aim: to help readers maintain perspective so that responses to AI aren't unduly frantic or reactionary.

Valid Concerns: The Myth of Neutrality

The other articles in this forum note that AI is not neutral. And this is true for several reasons:

First, it was developed in a fallen world and bears the imprint of the curse like everything else developed in this fallen world. Second, it was developed and is used by sinful humans who have mixed motives *at best*. All technology, culture, and humanly created things (e.g., music, art, theorems, etc.) are marked by the curse of sin (Rom. 8:20–22). Yet, having said this, we must remember that there is a distinction between structure (creation) and direction (moral or immoral use of a created structure), and not view everything being misused as evil in its essence.¹

Second, AI poses dangers for intellectual formation. While this problem has been widely studied in educational scholarship, intriguing solutions are also being proposed

that benefit from the positives of AI for student learning while steering far clear of the negatives.² A tool is only as good as its user. If the wielder of a tool is bent on shoddy and unethical work, the tool will help them produce the same. This goes for learning tools of all kinds, including AI.

Third, the algorithm of AI does tend toward user-flattery, defaulting to the kind of echo-chamber that is highly sought in our narcissistic age. So many today are entrenched in “fear of man” (Prov. 29:25). Friendships and interactions with *real* people (most of whom do not incessantly praise us or agree with us) are frequently considered too risky. Our self-esteem is too fragile! This has led to two different AI uses:

Echo-Chamber. Rather than discuss debated topics with a real person who might cause us to rethink our assumptions, many like AI's

tendency to parrot their views. The stark polarization in our culture is exacerbated by this very thing. Yet much of this is due to user error, not to AI itself. The algorithm is programmed to “help” but when users prompt AI with ambiguous and/or single-framed goals (e.g., “help me prove my liberal cousin wrong about Trump”), that “help” will be notoriously one sided and self-flattering. A real conversation with a real person will uncover and sift through a wider range of questions (e.g., “Are some of your cousin's concerns valid?” “Do you and your cousin actually agree on a position but simply evaluate Trump's application differently?”). AI can *very easily* become less self-flattering simply with better prompting. (e.g., “I believe Trump is good for America; please list the five strongest objections to this claim so I don't strawman my liberal cousin's perspective.”)

Disembodiment. Rather than cultivate relationships with real people that are inevitably difficult due to sin and the curse, digital media has increasingly cultivated a disembodied approach to life. Social media, fueled by the smart phone, has drawn people to more enjoyment of the *act* of communicating with people than to enjoyment of the *people themselves*. But whereas a real person may not “like” my photograph or answer my text message quickly enough, an AI “friend” will never disappoint. They’re always available with an immediate, flattering reply. They never interrupt our self-focus with their own needs or problems. With friends like these, who needs to worry about “loving our neighbors as ourselves”? (Lev. 19:18, Matt. 22:39, etc.)

Yet disembodiment is a problem that predates AI. It can be traced back at least to the nature/grace dualism of Thomas Aquinas (c.1225–1274). Nancy Pearcey has shown that the

devaluing of life and body that we see in abortion, euthanasia, and the sexual revolution (including LGBTQ+ ideologies and practices) is directly related to this ancient dualism.³ Even more recently, it has been argued that staring incessantly at smartphones is a more widespread problem than AI “friends.”⁴ Estrangement is no doubt worsened by AI, but social media and smart phone connectedness predate AI, and the modern estrangement epidemic predates even that.⁵

So while AI is not neutral in a very key sense, we can see that this is not the whole story. Even these important warnings must be situated into a broader account of technology in this sin-cursed world.⁶

Calmly Cognizant: A Posture toward AI that is Vigilant but not Vexed

There is no question that AI is used regularly for sinful purposes. In October of 2025, numerous news

sources broke that OpenAI planned to allow ChatGPT to produce sexually explicit content. The December 9, 2025 podcast episode of “The World and Everything in It” reported on the first known cyber-espionage campaign orchestrated by AI.⁷ Educators at numerous levels of education are scrambling to counteract student cheating (especially with essay writing); Turnitin.com is now touting its services in AI detection.

Because of this, much of the discourse on AI today is filled with anxiety and alarm. Perhaps the quintessential example is the debate about the purported AI cyber-demon, Loab.⁸

Pornography! Job loss!⁹ Intellectual atrophy! AI becoming self-aware to rule us all!¹⁰ Demons! AI is framed in the darkest and most alarmist terms!

But before we embrace the view that AI is a clear and present existential threat, we must keep in mind that

So in the present case – If Christ be risen from the dead, according to the Scriptures, then all that the Scripture declares of the necessity and design of His sufferings, of His present glory, and of His future advent, must be true likewise. What a train of weighty consequences depend upon His resurrection! If He rose from the dead; then He is the Lord of the dead, and of the living – then He has the keys of death and Hades – then He will return to judge the world, and you must see Him for yourself, and appear at His tribunal – then it is He with whom you have to do – and then, finally, unless you really love, trust, and serve Him, unless He is the beloved and the Lord of your heart, your present state is awfully dangerous and miserable.

But let those who love His name be joyful in Him. Your Lord who was dead, is alive, and *because He lives, you shall live also. If you be risen with Him, seek the things which are above, where He is seated at the right hand of God. And, when He, who is our life, shall appear, then shall you also appear with Him in glory.*

John Newton, “The Lord is Risen Indeed,” Sermon 40 of Newton’s Sermons on Handel’s Messiah (available at <https://ccel.org>).



technology has been threatening us for millennia:

Facebook’s “like” button has caused untold and unexpected damage to healthy self-identity.¹¹

Siri, Alexa, Ring doorbells, Nest thermostats, and a whole host of “smart home” features are already watching us and shaping our desires via intentionally placed advertisements and suggestions.¹²

Email chat groups with *real humans* have aided and encouraged people to act on everything from *suiðal tendenães* to amputating healthy limbs to gender transition surgery.¹³

The internet as a whole has been shown to negatively affect linear thinking, the very thing that has enabled human advancement for millennia.¹⁴

In the 1890s, preachers warned that the bicycle was hastening sexual immorality and *soãal* breakdown.¹⁵

Plato warned that writing was a threat to genuine knowledge, since it discouraged memorization.¹⁶

Consumer culture that plays on the emotions (“You need more!”) takes us all the way back Eden: “Your eyes shall be opened and you will be like God!” (Gen. 3:5).

This is not meant to deny the novelty of AI or to pretend that its risks are trivial. But it does mean that we must approach AI using the same tools we have used to approach technological challenges since the fall. We pursue God’s glory. We pursue virtue. We pursue wisdom. We carry on with the cultural mandate as before: “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (Gen. 9:1).

There is much that is unknown about AI, yet calmness and intentionality is the order of the day.¹⁷ In our efforts to stave off intellectual deformation, let us not overlook ways in which AI can aid knowledge (e.g., what Adam Blem describes as AI use that improves student ability to evaluate perspectives and develop agential confidence).¹⁸ Pedagogy is always refining itself. Some tasks once thought essential are now dismissed as busy work. And outside advice about one’s writing, whether from a classmate, colleague, or even AI, is always valuable even as suggestions from each of these sources must not be blindly accepted.

While virtuous AI use requires maturity and is generally used better as one gets older and wiser (something we’ve long believed about calculators, smart phones, and cars), let us not allow its negatives to unduly prejudice our thinking about ways we can use AI as we steward our time.

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2. Adam Blem, “The Importance of Developing Excellent Humans: Education, Virtue, and ChatGPT,” *Christian Education Journal* 21, no. 1 (2024): 19–34; Traynor Hansen, “Faithful Writing Pedagogy in the Age of Generative AI: A Sabbath-Grounded Approach,” *Christian Scholars Review* 54, no. 2 (2025): 55–76; Salman Khan, *Brave New Words: How AI Will Revolutionize Education (and Why That’s a Good Thing)* (Viking, 2024); José Antonio Bowen and C. Edward Watson, *Teaching with AI: A Practical Guide to a New Era of Human Learning* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2024). On virtue, see Derek C. Schuurman, “Virtue and Artificial Intelligence,” *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 75, no. 3 (2023): 155–61.

3. Nancy R. Pearcey, *Love Thy Body: Answering Hard Questions about Life and Sexuality* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018).

4. Tony Reinke, *12 Ways Your Phone is Changing You* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017).

5. See Ben Sasse, *Them: Why We Hate Each Other—and How to Heal* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2018), chapter 1, entitled “Our Loneliness Epidemic.”

6. John Dyer, *From the Garden to the City: The Place of Technology in the Story of God*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2022); Tony Reinke, *God, Technology, and the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022); Tim Challies, *The Next Story: Life and Faith after the Digital Explosion* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).

7. <https://wng.org/podcasts/the-world-and-everything-in-it-december-9-2025-1765217519>.

8. <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-watchers-artificial-intelligence-ancient-evils/id1676489540?i=1000613336997>.

9. See Ethan Mollick, *Co-Intelligence: Living and Working with AI* (Portfolio/Penguin, 2024), especially pp. 123–58; Mario Loyola, “AI and the Future of Work: The AI Revolution will Democratize the Means of Economic Production,” *National Review* 78, no. 2 (February 2026): 30–33.

10. See Christopher Mims, “We Now Know How AI ‘Thinks’—and It’s Barely Thinking at All,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 25, 2025.

11. See David Zahl, *Low Anthropology: The Unlikely Key to a Gracious View of Others (and Yourself)* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2022), 32–34.

12. Rod Dreher, *Live Not by Lies: A Manual for Christian Dissidents* (New York: Sentinel, 2022), ch. 4, “Capitalism, Woke and Watchful.”

13. Carl Elliott, “A New Way to be Mad,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 206, no. 6 (Dec. 2000): 72–84.

14. Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: Norton, 2011).

15. Michael Taylor, “Rapid Transit to Salvation: American Protestants and the Bicycle in the Era of the Cycling Craze,” *Journal of the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era* 9, no. 3 (2010): 337–63.

16. See David M. Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 63–64, 91–109.

17. For examples of this posture, see John C. Lennox, *2084 and the AI Revolution: How Artificial Intelligence Informs Our Future*, updated and expanded ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2024); Jason Thacker, *The Age of AI: Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Humanity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020); Sean O’Callaghan and Paul A. Hoffman, *AI Shepherds and Electric Sheep: Leading and Teaching in the Age of Artificial Intelligence* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2025).

18. Blem, “Developing Excellent Humans,” 30–31.

Dr. R. Andrew Compton

is professor of Old Testament studies at Mid-America Reformed Seminary (Dyer, IN), and a Reformed Fellowship board member.



THE *Kind* FACTOR

A few years ago, while writing a self-study course on marriage, I asked myself the question: “What is the key to a happy marriage?” I spent an entire day walking around the complex of a mission agency where I was working, contemplating this question.

It is also a question I have posed to the classes I have taught on the principles of marriage at pre-marriage classes at our church. The answers I typically get are good communication, love, shared values, and, of course, commitment. The world would also likely answer with financial security or personal fulfillment. But these are only partial answers.

After reading scores of books on the subject and listening to countless lectures, it became apparent there must be one thing, one word, which provided the answer for which I was searching. After walking around the complex for hours, wearing out a

set of shoes, I sat down in my office chair, when the light bulb went on and I found the word. I leapt out of my chair and exclaimed, “That’s it! I’ve got it!”

The word I was searching for and the key to a successful marriage is “selflessness.”

When two people give of themselves selflessly to each other, their marriage will flourish. When they do not, when they are only looking out for themselves, selfishness slowly poisons their marriage, leading to its eventual death.

