What is the second most popular item in the news beside the recent election and its aftermath? Climate change. Climate change is very politicized and fiercely contested. More and more it is a hot button issue that politicians feud over. Recall seeing any of these headlines? “Obama bans new oil drilling in Arctic Ocean,” “Trump nominates climate change skeptic,” “Why is Donald Trump discussing climate change with Al Gore?” “Environmentalist dismay at latest Trump Appointment;” “2016 set to become hottest year on record.” Climate change is not only a local political issue, it is also discussed at an international level, as was seen during fall 2015, when the world watched as its leaders met in Paris at the United Nations Climate Change Conference. Young people also encounter the issue at college. Take a class in any scientific discipline—earth science, biology, ecology, chemistry, or natural resource management—you will hear it brought up.

With all the attention climate change gets, as Christians we sure don’t seem to talk a whole lot about it, at least in my experience. Climate change seems more to be the butt of jokes, rather than a current event that is seriously discussed and addressed from a biblical perspective. What is our response as Christians? Do we have a response? My purpose in writing this column is not so much to convince you either to support or reject the legitimacy of climate change and man’s involvement; I will let the astute reader do his own research and make that decision. My purpose is to point out that there are serious issues brought up in light of climate change that we should be talking about. Climate change and the events surrounding the issue are changing the way the world operates. It behooves us to joke less and seriously discuss more. Our calling as Christians is not to have a knee-jerk reaction to what may seem
like a ridiculous idea on the outside. Whether or not the issue has any legitimacy, we still must have a biblical perspective on it.

This month we will describe briefly what climate change and global warming are and see how the world responds to these issues. There is so much information out there on climate change that it is easy to miss the forest for the trees. There are many arenas in which this issue appears—international and domestic politics, news media, education, social justice campaigns, and scientific literature. Before we form a biblical perspective on the issue (next month), we need to sort through some of these things.

Time for a quick crash course on climate change. We can define climate change simply as a shift in long term (a few decades or more) weather patterns. Global warming refers to a general warming trend in earth's temperature and climate are natural, and the scientific community openly acknowledges these facts. History has recorded global warming events and global cooling events in the past. Two events are the most notable, the Medieval Warm Period (approximately 950–1250) and the Little Ice Age (approximately 1500–1800). So if Earth’s climate has naturally fluctuated in the past with natural global cooling and warming trends, why the great ruckus about climate change and global warming today? The concern is that the natural trend of warming that we are currently experiencing is being accelerated by the activities of man, most notably his consumption of fossil fuels (coal, oil, and natural gas). Fossil fuels, when burned for energy, are pumped into the atmosphere, mostly in the form of carbon dioxide, which contributes to earth’s greenhouse effect. The greenhouse effect is earth’s natural way of preventing large fluctuations in temperature. Greenhouse gases form a layer that works to trap some of the sun’s radiation. Too much of a greenhouse effect would create a global hothouse and too small of a greenhouse effect would usher in another ice age given enough time. The concern today is that we are creating a global hothouse by consuming fossil fuels, which in turn increases the greenhouse effect.

Step back for a moment and consider the care of God for his creatures by way of the greenhouse effect. This layer of gas surrounding earth is all that separates us from the vastness of space—certain death. We see God’s hand in providing this creation of his with a built in mechanism like the greenhouse effect to protect itself, allowing life to thrive on the surface. A term thrown around the scientific community to describe our planet is “Goldilocks planet”—the perfect distance from the sun with the perfect atmospheric composition gives us a planet that is not too hot and not too cold.

Back to the issue at hand. Atmospheric measurements have shown an increase of carbon dioxide since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. Measurements also reveal an increase in temperature following the increase of this greenhouse gas in the atmosphere. These are facts. Now the real question. Is earth’s accelerated warming trend caused by an increase in greenhouse gases from man’s fossil fuel use? It makes sense that it would, and there is more and more data pointing toward this fact. A greater concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere should trap more of the sun’s radiation, warming the planet. However, while according to scientific standards the two measurements are strongly correlated, this does not prove causation. Given the weight of the data, the general consensus of the scientific community is that the natural warming trend we are experiencing has been accelerated by man’s use of fossil fuels.

Whether or not man has accelerated the process, earth’s weather patterns are trending warmer, and there are negative consequences. Sea ice at the poles is melting and glaciers are retreating. This combination is causing the oceans to rise and increase in temperature, disrupting food chains. Low lying islands like the Marshall Islands in the southern Pacific are slowly disappearing. High tides are more of a problem than they were in the past. Oceans are becoming more acidic, leading to the death of coral reefs.

How is the world responding to these issues? First, for better or for worse, more money is being allotted for climate change research. The United States spends about $1 billion each year to fund climate change research efforts in the Arctic and Antarctica.1 More money is also being spent on switching over to cleaner energy sources like wind and solar.

Second, for those that hold to an evolutionary worldview, there is general fear and some overreaction to climate change. Earth must be saved at all costs for the preservation of mankind. Any drastic changes that threaten to destroy life on earth could

And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his leaf in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper.

Psalm 1:3

Interview with Rev. Bernard Woudenberg (1)

It is June 24, 2009, and I am interviewing Rev. Bernard Woudenberg.

Mark H. Hoeksema: I’d like to begin, Rev. Woudenberg, by asking you to tell me when and where you were born.

Rev. Bernard Woudenberg: I was born in Grand Rapids, Michigan, at home (839 Watkins Street SE), on February 16, 1931.

MHH: Can you tell me a little bit about the family into which you were born—your parents, siblings if any, and what your life was like during your childhood?

BW: Well, the one little interesting twist was that my father’s family was living in Patterson. When two of my aunts moved to Grand Rapids to work in Cutlerville at the asylum there [Pine Rest], they went to Eastern Avenue [Christian Reformed] Church, and they told my grandfather about the preaching there. He moved the whole family to Grand Rapids so that

—and beneficial to note that some things are unnecessarily attributed to climate change. For example, one scientific study of the Atlantic cod population in the Gulf of Maine concluded that cold water from ice melt in the Arctic and in Greenland (caused by global warming) has lowered the temperature in the habitat of Atlantic cod. This lower temperature has apparently disrupted the food web and prevented the population from recovering despite strict fishing regulations imposed in 2010. The news media took this study, proclaiming that climate change had caused cod populations to collapse, removing emphasis from the fact that the population had been initially decimated by overfishing in the 20th century.

That is how the world is responding to climate change and global warming, but what about us? As Christians we realize that we are only sojourners on earth. The preservation of our planet is not our only hope. There will be a new creation, a new heaven and a new earth. This biblical perspective does not, however, minimize our responsibility to care for the creation or cause us to avoid the issue of climate change. To that biblical perspective we turn next month.

2 http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/10/booming/biosphere-2-good-science-or-bad-sense.html

he could belong to that church, which was the way the family came into Grand Rapids.

My father was about twenty years old. He met my mother, who was Lucy Hanko, the sister of Rev. C. Hanko. They married in 1924—must have been right around, just before the split took place. I was baptized by Rev. Hoeksema, but I haven’t had that verified. I wish I’d asked my mother that before she died, but I presume that was so. I grew up in First Church.

Now there’s a lot of history that has to do with schooling—Baxter Christian School. I think there were over 50% who were members of the Protestant Reformed Church.

What you might be interested in is I had your father [Homer C. Hoeksema] as a mathematics teacher in the seventh grade (laughter). I used to often walk home with your mother because she lived on Worden Street, so I knew her quite well.

Other than that, it was just a normal education in Baxter School, then to Christian High, and then to Calvin [College]. I graduated from Christian High in 1949. That was just before the split [of 1953 in the Protestant Reformed Churches], when all of the controversy was taking place. I lived very much through it. We were in the middle of it all at that time.

MHH: In what sense do you mean that?

BW: I started college in 1950. At that time we had a group of about 25 kids from our church who went to Calvin College and formed the Protestant Reformed group there—we even had a basketball team of our own. But we were so much involved in the controversy that quite a group of us began at that time to set aside two hours a week when your grandfather (Rev. Herman Hoeksema) was teaching dogmatics. We would walk, from Calvin College to First Church where he was teaching.

MHH: This was his dogmatics class?

BW: His dogmatics class. He was teaching it in the seminary. We would sit in on the class. The result was that before I ever started seminary, I had audited the whole of his dogmatics—all six loci. Then I went through seminary with him, and my first charge was in Creston Church, so I drove down and audited the dogmatics class a third time. I spent nine years in his dogmatics class.

MHH: What moved you to do it again the second time?

BW: Simply the fascination of interacting with him. He was very much a dialectic teacher. If he lectured, it didn’t amount to much because he was just composing his Dogmatics at the time, and he liked to read the manuscript in class into the wire recorder for your father to type out. But as soon as you could get him going on a question, then the recorder got forgotten and he would interact. So it was a matter of a game of constantly getting him off [his Dogmatics]. Whenever he interacted with us in that way, he would listen to anything we had to say. In fact he would often say, “You can be as heretical as you want here. Just don’t go out into the churches with it.” We accused him of being an idealist and all kinds of things like that just to get him going. He was always very affable about it. So it was primarily simply a matter of interacting with him. He was always a very fascinating person to discuss theology with, because he would listen, he would evaluate, and then he’d go to his Testament. He knew the English or the Greek or the Hebrew—whichever was pertinent. And he would explain his positions in that language.

In the time of the controversy, that always was a primary interest and concern. Whenever classis would meet, we would try, if at all possible to be there, so that most of the classical sessions leading up to the split of 1953 we attended, and synod too. In fact, in 1950, when they composed the Declaration of Principles, we were about to set out on a trip. There were four of us who were going to travel the West. Our first stop was in Hull, Iowa, where they were holding synod.

MHH: Excuse me. Just out of curiosity, historically, who went besides yourself?

BW: Myself, Herm Hanko, Jim Kok, and Dr. Earl Visser. Rather fortunately, Dr. Visser’s father was one of the few around who had money. He bought us a brand new car, so we traveled for fourteen weeks all through the West.

MHH: To what purpose?

BW: Just to cover the West. It was just a general tour of the whole thing. We camped out every night and spent about ten weeks on it—14,000 miles. We went first to Hull and then to Colorado—Long’s Peak, and then all the way down Carlsbad Caverns in New Mexico. Then we came back through the Grand Canyon, Bryce Canyon, and Zion Canyon. From there we went to Los Angeles and visited the churches there. That was interesting because when the Declaration of Principles was being written, there
was no problem there. It was what we always taught. When we got down to Bellflower and visited with your uncle, Lambert Doezema, he was very angry about it. We couldn’t figure that out for anything. He didn’t like that at all, which astounded us. At the time that it was adopted, why, that’s what we always believed, that’s what the Confessions teach.

