BEACON LIGHTS

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A Protestant Reformed Youth Magazine
beaconlights.org
EDITOR
Dewey Engelsma, editor@beaconlights.org

CONTENTS COMMITTEE
Ryan Kregel (Managing Editor), ryan.kregel@gmail.com
Jake Dykstra (Contributing Writer Correspondent), dykstrjb@mail.gvsu.edu
Josh Moelker (Contributing Writer Correspondent), josh.moelker@gmail.com
Macy Schimmel (Promotions Manager), promotions@beaconlights.org
Joel Rau (Archivist), archives@beaconlights.org
Matt Rutgers (Business Manager)
Abbie Kooienga (Secretary)

BUSINESS OFFICE AND SUBSCRIPTIONS
Matt Rutgers
PO Box 37
Hudsonville, MI 49426-0037
(616) 209-2824
subscriptions@beaconlights.org

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www.beaconlights.org

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Melinda Bleyenberg, dmbleyenberg@gmail.com

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1364 Bent Tree Ct.
Hudsonville, MI 49426
(616) 534-2835

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This month’s issue contains the three speeches given at this year’s Protestant Reformed Young People’s Convention. The convention was held at the Lake Geneva Christian Center in Alexandria, Minnesota from August 13–17. The theme of the convention was \textit{Guided by God}, and the three keynote addresses were delivered by Revs. Brummel, Engelsma, and Griess. According to a reputable source (my daughter), the weather was delightful, the speeches were inspiring, and the companionship was warm and engaging. As is the case with most fathers of teenage girls, I have tremendous gifts of insight since I can read all of that into the answer I received when I asked to hear how the convention went, and got this in return—“Good.” Effusive praise indeed!

The editorial addresses an ecclesiastical event that received almost universal support from the churches in Grand Rapids, Michigan and the surrounding area. Church after church had \textit{CityFest 2018: Luis & Andrew Palau} signs in the front of their church for months in advance of the event. Luis Palau is, according to his website, an international Christian evangelist who has spoken to more than 30 million people in 75 countries. In addition, his radio broadcasts are heard by millions.

What is CityFest? Why did it come to Grand Rapids? Although Protestant Reformed people attended the event, why did the event not have official PRC support? Should it have?

In this editorial, I will focus on the event itself and in next month’s editorial, Lord willing, look at the theology of Luis and Andrew Palau.

Because so many churches were involved—many of them Reformed churches—and because I felt that it would be tempting for our own young people to attend (the BMX competitions, popular music acts, and carnival atmosphere would see to that), I was convicted that I needed to write about the event. Convinced that I could not do justice to a review from afar, I attended on Saturday, September 8.

The Luis Palau Association (LPA) was accommodating and allowed me to interview Levi Park, the Festival Director for the Luis Palau Association, and they gave me a media pass for the event itself.

My disappointment is not with the Luis Palau Association, although I decry the “gospel” message that they bring. It is not the gospel taught by Paul in Romans 9:16, “So then it is not of him that willleth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy.” However, they make no secret of what they do and how they do it.

My bitter disappointment is with the Reformed churches that supported CityFest 2018. My question for them is this, “How can you say you are in the line of churches going back to the Synod of Dordt and bring in a man to preach to your people whose theology that Synod condemned?” The incongruity of bringing in Luis Palau and celebrating the Synod of Dordt within weeks of each other struck me as bizarre. What was the Synod of Dordt for if not to condemn the theology of Arminius and the Remonstrants, which is the theology of Luis Palau?

The question needs to be asked of our own churches as well. Were we warned off the pulpit and elsewhere about the dangers of CityFest 2018? The message brought is attractive and enticing. Enjoy the music, enjoy the festivities, bring a friend or neighbor! You want them to know Christ, don’t you? It will be a fun and harmless way to introduce them to Jesus. This way you don’t scare them off with your old-fashioned and intimidating church worship service.

Our young people were there that night. We fool ourselves if we think that gospel message cannot find its way into our self-seeking and proud hearts. How badly man wants to play some role in some aspect in his salvation!

Enjoy the rides! Face painting? Right over here! Now enjoy this world-famous musical act! It’s all free! All you have to do is make a decision for Christ.”
CITYFEST 2018: THE EVENT

“The truth is, that God wants everyone to come and know him.”
—Luis Palau

“It’s a beautiful offer, and I extend it to you now.”
—Andrew Palau

“Sometimes we forget how radically Jesus loves, well, everyone.”
—Luis Palau

“the Synod rejects the error of those” who teach that “while some obtain the pardon of sin and eternal life and others do not...depends on their own free will, which joins itself to the grace that is offered without exception.”
—Canons of Dordt, Head 2, Error 6

What an event! A carnival in the true sense of the word. There was face painting, carnival games, BMX competitions, climbing walls, puppet shows, and elephant ears. There was rock music and rap music, magicians and balloon animals, enough to make Vanity Fair of Pilgrim’s Progress envious. And people! Thousands and thousands of people.