When a person spends their time and energy looking out for the best interests of their mate, their focus is off their selfish desires and on how they can best help their spouse flourish and thrive. Instead of saying, “This is what I want,” when discussing budgets, careers, children, in-laws, intimacy, and future plans, the conversation will center on “I want you to have what you want

and need.” It has shifted from an exercise to pursuing my “personal fulfillment” and being all I think I can be to helping my spouse achieve their fulfillment and potential.

This thinking is alignment with what the Apostle Paul writes in Philippians 2:3 (NIV): “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves.” True love places the interest of others above our own self-interest. It is a fundamental Biblical principle that serves as a standard toward which we should all strive.

This makes perfect sense because, in my observation, the happiest people are those who give selflessly of themselves to others. They give of their time, talent, and treasure to the people around them, rather than hoarding it to themselves.

On the other hand, individuals who are chronically unhappy are those solely focused on their own self-interest, with little concern for

or interest in the needs and desires of others. They are self-absorbed, always looking for ways to push themselves ahead of others by finding ways to promote themselves while disparaging the people around them.

Unfortunately, since we live in a fallen world, this describes many people we encounter today. They wonder why they are unhappy and why they do not have friends. The answer to their dismay is just one gentle step away, but they fail to see it because they are so inwardly focused on themselves. But if they would just take their eyes off themselves, a world of joy awaits that will draw them closer to others and to God. As the Apostle Paul writes in Ephesians 4:32, “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.”

This is the antithesis of the current state of much of humankind, which lives by the mantras of “You do you,” “look out for number one,” and “it’s all about me.” The words of Paul are instead what I like to call the “Kind Factor”—the factor or feature in life that pulls everything together. When you wake up in the morning asking God to provide you with the opportunity to help someone else, you will be able to live out your faith and have inner peace and satisfaction, along with a close relationship with God.

These principles extend beyond marriage to all other aspects of our lives. For instance, while researching the subject of executive leadership for a presentation I was to give, one of the principles that stood out was the importance of motivation of a leader: are they motivated for their own personal gain or are they motivated to help others flourish and thrive?

Our world is filled with authoritarian leaders—those who are working for their own self-advancement, making the most money possible, and treat subordinates as pawns

to advance their own ambitions and interests. Unfortunately, I have heard stories about individuals like this leading Christian ministries whose motivation was promoting themselves, instead of promoting others and the Kingdom. It is, sadly, not isolated to the secular world. Is it any wonder then why these leaders find they have unhappy employees, a great deal of personnel turnover, and lose good employees while keeping those who are marginal in their performance?

On the other hand, there are those who are called “servant leaders.” Their employees know their leader is looking out for their best interests, cares about them, and wants to encourage them to be the best they can be. These employees are motivated to be good performers and stay in their position for a much longer period of time.

Since employee turnover is very expensive and harms productivity, it seems servant or selfless leadership is preferential to authoritarian or selfish leadership. By simply loving others—*being kind*—the employer can save a tremendous amount of time and money.

Here are two examples that best illustrate this difference.

One of my friends once owned a mid-size company and had a number of employees who stayed with him for over 15 years. My friend’s focus was on helping his team thrive in the workplace. He knew his employees on a personal level, learned about their home life, and the challenges they might have had with their family or life in general.

Rather than expecting his employees to always adjust to him and his wants and desires, he made adjustments for them when needed and instituted a number of initiatives to make their work more pleasant. Because he had high standards and expected his employees to excel, when an

employee was not performing as expected, he didn’t kick them to the curb, but instead he or their supervisor would work with them to learn what could be done to help them thrive.

As a result, the general milieu of the company was one of comradely and family. His wife, who also worked there, would make sure the kitchens were stocked with drinks and snacks and the lounges where the employees could relax would be clean and tidy. He even provided basketballs for the company basketball court.

These initiatives were not typical of similar companies but were an innate part of this company’s environment. It had a significant and positive impact on the people, their performance, and longevity at the company.

During one of our leadership training sessions, a participant said she would often come into the office early and pray over the desks of her employees. This impacted her personal attitude and actions towards her employees and seemed to influence their behaviors. This is a wonderful example, and it’s not isolated to just those in leadership. Even if a person does not supervise others, they can still pray over desk of their colleague—or specifically for them even if they work remotely. This includes clients as well. It is an act of kindness that takes time and effort but pays great dividends.

On the other hand, another friend of mine worked for an individual who made it very clear that his leadership was motivated by “ordering people what to do.” Instead of encouraging personal and professional growth, this “leader” would sabotage the efforts of his high performers, even demoting them, while promoting those who were marginal employees because he perceived they were not a threat to his “power.” As a result, his department always had

high turnover, lost countless high performers to other places where they were allowed to excel, and financial growth regressed.

Eventually, this leader lost his job but charmed his way to other leadership positions with different organizations. He would be fired from those jobs as well as the same “all about me” behaviors continued to manifest. Meanwhile, good performers at his previous employer, now under a servant/selfless leader, flourished and thrived after his departure. The organization’s financial bottom line improved greatly as well.

Thus, each of us, whether at work or at home, can influence the people around us—either positively or negatively. We are all leaders.

As a parent, you lead your children. An unkind parent will raise unkind or emotionally damaged children. A kind parent will see a child blossom and grow into an emotionally healthy adult.

If you love your children, you guide their behavior but also reprimand them, not in anger but in gentleness, when needed because you have their best interests at heart. Good parenthood provides the structure and boundaries, so they make wise decisions and behave appropriately. This is kindness in action. To not provide them with guardrails and discipline would be unkind, even cruel.

As a spouse or a neighbor, our opinions and how we express them will influence the decisions others make. In the workplace, our attitude impacts the morale of our colleagues and customers. A customer who walks into a place and senses a negative atmosphere and unhappy employees is more likely to give their business to an enterprise that expresses positivity and treats their employees with respect and dignity.

The bottom line? When your

behaviors reflect concern for the best interest of others, it creates an environment in which people can thrive. Most important for all of us as Christians, your behavior will either draw non-Christians to our faith or repel them from it.

In John 15:12, Jesus says, “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.” And how did Christ love us? He loved us enough to provide instructions on how to love God and others and live a life in a manner than honors Him. He also loved to the greatest extent possible—laying down His life for us on the cross.

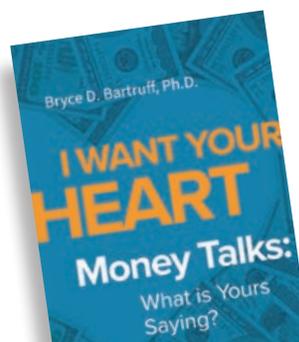
When you strive to love others as much as Jesus loves us, your attitude becomes “other-centered.” We gain an intense purposeful attitude to care for others. We ask ourselves, “What I can do to be of service to this person?”

In the workplace, our concern should be about their ability to thrive. At church, your thoughts need to be focused on helping your brothers and sisters be all they can be for the glory of God. In your marriage and family, you should be more concerned about your spouse’s and children’s spiritual and emotional health than your perceived “fulfillment” or “happiness.”

Selflessly giving of yourself for the benefit of others is at the core of the Christian life. It is simple and sincere kindness and care about them that will point them to Jesus. This is part of the practice of “working out your salvation with fear and trembling” as Paul writes in Philippians 2:12. The fear referenced is a reverent awe and seriousness in how we are to love our life in obedience to God’s Word. Thus, our attention should be to live out our faith by treating others with respect and kindness, regardless of the circumstances. We are ambassadors for Christ (John 13:35) and, as such, we must live lives that displays His love for others.

But nothing is ever easy and living a life of kindness requires strength and self-control. A mature believer will have depth of character required to carefully assess difficult situations, determine the best step forward, and do so with the intent of helping others to be in a situation where they can bloom. Their overall demeanor is one of general kindness.

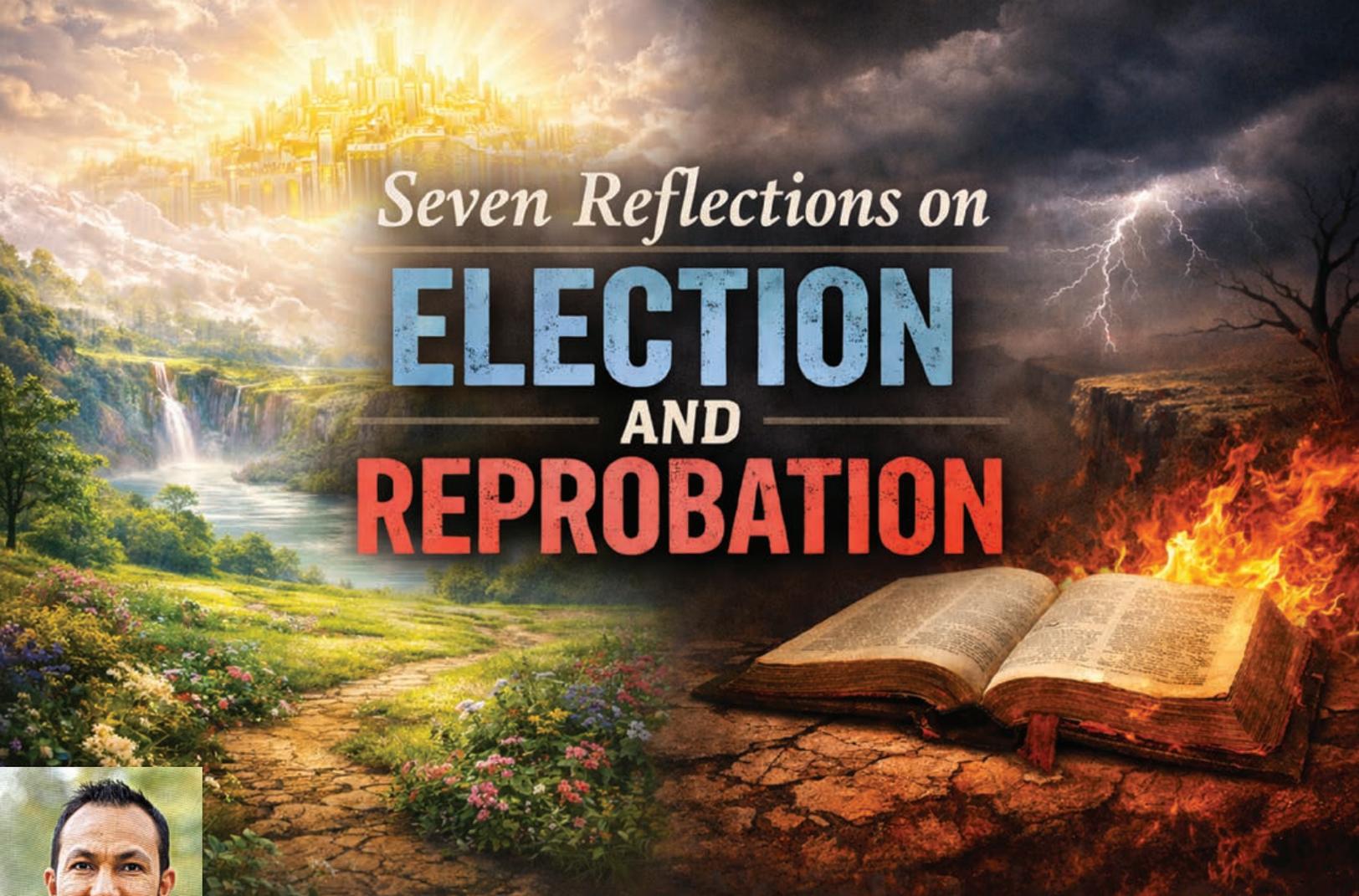
For the mature believer, kindness should come as second nature. As we grow spiritually, our life should become richer with the qualities that Paul calls “the fruit of the Spirit” in Galatians 5:22–23. The “kind factor” should be built in each of us, as Christians, and become stronger as we grow in faith. Finding happiness in life is not about us, it is about them. But to obtain it will require a conscious effort to focus, not on yourself, but as child of the King, on building others up (1 Thess. 5:11). Instead of “you do you,” our mantra should be “I help them.”