We spent about a week there, and then we traveled up the West coast to Washington. Then we spent a week in Manhattan, Montana, in the church there and went down to Yellowstone Park and then back through the Badlands and got home ten weeks later. It cost each one of us $150 for the whole trip.

MHH: Wow.

BW: Gas and oil included.

MHH: What an adventure.

BW: Camped out every night. I think there was only one night we ever had to pay a camp fee.

MHH: Really?

BW: Yes, other than national parks. I think Yellowstone at that time cost $5.50 to get in for the car with four guys in it.

MHH: Very interesting. Since you brought up the subject—and apparently you must know something about it—I would like to pursue the matter of the Declaration of Principles and some of the history and the reasons behind that. Would you care to expound on that?

BW: I can give you my views on it. I spent a big part of my life studying the thing, especially from the doctrinal point of view.

I was always impressed by the fact that your grandfather, Rev. Hoeksema, in seminary would remark, “This situation here is much deeper and more profound, more basic than 1924 was.” Well, the way the controversy was being carried on, it was just a cat-fight over whether we could use the word “condition” or not. That preoccupied everybody. I always wondered about that. In a way, I spent my life trying to pursue the question of what he was saying there, because it wasn’t evident to me, and no one else seemed to see that either.

For a big part of my life I mulled that over. I visited everybody I could, even Canadian Reformed people, to try to figure out what the difference was between their views and ours. If you want a rundown, as briefly as I can make it, my sense of what happened, it was this.

It basically started when [Dr. Klaas] Schilder visited here in 1949. Our family had something to do with that. When Schilder spoke in First Church, he was known to go through glass after glass of water during his lecture. The water pitcher they had up there on the platform was from our house, so that pitcher was always known as the pitcher that Schilder drank out of. I was just a kid then. Other than familiarizing myself with the name, I didn’t have a great deal to do with it.

If you get to my memories of First Church, I guess the first memory (and I don’t know the year) was when Rev. Hoeksema visited our house on family visitation. Boy, that was quite an event. He ate supper there. They held family visitation from noon through the evening because they had enough people at home that they could do that. As I recall, he was a very affable person all the way through. That’s generally true, too. My sister was taking a bicycle trip in the Netherlands some years ago. Evidently the leader was from the Liberated Churches. She said to me, “They kept on saying they were Liberal. I went to the church services—sure didn’t look liberal to me!” (laughter). Anyway, he found out that she grew up in Hoeksema’s church, and he asked her, “Well, what kind of a man was he?” “Oh,” she said, “He was a very kind, affable man.” “He wasn’t?” That was entirely the wrong image of what they had of him. He just was a very affable person.

I remember the day I was sitting in church and somewhere in the auditorium. I had a toothache, and I was kind of bawling about it, so Mom told me I could go home. I walked down that aisle toward the front door, and his eyes were following me. I got out of the door and I just sat down there on those steps and got my composition together enough to go home. Other than that, I always remembered him at Christmas programs. He’d talk to all of the kids. That was a high point of the meeting. I don’t know whether it was the Romans sermons or maybe the Revelation sermons, but that church auditorium was just packed with people. It sat 350 [the actual number was about 1200] people, and they would have double chairs all the way down the aisle (the fire department wouldn’t allow that now)—all in the front, between the front seats and the platform, and even sometimes people sitting on the platform. It was just jammed with people when he was preaching. I presume that would have been the Revelation sermons in the late ’30s or early ’40s, in that period.

To get back to Schilder. The big problem, the hurt
he felt all through his life was that theologians would never talk to him on an even plane. When Schilder came here, then they somehow got together. They may have corresponded some before that, I don’t know. But they got together and they got along fine together. The only basic difference was that Schilder was an infralapsarian and your grandfather [Herman Hoeksema] was a supralapsarian. But they got along perfectly well. But he got back [to the Netherlands] and shortly the war started and he was put in prison; he got out of prison and went into hiding and there was no contact all through the war.

The striking thing was that after the war they learned that Schilder and his people had been put out of the Gereformeerde Kerk [Reformed Church]. This astounded us. But Rev. Hoeksema felt very badly for the way they had treated Schilder. He didn’t feel involved in the debate because Schilder’s view was pretty much defending the old Heinsian doctrine, which he had rejected from the days he was in school, and what was maybe to him the most heretical part of the common grace controversy—the offer of the gospel. So his sympathies were on church political grounds. Then he heard all of a sudden that Schilder had rejected common grace. That just didn’t jibe with him because if they were defending Heins, that was the worst part of common grace. I presume that at that time he bent over to get Schilder invited over here basically with the purpose that he wanted to talk this out—find out what the real deal was. Knowing his relationship with Schilder, he thought if they could just sit down together they could figure things out. So, I presume we paid for the ticket for Schilder to come over here.

Then there was the disastrous stroke that your grandfather had the summer before. You have to see it as providential, but it really gummed the whole thing up from a church political point of view because now Schilder came over here. But when he arrived, Rev. Hoeksema was pretty much on his back yet. So this left Schilder to traveling the length and breadth of our country. Practically all of our churches he visited. He would preach, and he was a very charismatic person. The preaching wasn’t the problem. Perhaps the biggest consequence was the fact that he sat down with the ministers in the living rooms, and they would talk theology. Here was what they considered to be the greatest theologian in Europe, sitting in their little living rooms in these little scattered churches. They would talk to him and he would be nodding his head. They thought, “Boy, we get more recognition from him than from Rev. Hoeksema or anybody else.”

The fact that Hoeksema had had such a massive stroke was as though the king is dead. Who’s going to be the next king? There began to be this questioning and talking and maneuvering about, hey, who was going to be top dog next? When he actually recovered, it was almost a betrayal (laughter). He wasn’t supposed to get better, and they weren’t ready to swing back to the previous relationship. This would vary from one to another, depending where they were. A lot of these guys were in the small churches in the West, and they had gone through poverty there because those churches did not pay well, and the people weren’t too sympathetic.

When Schilder was ready to leave, [Rev. G. M.] Ophoff was the only one who really stood up and said, “Hey, look. There’s big problems here.” He gave Schilder a list of 18 questions that should be discussed. Schilder looked through them and read through them and said, “Yes. Those are interesting questions. I’ll write about them in the Reformatie [a church magazine],” which he never did. But he made the frightening pronouncement in the last meeting that we should be sister churches, and he was going to advise all those who were emigrating or going to emigrate to our country to join the Protestant Reformed Churches. All this was a big promise, of course. This captivated these fellows [ministers] so that their hopes now were set on Schilder. That became the big dividing point. There wasn’t a doctrinal question.

During those years, particularly after Hoeksema’s stroke, there was a growing sense that we should have more practical preaching. This was the kind of thing that DeWolf played into. Now, what they called practical preaching in that day wouldn’t be anything compared to what we have today. You had, for example, the Sunday when DeWolf was preaching and he started ranting about women wearing lipstick (which was a sign of a whore). Some weeks later, your grandfather preached, and he said, “You know, as we get older we look like death. I can understand that some of you women wear rouge on your faces (laughter). Just don’t put too much on.”

MHH: I want to ask a couple of follow-up questions without breaking your train of thought here. Do you feel that it is correct to say that the division of 1953 was at least in part, if not in majority, a matter of
political maneuvering rather than doctrinal issues? Is that an accurate statement?

BW: I think it is. They thought it was doctrinal when they started to argue about conditions when [Rev. Andrew] Petter introduced this as, conditions are OK. And there is the fact that Schilder had said that the whole difference between us was simply a matter of terminology and culture, and that there was no basic difference. So when Petter started defending the use of conditions, this raised the controversy, and it began to spread. That’s what everybody talked about.

Rev. Hoeksema would comment that the word condition is not the problem. But after Schilder went back—it must have been at least six months later—one of the ministers wrote to Rev. Hoeksema that he shouldn’t be fooled, but that many of them, maybe most of the ministers, were sympathetic toward or agreed with Heyns’ view of the covenant. And he published that letter. He didn’t put the name on it, so we don’t know who wrote it, but it was one of the Liberated ministers from the Netherlands. He wrote a rather congenial letter: if you feel that way, and if your people are convinced that way, ours are not the churches to go to. You’d better go to the Christian Reformed Church where there’s space for that.

There is something deeper behind that, which we didn’t know at the time. I first came across it when corresponding with a fellow in South Africa who had grown up in the Liberated churches and whose his father had been professor in Kampen Seminary. He said it was generally known in the seminary that Schilder and Prof. Holwerda did not agree on predestination. Holwerda was opposed to double predestination, but this was not brought out into the open at all. It was something that everybody at seminary knew, but they talked about it quietly and didn’t make an issue of it.

Not that long ago, Nels Kloosterman translated and published an article, “Unfinished Homework,” which traces the problem that centered around Holwerda’s weak view of reprobation, so that at times he came close to the point where he repudiated the Canons of Dordt. But we knew nothing of that at the time.

MHH: Schilder did not share Holwerda’s view, then?

BW: No, Schilder held to double predestination, but on an infralapsarian level

MHH: I want to ask you another question about something you mentioned a little while ago, when we were talking about the influence that Schilder had in our churches in the course of his travels. Do you have any reason to think that maybe Schilder saw himself as the successor to HH [Herman Hoeksema] or that the men in the western churches particularly saw Schilder as the successor to HH? Or is that question way off?

BW: No, I don’t think that entered in, other than that they saw Schilder as somebody who really appreciated them in a way they weren’t feeling appreciated any more.

MHH: So it was a matter that the king is dead, who is going to be the next one?

BW: Which of them would be the next one—would it be [Andrew] Cammenga, would it be Rich Veldman? Who was going to be top dog? Who’s going to be to most influential, who’s going to teach in the seminary? Then there was DeWolf who was making his effort to push Hoeksema out of First Church, or at least to the sidelines. Get him emeritus and build a nice, brand new house for him out somewhere (laughter). Then [DeWolf] would move into the parsonage, and he would be the big shot. For the most part the whole controversy was really more a church political power play than anything by people who were feeling unappreciated. Schilder came along, and that was just the verification that they were worth more than they were being appreciated for.

Then Schilder pushed through the synod that they should seek sister church relationships with us, appointed a committee, put Holwerda on the committee, and the committee never contacted us. Then [Rev. Bernard] Kok and [Rev. John] DeJong went over there. Whether they agreed to go together or whether they just happened to go together is hard to say. We presume that they just both decided to go visit their relatives at the same time (laughter).

Anyway, they went and talked to that committee, having no idea where Holwerda was really at. Then Holwerda asked them, “Is HH’s view binding in your churches?” Rather naively, they said, “Oh, no. Nothing binding about it.” And it wasn’t binding. His theology wasn’t binding, other than insofar as it was the ground work to 1924. Basically if you separate for a particular purpose, then that purpose should be maintained.