CityFest had come to Grand Rapids.

In the 1990’s, the globe-trotting evangelist Luis Palau decided to shift evangelistic methods from those of his mentor, Billy Graham. Gone were the choir robes and stadiums, to be replaced with action sports and open-air parks. What better way to bring people in than by having rousing, raucous music, magicians performing card tricks, and BMX riders performing turndowns and tabletops in front of screaming kids. In other words, make it seem as un-churchlike as possible.

CityFest comes to a city by invitation. There must be a certain level of church support, and each church must have a plan for how it will follow-up with those who “make a decision for Christ.” Its goal is to enhance the efforts of the local church, get people excited about their faith, and get them to bring their unbelieving neighbor, co-worker, or friend. Levi Park, the Festival Director of the Luis Palau Association calls it “relationship evangelism” and says the goal is to enhance the local churches’ effort in reaching the lost.

I would say the support was there. The Leadership Team was a who’s who of evangelical names, chaired by businessman Doug DeVos and Joe Stowell, the President of Cornerstone University. The President of Calvin Theological Seminary, Dr. Julius Medenblik, served on the Board of Reference alongside Father Robert Sirico, a Roman Catholic priest and founder of the Acton Institute, Grammy-nominated artist and pastor Marvin Sapp, and

2 Andrew Palau, CityFest 2018, September 8, 2018
businessman extraordinaire JC Huizinga, among others. Over 440 churches supported the event, so it is no wonder all of West Michigan seemed to be blanketed with advertisements for this grand event. From Christian Reformed to Wesleyan, Orthodox Presbyterian to Baptist, Roman Catholic to United Reformed, all poured their efforts (and money) into bringing Luis and Andrew Palau and their message into town.

As Levi Park put it, the list included everyone from “Calvinist to Arminian.”

The organizers considered CityFest to be a great success. There was total attendance of over 33,000, 220,000 online viewers, and according to Luis Palau’s summary after the festival, 1,833 people made a “decision” for Christ.

Imagine how happy God must have felt. He had been helplessly waiting at the door of all these hearts, desperately wanting to save them, pleading with them to accept him, until finally, Luis and Andrew Palau convinced them to make that decision for Christ. Come on in God, I’m ready for you now!

A Reformed church that invites Luis and Andrew Palau to come to their city and preach to their people has lost its way, and the church council needs to ask themselves what it is exactly that makes them Reformed. A Reformed believer has no business going to an event like this to be edified by the gospel brought by Luis and Andrew Palau, which is no gospel.

Can you imagine the Synod of Dordt inviting Arminius (had he lived) to give the keynote address at the close of the Synod? Why then should a church that claims to stand in the line of Dordt, and a believer who claims to be Reformed, invite and attend an event headlined by a modern-day Arminius?

You may have a great idea for bringing someone to Christ. You may even think, what is the harm in having an event like this if the results are good. Can’t God use an event like CityFest to bring his people to himself?

God can use a cross at Calvary to save a murderer and a thief, but that doesn’t mean the church should start hanging people from crosses.

The gospel that the Palaus, and Jacob Arminius before him preached, is no gospel. It eviscerates the sovereignty of God, and makes God weak and frustrated while he waits, waits, waits for someone to finally open the door. Man rules. It also makes God bi-polar in his desires: he loves someone now when he offers them salvation but hates them later when they experience his wrath in hell.

That some men believe in God and others do not, to their eternal ruin, is explained by the Canons of Dordt, Head 1, Article 6, “That some receive the gift of faith from God and others do not receive it proceeds from God’s eternal decree.” This is the teaching of 2 Thessalonians 2:13–14, “because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth: Whereunto he called you by our gospel, to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

This year is the 400th anniversary of the Synod of Dordt. Many Reformed churches will be holding anniversary celebrations of this great ecclesiastical event. Over concern that the doctrines of the Synod of Dordt might be lost, Classis Zeeland of the Christian Reformed Church sent a letter this year to their synod in which they encouraged the synod to celebrate the anniversary of the Synod, writing, “The danger is ever-present…that we who are Reformed churches, now 400 years separated from this great synod, will too soon wander from these doctrines of grace.”

How strange that churches from that Classis supported CityFest. Sending your young people to an event headlined by Luis and Andrew Palau is a sure way of causing them to “wander from these doctrines of grace.”