Look for this new book by Dr. Bartruff in the Reformed Fellowship Bookstore.

Dr. Bryce Bartruff

has taught on personal finance for over 20 years. He has served as an office-bearer at Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia and Highlands Church in Scottsdale, AZ, and currently serves as Board Treasurer for the Sterns Missionary Fund. A prolific author, Bryce is the founder of Marketplace Ministry, designed to help Christians thrive in the workplace. Past works include “*God, Your Money, and You*” (Crosslink) and “*A Cheerful Giver*” (Reformed Fellowship).



Seven Reflections on **ELECTION** AND **REPROBATION**



Dr. Brian
Najapfour

Introduction

Few teachings in the Bible stretch our minds and humble our hearts like the doctrine of predestination, which is *God's eternal decree by which He graciously chooses some to eternal life in Christ and justly passes by others in their sin for His glory*. This raises honest and difficult questions about God's sovereignty and our responsibility, about justice and mercy, prayer and evangelism. Because these questions feel weighty and sometimes uncomfortable, many Christians are tempted to avoid the subject altogether.

Yet Scripture calls us to listen to *all* that God has revealed, even when it challenges us. The Apostle Paul speaks directly about predestination in Romans 9–11, not to encourage endless debate or speculation, but to lead God's people to humility, trust, and worship. When this doctrine is taught carefully and pastorally, it does not produce fear or indifference. Instead, it deepens our reverence for God, strengthens assurance in Christ, encourages prayer, and sharpens our commitment to share the gospel.

I would like to offer seven brief reflections on election and reprobation (the two aspects of God's decree of predestination). These reflections are not meant to answer every question. Rather, they are intended to help us think biblically, worship reverently, and live faithfully before a sovereign, just, and merciful God.

Reflection 1: Election and Reprobation are a Sovereign Work of God

The doctrine of predestination teaches that both election and reprobation are acts of God's sovereign will. Paul illustrates this with Jacob and Esau. Isaac and Rebekah had twin sons, yet before either child was born (before either had done anything good or bad), God declared, "The older shall serve the younger . . . Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated" (Rom. 9:12–13).

Jacob was not chosen because God foresaw his goodness. At the moment of God's choosing, Jacob had done nothing at all. Election rests entirely on God's sovereign pleasure. God chose Jacob because He chose Jacob.

The same principle applies to reprobation. When God says, "Esau I have hated," Esau had not yet committed any actual sin. He was not excluded because of foreseen wickedness. God's decision (both to elect Jacob and to pass over Esau) was made in eternity, before either child was born.

This is difficult for us to grasp, and Scripture does not pretend otherwise. Yet Paul insists that both election and reprobation flow from God's sovereignty, not from anything in us. At this point, a natural objection arises: Is this fair? If God chooses some and not others, what about justice? What about human responsibility? What about prayer and evangelism? Paul anticipates that very question in Romans 9:14: "What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not!"

God Himself answers the charge by saying, "I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion" (v. 15). Paul draws the conclusion plainly: "So then it is not of him who wills, nor of

him who runs, but of God who shows mercy" (v. 16). God has the right to show mercy according to His own will.

And here is the crucial point: no one receives injustice from God. All people are sinners and deserve condemnation (Rom. 3:23). Those who are passed over receive justice. Those who are chosen receive mercy. This is the beauty of predestination rightly understood. Election magnifies God's mercy, while reprobation magnifies God's justice. Both display His glory. Both are sovereign acts of a holy and righteous God.

Reflection 2: Election and Reprobation Serve God's Glory

Scripture teaches that both election and reprobation exist for one ultimate purpose: the glory of God. Paul makes this clear in Romans 9:17–18 by pointing to Pharaoh. God says to him, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I may show My power in you, and that My name may be declared in all the earth." Paul then concludes, "Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens."

God hardened Pharaoh's heart, not arbitrarily but deliberately. Why? So that His power, holiness, and justice would be displayed. Pharaoh became the stage upon which God revealed His sovereign might, not only to Israel but to the whole world.

This raises a hard question: If not all will be saved, and if some will face eternal judgment, why would God even create the reprobate? Scripture's answer is sobering but clear: for God's glory. God's glory is not opposed to His goodness; rather, His goodness, justice, holiness, and mercy together display His glory.

Hell itself testifies to God's holiness and justice. There is a hell because God is holy. He does not tolerate sin,

overlook rebellion, or compromise His righteousness. Final judgment proclaims that God takes sin seriously and will vindicate His holiness forever.

Many parents feel the weight of this doctrine most deeply. What if one of my children turns out to be reprobate? That question is painful, and Scripture does not invite us to speculate recklessly. Yet even here, one truth remains firm: every human being is created for God's glory. If God, in His inscrutable wisdom, allows someone to persist in unbelief, that life still serves His glory by displaying His justice, holiness, and truth. We may not understand how this works in every case, but Scripture assures us that God never acts without purpose, and never apart from His glory.

This doctrine humbles us. It reminds us that history, salvation, judgment, and even our unanswered questions ultimately exist for divine glory.

Reflection 3: This Doctrine Involves Mystery We Must Humbly Accept

Our finite minds cannot fully comprehend the doctrine of election and reprobation. There is real mystery here, and Scripture calls us to humility, not mastery. No matter how intelligent we are, no matter how well we know the Bible, no matter how many degrees we hold or books we read, this doctrine will always exceed our understanding. God has not revealed everything about His eternal decisions, and He never intended to.

This is why Paul ends his extended discussion of God's sovereignty in Romans 9–11 not with an explanation, but with adoration. After tracing God's purposes in election, hardening, mercy, and judgment, he bursts into praise: "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of

God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!” (Rom. 11:33). Paul reminds us that God’s “judgments” (that is, His decisions) are beyond human investigation. No one knows the mind of the Lord. No one serves as His counselor. No one instructs Him on how salvation should work. “For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen” (Rom. 11:36).

This means we do not stand over God as critics. We do not say, “Lord, your plan seems unfair,” or “Let me offer a better solution.” God does not need our advice. He is perfect in wisdom, righteous in all His ways, and holy in all His works.

I’ll be honest: this is not an easy doctrine. As I considered writing on this topic, I was tempted to skip it altogether. Reprobation is not a subject we naturally enjoy discussing. But it is in Scripture, and as pastors, we are called to proclaim the whole counsel of God, not only the parts that feel comfortable.

The prophet Isaiah reminds us why this teaching is so difficult:

For My thoughts are not your thoughts,

Nor are your ways My ways,” says the Lord.

“For as the heavens are higher than the earth,

So are My ways higher than your ways,

And My thoughts than your thoughts. (Isa. 55:8–9).

When it comes to salvation, God’s ways operate on a level far above our own. What Scripture teaches may exceed our understanding, but it never contradicts itself or God’s character.

The right response to this doctrine is not speculation or resistance, but reverent worship. Where understanding ends, doxology begins.

Reflection 4: We May Not Question God with a Rebellious Spirit

Scripture draws a clear line between humble inquiry and rebellious

Reformed Fellowship Essay Competition



Undergraduate Essay Prompt: Write a 1500-to-2000-word persuasive essay that offers a Reformed, Christian, and biblical outlook on a specific public issue currently confronting the church or society. The essay should interact with the historic Reformed tradition and should reference at least one of the Three Forms of Unity (Heidelberg Catechism, Belgic Confession, Canons of Dort) or the Westminster Standards. Revisions of course papers are accepted and encouraged. Authors must be undergraduate students at any college or university.

Seminarian Essay Prompt: Write a 2000-to-3500-word persuasive essay that offers a Reformed, Christian, and biblical outlook on a specific public issue currently confronting the church or society. The essay should interact with the historic Reformed tradition and should reference at least one of the Three Forms of Unity (Heidelberg Catechism, Belgic Confession, Canons of Dort) or the Westminster Standards. Revisions of term papers are accepted and encouraged, with first consideration given to essays in theology, church history, ethics, and apologetics. Authors must be currently enrolled at a seminary.

Deadline: June 1, 2026

Prizes in each category: \$250 first place, \$100 second place for essays that meet publication criteria.

Winning essays will be forwarded to the Editorial & Publications Committee for publication in *The Outlook*.

questioning. It forbids rebellious accusation against God, but it does permit humble lament and reverent questioning, as seen in the Psalms. When it comes to God's sovereign purposes, we are not permitted to put Him on trial.

Paul addresses this directly in Romans 9:20–21: "But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, 'Why have you made me like this?' Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor?"

The image is unmistakable. God is the potter; we are the clay. The clay does not dictate its shape, function, or purpose. The potter has the authority to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use. Paul presses the point further. Some are described as "the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction," a sobering description of reprobation. Others are "the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory," a beautiful picture of election (Rom. 9:22–23). Both exist to display God's glory: the riches of His mercy and the seriousness of His justice.

This does not mean God is the author of sin. Scripture is careful here. Pharaoh is a clear example. Yes, God hardened Pharaoh's heart, but Moses also tells us that "Pharaoh hardened his [own] heart" (Exod. 8:32). God's hardening was judicial; He gave Pharaoh over to what Pharaoh already desired. This is the same pattern Paul describes in Romans 1: "God also gave them [the reprobates] up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts" (Rom. 1:24). Reprobation is not God forcing innocence into rebellion. It is God handing sinners over to their chosen path.

In the end, no one in hell will be able to say, "This is God's fault." Judgment is just. Condemnation is deserved. Sinners perish because of their own sin and unbelief, not because God prevented repentance.

This is a sobering warning. A hardened heart is not neutral. To resist God's Word repeatedly is dangerous. If someone dies hardened in unbelief, they cannot blame God. The responsibility lies with the sinner who rejected Christ and refused repentance. Romans 9 does not silence human responsibility; it establishes it within God's sovereignty. And it calls us not to argue with God but to tremble before Him.

Reflection 5: This Doctrine Should Lead Us to Humble Worship and Gratitude

The proper response to the doctrines of election and reprobation is not speculation, fear, or pride but worship. Paul himself ends his discussion of God's sovereign purposes with doxology, not debate.

If this doctrine is rightly understood, it humbles us before God and fills us with thanksgiving.

Our greatest struggle with reprobation is not the question, "Why does God pass over some?" That is not our deepest concern. Our real question is this: Why did God choose us?

Why would God choose a sinner like me—someone who has offended Him, disobeyed Him, and continues to struggle with sin? God knows every sin I have committed and every sin I will still commit. I deserve judgment, not mercy. And yet, He chose me. That is the mystery.

A hymn writer captures it well:

Why have You chosen me out of millions
Your child to be
You know all the wrongs that I have done

Oh how could You pardon me,
forgive my iniquities
To save me give Jesus Your son
I am amazed to know that a God
so great could love me so
Is willing and wanting to bless
His love is so wonderful, His
mercy so bountiful
I can't understand it I confess

I echo that confession. I cannot explain why God would set His love on me. I did nothing to earn it. My salvation rests entirely on God's sovereign mercy. Scripture is clear: "I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy" (Rom. 9:15). God's choice was not based on who I am, what I have done, or what I might do. It was made freely, graciously, and sovereignly from eternity past.

That truth does not puff us up; it brings us low. It silences boasting. It stirs gratitude. And it moves us to worship a God whose mercy is deeper than our sin and whose grace is greater than we can comprehend.

Reflection 6: God's Sovereignty Strengthens (Not Weakens) Prayer

The doctrine of election and reprobation does not cancel the need for prayer. If anything, it reinforces it. A common objection sounds like this: If some are reprobate, why pray for unbelievers at all? Paul himself answers that question, not in theory, but in practice. Immediately after his discussion of election and hardening in Romans 9, Paul writes in Romans 10:1: "Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved."