Rather naively, they were looking to Schilder more and they really appreciated him more than Hoeksema. But Holwerda’s got something in mind because he wants nothing of double predestination.
They just fall into his trap, and to a degree, he falls into their naiveté, although there might have been a bit of truth to it that by that time about half of the ministers or more were talking Schilder up and talking HH down. That’s altogether possible, and maybe likely, because this undertone had been started now.

MH: How, in your view, did the Declaration of Principles factor into all of this?

BW: That’s when the immigrants started coming over after the war, particularly after Schilder, who said, “Go to the PR churches.” So we heard from Hamilton [Ontario] that they would like to have help. Basically the Mission Committee was very careful. They went there and said, “We are happy to help you.” And we gave them a lot of material help and encouragement. But we also said, “You’ve got to understand where we are doctrinally, and we don’t just immediately organize.” They went through a course of instruction, telling them how our view of the covenant differed from the Heynsian view. From all reports from those who worked there, this was accepted, and there were a good many of them that really appreciated it. One of them was Dingman Scheele, although he was in Chatham [Ontario], not in Hamilton. He was the one that started writing to Holwerda. I know Dingman because I worked with him when I was in Lynden years later. He had really accepted our view completely, as much more sound than the Heynsian view.

He started writing to Holwerda. Then Holwerda wrote him a letter [to the effect] that he had talked to Kok and DeJong, and they had assured them that Schilder/Hoeksema’s views were not binding and that most of the men were ready to follow Schilder. So: join the PR church, but get the learned teachings of our professors to these dummies (in effect) in America. By no means have anything to do with Hoeksema’s doctrine, but get in there. It was fairly an invitation to infiltrate and take over the PR churches. One can understand that when Scheele showed it to Ophoff, and Ophoff copied it down, that he was furious, as Ophoff could be. If I have it correctly, he wrote his Standard Bearer article about it and then he brought it to HH, and HH said, “No, George, you shouldn’t publish that.” The problem was, that the deadline for the Standard Bearer rubric was there and he didn’t have anything else. So he went down to Doorn Printing and gave it to them anyway (chuckle). It just upset the apple cart, as far as everybody was concerned, because now all of a sudden this became the center of discussion and not what Holwerda had said or whether Kok and DeJong had really said it or not. But they all blamed the messenger because he had published it. Ophoff took the brunt of the thing, but it blew everything wide open. That’s when the controversy really got rolling.

At that time [Andrew] Cammenga took the call to be missionary, and Herm Veldman was up in Hamilton. He just dropped into the middle of the fight. Now everything was as much as done with the Liberated people. It was Rich Veldman, I understand, that (on the Mission Committee) said, “Cammenga was complaining that we don’t know what to tell the people.” They say, “What is the view of the covenant, and what’s binding?” What are we going to tell them? Then Rich Veldman suggested, let’s go to synod and ask synod to draw up a declaration of what our position is. That went through the Mission Committee and came to synod. Cammenga already wasn’t too hot on it. He was there and he stood up, and HH went for the thing. Over the weekend, he drew this up.

If you take the Declaration as it was published, and you remove all of the quotations from the Confessions, there’s hardly anything left. Maybe 5–10% of it is comments, conclusions, or “this Confession teaches,” or, “that Confession teaches,” and then a short treatment of common grace that doesn’t really amount to very much.

I don’t think there were any who really understood what was going on in the Netherlands or really agreed with it, but they wanted those people [the liberated] in the worst way, and almost at any cost.

Again, the whole controversy over the Declaration was not about what it said, but the fact that they had drawn it up in the way they did. It never got down to what the problem was. I don’t think at that point there was any real understanding of the problem, and that even HH didn’t know how to get through the brush, down to the heart of the thing, because it was so completely wrapped up in this terminology thing. Use the word conditions the way it was being thrown around, and sometimes it was absurd, sometimes it was perfectly innocent, and sometimes it was downright heretical. It was just a total confusion. Wherever you went, there was debate about it. At this time the split had really taken place. [Rev.] C. Hanko’s testimony of it was that DeWolf was feeding the fire, and that the statements he made were carefully designed to say, “I don’t go along with the
Declaration.” But they were so carefully said that even today some people say, “What’s wrong with that?” It was very carefully done.

**MHH:** And it ultimately provoked the open division that happened?

**BW:** Yes. This came in the time when the Classis said that DeWolf was wrong. He had to make a confession. He made his confession, and then they came up with questions, whether that was going to be accepted. At that time the majority of the [First Church] Consistory changed. [On the first Sunday after the actual split, Hoeksema and his followers met in the auditorium of Grand Rapids Christian High School] Hanko has said they were totally disheartened and they really didn’t expect any sizeable number in Christian High. They were amazed that they filled that auditorium.

I would almost suspect that if they had held their ground and simply said, “Rev. Hoeksema’s going to preach Sunday morning,” and he had gone there [to First Church], we would have gotten the majority of the people.

**MHH:** Really?

**BW:** Yes, simply because most of them went there [to First Church] just because they didn’t know where they were at.

**MHH:** So, if he would have been aggressive….

**BW:** If they would have been aggressive. But they were disheartened by that long battle.

**MHH:** In the midst of this, you were in your college years and then beginning to go into seminary, correct?

**BW:** These were my college years. I graduated in 1953 and started seminary in October ‘53. School started at the end of October because of all of the unrest. We got married the 19th of November, 1953, in Thanksgiving vacation. We got back in school and HH said to [Rev. Gise] Van Baren and me, “You both have to make a sermon.”

**MHH:** Van Baren was with you?

**BW:** Yes, we were in the same class. [Prof. Herman] Hanko was a year ahead. So we made our first sermons, and in January we preached in Oak Lawn. A few weeks later, HH said to us, “Each of you has to go to Hull for six weeks. Who’s going first?” (laughter). We said, “We only have two sermons!” So he went to his file cabinet and started digging around. “You can use this one, you can use that one, no, better not use that one, use this one.” So we went away with a pile of his sermons.

**MHH:** This was your very first year.

**BW:** First year, and we had maybe three months of school.

**MHH:** So you really didn’t even know very much about the original languages, for example.

**BW:** No, no. The only thing is we had gone through Dogmatics. And he knew us.

**MHH:** What about your school work during those six weeks? You were expected to continue that?

**BW:** No, that just got overlooked.

**MHH:** Unbelievable.

**BW:** Later when I started my Masters’ at Calvin, then I had to have my records. There was one semester where there was a report card.

Through those years, once in awhile HH would say, “Well, we’d better have a test, I guess.” So we had a little test. But I don’t know if he ever marked them, because we never got them back. But we were right in the middle of everything. We were completely immersed in this work. But it was a very fragmented course of study that we had.

**MHH:** What about in your subsequent years in the seminary?

**BW:** It was not organized. Ophoff had his classes, and Hoeksema had his classes, and Heys would come in for some, and then Vos would teach us Dutch. But it was a very close, personal relationship all the way through.

**MHH:** Do you feel that you received an adequate education or perhaps something less than adequate?

**BW:** In certain areas it was less than adequate. I wouldn’t have missed what we went through for anything because we were so involved in it. It was almost a personal tutorship that we went through. But not at all organized. Nothing like they have now. There are certain areas that were very weak, but when it came to really feeling the touchstone of theology, I think we got a very good education. Just being with him was something in itself that you couldn’t substitute for—to see the way he operated. You learned more by imitation than by direct instruction.

Already when I was in Christian High, we’d get our four classes in, and if you got them scheduled in the morning, we’d take off at noon, and Hanko and I would go across town and work all afternoon all the way through high school. Essentially we did that
Fellowship with Unbelievers

**Question**

How would you respond to those who like to have fellowship with unbelievers? They argue that we are called to be the light, and in order to do so we must send our children to public school and fellowship with unbelievers.

**Answer**

It seems to me that there is confusion here. There is a difference between “fellowship” and “witnessing.” In the Bible the word fellowship presupposes that we have something spiritual in common with another person. The word can be translated “participation,” “sharing,” or “communion.” 2 Corinthians 6:14–16 could not be clearer: “Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? And what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? Or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? For ye are not under the law. But then what do you do with the law? That came to the fore to me especially when in the early 1990s, I started writing in the Standard Bearer on the history of the split. I came to sudden realization that, to [the Liberated], the covenant was a forensic or legal relationship. Schilder says that. There was this little book of these articles in the Reformatie, which was really a low blow, because it’s very belittling to HH. You feel the scorn for “you guys in America.” You really don’t understand. Hoeksema, you’re a smart man, you ought to realize this. All these supralapsarians use the term condition. Why can’t you?

Hoeksema finally answered him and said, “So much of what you said is superficial.” And he was rather kind. He [Schilder] got furious about that and said, “OK, then we’re done. Nobody’s going to talk about my writing as being superficial.”

To be continued...
daughter of Ahab and Jezebel, Athaliah. God cut off almost all of Jehoshaphat’s seed, sparing only Joash. But for God’s covenant faithfulness to David, the line of Christ would have been wiped out!)

However, I am not convinced that “fellowship” is the appropriate word here, for the questioner goes on to explain his friend’s position. First, the friend argues that God’s people are called to be light (Matt. 5:14–16), which is true. Second, the friend argues that to be light means that Christians may (or even should) send their children to public schools, which is false. To be the light of the world does not mean to have fellowship with the world, and there is where the confusion seems to lie. To be light means to shine in holiness before the world, so that the world sees our good works and glorifies our Father in heaven (Matt. 5:16; 1 Peter 2:15). To shine is to be a witness, not to have fellowship. Light shines in darkness and against the darkness. Light does not fellowship with the darkness. Light does not seek some point of commonality with the darkness. “Be not ye therefore partakers with them” (Eph. 5:7). “And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness” (Eph. 5:11).

If we may not have fellowship with unbelievers, does that mean that we cut off all contact and social interaction with them? That is to turn to the opposite extreme. We must live with unbelievers in this world. Many of us work with unbelievers. Social interaction with unbelievers is necessary and unavoidable. We must not treat unbelievers with haughty scorn as if we are better than they are. We must not refuse to speak to our unbelieving neighbor, or (if we are at a secular university) our unbelieving fellow student or professor. We must not refuse to help them when they are in need. We must not refuse to eat with them. We must witness to them, both in words and by deeds. Paul warns against cutting ourselves off from society in 1 Corinthians 5:9–11. Nevertheless, social interaction with unbelievers is limited. We do not share a spiritual bond, so we cannot do certain things together. Therefore we cannot enjoy true friendship, which is a sharing of life. Our relationship with unbelievers can never reach that spiritual closeness and oneness that we enjoy with our fellow saints in the church.