This is to say nothing of the music that was played at CityFest. The evening was filled with music, loud music. Music that you would not be able to discern from the popular rock music of the day. A word of caution to the churches that sent their young people to CityFest. Your praise band can’t compete with Daniel Gokey, the Afters, or Lacrae. If you find fewer and fewer young people at your worship services, it may just be because they found a praise band that could.

The final act was a hip-hop artist named Lacrae. He is a rap artist, his sound indistinguishable from the popular rappers of the world.

As I left the event, I could hear him commanding the star-struck crowd, “Move! Move! Move!”

And the Reformed young people moved.

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4 I encourage you to visit this link to see what the scene looked like: https://www.facebook.com/cityfestwestmichigan/videos/263763107810369/
“Nevertheless I am continually with thee: thou hast holden me by my right hand. Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward received me to glory” (Psalm 73:23–24).

In Psalm 73 the inspired psalmist Asaph reveals a painful struggle of faith that he endured. He speaks of how he was brought to the point of despair when he considered the life of the ungodly. He saw how they enjoyed riches and pleasure and how they seemed to have no cares or worries (vv. 3, 5).

And then he compared that with his own life. His life was filled with many sorrows and afflictions (v. 14).

In these circumstances, the psalmist responded in a sinful way. He was angry with God. He doubted God and his love and goodness. He even despair of living as a child of God any longer (vv. 2, 13).

As Christians, we know that our life is not going to be easy and free of sorrows. Some of you may not be experiencing that presently, but you know that someday you will. For others of you, you are there right now. You are hurting deeply. Some of you have been hurt by living in a bad home with fighting parents. Some have had a parent abandon and leave you. Some of you have had a parent die. Some have been deeply hurt by things said or done to you. Some are dealing with sickness and constant pain, even one young woman who couldn’t come to convention because of leukemia. Some are discour-aged and disappointed because their plans have not come about. Some come from churches that are deeply troubled. Some are hurting because they are lonely and have no friends. Some are struggling with feeling like they have no gifts.

Our struggles increase when we compare our life to the lives of others. It seems like no one has it as bad as we do.

Like Asaph, we are tempted to respond to these hard circumstances in the wrong way. We are tempted to be angry with God: “God, why would you do this to me!” We are tempted to doubt God and his goodness: “God must not love me if he has sent this into my life!” We might even be tempted to despair of living as a Christian any longer: “What’s the use! If God doesn’t care about me, why not live how I want to!” This is one of the most powerful and difficult temptations that the child of God faces. We respond so easily in the wrong way.

The proper way to respond to these things is taught in verses 23–24. We respond by filling our mind with thoughts of God. Rather than listening to ourselves (our feelings, our self-pity), we preach to ourselves the truth of who God is and what he has done for us. There are three things we are to fill our minds with.

1. Fill your mind with the thought that God is guiding you by his counsel (v. 24a).

A guide is a person that knows a certain path and helps lead someone that does not know the way. Think about a white water rafting guide. He maps out the path through the rapids and rocks, and then he leads the inexperienced rafter through the river.

God is our guide, and he guides us by his counsel. This means that God has planned all of the details of our life in his counsel. God’s counsel is his eternal, perfect plan which determines everything that will occur in time and history. From eternity, God not only planned the details of the creation and history broadly, but he also planned the details of our lives. He planned when we would be born, how long we will live, where we will live, how tall we will be, what calling we will have, whether we will marry or not, and the number of children we will have. His counsel includes even the seemingly small and insignificant details of life: how many hairs are on our head, every little twitch and movement we make, and so on.

Having determined all things about us in eternity, God now guides our life according to that plan. He leads us every step of our journey according to his eternal plan.

This is so important to remember in our struggles. We need to remember that these things do not come by chance and at random. They are not a mistake. God didn’t mess up or get it wrong. But we are being guided by the counsel of God.

We don’t always understand these things. God’s counsel is mysterious (cf. Isaiah 55:8–9).

But we believe that God’s counsel is wise and
good. Because God is wise and good, his counsel also is wise and good. He directs all things in a perfect way to reach the highest goal: his glory in our salvation.

2. Fill your mind with the thought that God loves you and is with you always (v. 23).

We must not imagine God's guidance to be that of a cold and distant God as if he made his abstract plan in eternity and then watches from afar as it plays out. God's guidance of us is that of a warm, personal, loving God who is present with us.

The reason why we are continually with God is because God is continually with us. God has established his covenant with us and has drawn us to himself. This means that God is with us and we are with him.

And this is the case always. God's covenant is unbreakable. Once we are in God's covenant, we are always in God's covenant. He is with us, and we are with him at all times.

This gives us comfort in so many difficult circumstances of life. God is with us when we are single and are lonely. God is with us when our family and friends forsake us. God is our friend who never leaves us, forsakes us, disappoints us, betrays us, lets us down, or hurts us.