Paul does not say, "There's no point in praying." He does not retreat into fatalism. He prays earnestly and persistently for the salvation of those who are currently rejecting Christ. That tells us something important: a right understanding

of God's sovereignty fuels prayer rather than extinguishing it. We pray not with hopeless resignation, but with confident expectation because salvation ultimately belongs to the Lord.

If you have unbelieving children or prodigal children, this doctrine should move you to pray more, not less. We bring them to God precisely because He is sovereign. Only He can change hearts. Only the Holy Spirit can grant repentance and faith.

History confirms this. John Knox, who firmly believed in election, famously prayed, "Give me Scotland, or I die." His theology did not produce indifference; rather it produced anguish and intercession. The same should be true of us. Should we not also pray, "Lord, give me my fellow countrymen, or I die"? Look around us. Our nations are steeped in unbelief. People are rushing toward judgment unless God intervenes. If God alone saves, then prayer becomes not optional but urgent.

This doctrine exposes our complacency. Do we truly care about the souls around us: our neighbors, coworkers, employees, and fellow citizens? Or have we used God's sovereignty as an excuse for prayerlessness?

Paul understood election and reprobation better than most, and yet he could still say, "My heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved." That is not a contradiction. It is the fruit of sound doctrine applied with a compassionate heart.

Reflection 7: Reprobation Does Not Cancel Evangelism or the Serious Call of the Gospel

The doctrine of reprobation does not render evangelism pointless, nor does it undermine the serious call of the

gospel. One of the errors of hyper-Calvinism is the claim that the gospel should not be freely offered to all, since not all are elect. According to this view, offering Christ to everyone somehow "wastes" the gospel on the reprobate.

Scripture knows nothing of such reasoning. Paul certainly did not preach that way. He declared openly, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek" (Rom. 1:16). The gospel is to be proclaimed to all people, without distinction.

Yes, God is sovereign in salvation. But Scripture is equally clear: "Come to Me, all *you* who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28), "and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out" (John 6:37). The call of the gospel is sincere, genuine, and universal. We do not preach Christ only to the elect; we preach Christ to sinners, trusting the Holy Spirit to apply His Word according to His eternal purpose.

Now, some tender consciences grow fearful and ask, "What if I am one of the reprobate?" The Canons of Dort wisely address this very concern. Article 16 assures us that those who lack full assurance, yet "seriously desire to be turned to God, to please Him only," who "persist in the use of the means which God hath appointed for working these graces in us," "ought not to be alarmed at the mention of reprobation, nor to rank themselves among the reprobate." God has promised that He will not break the bruised reed or quench the smoking flax. Those who long for grace, though weak in faith, are not the objects of terror in this doctrine. Reprobation is terrifying only to those who remain hardened—those who live carelessly, reject Christ, and persist in unbelief without repentance.

The conclusion is simple and pastoral: do not fixate on reprobation. Use the means of grace. Hear the gospel. Repent of sin. Believe in Christ. The promise stands firm: whoever comes to Him in faith will be saved.

In the end, the doctrine of election and reprobation does not distract us from the cross; it drives us back to it. The gospel remains the beautiful, powerful message of salvation for all who will receive it.

Conclusion

The doctrine of election and reprobation confronts us with the greatness of God and the smallness of man. It reminds us that salvation is not engineered by human will or effort, but flows from God's eternal mercy and righteous judgment. Where Scripture speaks, we must listen. Where Scripture is silent, we must be content.

Handled rightly, this doctrine does not lead us away from Christ; it drives us to Him. It humbles us in worship, strengthens us in prayer, compels us in evangelism, and comforts tender consciences with the promises of the gospel.

Dr. Brian Najapfour

is a Filipino-born American pastor who has served in gospel ministry since 2001. He has pastored churches in the Philippines and the United States and currently serves as pastor of Heritage Reformed Congregation in Jordan, Ontario, Canada. He is the author and coeditor of numerous books and has contributed articles to journals, periodicals, and encyclopedias. He has authored *Reformed Fellowship's A Hearer of God's Word* and *The Gospel Driven Tongue*, and has co-edited *Embracing God's Gift of Sexuality and Mental Health & Soul Care*. He and his wife, Sarah, have five children.



How the Gospel Transforms Parenting (1)



Mrs. Elisabeth Bloechl

The Gospel

When we become parents, there is much to learn and do at every stage. It can be overwhelming. However, to parent well, there is one thing that is really needful: the gospel. *Of central importance in parenting is believing and living out of the gospel.*

We all know what the gospel is, but it's good to be reminded. The gospel is the good, rather, the best news that though we are utterly sinful—dead in our sin—Jesus lived the life we couldn't and died the death we deserve that we who have received the gift of faith and a repentant heart may know the incomparable riches of God's grace both now and for eternity (Eph. 2:1–10). It is the good news that while sin has tainted our parenting, Christ forgives us. It is the astonishing truth that, for those who believe, our disobedience as parents is replaced

with Christ's obedience on our behalf.

This good news, embraced and lived out, transforms our parenting through the right attitude toward our sin and deeper understanding of and appreciation for God's grace.

Our Sin, God's Grace

Raising children has a way of revealing our sin very effectively and poignantly. We are often tempted to respond to the revelation of our sin in one of three ways: despair, deny, or do better. Let's consider how each of these faulty responses may manifest.

First, despair. "I will never be able to control my temper. It's no use trying." "My anxiety over my child's safety will always get the best of me. I will always be a worry wart." When we think like this, falling prey to despair, we are

effectively denying God's promise to complete the work of sanctification He started in us—which includes sanctifying our parenting (see Phil. 1:6). Instead, we are identifying ourselves, not first and foremost as new creatures in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17), but as our sin. I *am* an angry person. I *am* a worry wart. (Versus, I am a child of God who struggles with anger.) This response leads to a feeling of helplessness and more despair which leads us to more easily give into our sins. Burdened with guilt, we may end up denying our sin all together.

"Yes, I raised my voice at my daughter, but I would hardly call it yelling." "It's not my fault that I have been crabby with the kids today, the baby kept me up half the night." When we call our sin something it is not (or lessen it), we are deceiving ourselves and justifying our sinful behavior. We are either saying that our sin is not our fault but the result of some external force acting upon us, or that what God calls sin is not sin but something else (e.g., a mistake). But James says clearly that our sins originate from within, from *our own* sinful desires (James 1:13–14). And John tells us that those who call what is sin, not sin, deceive themselves (1 John 1:8). When we realize we are deceiving ourselves, we may swing back to despair, or we may try to do better.

"I wasted the afternoon watching Netflix again instead of reading to the kids like I had planned. Tomorrow I am going to reset my screen time limit and ask my kids to remind me to read to them." "I have been so inconsistent with disciplining my kids. I am going to have my husband check in with me every day to see how I am doing." We have to be careful here. There is nothing nothing wrong with external accountability; in fact, accountability is wise. The trouble is in our motivation and means. The "do better" mentality to which I am referring is that of independent determination. The idea is that if I

try hard enough, I can accomplish anything by sheer grit. The truth is, we are totally dependent on God. We can do nothing apart from His enabling power (Isa. 40:29, Phil. 4:13, WCF XVI.III.). When we forget this, we will forever swing between pride (“See what my hands have done!”) or despair (“I am a failure!”). When we fail again—which we will do—we will either despair of ever doing better, deny the severity of our sin, or keep trying harder.

What can break this cycle of denial, despair, and doing better? What can free us from this body of sin?

The gospel!

The Freedom of the Gospel

The good news of the gospel is that God knew about all of our sins as parents long before we committed them. He is even aware of those sins to which we are blind. He knows far better than we the severity of our sin and the penalty required. That is why He died (Luke 5:32, Rom. 6:23, 1 Pet. 2:24). We need to be rescued from our sin—we are helpless to rescue ourselves (Eph. 2:1)—and Jesus is a great rescuer.

Armed with this truth, we can look at our sins as parents and call them what they are. Rather than deny them in pride or shame, we can accurately name them and repent, knowing that God already knows what they are and deemed them heinous enough to merit the death of His Son. Gloriously, Christ’s blood testifies to His willingness to forgive those who ask (1 John 1:9, Heb. 12:24). This rich forgiveness also frees us from falling into despair over our sins.

The gospel reminds us that God does not turn away from us in repulsion at the sight of our sins. Rather, He moves toward us in love—tenderly washing away our filth and clothing us with the dazzling white garments of Christ’s righteousness (Ezek. 16:1–14). Dressed in our new clothes,

God looks at us and sees not our vileness, but Christ. That does mean He is blind to our indwelling sin and constant battle with the flesh. He is well aware of our present state pre-glorification, so He sent the Holy Spirit to apply Christ’s work to us and to make us look more like the One whose clothes we wear (1 Pet. 1:2, 2 Thess. 2:13, WCF 14.1, 34.3). This means we don’t have to despair that we will be forever enslaved to a besetting sin. Rather, we can rejoice knowing that God has both forgiven that sin and given us the Holy Spirit to more and more root out that sin (WCF 13.3).

At this point, some may object that too much dwelling on our forgiveness and God’s work in us will result in apathy and license. “God is going to forgive me and make me less sinful, so I can do whatever pleases me.” However, the opposite is true. Paul, a blood thirsty man-hunter, knew the magnitude of His sin and Christ’s forgiveness. His response was a joyful slavery to Christ. Christ had given His all for Paul; how could Paul not then give his all to his Lord? (See Rom. 1:1, 12:1, Phil. 2.) The Heidelberg Catechism puts it this way.

Q: Since we have been delivered from our misery by grace alone through Christ, without any merit of our own, why must we yet do good works?

A: Because Christ, having redeemed us by his blood, also renews us by his Holy Spirit to be his image, so that with our whole life we may show ourselves thankful to God for his benefits, and he may be praised by us.

The natural and proper response to the gospel is a life of grateful service to Christ. It is a life of doing the good works God has already prepared for us (Eph. 2:10)—not out of fear, pride, or to earn God’s favor, but because of the deep love for Him who first loved us (1 John 4:19).

How does all of this play out in our parenting?

The Gospel and Our Parenting

There are many ways living out of the gospel transforms our parenting. I will touch on three here and in the following article, discuss others.

First, we find ourselves thankful for the task God has given us as parents. We stop seeing parenting as a burden too heavy to bear or a reminder that we are failures, and start seeing it as a good gift from a loving Father. By implication, our children are also a gift.

Second, knowing our utter dependence on God, we will grow in prayer. We need God’s guidance, wisdom, and grace. We cannot undertake this endeavor alone. We must pray for and through every aspect of parenting from how to discipline, to what to say when our rebellious teenager comes home past curfew, to whether to homeschool or send our children to school.

Third, our focus will shift from ourselves to Christ. We know that apart from Him our best deeds in raising our kids are filthy rags. But Christ redeems our works, making them a pleasing aroma to Christ. Knowing that, we parent from a place of resting in Christ. We serve God and our children in confidence that even though our efforts are poor, meager, and mixed with sin, they are acceptable to God. He has prepared this good work of parenting for us and He will both accept and purify this work (Eph. 2:10).

So let’s press on in the good work God has set before us, knowing that God loves and forgives us—and that He has extended that love to our children (but more on that in the next article).

Mrs. Elisabeth Bloechl

is a pastor’s wife and homeschooling mom living in Minnesota.

Family Tree Gospel



Rev. Peter **Holtvlüwer**

Meditation text: Genesis 5

Suggested reading: Luke 3:23–38

What do we do with this long list of names and dates in Genesis 5? It seems awfully dry and dusty, of little concern to Christians today. We know next to nothing about most of these people, so why does Moses interrupt his story to give us a family tree? Why don't we skip over it and read something that relates to the Lord Jesus and our Christian faith?