The last issue is education as an example of fellowship. Our children are not called to fellowship with the children of the ungodly in the public schools. In fact, they may not and they cannot do so. The lambs of the flock of Christ have no fellowship with the little vipers of Satan! Public schools might be an option for some parents in the absence of a good Christian school and where homeschooling is impossible. (However, few Protestant Reformed parents are in that position, and we do not make rules out of exceptions.) Nevertheless, if with a heavy heart, Christian parents have no option but to send their little ones to a public school, they do not send their children there to fellowship. In fact, in many ways, they send their little ones to the front line of the battle, and they do so with many, many prayers, beseeching God to clothe them with the full armor of God (Eph. 6:10–18). There are Christian parents who are compelled to do this, but the reason is the unavailability of good alternatives. It is not because such parents deem Christian education too expensive. (If Christian parents in our churches struggle with the cost of Christian school tuition, let them contact the deacons. They stand ready to give advice and help as the representatives of the merciful Christ).

Foolish beyond measure, then, is the parent who, despising the good Christian schools, sends his children into the public schools with such a cavalier attitude! Extraordinary is the grace necessary to preserve the lambs of Christ’s flock among the wolves of public school teachers and the vipers of public school students in a godless, antichristian atmosphere! That grace was given to Daniel during his schooling in Babylon, but neither Daniel nor his parents chose Babylonian education. It was forced upon them.

It is not the calling of our little lambs to witness, at least not in the same way as adult saints. It is the calling of parents to protect the little lambs until they are mature enough to witness fully in the world. And it is the calling of all Christians, young and old, to maintain the antithesis, which is the spiritual separation (and not fellowship) between believers and unbelievers. Witness to unbelievers, live a holy life before them, but do not fellowship with them.

Schuyler
Wisdom Without Price
Read Job 28
Last August our family camped in the Rocky Mountains. As we drove to a trailhead one afternoon, intending to hike to a nearby waterfall, we passed a gaping hole in the side of a mountain. Aha! This must be the gold mine that a camp volunteer had mentioned. Early in the 20th century, a man had come from the East, wintered in Denver, and spent seven summers digging with a pick and shovel near the base of Sheep Mountain, convinced that God had revealed to him that he would find gold there. He never found any, but he left a six-foot tall, 100-foot long hole as a testament to his desire to be rich.

Others have struck gold in the Rocky Mountains, but the treasure of wisdom cannot be mined with a pick or shovel. Nor can it be bought with gold or precious gems. As Job confesses in Job 28, Jehovah God himself is the source of wisdom, and in his son Jesus Christ “are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col 2:3). Does his precious word dwell in you richly in all wisdom? (Col. 3:16)

Sing or pray Psalter #40.

Job’s Personal Testimony
Read Job 29
Job gives his personal testimony in Job 29. His testimony isn’t a dramatic conversion experience. It’s a record of God’s work in and through him. Job’s religion was pure and undefiled: his faith was evidenced by his good deeds. In verses 12–16 Job proves that Eliphaz had falsely accused him of neglecting the poor, fatherless, and widows (see Job 22:6–9). Unlike the counsel of his friends, Job’s counsel had been both highly valued and encouraging (29:22–23). He had enjoyed physical, familial, and spiritual prosperity (vv. 4–6). His life was not without trials, but he directed his steps in the beam of God’s light even in those dark times. Does his testimony seem self-righteous or boastful? God agreed with Job’s self-assessment. He had declared that Job was “a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil” (2:3).

Is your life consistent with your profession of faith? Scripture teaches that if we are hearers of the word and not doers of it, we deceive ourselves: faith without works is dead. Do you see a small beginning of that new obedience in your life? Praise God for that assurance that your faith is a living faith (see Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 86 and 114).

Sing or pray Psalter #79.

From Prosperity to Persecution
Read Job 30
In addition to physical, familial, and spiritual wealth, Job had also enjoyed social prosperity. Even among his elders, he had sat as chief (29:25). “But now,” he laments, “they that are younger than I have me in derision” (30:1). Job was no longer respected. He was ridiculed, even by the lowest members of society. Those who had been the recipients of his charity rewarded evil for his good.

Jesus taught that his followers would be hated by the world because we are not of the world. We must be careful, however, not to give God’s enemies an occasion to blaspheme. Like Job, we must have our “conversation honest among the Gentiles,” “in all things shewing thyself a pattern of good works: in doctrine shewing uncorruptness, gravity, sincerity, sound speech, that cannot be condemned; that he that is of the contrary part may be ashamed, having no evil thing to say of you” (1 Pet. 2:12 and Titus 2:7-8). “For what glory is it, if, when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it patiently? But if, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God” (1 Pet. 2:20).

Sing or pray Psalter #300:1–3.

Pure in Heart
Read Job 31
Throughout the book of Job, we’ve seen Job on the witness stand, pleading his case before the Judge, appealing God’s justice. He has defended his godly conduct and implored, “Why do I suffer?” Job concludes his testimony in this climatic chapter, chapter 31. What’s striking about this chapter is Job’s emphasis on his heart. Yes, he was faithful to his wife. He treated his servants fairly and had mercy upon the fatherless and widow. But these actions were not an outward show. They flowed out of a heart that was guarded from covetousness and consecrated to God. Job understood what the tenth commandment requires of us: “That even the smallest inclination or thought contrary to any of God’s commandments never rise in our hearts; but that at all times we hate all sin with our whole heart, and delight in all righteousness” (H.C. Q. & A. 113).
An honest evaluation of my own thoughts and motives compels me to pray, “Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me” (Ps. 51:10). Do you also desire to be pure in heart? “Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God” (Matt. 5:8).

Sing or pray Psalter #141.

**Elihu Vents**

**Read Job 32**

As Job, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar debated, Job asserting his righteousness and Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar accusing him of wrongdoing, a young man named Elihu looked on. He waited for the other men to finish speaking out of respect, for they were his elders, but now, in chapter 32–37, he voices his opinion. Elihu is angry with Job for justifying himself rather than God (v. 2). It seemed to him that Job valued his own reputation more than God’s. Elihu is frustrated with Job’s three friends as well, for they were unable to refute Job’s defense or convince him of their perspective, but still they condemned him. Interestingly, God later rebukes Job’s three friends, “for ye have not spoken of me the thing that is right” (42:7), but he doesn’t say anything to Elihu. Elihu’s name means “My God is he.” And yet, although much of what he says is right, his motivation for speaking is lacking: he speaks that he “may be refreshed” (v. 20).

The next time you’re tempted to vent, pause first and ask yourself, “Will what I want to say minister grace unto its hearers?” (Eph. 4:29).

Sing or pray Psalter #305.

**A Mediator**

**Read Job 33**

Elihu sets himself up as a mediator in Job 33, declaring that he speaks in God’s stead (v. 6). Job had said that he was afraid of God (9:34, 13:21). Elihu reassures him, “My terror shall not make thee afraid, neither shall my hand be heavy upon thee” (v. 7). Like Job’s three friends, Elihu asserts that God is just, but he offers a more sophisticated reason for Job’s suffering. He suggests that God is not punishing Job but chastising him in order to incite repentance, which would result in restoration. Unlike Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, Elihu claims that he isn’t intent on condemning Job: he desires to justify him (v. 32).

Reading Elihu’s speech makes me thankful for our mediator and deliverer, Jesus Christ. Not only does he sympathize with us in our suffering, he is mighty to save us as well. He doesn’t only desire to justify us: he justified us once and for all by the sacrifice of himself. When we walk in unrepentant sin, his word comes to us, “As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent” (Rev. 3:19).

Sing or pray Psalter #47:1, 4, 7, 10–11.

**Elihu Persists**

**Read Job 34**

Elihu addresses Job less gently as he begins a second speech, challenging some of the statements that Job had made. He ought to have had more compassion on Job, keeping in mind the anguish of body and soul that had compelled him to cry out as he had, but much of his theology is correct. He contends that God is righteous, sovereign, and no respecter of persons. Although he declares that the ways of the Almighty are past finding out, he seems pretty sure that he understands those ways when he declares, “My desire is that Job may be tried unto the end because of his answers for wicked men” (v. 36). In other words, Elihu doesn’t think that Job has learned whatever lesson(s) God is trying to teach him yet; therefore, he hopes his suffering continues. As he gathers steam he seems to forget his earlier desire to justify Job.

Watching over this exchange is the Almighty, whose “eyes are upon the ways of man, and he seeth all his goings” (v.21). “For the work of a man shall he render unto him, and cause every man to find according to his ways” (v. 11).

Sing or pray Psalter #162.

**Our Self-Sufficient God**

**Read Job 35**

At the beginning of Job 35, Elihu misrepresents Job: never had Job claimed that he was more righteous than God. At the end of the chapter, Elihu suggests that God has not dealt with Job after his sins: he deserved even more severe suffering than what he already endured. Elihu also implies that Job’s prayers are proud and insincere; therefore, God does not answer him. In the middle of the chapter, however, Elihu accurately highlights an attribute of our heavenly Father. Our God is self-sufficient, independent. Rev. Ron Hanko writes about Jehovah’s self-sufficiency in *Doctrine According to Godliness*: “Nor can anyone give anything to God. Even when we “give” thanks, praise, and glory to him, we add nothing to his glory. The salvation of the whole church adds nothing to his glory, but is only a revelation of the glory he already has in himself…” Nor, as Elihu declared, can our sins hurt God in any way. (They can certainly harm our neighbor, however, just as our good deeds may benefit him or her.)

What a humbling truth! Jehovah is everything without us. We are nothing without him.

Sing or pray Psalter #275.

**Wisdom from the Weak**

**Read Job 36**

Job and his three friends had each made three speeches. So had Elihu, but he begins yet another discourse in chapter 36 by entreatting the patience of his audience:
“Suffer me a little,” he says. “I have yet to speak on God’s behalf.” Earlier he had shown deference to his elders. Now he reveals his true opinion of himself, “He that is perfect in knowledge is with thee.” He then makes similarly simplistic claims about God’s justice that Eliphaz, Zophar, and Bildad had made (vv. 11–14). What if you were in Job’s position? Would you be offended by such an arrogant address? Would you listen to anything else Elihu had to say? In spite of his pompous claims, some of Elihu’s statements about God are true.

The fact is that every member of Christ’s body is sinful, prone to self-righteousness and conceit. Nevertheless, we’re called to counsel and to minister to one another. Do you submit to the instruction and correction of your Christian brothers and sisters, particularly those whom God has placed in authority over you? Do you bear patiently with their weaknesses and infirmities, or do you consider their sins grounds to disregard any wisdom they impart?