We have this comfort because of Christ. He felt what it was to be forsaken by God at the cross, when he cried, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” Because he was forsaken, we are never forsaken.

So close is that presence, that the psalmist says, “...thou hast holden me by my right hand.”

Think about how an earthly father holds the hand of his child. He holds the child’s hand as they’re walking simply so that the child knows they are together. When there is something that scares the child, the father holds on tightly to the child’s hand.

In the same way God our Father places our hand in his hand and holds us tightly. This is the expression of his tender, fatherly love for us. We are with him always, because he is always holding our hand. What a comfort when we are going through some dark time to know that our Father is holding our hand! O how great is his love that will not let us go!

3. Fill your mind with the thought that God is leading you to glory (v. 24b).

When the psalmist speaks of glory, he is referring to the heavenly life that awaits us at the moment of death. When we die, we will be taken to life in heavenly perfection. This will be a life without any more sorrow or suffering or sin. We will be delivered from the battles against the devil, from our wearisome labor, from the dark clouds of doubt and fear that descend. But the greatest joy and blessing is that this is life with God.

This will be glory. The word for glory refers to something that is heavy or weighty. Something that is heavy is not cheap, flimsy, or passing. It is something solid, something expensive, something that lasts. That’s the glory that awaits us. It is not cheap, flimsy, or passing. But it is solid and lasting. It is of infinite value because it was purchased with nothing less than the precious blood of Christ.

When the text uses the word “afterward” it is indicating that there is an inseparable connection between our trials and glory. It is not simply the case that trials are followed by glory chronologically or that the trials are outweighed by the glory. But the truth is that the trials are the necessary way to glory. God uses the trials to prepare us for glory. 2 Corinthians 4:17 says, “For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.”

Trials strengthen our faith and draw us closer to God. They loosen our grip on the things of this earth and make us look heavenward. They cause us to see our sins and turn from them. In these ways, God uses the trials to prepare us for glory.

The trials that God sends are difficult. They make us hurt, and grieve, and feel overwhelmed. And we don’t always understand why God does what he does.

But in faith and dependence upon him, we submit to his way for us. We measure what he sends not by how much it hurts but by the outcome. We live in the hope that in heaven we will see that we did not have one trial too many. All were necessary to lead us to glory.

Receive the trials God sends in that way. Walk by faith, and not by sight. When we walk by sight and not by faith, then we stumble and despair. But when we walk by faith and not by sight, we will receive strength to bear those trials. Trust God in the dark.

With your mind filled with these thoughts of God, press on! Press on in the knowledge of God’s guiding counsel! Press on in the knowledge of God’s loving presence! Press on in the hope of glory!

Rev. Engelsma is the pastor of Doon Protestant Reformed Church in Doon, Iowa. This is the text of a speech given at the PRC Young People’s Convention held at Lake Geneva Christian Center in Alexandria, MN in August 2018.
“Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee. My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion forever” (Psalm 73:25–26).

Desire is not a bad word. Desire is a good word. And the fact that humans desire is not evil in itself. God created us with desire and called it good. Our problem is that after the fall our depraved nature leads us to desire the wrong things; or even to desire the right things for the wrong reasons; or even to desire right things too much. Only the Spirit, through the word, drawing life out of the seed of regeneration within can set our desires straight. When the Spirit does this in the Christian’s life, this is what he does first and last: He sets the child of God’s desire upon God himself. In the wake of that, everything else slowly and surely gets desired in its proper place and way.

The Hebrew word for desire in Psalm 73:25 indicates the deepest most all-encompassing desire possible. A desire that, to have it, shows me that other desires I have had, have been partial at best, and even if satisfied never let me be fully satisfied. That’s the kind of desire Asaph confesses he has for God, by the power of sovereign grace, and the new capacity of regeneration life. Asaph, child of the covenant though he was, had dabbled in other lesser things that drew out of him lesser desires. But God himself, set before Asaph in all his attributes, his persons, and his works, has captivated him on every level.

And fellow regenerated people know why. This is the being who is so powerful he created all this world and upholds it every moment. He is the God who sovereignly redeems, planting his own life in the hearts of his own, creating a new human race of individual people who will all fit together into one body. He is the God who sovereignly determines opposition to his own purposes and defeats it before the wondering eyes of the objects of his eternal love. This is the being who loves so deeply, his purpose was to be overtaken by his enemies momentarily to show his love; never the victim! Who is so just he created Egypt and Sheba to be given in pure justice so that his love could be more fully manifest. This is a being who is all of this personally. He is not a force, not a blind power. And not merely a feeling we have or experience in our minds. He is a person. Long after Asaph, Augustine famously said of this God, “Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee.”