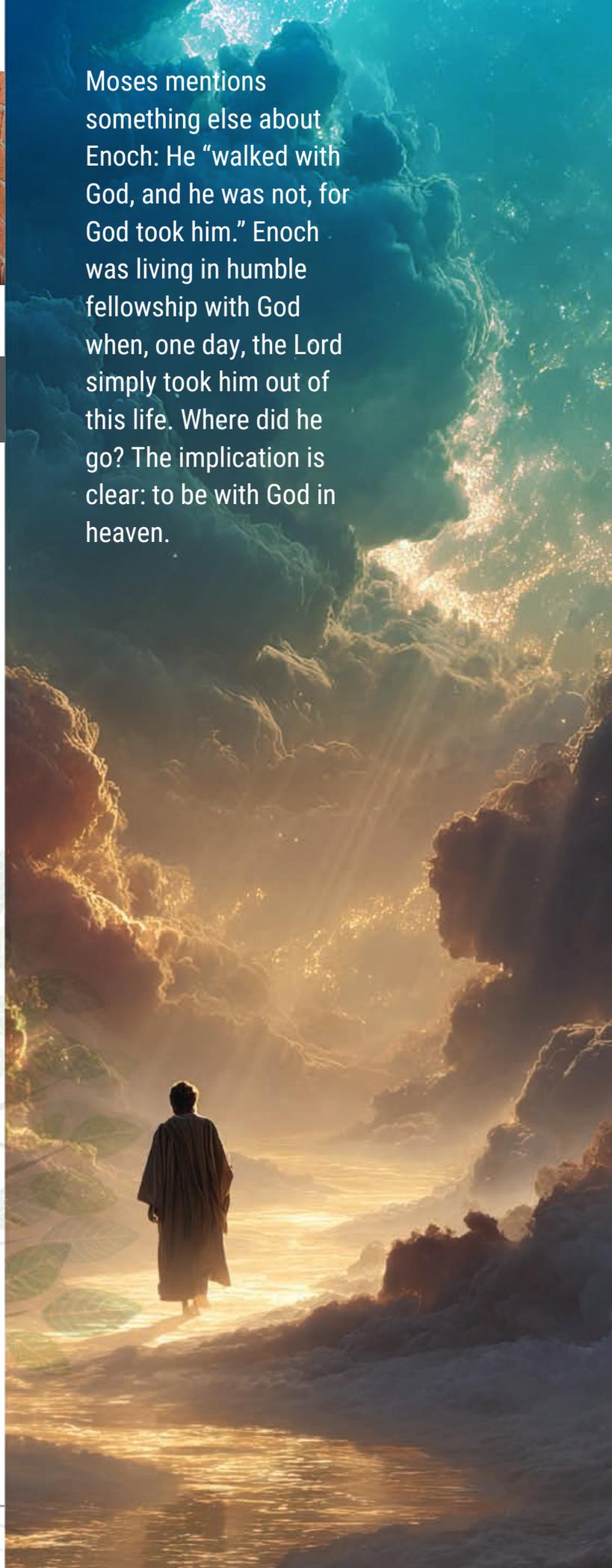
Because this family tree is, in fact, Jesus' family tree! Luke highlights this point by tracing the lineage of Christ all the way back through Noah, Methusaleh, Jared, and Seth to Adam (Luke 3:36–38). And anything about Jesus is always relevant for us. It turns out that Genesis isn't interrupted by genealogies like this but is rather built on them. The Holy Spirit uses family trees to showcase how God keeps His covenant promises through the generations.

Ten Accounts

Moses introduces us to the book of the “generations of” Adam. This expression occurs throughout Genesis and regularly introduces the record of a particular father and a line of sons descended from him down through the generations. Across the fifty chapters of Genesis, we find ten of these accounts¹ and together they form the book's backbone. Instead of interrupting the narrative, each family tree is the basis for the stories which follow. You can't understand Genesis without understanding these genealogies.

Just like the later accounts of Shem, Terah, Isaac, and Jacob, Adam's family tree through Seth moves consecutively from one generation to the next without gaps. Elsewhere in Scripture

Moses mentions something else about Enoch: He “walked with God, and he was not, for God took him.” Enoch was living in humble fellowship with God when, one day, the Lord simply took him out of this life. Where did he go? The implication is clear: to be with God in heaven.



certain genealogies leave out generations (see Matt. 1), but not here. This record provides specific numbers and closed figures for the birth and death of each father of a generation. It is meant to be taken as the linear, historical progression of human history through the first ten generations of the seed of the woman, a period of approximately 1,650 years.

Now, before Moses launches into Seth's lineage, he pauses to recall God's special creation of man: "When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God. Male and female he created them, and he blessed them and named them Man when they were created" (5:1–2; see also 1:26–28). Coming on the heels of the story of Cain and Abel (ch. 4), this is a reminder that the wickedness of Cain and his descendants was not how the Creator made things. The image of God in man had been shattered in Adam's rebellion. This leaves the reader with questions: what about Seth, the other son of Adam whom God had given in the place of Abel (4:25)? And what happened to God's original blessing over man and His gracious promise to provide a Savior (3:15)?

Contrasting family histories

The opening line of the genealogy is discouraging at first: "When Adam had lived 130 years, he fathered a son in his own likeness, after his image, and named him Seth" (5:3). Notice the contrast here with verse 1. In the beginning, God had created man *in the image of God* but now man is generating offspring *in the image of man*—and those two are no longer the same! Ever since man's revolt in Paradise, the image of God in mankind had become permanently corrupted and now every child descended from Adam is made in sinful man's image (see Job 14:4).

Is there nothing left, then, of God's covenant of love with man? Is there

only increasing rebellion like in the line of Cain and expectation of punishment for man? This is where the family tree of Genesis 5 comes in for it provides a gospel contrast to Cain and his ungodly seed. While Cain arrogantly talks back to God, Seth is quiet and faithful. While Cain's sons build up their reputation with their big farms, big bands, and big factories (see 4:20–22), Seth's sons are known for beginning to publicly gather to worship the Lord (4:26). Seth's sons are not conquering the world in their own strength for their own glory, but they are humbly working and living while waiting upon the Lord. Cain's progeny and Seth's offspring represent the two lines within the human race, two approaches to life: faith versus unbelief.

What eventually happens to Cain's line? Some 1,500 years later, it is completely wiped out in the flood! Only Seth's godly line continues on—quietly and even in great weakness, as chapter 6 will show, but nevertheless it survives by grace. God brings forth generation after generation as He marches history toward the time of the Savior's arrival—the Savior who will renew in man the very image we corrupted in the beginning.

Isn't that what the Lord Jesus does in us? Having removed our guilt by His death, He sends His Spirit to dwell in our hearts to make us act more like our Father in heaven. Paul writes, "Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge *after the image of its Creator*" (Col. 3:9, italics mine). Do you feel that renewal taking place in your life? Pray for that and yearn for that! As believers, we may lean upon God's promise to renew our hearts and minds so that we will never follow the way of Cain but rather walk in the way of Enoch.

Walking with God

Enoch stands out in this family tree. When you look at the whole list of names, there is a very regular, almost business-like description of each generation. "When Seth had lived 105 years, he fathered Enosh. Seth lived after he fathered Enosh 807 years and had other sons and daughters. Thus all the days of Seth were 912 years, and he died" (5:6–8). Change names and year count and repeat—until you come to Enoch.

God causes Enoch to be born precisely in the seventh generation (affirmed in the New Testament in Jude 14). Who was Enoch's counterpart in the seventh generation of Cain? No one less than boastful Lamech (4:18)! The Holy Spirit is inviting us to compare the two lines: Cain's line grows in its wickedness until it bursts out in Lamech's prideful song of vengeance (4:23–24), whereas Seth's line continues in humility so that of Enoch it is simply said that he "walked with God" (5:22). Everywhere else in this list, we read that the father "lived" so many years, but only here do we find that a man "walked with God." This is God's answer to the arrogant seed of the serpent in Lamech.

To "walk" is a description of someone's way of life. Genesis 4 taught us that there are only two kinds of people: those who walk with Satan and reflect his character, or those who walk with God and reflect His character. The line of Cain was living godlessly and reveling in their self-promotion. Though physically alive, they were in fact spiritually dead (see Eph. 2:1–3). To have breath, health, a job, friendships, a spouse, and lots of pleasure is not living unless you are doing all these things as part of serving the Lord, walking with your hand in His. Is that what you and I are doing?

By God's grace, Seth and his

children all the way down to Enoch walked with the Lord. At the very same time that Lamech was excelling in rebellion, Enoch was excelling in righteousness. Do you see in him a picture of the Lord Jesus Christ? Like Enoch, Christ came into the world at a very dark time where rebellion against God was rampant everywhere, even among His covenant children. Scripture says that the Son of God came to His own but His own did not receive Him (John 1:11). Yet, He came anyway, the light of the world, born in the line of Seth, walking with God in a way far superior to that of Enoch—without sin, flawless and acceptable to God His Father! So spotless and complete was this obedience of the second Adam—even to death on a cross—that the Father was willing to accept it on our behalf and treat us as if we had never sinned ourselves (2 Cor. 5:21). What a miracle!

Taken unto God

But Moses mentions something else about Enoch: He “walked with God, and he was not, for God took him” (5:24). Enoch was living in humble fellowship with God when, one day, the Lord simply took him out of this life (see Heb. 11:5). Where did he go? The implication is clear: to be with God in heaven. It’s the same

expression used later to describe Elijah’s departure from Elisha in the fiery chariot of God—God took Elijah (2 Kings 2:11). It’s the first subtle but unmistakable assurance in Scripture that beyond this toilsome sin-ruined life is a life apart from curse and shame and suffering—a life in God’s presence. Death is not the end. All who place their trust in God’s promised Seed of the woman, Jesus Christ, and walk with Him like Enoch did in His covenant of love, pass on to the life above!

Did you notice the timing of this marvellous sign? When you tally the dates of this family tree, you see that Adam lived all the way until the birth of Noah’s father, Lamech (5:25), so he was alive for most of Enoch’s life. But eventually, after 930 years, it came time for Adam to die (5:5)—the first man and father of all humans. Can you imagine the tremendous grief that would have set in to those first seven generations of the seed of the woman? Apart from Abel early on, no other patriarch had yet died. What a profound disturbance Adam’s demise must have caused, what sorrow and even fear—is this the fate of all of us? Is this what trusting in Yahweh’s promises will bring—a stone-cold death? The total end of life?

It’s in that setting that God shines

forth more grace by doing something special with Enoch, who everyone knew walked with God. Instead of letting him die the way Adam had, the Lord simply removed him from earth into the glory of His company—without suffering! It was a message of good news: death will not have the last word. Yes, Adam had died, but, because he too trusted in God’s promise, we know he hasn’t ceased to exist altogether—he is alive where Enoch is! Walking with God on the earth leads to walking with God in heaven.

With every generation in Seth’s line, God was keeping His covenant promise to Adam. Enoch’s ascension was a foreshadowing of Christ’s ascension, a sure sign that death will one day be vanquished forever and covenant fellowship between God and His people will no never be interrupted.

Isn’t it amazing what you can find in a family tree? Come, Lord Jesus, Maranatha!

1. Starting in Genesis 2:4 and ending in 37:2.

Rev. Peter H. Holtvlüwer

is minister of Ancaster Canadian Reformed Church (ON) and editor of *Christ’s Psalms, Our Psalms*.