The Sovereign Weather-Worker

Read Job 37

Polite conversation in our culture often begins with an exchange about the weather. Perhaps that is because the weather is something we all have in common, a force greater than ourselves to which we all are subject. Maybe this social convention is an unconscious acknowledgment of the God who reigns. Elihu didn’t begin his speech with observations about the weather. Instead, he ends that way. More specifically, he closes by pointing to God, the sovereign weather-worker, who commands the climate according to his counsel. This passage brings to my mind the final verses of Mark 4, in which the frightened, storm-tossed disciples awaken Jesus, who calms the wind and waves with a word. What is the disciples’ response? Not relief, but even greater terror! “They feared exceedingly” (Mark 4:41). They knew no mere man was with them in the boat.

Of that Almighty God, Elihu concludes “He is great in power; justice and abundant righteousness he will not violate” (v. 23 ESV). Therefore, he calls on Job—and you and me—to bow before him in godly fear.

An Awe-Inspiring Answer

Read Job 38

The wisdom of Job and his three friends has been exhausted. Now Wisdom himself speaks. That the Almighty condescends to speak to Job is a gracious wonder. Though gracious, he is still awe-inspiring, for he answers Job out of a whirlwind, challenging the assertions that have been made about him. We might expect God to explain why a good man like Job suffers, but he never even broaches the topic. Instead, he calls Job to consider who he is: the eternal Creator, the omnipresent Sustainer, the one who calls the stars by name and gives every living thing its meat in due season. That Almighty God, the God of unfathomable power and incomprehensible wisdom, does not need to answer Job’s why. Nor does he need to answer your why or mine. The knowledge that he is God, the one who is in the heavens and does whatsoever he hath pleased, should be enough, must be enough, is enough.

Is the knowledge of who God is enough for you, or do you clamor to know why with regard to the things that befall you in his providence?

Overwhelmed

Read Job 40

God concludes his first speech in the opening verses of Job 40 by demanding a response from Job. Job repents and then, overwhelmed by how insignificant he is in comparison to the Almighty, refuses to say anything further. But God goes on to remind Job that not only does he reign over the natural world, he reigns in the kingdoms of men as well. Not only is he alone able to behold every one who is proud, he also is the one who brings the proud low and treads down the wicked (v. 12). If you were able to
do this, Job, God says, then you could save yourself, too. God goes on to describe the behemoth, a real creature that was familiar to Job. People have speculated about the identity of this animal, suggesting that it might be a dinosaur, elephant, or hippopotamus. Its identification is inconsequential, however. The point is that while no man dares approach this mighty beast, it, too, belongs to God and was created for his glory.

Are you, like Job, overwhelmed by the Almighty? Then you will find that your own self and sufferings grow dim in the light of his glory and grace.

Sing or pray Psalter #405.

**February 21**

**Leviathan**

**Read Job 41**

Some people attribute all suffering and sorrow to Satan. God is good, they reason. Therefore, Satan must be responsible for the bad things that happen to good people. But maybe, just maybe, God is able to make something good come out of them. Sometimes those who think this way point to the book of Job to prove their perspective. After all, it was Satan who wreaked havoc on Job. But wait. Who gave permission to Satan first to touch all that Job had and then to touch his bone and his flesh? God. God was sovereign over all Job’s suffering.

What does that have to do with Job 41, the chapter in which God describes leviathan? Like behemoth, leviathan was a real creature. Yet he was a fierce adversary of men. He breathed fire, and his heart was like a stone. No creature was prouder than leviathan. Leviathan aptly represents Satan, our adversary, who one day will face the judgment of the God who reigns supreme. “In that day the LORD with his sore and great and strong sword shall punish leviathan the piercing serpent, even leviathan that crooked serpent; and he shall slay the dragon that is in the sea” (Is. 27:1).

Sing or pray Psalter #223.

**February 22**

**The Conclusion of the Matter**

**Read Job 42**

In this final chapter of the book of Job, Job repents “in dust and ashes.” Jehovah rebukes Job’s three friends, not for misinterpreting his word – some of what they had spoken was true – but for misapplying it and using it to accuse Job wrongly. In turn, they also repent and bring an offering to Job. Job pictures Christ, offering a sacrifice on behalf of those who had sinned against him. Then God gives Job a double portion of his previous wealth, restores his relationships, and blesses him with ten more children. Notice, though: Job repented while he still suffered. His penitence was not driven by the desire for the restoration of his possessions or position. There are no grounds for a prosperity gospel here!

What is the conclusion of this poetic book? Job’s friends argued that suffering is a punishment for sin. In light of God’s justice and his own righteousness, Job contended that his suffering couldn’t be explained. Elihu maintained that suffering comes as chastisement. But God taught them—and he teaches you and me—that the suffering of the righteous is a call to trust him, the Almighty, who works all things together for good to them that love him.

Sing or pray Psalter #162.

**February 23**

...and You Will Be a Blessing

**Read Genesis 12**

We return in our chronological reading of the scriptures to the book of Genesis. Genesis 11 records the rebellion of man in building the Tower of Babel and concludes by tracing the descendants of God-fearing Shem to a man named Abraham. Jehovah had already communicated his covenant to Adam and to Noah. Now in Genesis 12 he rearticulates his covenant to Abram. God did not institute many covenants. Rather, each of these instances was a distinct reaffirmation of God’s one covenant, which, as scripture states repeatedly, is everlasting. The covenant that Jehovah made with Abram was a promise to bless him. Not only would he bless Abram the individual, however: he would also make Abram to be a blessing. In him would “all families of the earth be blessed” (v. 3).

In Galatians 3 the inspired apostle Paul commentates on God’s covenant with Abram, demonstrating that it is in Abraham’s seed—Christ—that the blessing of Abraham comes on the Gentiles. Have you received “the promise of the Spirit through faith”? (v. 14) Then you are blessed with faithful Abraham” (v. 9). And you are called to be a blessing.

Sing or pray Psalter #176.

**February 24**

**Strife Between Brethren**

**Read Genesis 13**

Abram left Ur of the Chaldees with his father, brother, and fatherless nephew Lot. For a time they all lived in Haran. Then God called Abram again to go to a land that he would show him, and again Lot accompanied him. God had declared that he would make Abram to be a blessing. Lot was the first beneficiary of that blessing. He worshipped at Abram’s altars, and he shared the material prosperity that God had showered on his covenant friend. But those riches led to trouble, as riches so often do, and Abram’s and Lot’s herdsmen quarreled. To Abram’s dismay, this dispute was witnessed by their neighbors. “And Abram said unto Lot, ‘Let there be no strife...between me and thee...for we be brethren’” (v. 8).

How highly do you esteem the gift of Christian brotherhood? “Christian brotherhood is not an ideal which we must realize; it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate. The more clearly we learn to recognize that the ground and strength and promise
of all our fellowship is in Jesus Christ alone, the more serenely shall we think of our fellowship and pray and hope for it” (Bonhoeffer).

Sing or pray Psalter #371.

King of Peace
Read Genesis 14
Lot had lately pitched his tent toward Sodom, that exceedingly wicked city, and already Abram is compelled to come to his rescue. The king of Sodom with four of his allies throws off the yoke of Chedorlaomer, whom they had served for 12 years. Chedorlaomer and three of his allies descend from the northeast, win a decisive victory, and take for themselves the goods and citizens of Sodom, Lot among them. Abram pursues Chedorlaomer, divides his 318 men into separate companies, attacks by night, rescues Lot, and restores Sodom’s goods and people. Abram was quick in his response and wise in his strategy; yet, as Melchizedek states, it was God who delivered his enemies into his hand (v. 20a). Abram concurs, refusing to take any portion from the King of Sodom.

Melchizedek, the mysterious king of Salem, that is, king of righteousness and king of peace, points to our high priest, the Lord Jesus Christ. He is our high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. “Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them” (Heb. 7:25). In him we have the victory.

Sing or pray Psalter #302.

By Grace Alone
Read Genesis 15
Abram is troubled: God’s promise is not unfolding the way he thought it would. But Jehovah maintains that he and Sarai will have a son. He will be Abram’s heir, and Abram’s offspring will be as innumerable as the stars. Abram believes Jehovah, who counts “it to him for righteousness.” Abram was justified through faith, by which the righteousness of Christ, his Seed, was imputed to him. And even that faith was a gift (Eph. 2:8).

God then seals his covenant, employing a custom with which Abram was familiar. (See Jer. 34:18–20.) When two parties made a solemn covenant, they would walk together through animals that had been sacrificed and divided, signifying that death would fall on either if he broke the covenant. God demonstrates to Abram that his covenant is all of grace and not at all dependent on human efforts, for while Abram sleeps, a smoking furnace and burning lamp pass through the divided animals. The lamp shining through the smoke pointed to the Light that and burning lamp pass through the divided animals. The lamp shining through the smoke pointed to the Light that

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God Sees Me
Read Genesis 16
God’s promise was not unfolding the way that Sarai thought it would, either. She recognizes that God is in control of conception and birth, yet she still determines to take matters into her own hands, and suggests that Abram take her maid, Hagar. Abram acquiesces, and generations of heartache and trouble ensue, as is always the case when God’s laws regarding marriage and family life are disregarded. Though an Egyptian, likely acquired when Abram and Sarai fled to Egypt during the famine, Hagar believes in Jehovah and understands that her master is God’s covenant friend. When she conceives his child, Hagar understandably, though not excusably, becomes defiant. Rather than acknowledge the evil fruits of her own lack of faith, Sarai deals so harshly with her pregnant maid that Hagar flees. But God looks with mercy on this mistreated maid servant. Hagar is witness to a theophany, an Old Testament appearance of Christ. The Lord promises to multiply her offspring through the son that she will bear, but first he commands her to return and submit. By grace, Hagar repents. She turns around and returns home.

What lessons from this chapter about faith and submission can you apply to your life? What comfort to be able to confess as Hagar did that “thou God seest me” (v. 13).

Sing or pray Psalter #398.

Circumcision of the Heart
Read Genesis 17
Jehovah institutes the sign of the covenant in Genesis 17, commanding that all males in Abraham’s household above eight days old be circumcised. Why that sign? Calvin suggests two reasons: “first, to show that whatever is born of man is polluted; then, that salvation would proceed from the blessed seed of Abraham.” The fact that the sign was administered to Abraham’s children as well as to his servants pictured the reality that God’s covenant is with people from all nations and classes. Circumcision was a visible seal of the righteousness that Abraham already had by faith (Rom. 4:11). It was administered to “a secret part of the body; for the true circumcision is that of the heart” (Matthew Henry). So God’s initial command to Abraham in Genesis 17 is this: “Walk before me, and be thou perfect” (v. 1).