When my desires are set on him, they are directed home. And when they find him fully, they come home. Heaven can be spelled with three letters, G.O.D. Heaven is not endless chocolate pies and football, it’s him. He is our portion, our inheritance, forever! In heaven, he gives us the greatest gift he could think to give us, himself.

Do your desires skew to the intellectual because of who God made you? His entire infinite mind is your holy playground there. Did things happen in your life so that your desires skew toward reaching for the calm to your fears? The security of Father’s embrace overwhelms you with peace there. Are you broken so that intimacy and fellowship are hard for you? His love so pure and powerful breaks through and takes you out of the prison and to himself for joy. Do you feel you never fully fit in? In Christ, he is preparing a place for you where all he has created you to be will be fully used without sin in a fully functioning garden city where you will do all to his glory, in fellowship with him and under his everlasting smile.

Now come back down to earth. What do you desire now? You will have him in heaven, fully, to the eternal satisfaction of your soul. What do you desire until then? Isn’t it ultimately the same thing; as much as is possible in this life?

God by giving me new life allows me to have a taste of heaven on earth. This is the joy of being a Christian. I can live in this world with all its secondary desires and hold them in their place. They won’t satisfy me. I have him on earth. And their place now used properly is even to help me have a taste of him through them.

All the joys of this life were never intended to usurp God’s place as the ultimate object of desire. Our sin is that we are constantly falling into the temptation to make secondary desires the ultimate desire. As a man said once, when we do that, we lose both the first thing, God, and the secondary things.
We give them a place in our lives they were not created to have. But if we make the ultimate thing God, we get the secondary things too. Used properly, in and through them we can even have another taste of him.

Eat your next steak that way; I guarantee you it will transform everything about it. You will really mean it when you thank him for it. You will really mean it when you say, “I don’t need it to be happy. But if you give it to me, I will receive it as a good gift from thy hand, and because it’s from thy hand, I will delight in its right place. And if it is thy will I don’t have it, the lack of it can’t take thee away from me.

You hear it all the time, “Be careful! It’s a sex-saturated culture you are growing up in,” and you need to hear it, and I do too. But do you know why it is that way? Do you know why in my lifetime and yours the culture has given itself over like a pack of animals to lust of every kind and sort? It’s because this culture has rejected the ultimate thing. Sex was created by God to be a picture of the intimacy of his covenant. A picture of it.

And the people of this culture, who once had him a whole lot more, the ultimate thing, don’t anymore. Something has to fill the void. Giving up the ultimate thing they have gone after its picture. And they keep trying to make it give them what only the ultimate thing can give them, but it only leads them to hell. “Maybe more and more of it; maybe more deviant and more perverted, that will do it. That will satisfy the restless heart.”

It is only you who can get it straight. Only you can use it and enjoy it as he tells you to, and find even a taste of the delight of him in it. Here is the antithesis, children of the covenant of grace! I know there will be a battle for it in your heart and soul. You have an old man in this life who doesn’t desire God, believes the lie that the apple is more fulfilling than the walking and talking. But see if he will not be the satisfaction of your soul, now and fully in the day our inheritance comes home to us, and God receives us to his own right hand, where streams of pleasure ever flow, and countless joys abide.

Rev. Griess is pastor of First Protestant Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan. This is the text of a speech given at the PRC Young People’s Convention held at Lake Geneva Christian Center in Alexandria, MN in August 2018.

**Convention Speech** Rev. Allen Brummel

**DRAW NEAR TO GOD**

It is tempting for believers to doubt God’s favor and love and to think it is not worth living as a Christian.

The main theme of Psalm 73 is the truth set forth in the first verse: “Truly God is good to Israel.” The final verses of the Psalm involve a renewed commitment to focus on God as the true treasure.

Draw near to God! Put your trust in the Lord God!

All the things of earth will fail. Friends, family, and spouses will forsake. Your health will deteriorate. Your strength will diminish. But God will not fail!

There is nothing as desirable as God. The closer you are to God, the less you will be affected by the distractions and attractions of the world. It is good for you, me, and all saints to draw near to God.

Drawing near implies distance.

By nature, there is a chasm between God and us. The fall of man into sin cast all men away from God. Not only are sinners far from God, they don’t even desire to be anywhere close to God. The wicked try to get as far away from God as they can, like Cain who “went out from the presence of the Lord” (Gen. 4:16).

Rather than draw near to God, every morning after we wake up we are tempted to run away from God. We are selfish, and we pursue our own desires. The prodigal son went into a far country and tried to get as far away as he could from his parents. The prodigal of Luke 15 is a picture of the sinner running away from God. We fill our minds and our days with all kinds of activities, and we try not to think about God. We draw near, not to God, but to all kinds of wicked things.