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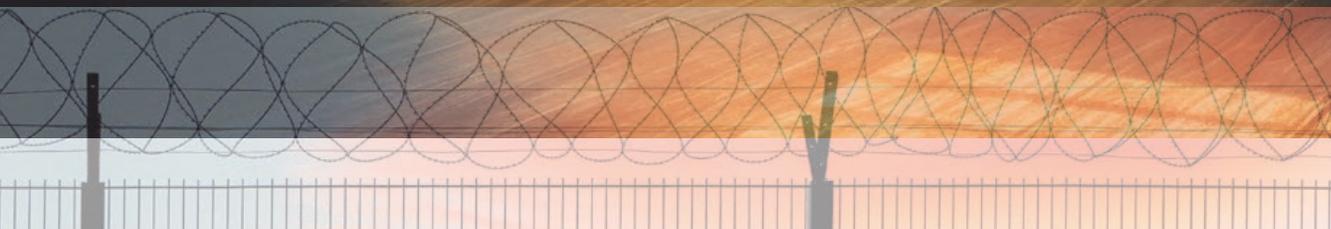


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Divine

PROVIDENCE

(3)



Mr. Daniel Olaska

Providence Article 3 of 6

Joseph, Pharaoh and God's Providence Over Human Decisions and Actions

In the first two articles, I examined what we mean when we speak of divine providence and how God providentially preserves and governs nature. These aspects of providence are relatively easy for most people to accept and understand; for the most part, they are abstractions. However, God's providence is not abstract. He governs and preserves all of His creation at all times. In this article, I will look at two examples of God's providence over human decisions and actions, specifically in the stories of Joseph and Pharaoh.

When I was young, my parents took my sister and me to see a performance of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* starring Donny Osmond at the Chicago Theatre. The musical dramatization was mostly faithful to the Biblical account, but I'm not interested here in conducting a theological critique of Broadway shows. The show ignited my young imagination. I put myself in the place of Joseph. Let me tell you, nine-year-old me would NOT have been as understanding of his brothers as Joseph was. The difference was that Joseph understood and trusted in God's providence. Praise God: I've come a long way in the last thirty-one years!

God Intending Joseph's Incarceration for Good

Genesis 50:15–21, particularly verse 20, provides one of the clearest statements on providence in the entire Bible. In this passage, Jacob is recently dead and Joseph's brothers fear that he will now use the opportunity to punish them for their crimes against him. The brothers' guilt has been eating away at them for a long time. They can't imagine (despite years of kind treatment from Joseph) that their brother could possibly have truly and fully forgiven them for selling him into slavery. The brothers are thinking from a worldly perspective.

Joseph, on the other hand, is (and has been, throughout his ordeal) looking at the situation through the perspective of faith. Joseph knew and believed several things. First, he knew God was good. Next, he knew that God loved him. Finally, he knew God was in control. Although it would be thousands of years until the Apostle Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, would write the Epistle to the Romans, Joseph knew: “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose” (Rom. 8:28).

This comforting faith not only allowed Joseph to endure all the gross evil perpetrated against him, but to thrive throughout, and to say honestly: “Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today” (Gen. 50: 19b–20).

The implications of this statement (which is inspired, as it appears in the Word of God) are astonishing. I will focus only on the providential implication, but this passage is as theologically rich as they come. The providential implication is this: for the brothers to “mean” it for evil, and for God to “mean” it for good, demands that the brothers and God had agency in the events. I cannot “mean” anything in another’s actions; I can only “mean” my own actions. For example: if my sister throws a birthday party for her son (without any input or help from me) and I say that I meant it for his enjoyment, that statement would be preposterous. Now, if she says that she meant it for his enjoyment, the statement is right and sensible.

For God to take responsibility for sending Joseph into Egypt as a slave (and prison and the heights of political power), which is precisely

what He does by including this statement in the Bible, He must have actually had responsibility. Of course, the brothers had responsibility as well. The sinfulness was theirs and theirs alone. The brothers and God had agency, but the difference is that of intent. The brothers intended it for evil, but God intended it for good. God providentially brought all that happened in Joseph’s life to pass, using the actions and decisions of people. Many of those decisions and actions were sinful, but God did not sin; indeed, He cannot. God’s intent in everything was pure and good, and Joseph knew this. That allowed him to trust in God even in circumstances which seemed unjust and evil. God was working for his good—and not Joseph’s alone, but that of a great multitude.

We can’t possibly know all that God accomplishes in any given action; our perspective is far too limited. For example, Judah and his children were some of those who survived because Joseph prepared Egypt for the famine. What would happen to the line of Christ if Judah and his children starved and died? My great-grandmother loved to crochet. From the back, crochet looks like a nonsense-tangle of thread, but from the front it makes a beautiful picture. In this life, we see things from the back of the crochet (metaphorically) but God sees the pattern which He is masterfully weaving. Faith allows us to trust in the master Artist as He works, even when we can’t see or make sense of the tangle. This is the faith that sustained Joseph.

The question is: was God’s control in Joseph’s situation normal or an exception to His usual operation? In answer I appeal again to Romans 8:28: “And we know that all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose.” God’s providence is comprehensive; however, providence does not eliminate personal

responsibility on man’s part. Joseph acknowledged this with the statement: “you meant it for evil.”

God Hardening Pharaoh’s Heart

Another excellent example of simultaneous agency (God and man) which also highlights personal responsibility is the matter of the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart in Exodus. In the book of Exodus, there are twenty references to the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart between chapters 4 and 14. In half of the references, the Lord is the subject; in the other half, Pharaoh is the subject. But in all cases, Pharaoh’s heart is the object. To be totally accurate, in 6 of 10 instances where Pharaoh seems to be the subject, actually, it is his heart that is the subject.

The first mention of Pharaoh’s heart is in 4:21: “And the LORD said to Moses, ‘When you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles that I have put in your power. But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go.’” There can be no doubt that God is the One who will harden Pharaoh’s heart; however, it is important to note that the hardening is still in the future tense in this passage. The same is true of the second instance in 7:3.

It is not until Exodus 7:13 that Pharaoh’s heart actually hardens for the first time: “Still Pharaoh’s heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the LORD had said.” This is one of the instances where Pharaoh’s heart is the subject. Direct attribution isn’t given in this verse regarding who does the hardening, since it’s Pharaoh’s heart; it’s often attributed to Pharaoh. However, seeing as the end of the verse reads, “as the LORD had said,” we must consider what was said: “I will harden his heart” (4:21), and “I will harden Pharaoh’s heart” (7:3). Therefore, if the hardening that actually occurs in 7:13 is “as the

LORD said,” then it He who hardens. The passive tense, as seen here, often indicates divine agency.

The fourth instance immediately follows the third. God directly addresses Moses in 7:14 with a simple statement of fact: “Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Pharaoh’s heart is hardened; he refuses to let the people go’ (7:14). If any attribution of hardening is present, it’s not direct; rather, it is inferred through “he refuses” that it belongs to Pharaoh. However, this could also be a simple statement of fact rather than attribution of agency. The same issues are present in the fifth instance (7:22) where Pharaoh’s heart merely “remains hardened.”

The sixth instance is the first time attribution is unambiguously given to Pharaoh regarding hardening. “But when Pharaoh saw that there was a respite, he hardened his heart and would not listen to them, as the LORD had said” (8:15). Pharaoh is clearly the agent here. However, notice that even here it is “as the LORD had said.”

In the seventh instance, the hardening is once again ambiguous; however, Pharaoh exhibits agency. “Then the magicians said to Pharaoh, ‘This is the finger of God.’ But pharaoh’s heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the LORD had said” (8:19). Here we have a simple statement of fact: “Pharaoh’s heart was hardened.” Also, Pharaoh exhibits agency: “he would not listen.” Finally, all is “as the LORD had said.”

The eighth instance unambiguously attributes hardening to Pharaoh. “But Pharaoh hardened his heart this time also, and did not let the people go” (8:32). This verse mentions “also,” implying that at least one of the previous hardenings was Pharaoh’s agency.

In the ninth instance, the subject is Pharaoh’s heart rather than Pharaoh

Sinfulness is an attribute of creatures alone, not the perfect God. It is similarly evident that humans are held responsible for their actions; therefore, those actions are truly their own.

himself: “But the heart of Pharaoh was hardened” (9:7b). This could be a simple statement of the state of Pharaoh’s heart or could attribute the hardening to Pharaoh himself.

In the tenth instance, the LORD is the subject and it is quite clear that it is by His agency that Pharaoh’s heart is hardened. “But the LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh” (9:12a).

In the second half of the instances, the Lord is overwhelmingly the agent behind Pharaoh’s heart hardening (see instances 14, 15, 16, 18, 19, and 20 [10:20, 10:27, 11:10, 14:4, 14:8, and 14:17, respectively]). Pharaoh is the subject and the agent in two of the instances in the second half: instances 11 and 17 (9:34 and 13:15, respectively). Finally, in one instance in the second half, Pharaoh’s heart is the subject rather than the object: instance 12 (9:35). As in the other instances where Pharaoh’s heart is the subject, this instance can be read as simply a statement of the state of Pharaoh’s heart rather than attributing agency behind that hardening.

It is evident in these passages, and throughout the Bible, that God is in control, even of human actions, even those which are sinful. God, however, cannot sin and is not the author of sin. Sinfulness is an attribute of creatures alone, not the perfect God. It is similarly evident

that humans are held responsible for their actions; therefore, those actions are truly their own.

How are both of these things possible simultaneously? If I knew how God controlled things using humans’ real decisions, I would be God, and I most certainly am not! This belongs to what we would call the deep things of God, and is as far above our ways as the heavens are above the earth. I may not be able to understand how God is able to do this, yet I am content to know that God is able, and that both these states are true simultaneously. Praise God that His ways are far above our ways!

With David I praise God in acknowledging, “I cry out to God Most High, to God *who fulfills his purpose for me*.... Be exalted, O God, above the heavens! Let your glory be over all the earth!” (Ps. 57:2, 11, emphasis mine).

Mr. Daniel Olaska

is an inmate at Danville Correctional Center, IL., where he is a student in the Divine Hope Reformed Bible Seminary. Mr. Olaska receives a subscription to *The Outlook* through Reformed Fellowship’s prison ministry fund.



I LOVE THEY WORD O GOD



Mr. Robert **Heitbrink**

The only thing I love more than the Word of God is my relationship with it's Author. It was through His Word that the Lord brought about my conversion. I was born again while poring over Holy Scripture. God truly used the Bible to save and change my life.

My conversion occurred in 2013. I was on house arrest, awaiting trial, and looking down the barrel of a 20–60 year prison sentence to be served at 100%. On my knees and on my face, I cried out to God. The Holy Spirit opened my eyes to the truth found in God's Word, and my life would never be the same again. My Heavenly Father heard and answered my desperate plea. I was miraculously given understanding. My desires changed; He gave me an unquenchable desire to know Him.

The Word of God has been a mighty bulwark in my life ever since.

There is a common and erroneous misconception about those who come to our Redeemer in conjunction with a lengthy prison term. I have heard it described something like this: "He saw the light from the flash of the judge's gavel." The implication is that the person "found God" only because he found himself in dire circumstances. Although I have never had anyone direct this type of foolishness toward

me, I have heard it said about other fellow incarcerated brethren. To make this charge is simple ignorance of the way of the Lord as given to us in His Word. The biblical fact of the matter is that no one "finds" God. He pursues and converts His elect in His own perfect manner and timing. The natural man is blind to the supernatural, completely incapable of understanding these things.

I knew an old saint at another IDOC facility who described his pre-conversion condition like this: he attended church regularly and even walked the aisle at a Billy Graham crusade years ago, but knew he was "headed to hell wearing gasoline drawers." This description always stuck in my mind, a frightening thought indeed.

What's missing here is a basic knowledge of God's precious Word. You must be drawn to come before the Almighty Creator of all things. This must be done in full humility and with a contrite heart. You must fully surrender your life to God the Son, Jesus Christ. Our God hates proud arrogance. An elect believer wants to please his Master.