That command comes to us, too, for “the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live” (Deut. 30:6). “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature” (Gal. 6:15).

Sing or pray Psalter #304.
I Know Him

Read Genesis 18

Jehovah makes a beautiful statement about Abraham in Genesis 18:19: “For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the LORD, to do justice and judgement.” In the previous chapter the Almighty God had appeared to his covenant friend and changed his name from “Abram,” which means “exalted father,” to “Abraham,” which means “father of a multitude.” Now he appears to Abraham in human form and reveals his intent to destroy the city of Sodom. That Abraham knows God is evident from the humble manner in which he addresses him, acknowledging that he is “but dust and ashes” (v. 27) and basing his petitions on Jehovah’s own attributes: “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (v. 25).

Are you one of Abraham’s children? Gal 3:29 declares, “And if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.” Do you follow in Abraham’s steps, keeping the way of the LORD? Listen to his word. He reveals himself to you there, just as he revealed himself to father Abraham.

Sing or pray Psalter #325.

A Dark Night and a Lonely Cave

Read Genesis 19

Lot was a child of God, a “just” and “righteous” man, but while he lived in Sodom, he “vexed his righteous soul from day to day with their unlawful deeds” (2 Pet. 2:7–8). Lot paid a high price to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season. He sacrificed the souls of his wife, children, and numerous grandchildren, the children of Moab and Ammon, who to the tenth generation were forbidden entrance to Jehovah’s temple (Deut. 23:3–6). Does Lot’s sad end cause you to shake your head? Jesus warns us, “Remember Lot’s wife” (Luke 17:32), and “let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall” (1 Cor. 10:12).

But Lot’s story doesn’t end on a dark night in a lonely cave near Zoar. It commences on another dark night in another lonely cave, with the miraculous birth of the Seed promised to Abraham, the long-awaited Child who was also a descendant of Lot through Ruth. Why did God save Lot? Why did he give him the privilege of being a father of our Lord? In order that he might clearly demonstrate that salvation “is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy” (Rom. 9:16).

Sing or pray Psalter #82.

Imperfect Faith

Read Genesis 20

Abraham’s lie to Abimelech in Genesis 20 is all the more shameful because he had previously used the same half-truth (Gen. 12). At that time he had been rebuked by Pharaoh.

Now Abimelech chides him for lying. Abraham’s behavior demonstrated a lack of care and concern for his wife as well as a lack of faith and obedience toward God. Abraham gave unbelievers occasion to blaspheme the worthy name by which he was called. Prov. 29:25 teaches, “The fear of man bringeth a snare: but whoso puttheth his trust in the Lord shall be safe,” and 1 Timothy 5:8 warns, “But if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel.”

How brightly God’s faithfulness shines in light of Abraham’s unfaithfulness. He protects the honor of his daughter Sarah and still hears and answers Abraham when he prays. How can that be? Abraham’s faith was imperfect, but through that faith Jehovah imputed to him the perfect righteousness of his only begotten Son, who said, “Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.” On that basis, too, Jehovah is faithful to you and to me.

Sing or pray Psalter #152.

The Laughing Princess

Read Genesis 21

That the first verses of Genesis 21 follow the final verse of Genesis 20 highlight the truth that our God is sovereign also over conception and birth. That’s true still today.

What a fascinating woman Sarah was! She was first Abraham’s dear wife Sarai, which means “my princess.” But she was foremost God’s “princess,” Sarah, the free woman who through the promised seed would be the queen mother of many nations and kings (see Gal. 4:21ff). She was a woman who still at ninety was so beautiful she was commended to a king and taken into his harem. But she also possessed a beauty that would never diminish, the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which adorned the hidden man of her heart. In adornment and subjection she is our example, dear sisters (1 Pet. 3:1–6). Do you conduct yourself as her daughter? She was also a woman who reaped the bitter fruit of attempting to take matters into her own hands, and one who laughed, first in unbelief and then with joy when she held the realization of God’s promise, the child conceived by faith, in her arms.

Do you hear and laugh with her?

Sing or pray Psalter #360.

A Test

Read Genesis 22

Genesis 22 begins, “And it came to pass…that God did tempt Abraham.” James 1 makes it clear that God does not tempt any man to sin, but he does try or test his people in order to prove their faith. Heb. 11:17 concurs, “By faith Abraham, when he was tried….” Abraham’s willingness to offer up his dear son Isaac demonstrated that his faith...
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was complete. By faith in Christ, Abraham was justified. That faith was evidenced in his works (see James 2:21–22). To all outward appearances, the command to kill Isaac was contradictory to God’s very nature, and his death would thwart the fulfillment of God’s promise. Yet Abraham obeyed. He so loved and trusted God that there was nothing he would withhold from him.

We also are called to walk by faith, not by sight. Is there something in your life—even something good, perhaps—that God would have you give up in order to prove that you are fully devoted to him? He didn’t spare his own Son for our sake. “How shall he not with him also freely give us all things?” (Rom. 8:32)

Sing or pray Psalter #334.

A Stranger and a Sojourner

Read Genesis 23

Thirty-seven years after the birth of Isaac, Sarah dies. The mother of the promised seed, she has the distinction of being the only woman whose age is recorded in Scripture: 127 years. Following her death, Abraham goes to the gate of a city of the Hittites and in public council purchases the cave of Machpelah for a burial place. This is the first piece of property that God’s people own in the promised land.

Abraham is an example of how we should live as those who are in the world but not of the world. He was, in his own words, “a stranger and a sojourner” (v. 4). He lived separately from the Hittites. Yet he did not avoid interaction with them, and his dealings with them were courteous. Abraham honored all men (1 Pet. 2:17). He showed himself a pattern of good works. We’re called to live that kind of life, too: “in doctrine shewing uncorruption, gravity, sincerity, sound speech, that cannot be condemned; that he that is of the contrary part may be ashamed, having no evil thing to say of you” (Titus 2:7–8).

Sing or pray Psalter #26.

March

7

Isaac’s Bride

Read Genesis 24

Long before Isaac ever met Rebekah, Jehovah was preparing her to become the next mother in the promised line. Her genealogy had been reported to Abraham sometime earlier. (Genesis 22:20ff). Now, in a series of wonderful events, the LORD brings her to Isaac to be his wife, “witnessing thereby that he doth yet as with his hand bring unto every man his wife” (Marriage Form). Is it your earnest desire that your children marry from among the family of God? Do you counsel your children with regard to seeking a godly spouse? Do you pray fervently for that, even if your children are still young? Do you continually pray for the spouse whom God has given you?

What a godly example of obedience and trust is young Rebekah! When it comes to following the Lord, she doesn’t hesitate like those whom Jesus called in Luke 9:59-62. She goes out, not knowing whither she went. Are you willing to follow our heavenly bridegroom unconditionally? What joy there will be when the beloved Son of God is united with his bride in heaven forever!

Sing or pray Psalter #124.

Truth vs. Error

How Is It That We Obey?

There is an idea that has circulated among different Christian groups through different times and ages. It involves the question of how it is that we obey and also then how we do good works. The Christians who hold to this idea commendably exert great emphasis on the importance of grace and the importance of not becoming legalists, works righteous, or Pharisaical. They insist that the activity of obedience and good works is done by Christ and only by Christ within the believer and not by the believer himself or herself. These believe that they uphold grace when they say that Christ is the one who obeys and does our good works and they believe that it teaches works righteousness to say that the believer does these things.

These teach that actual obedience by us is essentially impossible in this life because of the continuous corruption of our natures. They teach our perpetual and unrelieved depravity. These emphasize that we are rotten sinners, dead in our trespasses and speak rarely, if at all, of our living in Christ, out of him, or of bearing fruit in union with him. They teach that
all men are filthy and none do good based on their interpretation and application of Isaiah 64:6. They teach that any good that is in us cannot be truly ours and must exist only in Christ who is within us. They teach that the only way that obedience and good works flow from us is because it is Christ doing this for us.

This teaching identifies our obedience as passive. This idea is part of the teachings promoted by what is currently called the Hypergrace Movement. Connected with this passive obedience is also their teaching that we cannot find assurance of our justification or salvation by looking at our sanctification (our holy walk). They believe that doing so would be relying on our works. Although they do promote a certain piety in one’s conduct and behavior, they teach that our holiness is spiritual and increased only by a greater and greater focus on the work of Christ and a greater thankfulness for it in heart and mind. For them, the activity of faith is to remember, revisit, and rediscover the cross of Christ, the finished nature of his work on it and the substitutionary aspect of it; Christ does everything else. They teach that for assurance and for motivation in piety we may look only to the work of Christ and be filled with gratitude for it.

Those who promote this passiveness of our obedience believe that our sanctification is (for lack of a better word) sucked up into our justification. To them, sanctification is a sub-part of our justification. When sanctification is absorbed up into justification, they both become a one-time event for the believer. This is why these often do not hold to the idea of our growth in holiness, called progressive sanctification. They believe that holiness as our activity is essentially impossible. This is also why they will insist that obedience and good works are done by Christ in us. If our sanctification is indeed a sub-portion of justification, then our obedience cannot be of us. We are dead after all and need Christ to do it all on our behalf. So, Christ does it all, including our obedience and good works, end of story.

Well, you are thinking that doesn’t sound so wrong. Saying that Christ does it all emphasizes grace, right? If we contend that the believer does the obeying and the good works, isn’t that hogging some of the glory that rightfully belongs to the Savior? Isn’t that saying that we are gaining salvation with our obedience? Indeed, only Christ’s obedience can ever be the basis and grounds for our justification. We contribute nothing to earn or gain our salvation. But the gospel does not stay at Easter and neither does the believer. Pentecost is following close on the heels of the resurrection and our redemption! Sanctification follows justification as a separate work that unfolds throughout our life. It is Christ’s work of redemption from eternity applied to his people over time by the Holy Spirit through the preaching. It is a holiness that does not remain cooped up in our heads or hearts like reservoirs for God to see, but it always spills over into our daily lives. Sanctification is much more than growing in our conscious awareness of our belief in Christ and him alone. Our “remembering” is fickle and inconsistent. The Bible is clear over and over that we do not remember God, but it is God who remembers his people, and his remembering is perfect.