We draw near to the world and the ways of sin. Think of Demas whom Paul mentions in 2 Timothy.
4:10, “For Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world.”

The wicked think it is good to be far apart from God! The Psalmist starts thinking that way as well. “So foolish and ignorant I was,” says Asaph (Ps. 73:22).

What you need to realize is that the further you are from God, the closer you are to hell!

If God is truly good to Israel, then it is good for his people to draw near to him, as verse 28 states. God calls us to repent and to draw near to him.

How do we draw near to God?

We draw near to God only because he drew us to himself first! By virtue of his wonder of election and his work of grace in my life I am drawn to him, and I draw near to him.

What a wonder of grace! He drew you and me before the mirror of his perfect law, and he gave us eyes to see ourselves in our sin. He caused us to stand in shock before that mirror as we saw the folly and misery of our image by nature. We see the chains of sin binding us. We see the bonds of hell wrapped around us. We see ourselves enslaved to sin. We thought we were free, but now we see that we are bound. God works a wonder in our hearts by which he draws us to himself with his cords of love. His cords break the chains of bondage to sin and set us free!

He draws us by the power of his everlasting word to the cross and shows us the wonderful love by which he loved his people from before the foundation of the world.

We draw near to God only through Jesus Christ. Jesus is our Mediator through whom we are able to come to God. “Having made peace through the blood of his cross” (Col. 1:20).

We read here literally, the nearness of God is good! This is a marvelous confession. God’s everlasting love in Jesus Christ draws us to himself and gives us to know and believe that he is our God and we are his children. He gives you to know that you are free from the bondage to sin and death. You are free to draw near to God and his life and light and love. You experience peace and joy and the goodness of God’s presence. O how good it is!

But, we worry still and are inclined to depart from him. So ungrateful we are! With the Psalmist, our feet are sometimes almost gone, our steps slip (Ps. 73:2).

But, God is always near! He never fails even though we fail him. He never forsakes or lets us go.

There is only one place that is good for the child of God—to be near to God!

“They that are far from thee shall perish” (v. 27). As we are tempted to draw near to all kinds of things other than God, we constantly need to remind ourselves of the warnings of God’s word. I can not trust my own will and desires.

How must we draw near to God? By faith. Trust that his will is good for you. That involves self-denial. You belong to him, therefore what matters is not what you want, but what he would have you to do.

“I have put my trust in the Lord God” (v. 28). Renounce your own weak judgment of things. Trust that although the way seems dark and wrong and destructive, nevertheless, all will be well and God will work all things together for good to them that love him (Rom. 8:28).

We draw near to God through his word. The word of God is the revelation of God to us as his children. God reveals himself through creation, but that testimony is not able to be understood apart from the word. We draw near to God by reading and searching his word as his letter of love to us as his children. We not only view his glory in creation from afar, but we draw near by coming to his word.

As you read the scriptures, what will be the fruit? At least these four things: First, we will stand more and more in awe of the greatness and glory of God and his wonders. Second, we will see God’s grace manifest toward his people in treating them not how they deserve, but in love. Third, God’s faithfulness will be more and more seen as God does not forsake his promises. Fourth, you will more and more see your own sinfulness and unworthiness as you stand before the will of this great God who is the searcher of hearts.

The fruit will be seen in our worship and prayer. “That I may declare all thy works” (v. 28). We gather in worship to declare the great and glorious works of God. Prayer is a coming to him to glorify him and to make known our needs to him. The whole of our lives becomes a confession of the intimate covenant friendship with God, a communion of life concerning which David says: “I have set the Lord always before me.” We delight to go to his house to worship him Sunday after Sunday. We draw near to him in worship, confessing the greatness of his glory and bringing our sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving.

“Thou hast destroyed all them that go a whoring from thee” (v. 27). There is nothing about the world and their lives that we ought to envy. Pray for them! Witness to them of the greatness and glory of God and the peace and joy that is in Jesus Christ.

Nearness to God does not mean the end of earthly
troubles. Nearness to God is not first of all about my comfort and encouragement, but it is about God and his glory. The life to which God calls his people is a life of suffering with a view to final glory. God often does not change the circumstances of our life but gives us grace which changes our attitude and response to those troubles.

For the first time in this psalm, the Psalmist confesses God as his covenant God, Jehovah! Jehovah is the covenant-keeping God who works all things well and performs everything for his glory and his people’s good. He is our refuge and our strength! He bears our troubles and will preserve us in his great glory.

“It is good for me to draw nigh to God, that I may declare all thy works” (v. 28).