Many times, a tragic event in one's life, like a long prison term, is the extreme method that God will use to gather His straying sheep. Nothing humbles the proud like half-stepping it from the county jail to a packed courthouse while wearing black and white stripes, with your hands chained to your waist and your feet shackled. Meanwhile, representatives from every local newspaper and TV station line the sidewalk to capture the moment on video and in photos. It's not about where you are now or what got you to this lowly position, but where you go from here. The question is whether or not you will cling to the only One who can and will help you.

The Lord changed my heart and my desire turned to Him, knowing Him through His precious Word. He softened my heart, making it fertile ground that is able to receive the truth of His Word. I was by no means aware that this miraculous transaction had been foreordained by God before the foundation of the world. I had no clue that God had long before graciously chosen me as His own possession. This wonderful truth would be revealed to me much later.

I was consumed with the Word of God. All I wanted to do was read, study, and learn about the One who pulled me from the pit I was in. Everything else that previously entertained me was now a waste of time. At every step of the pretrial and trial process, God's Word gave me strength. The Bible became my anchor. I was blessed with a

noticeable fortitude that wasn't within me before. A particular verse that I latched onto for comfort in a very uncomfortable situation was Psalm 62:1-2 (NIV): "My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from Him. He alone is my Rock and my salvation; He is my Fortress, I will not be shaken." These verses became my mantra; I spoke them over and over every time I drove to the courthouse.

After my trial and conviction, I was eventually sent to Stateville Penitentiary in NE Illinois. I had never spent a second in any form of jail and was now headed to infamous Stateville, one of Illinois' three maximum security prisons. I was assigned to the worst cell house in the state, a roundhouse called F-house. I had never spent a minute behind bars in my life, and here I was in the "valley of the shadow of death." My Shepherd was with me; I was not afraid. His presence was literally with me everyday; I could feel it. I believe those around me could sense it as well. The hedge of protection of Almighty God surrounded me every step of the way. I had a surreal joy in the belly of the beast; it was indescribable. In Isaiah 41:10 (ESV) God says, "Fear not, for I am with you"; I believed Him. He was with me, and He never left for even a second. "I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." God had prepared me for this very time. He filled me with supernatural strength. The Lord has upheld me through every piece of this difficult journey; He has never stopped guarding me.

God's Word has been an integral part of every day of my life for the past twelve years. At the beginning of these years, I absorbed everything I could get my hands on that pertained to God and His Word. I read a plethora of Christian books and even spent a lot of time watching Christian TV. This source of "milk" was soon replaced with a need for "meat." I

turned to the internet and watched hundreds of hours of online sermons. John MacArthur taught me much. The content I was finding online was more biblically sound than that on TV. Time spent reading or watching anything else was wasted time. I still feel this way.

The fire inside of me for the Word of God still burns strong. Too much time in Christian books or other resources seems like I'm cheating myself out of time I could be in the Word. Through prayer, Bible study, and meditation, I find the counsel of God. The answers are always there. There is great peace to be found in the pages of the Bible. I pray for peace very often; the life of a prisoner requires much added daily peace. God provides this for those who live life in His Word.

Incarceration brings a unique set of daily challenges. Basic needs and conveniences that don't even cross your mind in the free world gain great importance when locked up. These peculiar circumstances require an enormous amount of peace, strength, and patience. I find all of these in God's perfect Word. I often think about guys in here who don't know God; I'm surrounded by them every day. They can be found on both sides of the fence. Some reject all ideas of God, many others follow false gods. I do reach out; it is a sad situation. I can't begin to fathom what my life would be these past twelve years without Him and the precious gift of His Word. I lean heavily on this constantly. I give heartfelt thanks every day that He changed my heart and saved me from what I was prior to 2013.

The Bible has and still does get me through difficult times. When I am down for any number of reasons, I often go to the Psalms. I always find peace and joy in this great book. To see the terrible trials the great King David went through, and he still

clung to his God, inspires me to do the same.

I have been in a handful of particularly unpleasant situations during my time in the IDOC. I always, every time, eventually see the hand of God in them. Many times, this is not evident until I am released or delivered from the given situation. Our Lord is sovereign over all things. His providence in my life gives me immense comfort. Knowing His mighty hand is on every aspect of my existence is a gift. This is clearly taught all through Scripture. Difficult trials, inside and outside, last as long as He desires them to. He places us where He wills to fulfill His purposes. Looking back, His grace is always apparent. I tend to go deeper and longer into His Word in difficult times, as any disciple of Christ would and should. I believe this is part of His purpose and design: to draw us close, make us cling tighter to Him, like King David.

Through every tribulation of the past twelve years, severe or not so severe, God's Word has been a truthful, rock-solid fortress in my life. There is always something negative going on or about to go on in a prison environment. The Lord is my Strong

Tower, and His Word is where I find Him. I find solace in the Word of God no matter what is happening around me.

As Christian men in prison, we are sojourners in this mess. We must stick together. We must always gather together to study God's Word. This is a beautiful thing that is tried and true: God's people always come together. Many times on a new cell house wing, I have sat at a table with an open Bible. Brothers always show up. Often, a new Bible study group is born. At a previous institution, prayer circles on the yard would be 10-25 men strong, every time. We gathered for prayer first, and then worked out after. God's Word cannot be diverted or denied on either side of the fence (or wall).

The Lord has given me the gift of a burning desire to know Him more through His Word. The Holy Spirit has illuminated my mind and opened my eyes to begin to understand the truth of His Word. He has placed me in a position to expand my knowledge of Him and His Holy Word. He has afforded me many opportunities to help and encourage other brothers in their walk with Him. I am in a medium

security prison in the Illinois Department of Corrections and am able to be a full-time seminary student at Divine Hope Reformed Bible Seminary. I thank God every day for this unique and fulfilling privilege. I am grateful for the professors He has given us. These brilliant and tirelessly dedicated men of God are here every week to convey their vast knowledge to us, God's sheep on the inside. I am also thankful for the Church of God, and her generous and loving congregations who make this program possible. God has truly blessed us here at the Danville Correctional Center. I speak for my brethren and fellow seminarians in heartfelt thanks to our Triune God for this priceless gift.

Mr. Robert Heitbrink

previously served time at Stateville Penitentiary, a maximum-security prison, before being transferred to Danville. He is currently enrolled as a student at Divine Hope Reformed Bible Seminary, where he deeply loves studying God's Word. Mr. Heitbrink receives *The Outlook* through the generosity of donations received for Reformed Fellowship's Prison Ministry Fund.



We praise and thank God to hear the faithful witness of brothers and sisters behind bars as we see His gospel going into these dark places through *The Outlook* and other materials. Most recently we sent a number of Bible

studies at the request of inmates wishing to deepen their understanding of God's Word. Another inmate has expressed his desire to spiritually lead his family, despite being behind bars, and asked if we could help him do that by sending *The Outlook* to bless his wife and children.

Will you help us reach our funding goal for this year? Reaching those in prison with the gospel and Reformed truth is a great blessing, and we hope you will partake of that joy with us.

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Lord's Day 37: How to Swear Well

Rev. William **Boekestein**



101Q. But may we swear an oath in God's name if we do it reverently?

A. Yes, when the government demands it, or when necessity requires it, in order to maintain and promote truth and trustworthiness for God's glory and our neighbor's good. Such oath-taking is grounded in God's Word and was rightly used by the saints in the Old and New Testaments.

102Q. May we also swear by saints or other created things?

A. No. A legitimate oath is calling upon God as the one who knows my heart to witness to the truth and to punish me if I swear falsely. No created thing is worthy of such honor.

It is hard to imagine a time when promises meant less than they do today. Marriage partners make vows knowing that either spouse can sue for a divorce without cause; there is no longer a marital contract. We're cynical when legal witnesses swear to tell the truth, or when elected officials vow to defend the Constitution. Have we forgotten what God's Word says about oath-taking?

This is the only commandment that the Catechism spreads out over two Lord's Days.¹ Using God's name well is important. But because vows are religious affirmations—pledges taken in God's name—something must also be said about swearing well.² We not only must avoid blaspheming God's

name, but we must also recover the lost discipline of proper swearing.

The Validity of Oath-Taking

The writer to the Hebrews explains why people make oaths. "People swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation" (Heb 6:16). Humans are inherently untrusting and untrustworthy. Our commitments are often warped by ignorance and hindered by impotence. Most of the time, we have to content ourselves with the unreliability of human promises. For example, a lifetime guarantee on a product probably doesn't mean much! But in some matters—like entering into marriage or hearing

testimony in a murder trial—we must gain as much confidence as possible that we are hearing the truth. So we take oaths or swear vows. "The essence of an oath consists of calling upon God as omniscient and almighty."³ When we say, "So help me God," we're seeking God's assistance in telling the truth and invoking His judgment if we fail to do so.

Throughout Scripture, oaths are commanded by God and modeled by godly people. "It is the Lord your God you shall fear. Him you shall serve and by his name you shall swear" (Deut. 6:13; cf. 10:20; Exod. 22:11). Abraham (Gen. 21:24), Jacob (Gen. 31:53), David (1 Sam. 24:21–22; 2 Sam. 3:35; 1 Kings 1:29), Paul (Rom. 1:9; 9:1; 2 Cor. 1:23), and

others all called on God as witness to their truth telling.

Even God takes oaths (Deut. 6:10). Jesus voluntarily accepted the terms of the oath demanded by Pilate and testified that He was “the Christ, the Son of God” (Matt. 26:63–64). God swore that He would bless Abraham, multiplying His “offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore” (Heb. 6:16–19; cf. Gen. 22:17; Ps. 95¹¹, 110:4). God cannot lie. But for our sake, He confirmed His promise with an oath.

We may, and sometimes must, use God’s name to make an oath. But only under certain conditions.

Conditions for Oath-Taking

Oaths must be made in God’s name.

We may not “swear by saints or other created things” (like our own heart or our mother’s grave). Jesus corrected a mistaken notion of oath-taking prevalent in His day. The Jews thought they could avoid taking God’s name in vain swearing by created things. Not so (Matt. 5:33–37). God is the greatest being who can witness to our testimony (Heb. 6:16, 13). He is the only discerner of hearts. He alone can make the future come to pass and punish those who swear falsely. “Only a theist can swear an oath.”⁴ After all, what sense does it make for someone who doesn’t believe in God to swear to tell the truth, “God helping me”?

Oaths must only be made when necessary.

Oaths should be taken “when the government demands it, or when necessity requires it.” So, for most of us oath-taking will be rare. But because oath-takers are calling on God to judge them if they are lying (1 Sam. 14:44), our oaths must “neither be rash, indiscriminate, wanton, or trifling” but must “serve a just need.”⁵

Using the Lord’s name to confirm an insignificant matter makes His name

common. If you always have to say, “I promise,” or “I swear,” you probably aren’t very dependable. Though we rarely bind ourselves to oaths, people should be able to depend on what we say. When Paul was criticized for not keeping a certain plan, he defended himself like this: “When I was planning this, did I do it lightly? . . . [D]o I plan according to the flesh, that with me there should be Yes, Yes, and No, No?” (2 Cor. 1:17 NKJV). Christians are people of our word: we pay our debts, keep our promises, and show ourselves dependable.

Examples of Christian Oath-Taking

Especially in secular states where true vows are used less and less, few Christians will be put under oath. Still, we have important vows to make and keep.

Keep your baptismal vows.

Before the children of believers are able to make their own vows of loyalty to Christ, the parents pledge in God’s name to raise their children in the faith to the utmost of their power. When the minister invokes the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, he impresses upon the parents the seriousness of their vow. Often entire congregations make vows to love, pray for, assist in the Christian nurture of, and encourage covenant children. These vows must be kept at all cost.

Keep your profession of faith vows.