Yes, man alone is incapable of doing any good; we were dead in sin. But now, as born again and united to Christ, we are dead to sin and alive to Christ (Eph. 2:1–5; Rom. 6). Unbelievers do not truly good thing ever. They cannot even see themselves as the wicked people that they are. Only God’s people acknowledge their sin as Israel did in Isaiah 64:6. Only God’s people ever obey God when they say, “O wretched man that I am.” Not one person, other than the saved, even of those in all the wretched places of the hospitals, graveyards, insane asylums, or wars will ever say that. Who but the redeemed are made alive in Christ (Col. 2:13)? Who but the redeemed in Christ can say, “I rejoice and am exalted; lifted out of my guilt, I am glad?” Only we repent. Only we cast ourselves upon God and claim him as our unchanging father (Isa. 64:8). Only we are able actually to do good works and obey God’s laws through God’s grace and by the power of Christ that we receive by faith. Granted, ours is a very small beginning of obedience, especially compared to what awaits us in heaven, and we soil it terribly. But our meager obedience is accepted by God because of Christ (2 Cor. 5:5–9; Heb. 11). God sanctifies us through the Spirit and we do good and our souls enjoy it. We are given so much more than a new spiritual state and legal status before God. We are given power to live unto God in thought, word, and deed.

Of all the ancient nations, only Israel was called to activities of obedience and given the hearts to do it. Obedience in the Old Testament was joyous to the people of God. Their obedience was tied to the pictures that the Old Testament was making. The Pharisees eventually corrupted obedience, made
it tedious by adding to it, and warped it into an earning of salvation. Jesus denounced this, but he did not ever denounce obedience or call it works-righteousness (John 14:15). Jesus obeyed. Perfectly his perfect obedience earned righteousness for us. This righteousness is imputed to us, put to our account. That is justification. Because we are counted as righteous in Christ, we are also made able to imitate Christ our obedient head as his re-created beings. That is sanctification. Righteousness is imputed, not imparted. Justification declares our new legal standing as righteous before God, but it does not change us inwardly and subjectively. That is the work of sanctification by the Spirit.

The teachings of Hypergrace, that Christ obeys on our behalf, leads the believer to think along the lines of Christ’s righteousness and obedience as being poured or inserted into us. Although we are his vessels in that he lives within us by his Spirit, his righteousness and therefore his personal obedience are not poured into us. This idea is a variation of Rome’s teaching of infused righteousness. Infused righteousness of Rome teaches that man co-operates with Christ in his salvation because it blurs or “bleeds” justification into sanctification. Hypergrace teaches the converse of this that man does absolutely nothing, ever. With justification absorbing sanctification, Hypergrace tries to protect grace from the filth of man’s hands. The Bible does not teach that Christ unites to us by any version of infusion. Christ does not merge with us like two colors of Playdoh squished together to make a new color; this is not our “new man” that now can cooperate with Christ. Nor is our “new man” simply Christ obeying on our behalf which leaves us as inanimate objects of his participation. We are not like gloves for Christ who is the hand that performs obedience.

The teaching that Christ does the obedience for us and we are passive makes our obedience impersonal and cold. It denies the transforming and life-changing power of the ascended Christ. We are given a living relationship with God through Christ by the Holy Spirit. The definition of a relationship is that there is communion, communication back and forth between separate things. I have a living relationship with my hand. It is separate from my mind but it obeys and is empowered by my will for it. It communicates things back to me and what it touches gives me joy or displeasure. If I have an artificial hand and even though it may be wired to my brain to respond and obey my every thought, I do not and cannot have a living relationship with it. The communion is only one direction. To say that Christ does the obedience on our behalf in our lives here on earth changes our relationship with Christ to be more like the one I would have with my mechanical hand.

This living relationship includes the gift of faith. Faith is more than just the ability to believe with the heart or remember with the mind. Being given faith is not a one-time event. Faith is something that is alive. It binds us to the living Christ, making us alive. Giving us living faith is Christ’s ongoing work by the Holy Spirit of making and keeping us spiritually alive like a grafted branch is alive in the vine (John 15:4–5). The branch is enabled to produce good fruit by the power of the vine which it is grafted into. We were dead but are now alive in Christ. We are kept spiritually alive by the Holy Spirit through the preached word. Our living faith produces in us obedient activities of our bodies, our feet, hands, ears, eyes, hearts, and minds. Our obedience is not a moralism that the believer is compelled or driven to do like a student trying to get an A. Rather, it is our intentional activity that springs from our new man for God’s glory, as a witness and light to the world around us and as a reflection of the image of Christ that we bear. Our obedient activity is literally from our regenerated heart; it is our gift of love back to God because he first loved us (1 John 4:7–11). It is our thank-offering. We reflect the unconditional love God sends to us back to him with obedient deeds of unconditional love (Matt. 25:35–40).

Our part in God’s covenant is to give God glory. We do that with our obedience as his new creatures in Christ (Baptism Form, Principal Part 3). God makes sure that he is glorified by our obedience by making us willing and able to do it by his power (Ez. 36:25–27). Our wills are no longer in bondage to sin and only able to hate and destroy, but we are alive in Christ with a new obedience of love. Our wills are set free and liberated from sin and death by Christ (John 8:36). Our obedience springs out of our liberty as well as gratitude and a hope of reward. This liberty is never sovereign but is always subject to Christ. We are not only obedient in principle, but we are inevitably obedient in reality, right here and now in our relationships among God’s people (Canons III & IV, 12). We will not fail to obey because we have been redeemed from the bondage of sin, death and
its oppression (Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 64). Our personal obedience does not cause our salvation, but is the pathway to it that we follow (Ps. 119). As new creatures in Christ we are set on a new course; the way of destruction is removed and the way of life is our new path. This path ends in heaven. This path of obedience is our perfect freedom according to Rev. R. Decker in the Standard Bearer’s 1988 special issue on sanctification, p. 278; we are free to obey and able to obey by the power of the Holy Spirit. This obedience is as much our own obedience as Adam’s was in his innocence (Belgic Confession 14); as Abraham’s was (Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4:3–9; Gal. 3:6); and as Christ’s obedience is as our head and the first fruits of salvation.

The ability to use thinking and reason has always left mankind’s rational soul morally responsible to live unto God. Salvation does not remove or replace our responsibility to live unto God (Rom. 12:1–2). Thankfully, God does not leave us the way that he finds us when he draws us to him but he transforms us into the likeness of his Son (John 15:3). As new, transformed beings we are able to fulfill our responsibility and able to make effort to change our lives, kill our old man, strengthen our new man and conform to Christ’s image (Eph. 4:20–25). The indwelling Spirit does not make us divine but empowers and enables a willing obedience in us (Phil. 2:12–13). We are still separate beings from God and mere creatures. But we are new creatures now with capabilities that we did not possess before (2 Cor. 5:17). The Spirit so works in believers that our obedience is truly our obedience. The psalms are full of language that teaches this personal nature of our obedience. Faith, though a gift, is our faith. The power comes from God; the act belongs to humans, starting with Christ in his human nature as our head (Heb. 9:14; Triple Knowledge 3:22).

It is then also our calling to learn obedience and grow in knowledge. Let’s not forget that even Christ in his finite human nature learned obedience.¹ He learned it through suffering (Heb. 5:7–9). And if he learned it, we are not greater than our master, so we must also learn it, and will mostly through suffering (John 15:2). Christ relied on the Holy Spirit for his holiness and obedience (Isa. 11:1–2), and this is also how it works for us, his brethren. Christ grew in grace and wisdom according to his age and knowledge, and his divine nature was not unto him in the place of a soul but his rational soul willingly obeyed. His spiritual growth was the peculiar work of the Spirit in him. So it is also in us.

What a gift is our sanctification! God gives us such power to live in obedience according to his word. We are freely given this power to live by from Christ’s immeasurable store. Understanding this keeps us from works righteousness and from apathy toward our Christian walk. Understanding this keeps us from despair and depression that may arise from assuming that we are not actively involved in our own obedience. The promise of new life is not a cold doctrinal idea but a reality that begins in our earthly existence. Although it is good to remember the great evil our old man is capable of, it is not correct to fixate on total depravity as if the message stops there. The gospel message does not stop at the point of Christ’s work for us but continues with all of his benefits imparted to us.

As born again Christians we are new creatures; good creatures that are capable of and expected to obey and show forth good works in our lives (John 15:12–17). The Bible is full of passages that teach that believers exert themselves to grow in holiness and sanctification. Effort toward obedience is not automatically works righteousness (1 John 5:2–3). Effort empowered by the Spirit’s quickening work in us is our human responsibility as blood bought friend-servants. We are called to live what we claim to believe. So, if your will isn’t captured, captivated, in love with, and directed by Christ’s will, you are not yet alive in Christ (James 2:20–26). Faith filled effort, trusting and obeying is a living faith (Westminster Confession 13:1).

Authors who to varying degrees are used to teach the error of passive obedience include but are not limited to John Eaton, Tobias Crisp, John Saltmarsh, John Cotton, Anne Hutchinson, Henry Vane, and Tullian Tchividjian.

Brenda is a member of Hudsonville Protestant Reformed Church in Hudsonville, Michigan.

¹ Don Doezema, Upon This Rock vol.1, ch. 7
Special Needs Children—Gifts from God

Note from the Society for Protestant Reformed Special Education: We give thanks to our heavenly Father for his special children he has given to us and knowing as we read in John 1:3 “All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made.” We believe that all our covenant children have been placed on our path for the glory of God, and that it is our calling to view them as part of the body of believers. As the board of Protestant Reformed Special Education representing the PRSE society, we are thankful for this fruitful and rewarding work that we have been given to do. We pray that you the reader will be encouraged and inspired by this article and if you are not already a member of the PRSE society, that you would consider joining our society for this kingdom cause.

I have always had an interest in and a special place in my heart for children with special needs. This is probably due to the fact, at least in part, that our family had a special needs sister. She had suffered brain damage at her birth; my mother came very close to death during delivery.

Because my sister had both physical and mental limitations and because there were, at the time of her birth, no organizations or institutions devoted especially to handicapped children, we had to do for her what we could. In many different ways, the responsibility for teaching her as much as possible, living with her, and assisting her with things she could not do herself, fell on all the family, but especially on her only sister Elaine.

Part of the difficulty for the whole family was that she was in many respects apparently normal. She did learn to read. She could communicate well with others. She was very generous, almost to a fault. She was physically capable of doing many things that made one conclude she could do much more than she was actually capable of doing. Her problems with doing many things were chiefly mental, not physical. More was sometimes expected of her than she was capable of doing.

Yet she had an important God-given role to play in the family, one we did not realize she had until many years later when all the other children were married and had families of their own. My mother died in 1974 and my father was responsible for keeping the household together and taking care of my sister. He lived to the year 2005 and died at the age of 97. In the last years of his life he was unable to walk; he was deaf and blind; and he was very weak, although he retained his mental faculties.
One event that my father dreaded greatly was the need to go to a special care facility. My sister made that move unnecessary. She could prepare meals, do the laundry, keep the rooms in which they lived sufficiently clean, and read to my father The Standard Bearer, Beacon Lights, and The Grand Rapids Press. She also in her limited way gave him some companionship. This arrangement worked well with the help of other siblings, although as they both aged, the time came when she could no longer do it.