Your calling as you go to work and school is to declare all the works of God. Show forth his praise! You have been drawn to him and you have seen his greatness, his glory, his love, and his faithfulness. Your life is not about yourself, but it is about God and his glory. Be guided by him. Draw near to him and show forth his works!

Rev. Brummel is the pastor of Calvary Protestant Reformed Church in Hull, Iowa. This is the text of a speech given at the PRC Young People’s Convention held at Lake Geneva Christian Center in Alexandria, MN in August 2018.

Devotional Ben Laning

THE DAILY PRESS
“press toward the mark...”
(Philippians 3:14)

November 8 Read Hosea 7

A number of weeks ago we had a sermon about the sin of adultery, which the prophet says Israel is guilty of in Hosea 7:4. The sins of adultery and idolatry are quite related, as idolatry is committing spiritual adultery. Our pastor approached this commandment from the positive viewpoint of the sanctity of holy marriage. Our love for Christ must be exclusive. This is also true in our earthly marriages, as they picture that perfect union between Christ and his church. Even the parent-child relationship must not interfere with the marriage union. In a world that has completely embraced adultery, our young people are under increasing pressure to give in to their lust. Ironically, the world treats virginity as a disease, even as the STDs promiscuity brings with it run rampant. In opposition to this, parents must model a strong biblical marriage so their children have a high view of this union. It’s vital that our children see that “Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled” (Heb. 13:4a). When we confess this with the same frankness used in the Bible, then passages such as those found in the Song of Solomon become beautiful instead of embarrassing. Sing or pray Psalter #271.

November 9 Read Hosea 8

Hosea 8:13 reads, “They sacrifice flesh for the sacrifices of mine offerings, and eat it; but the LORD accepteth them not; now will he remember their iniquity, and visit their sins: they shall return to Egypt.” According to Calvin, in the first part of this verse, God is rebuking the Israelites for sacrificing and eating what should have been burnt with fire. These sacrifices were gifts from God that should have been offered to him, but instead the people were keeping the flesh for themselves. They corrupted this act of worship by using it just to cram themselves. The verse goes on to infer that God spares them for a time, but will soon punish them for their wicked acts. They could even flee to Egypt, but it would be in vain. Calvin ends on this note, but I wonder if there’s more to be said about the mention of Egypt. Why Egypt? Does it simply represent fleeing into the world in general? Is it showing how far they had fallen, that they would even look for their deliverance from the very nation they were brought out of? Sing or pray Psalter #24.

November 10 Read Hosea 9

Can you imagine how angry you would be if you walked up to someone and told them how happy
you were to see them, only to be met with rejection and contempt? It’s hard to imagine anyone being that hateful and uncaring, isn’t it? And yet, that’s the type of response Israel was giving God, and the type we give him as well by nature.

Hosea 9:10 reads, “I found Israel like grapes in the wilderness; I saw your fathers as the firstripe in the fig tree at her first time: but they went to Baalpeor, and separated themselves unto that shame; and their abominations were according as they loved.” Grapes are an unexpected and delightful find in the wilderness, as is finding the first crop of the year. However, the fruit was corrupt and unworthy of being sought after. As Calvin puts it, “The Israelites went in unto Baal-peor, as an adulterer goes in unto a harlot; and they separated themselves; for they denied God, and violated the faith pledged to him; they discarded the spiritual marriage which God made with them.” They had chosen the way of wickedness and now become abominable like their lovers. Sing or pray Psalter #92.

Yesterday we talked about Hosea 9:10, which begins, “I found Israel like grapes in the wilderness.” It was mentioned that finding grapes is a very pleasant surprise in the wilderness, but Israel wasn’t worthy of this eagerness, because they had forsaken God. In contrast, the chapter today begins, “Israel is an empty vine, he bringeth forth fruit unto himself: according to the multitude of his fruit he hath increased the altars; according to the goodness of his land they have made goodly images.” Now Israel is portrayed as a vine without grapes. The following words explain that Israel actually had some fruit, but it was corrupt. They had no good fruit. All they had was the fruit of serving self.

We talk about it often, but we need constant reminders that seeking self is a great danger for us today. We live in a world that glorifies self-worship as the right way to live. Without shame they talk about everything they deserve and getting as much out of this life as possible. Instead of this corrupt fruit, we must bring forth the pure fruit of walking according to God’s commandments. Sing or pray Psalter #81.

Ephraim was not the oldest of the tribe fathers, but God chose him as Israel’s leader. Because of this, Israel is often referred to simply as Ephraim. For example, Hosea 11:12a reads, “Ephraim compasseth me about with lies, and the house of Israel with deceit.” All of Israel was guilty, but God especially placed the blame on Israel’s leader, much like an oldest child receives most of the blame when all the children are disobedient.