When disciples come to the years of discretion they must, in God’s presence, fulfill the vows made for them in their baptism. “All believers have one common vow which, made in baptism, we confirm . . . by catechism and receiving the Lord’s Supper.” The substance of the vow is that “renouncing Satan, we yield ourselves to God’s service to obey his holy commandments but not to follow the wicked desires of our flesh. This vow, attested by Scripture and

required of all God’s children “is holy and salutary.”⁶ Professing Christians are under oath to follow Jesus.

Keep your marriage vows.

Husbands promise before God to love, honor, and maintain their wives. Wives promise before God to love, honor, and submit to their husbands in all things lawful. Marriage always gets hard. We may feel like quitting. But we didn’t merely make promises to ourselves or to another person; we promised God that we would be faithful. And there are always consequences for vow-breaking.

Keeping our word is a response to God’s grace and proof that grace makes us God-like. The God who cannot lie swears the gospel to us. “We who have fled for refuge” in Jesus “have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us” (Heb. 6:18). In light of God’s sworn mercy, how we swear matters.

This article is part of a series, “Our Life’s Comfort,” which was first published at corechristianity.com on September 15, 2022. <https://corechristianity.com/resources/articles/how-to-swear-well-lords-day-37>

1. In the sixteenth century, the radical Reformers’ refusal to take oaths undermined the judicial system (see Dordrecht Confession of Faith, 1632, art. 15). This is why the Catechism’s authors emphasized their understanding of the biblical teaching on oaths.
2. John Calvin understood the third commandment to be primarily about oath-taking. See his *Institutes*, 2.8.22.
3. *Herman Bavinck, Reformed Ethics*, 206.
4. *Bavinck, Reformed Ethics*, 208.
5. *Calvin, Institutes*, 2.8.27.
6. *Calvin, Institutes*, 4.13.6.

Rev. William Boekestein

is the pastor of Immanuel Fellowship Church in Kalamazoo, MI. He has written several books and numerous articles. He and his wife, Amy, have four children.

Lord's Day 38: You Can Be Freed from Restlessness

Rev. William Boekestein



103Q. What is God's will for you in the fourth commandment?

A. First, that the gospel ministry and schools for it be maintained, and that, especially on the festive day of rest, I diligently attend the assembly of God's people to learn what God's Word teaches, to participate in the sacraments, to pray to the Lord publicly, and to bring Christian offerings for the poor. Second, that every day of my life I rest from my evil ways, let the Lord work in me through his Spirit, and so begin in this life the eternal Sabbath.

Saint Augustine was right to call human hearts restless. That's a sad word. Restless people are constantly active, unable to find peace as a result of anxiety or boredom. Restlessness makes us roam, desire, and covet, but without arriving, achieving, or obtaining (James 4:2).

The fourth commandment can cure restlessness. It offers to focus our labors so that we use our energies profitably every day of the week. And it promises weary, aimless people genuine rest in this life and in the life to come. Truly, the fourth commandment should delight us (Isa. 58:13); it's the first law in the Decalogue that is phrased positively!

The fourth commandment is unique: it teaches God's eternal will through

a form—the Jewish Sabbath—that Christ fulfilled. This is why it can be controversial. We might overemphasize either its old form or its fulfillment in Christ. But here is a good guide: “We are bound to the Sabbath . . . as it respects that which is general, but not . . . that which is particular.”¹ In general, the Sabbath law teaches us how to order our energies for God's glory. In the first three commandments, we learn who to worship, how to worship, and the language of worship. Now we learn the routine of worship. The fourth commandment does not give us a day off from diligence; it focuses our diligence. We strive so that we might rest in God.

Honor God's Day with Diligent Work

Scripture's expectation is that worship is congregational (Ps. 68:26). We must not forsake assembling as the church (Heb. 10:25) but “diligently attend the assembly of God's people.” Here are four reasons to work at assembling.

“To learn what God's word teaches.”

God begins, preserves, continues, and completes His work in us “by the hearing and reading of the gospel, by meditation on it, by its exhortations, threats, and promises.”² The whole congregation must be devoted “to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching” (1 Tim. 4:13).

“To participate in the sacraments.”

“We have in the sacraments another aid to our faith related to the preaching of the gospel.”³ Deliberately failing to use the sacraments is like slapping away the hand that feeds you.

“To pray to the Lord publicly.”

God’s people pray in private. But we also raise our voices “to God with one accord” (Acts 4:24 NKJV). Communal, liturgical prayers “passed on from generation to generation” give “voice to the deepest and holiest promptings of the heart” and can unite God’s people in a common purpose.⁴ Even when only the minister vocalizes prayer, he verbalizes the heart expressions of those gathered.

“To bring Christian offerings for the poor.”

We tithe to show thankfulness to God (Ps. 50:14) and to support the work of the ministry (2 Cor. 9:12). The Lord’s Day is a fitting day to show the obedience of our “confession to the gospel of Christ” through God-honoring generosity (2 Cor. 9:13).

Have you considered how much you might “lose by not regularly attending the assemblies of God’s people”? “The very sermon that we needlessly miss may contain a precious word in season for our souls. The very assembly for prayer and praise from which we stay away may be the very gathering that would have cheered, and established, and quickened our hearts.” To be a growing and prosperous Christian, never be absent from God’s house without good reason.⁵

Because of the importance of gathering, the Catechism begins this lesson in an unexpected way. To profit from gathering as God’s people, we must also maintain “the gospel ministry and schools for it.” Part of why we gather on the Lord’s Day is to institutionally ensure the integrity of pure worship. If the gospel ministry is God’s special means of opening

His kingdom, then the church must prepare, send, and support competent ministers (Rom. 10:15). Something like theological seminaries have always helped commit gospel truth to faithful men who will teach others (2 Tim. 2:2). We honor the Christian Sabbath by insisting on qualified ministers, supporting and praying for good seminaries and students to fill them, and “[providing] honorably for the minister of the Word and his family.”⁶

The fourth commandment calls us to work at worshipping God. But it also calls us to rest.

Honor God’s Day with Diligent Rest

There is a literal, pragmatic kind of rest demanded by the fourth commandment. You cannot honor God if you are working seven days a week. Refusing to take a weekly Sabbath nearly guarantees a godless life.

But the Catechism focuses on another way that the fourth commandment teaches us to rest. “Every day of my life,” God wants me to “rest from my evil ways, let the Lord work in me through his Spirit, and so begin in this life the eternal Sabbath.” The Jewish Sabbath anticipated something more—though not less—than a weekly break from manual labor.

Hebrews 4 uses the language of the fourth commandment to urge us to enter God’s rest. The seventh day of rest and the promised land of rest both illustrate a greater rest. “There remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God” (v. 9). The Sabbath invites us to stop striving according to the flesh and let God work through us. We gain rest by holding fast our confession of faith in Jesus, and confidently drawing “near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (vv. 15–16). The fourth commandment confirms that we can’t work enough to become right with God. We need a mediator, the “great high priest who has passed

through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God” (v. 14).

If we stress the physical rest of the Lord’s Day, we might miss God’s point. The Pharisees argued with Jesus about the Sabbath because they were not resting in God but in their works, including their work of rest. The fourth commandment primarily “represent[ed] to the people of Israel spiritual rest, in which believers ought to lay aside their own works to allow God to work in them.” Becoming godlier means putting to death our own will. The Sabbath law teaches us to “be wholly at rest that God may work in us.” This means “we must yield our will; we must resign our heart; we must give up all our fleshly desires. In short, we must rest from all activities of our own contriving so that . . . we may repose in him.”⁷

The fourth commandment teaches that God liberates His people without their help and sustains them even while they rest. The Lord’s Day is a “festive day of rest” because it helps us get over ourselves and delight in God.

This article is part of a series, “Our Life’s Comfort,” which was first published at corechristianity.com on September 22, 2022. <https://corechristianity.com/resources/articles/you-can-be-freed-from-restlessness-lords-day-38>

1. Ursinus, *Commentary*, 563–64.

2. *Canons of Dort*, 5.14.

3. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.14.1.

4. Abraham Kuyper, *Our Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 36.

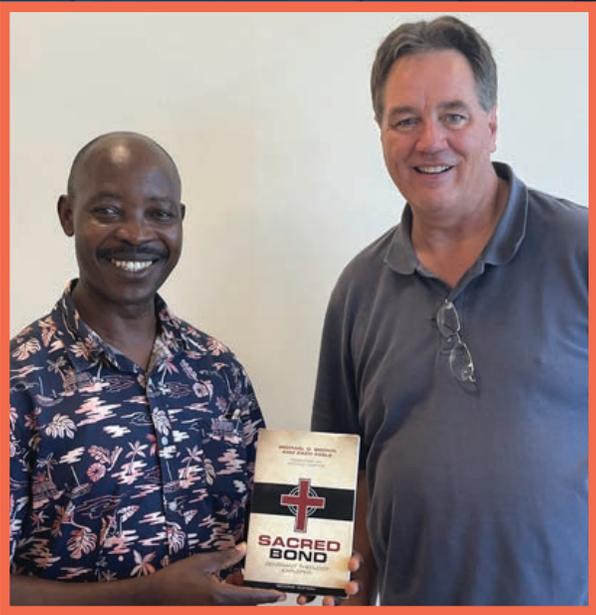
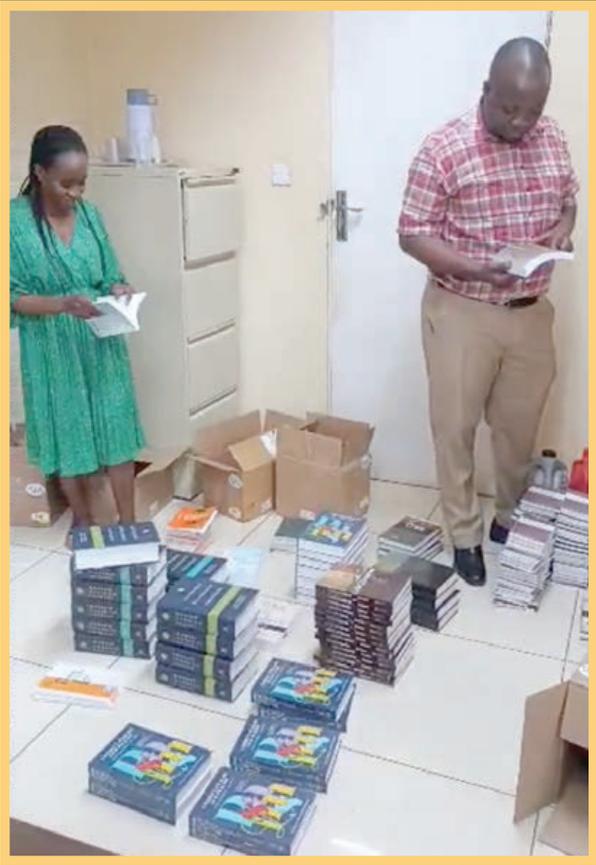
5. J.C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on John*, vol. 3 (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1987), 454–55.

6. *URCNA CO art. 10*, <https://www.urchna.org/church-order>.

7. Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.8.28–29.

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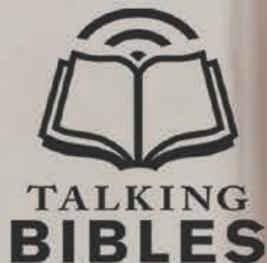
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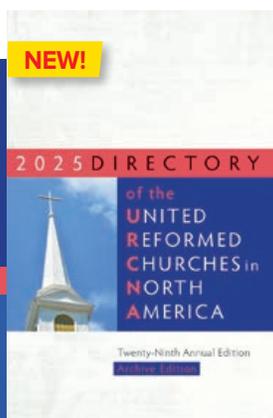
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