But when that time came and we were pondering our next move, the Lord took our father to heaven. Shortly after he died, my sister said to me, “Now that Daddy is dead, my work on earth is finished and I want to die as well.” Within six months the Lord granted her this desire.

Since the time of my sister’s death, our Protestant Reformed Churches through our schools have done much to educate the children born to our covenant families whom God sent into our lives with physical and mental disabilities. I am amazed at what these programs have done for our special needs children, and often wonder what they could have done for our sister if she had had such opportunities.

The blessings these programs have had in our fellowship are hard to sum up. At the risk of forgetting some of these benefits, I will mention a few.

The children themselves, whether slow learners who can with some help keep up academically with their classes, or are disabled physically and/or mentally and need special attention, have made astounding progress that I never thought possible. As a result of the training they receive, they are benefited by the preaching; they have opportunities for group Bible studies; they are (through the untiring labors of some parents and young people) able to engage in many activities and sports that normal children take for granted; they are able to hold jobs in businesses that are willing to hire them; they frequently are able to make confession of faith in their congregations and contribute to the life of their fellow saints in the congregation; and they give programs that are so moving that at the end of the program there are few dry eyes in a packed auditorium. They themselves are strengthened in their faith by these programs, because they are able to make their own contributions to the communion of saints.

I have been with many families with special needs children. It is a joy to be in these homes. Parents and children alike receive these children as special gifts of God, who by their presence enrich the family. One home comes to mind in which a child so handicapped that he could scarcely show any response to most of what was going on around him, was the center of the life of the family. Not one child could pass his wheelchair without a few words of love, a pat on the head, a kiss on the cheek or a tender touch to ease his isolation.

I have an adopted cousin whose parents did not want him, who grew up in a covenant home, and who is now an active and confessing member in a congregation in which he faithfully ushers. These children are often greater blessings to their families and congregations than “normal” children. They are indeed special blessings that enrich the whole body of Christ.

It all begins with the family. Every family into whose fellowship God sends a child with special needs must first deal spiritually with the question: Why does God send such a child to us? There is, of course, no answer to that question, for as Job had to learn, God is under no obligation to explain to us what he does. Nor are his ways proper objects of our investigation, for his ways are too high for us.

Yet, in a covenant home, such questions do not need answering. When parents and siblings alike reconcile their will to God’s will, they come to experience the blessedness of having such a child in their fellowship. I have been in many homes and talked with many people to whom God gave a special needs child. Two instances in my life will underscore the truth that a special needs child is a great blessing.

One father, grief-stricken at the death of a Downs syndrome son, told me that the loss of his son left him with an empty sense of loneliness that left a hole in his life, which no one could fill, and could only be healed by God’s sustaining grace.

I had an uncle and aunt who were foster parents of a baby boy, who, because of handicaps, was not wanted by his parents. The child grew up in the home and church; the mother died being old and full of days; the father and now-grown son lived together as long as they were able, but had to be separated because of the passing of many years. But their need for each other and their love that bound them together was so great that separation was literally killing them, for they both could not eat and sleep. They had to be brought together again until the father died.

The homes with special needs children are
homes filled with love that has its center in the child who has special needs. Indeed, the life of the home revolves around the special needs child and is the more blessed for the presence of this child. Each member considers it a special honor to help his brother or sister.

These blessings extend to the church. I am convinced that special needs children become an important part of the communion of the saints because of our covenant view. I cannot understand how families with a wrong conception of God’s covenant can be reconciled to the presence of such children in their congregations. We believe, as Protestant Reformed Churches, that the children of believing parents are covenant children. They are such not because they belong to a covenantal community; they are covenant children who are regenerated in infancy or even before birth and are numbered among God’s saints. In the one great condition that only counts with God, they are equal to—or even perhaps superior to—every other saint in the household of faith.

Jonathan Edwards, the great Puritan theologian, in his haste to emphasize total depravity, but without any conception of the Bible’s teachings on the covenant, called the children of believers, “A nest of vipers.” How does one deal with any child born in our homes, but especially with “vipers” who have special needs? The Holy Spirit, the author of all our salvation, works in his great work of sanctification according to a person’s mental and physical abilities. And so, I often wonder, although some special needs children have limited capacity to know and understand the truth, whether they may outshine us in their inner, spiritual life, for we struggle with so many sins and are so often unsuccessful that sin becomes a great burden of shame and sorrow.

I for one would not dare minimize the work of the Holy Spirit by claiming that those with even severe disabilities cannot know their Father in heaven and their Savior. That truth of God’s covenant gives the church and the home incentive to use every means available to give to these children the knowledge of the truth, and to build up in them a sense of their worth and value to God, and therefore to them. They are needed. The home and church would be impoverished without them. Let us never do injustice to the work of the Holy Spirit. He is all-powerful. And if he is able to make of any one of us a saint (when all he has to work with is a useless clod of mud) why cannot he work also in those who are not by our standards “normal?”

And now our schools. I am so pleased with the progress our schools have made in the field of special education that I cannot refrain of expressing my deep and sincere gratitude for all that has been done—by our school boards, by parents who contribute countless hours to make such education possible, and by our special education teachers, who have done such a remarkable job in dealing with our children.

Nor can I forget those parents along with our young people who arrange special activities for these children that are so precious to us. I have no idea what all they do, but I know it is a lot. They contribute their time and energy in helping these children possess a sense of being worthwhile, of being necessary, of being wanted, of being able to do many things that their siblings and classmates do. These young people are the ones who do all the work to prepare these children (some of whom are now adults) for that program given every two years or so—which my wife and I would not miss for anything.

We do injustice to our special needs fellow saints if we say only that our special needs program has been a blessing to them. To me these children have been a greater blessing to all our children than we can measure. I have seen it and know it. When I went to a Christian school such children were teased, mocked, and isolated from fellowship with other children. This is, I think, no longer true. When special needs children are main-streamed as much as possible and are in daily contact with children of the same age on the playground and in the lunch room, it seems to me that our children have learned compassion, love for others, willingness to help, and a desire to make special needs children feel “right at home” whatever the circumstances may be. The special needs children have made our children better Christians.

I don’t doubt that all that I have said has its exceptions. But the fact is that while the biblical truth of God’s everlasting covenant of grace has been a great blessing to our homes, our marriages, and our schools; it has also been a blessing to all of us—a blessing that comes through our special needs children.

Prof. Hanko is professor emeritus from the Protestant Reformed Seminary.
Redemption’s Snowy Apparel

Swirling, twirling, beautiful to witness,
Landing gently with covering swiftness.
Carried by the wind of him who breathes forth.
Glist’ning, settling South, East, West, or North.

Not knowing where it has resolved to stay,
Swooping here and there, perfect in its way,
Generously bestowing its light cloak
On manifold vessels, with caring stroke.

Broken mute vessels of filth and decay
Now arrayed, spark’ling with the Light of Day.
Heavn’ly illuminations pure and bright
Craft reflections, an iridescent sight.

Poem
Monica Koole

Church News
Melinda Bleyenberg

BAPTISMS
“Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of heaven.” Mark 10:14
The sacrament of holy baptism was administered to:
Garrett Andrew, son of Mr. Clint Varner—Crete, IL
Liam Dean, son of Mr. & Mrs. Dean & Anna Brummel—Doon, IA
Adeline Kay Tenisha, daughter of Mr. & Mrs. Jeff & Crystal Talsma—First, MI
Theodore James, son of Mr. & Mrs. Aaron & Melinda Knott—First, MI
Quinton David, son of Mr. & Mrs. Tom & Sauda Spriensma—Georgetown, MI
Eli Joel, son of Mr. & Mrs. Joel and Laura Bodbyl—Grandville, MI
Silas Owen, son of Mr. & Mrs. Nate and Melanie Dykstra—Grandville, MI
Emerson Joy, daughter of Mr. & Mrs. Geoff and Becki Veldman—Grandville, MI
Ezra Richard, son of Mr. & Mrs. John & Ashley Cleveland—Hope, MI
Breslin Elizabeth, daughter of Mr. & Mrs. Phil & Holly Cnossen—Hudsonville, MI
Emmet Richard, son of Mr. & Mrs. Dave & Abby VanTil—Hudsonville, MI
Emma Lynn, daughter of Mr. & Mrs. Mike & Leah Booth—Hudsonville, MI
Noah Jonathan, son of Mr. & Mrs. Mike & Sara Oosterhouse—Randolph, WI
Lee Richard, son of Mr. & Mrs. Dan & Becca Regnerus—Randolph, WI
Dane Jacob, son of Mr. & Mrs. Kent & Sandy Hoksbergen—Randolph, WI
Abigail Ruth, daughter of Mr. & Mrs. Philip & Marie Hopkins—Redlands, CA

CONFESSIONS OF FAITH
“Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven.” Matthew 10:32
Public confession of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ was made by:
Timothy Bruinsma—Crete, IL
Alex Smith—Georgetown, MI
Jordan Engelsma, Jr. —Georgetown, MI
Makenzie Engelsma—Georgetown, MI
Cassidy TenBrock—Grace, MI
Jacob Langerak—Hope, MI
Jared Minderhoud—Hope, MI
Caleb Koole—Hope, MI
Stephan DeVries—Southwest, MI
Emmet Langerak—Southwest, MI
Emily Schipper—Southwest, MI
Lydia Dykstra—Trinity, MI
Beacon Lights 27

Danny sipped at his hot chocolate while he looked at the picture of the Roman sword in the book. Becky leaned closer to the picture as well. “So if the word of God is like a sword, then is that the sword we have as part of the armor we have as Christians?”

Their mom pulled out their family Bible and flipped it open. “Yes, it is. The sword that goes with our armor is made of the word of God. But we don’t use it by ourselves. The sword belongs to the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit wields or uses it through and in us.”

“Like when we listen to the sermon in church? And we learn how to be good and stuff?” Danny slurped more of his hot chocolate.

“Yes. The Holy Spirit works in us to want to follow God’s laws. And, when we learn God’s word, we are being trained, like a soldier learning how to use a sword. Soldiers can’t just pick up a sword and start swinging around blindly with it. They will hurt somebody. We have to be trained in God’s word to apply it to ourselves and to the Christian life properly.”

**Question to Think About**

1. Read Ephesians 6:17 and I Corinthians 9:26–27 by yourself or with your parents. What does it mean when the Bible says we have the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God?
2. Why do we have to be trained in the word of God?

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**“LITTLE LIGHTS”**

... let it shine!

Tricia is a member of Byron Center Protestant Reformed Church in Byron Center, Michigan.
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Philippians 2:15-16

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