As children, we may not think it’s fair that our parents usually make us responsible for things, but when we grow older we understand that this is taught in God’s word. As the head, whether that be an oldest sibling, teacher, father, minister, employer, or board president, we’re responsible for the actions of those under us. May God give us all the grace to lead in the right way, no matter what magnitude of leadership he’s called us to. Sing or pray Psalter #73.

Verses 7 and 8 of this chapter have contradicting statements. Hosea 12:7 says, “He is a merchant, the balances of deceit are in his hand: he loveth to oppress.” Then verse 8 says, “And Ephraim said, Yet I am become rich, I have found me out substance: in all my labours they shall find none iniquity in me that were sin.”

We had a sermon recently about the sin of stealing. It was brought out that not long ago things were sold according to weight, and there were often news stories about weighted balances being discovered. Although balances aren’t used much today, we do see frequent oppression in situations where someone in distress is charged extremely high interest, just to mention one example. Israel was committing these kinds of sins, but then denying any wrongdoing, as we see in verse 8. By nature we are very good at justifying our sin in our own eyes. Money can deprive man of all ability to use reason. As we were told in the sermon, it’s ok to be rich, but getting rich must not be our motivation in life. Sing or pray Psalter #198.

The last verse of this chapter reads, “Samaria shall become desolate; for she hath rebelled against her God: they shall fall by the sword: their infants shall be dashed in pieces, and their women with child shall be ripped up.” Those are some extremely graphic words of judgment for wicked Israel. We read of this horrific act taking place in a few different passages.
of scripture. In 2 Kings 8, God commands Elisha to anoint Hazael king of Syria. Elisha weeps when he does this, because he knows that Hazael will commit these atrocities in Israel. Amos 1:13 tells us that the Ammonites were also guilty of committing these acts in Israel. Then, in 2 Kings 15, we see that Israel had so degraded that even their king did this to his own subjects.

It’s difficult to imagine anything more evil than ripping up women with child. Not only is the act almost unbelievably gruesome, but it also shows an organized effort to completely exterminate the afflicted group. This also shows the seriousness of Israel’s sin, that not even their infants escaped judgment. Sing or pray Psalter #207.

**Read Hosea 14 November 15**

A couple of phrases in verses 2 and 3 stood out to me. At the end of verse 2 Israel says to God, “so will we render the calves of our lips.” Then verse 3 begins, “Asshur shall not save us; we will not ride upon horses.” Calvin says the end of verse 2 could be reworded to say, “The calves which are wont to be offered are not the true sacrifices in which God delights, but tend rather to show that men are to offer praise to God.” In other words, God isn’t pleased with mere outward obedience; we must obey him from the heart. Moving on then to verse 3, I remember from ancient world history class that Asshur is the capital of Assyria. Israel looked for deliverance from Assyria a number of times before that nation took them into captivity. Here it’s made plain that even if they get on horses and run to Assyria for help, there will be no deliverance. Our only hope is found in God, not in the powerful men and nations of this world. Sing or pray Psalter #235.

**Read Isaiah 28 November 16**

It’s important that teachers give instruction at the students’ level. When I started teaching there were some topics I remembered studying in college that I was interested in and very excited to teach. I put a lot of work into an in-depth study, but I became frustrated and disappointed when I presented it to my 5th and 6th-grade class because many of them were left confused. Instead of helping them delve deeper into the topic, I had made it so difficult to understand that they had gotten very little out of it.

Matthew Henry brings out this idea in his commentary on verse 10. However, he and Calvin connect this with verse 13 to see the whole picture. Israel had been taught like small children by the prophets, but it was of no effect to them. The word of God had become nothing more than “precept upon precept” and “line upon line.” No progress was being made in the instruction because the people weren’t interested in learning. The same is true for us. We can sit under the preaching our entire lives, but if we don’t come with ears to hear the only result is a hardened heart. Sing or pray Psalter #222.

**Read Isaiah 29 November 17**

Verses 1 and 2 read, “Woe to Ariel, to Ariel, the city where David dwelt! add ye year to year; let them kill sacrifices. Yet I will distress Ariel, and there shall be heaviness and sorrow: and it shall be unto me as Ariel.” Calvin says that the Ariel mentioned here is referring to the temple altar. Isaiah’s threat is coming on all Jerusalem, because the altar is their greatest defense. The people had come to believe that God would be with them as long as they continued an outward show of obedience, and they forgot that God commands obedience from the heart. Calvin states that some people think Ariel is referring to the temple as a whole, based on how it’s similar in shape to a lion. I don’t know what the connection is between Ariel and a lion. Do you? Calvin ends his discussion on this verse by saying Isaiah “intended to strip the Jews of their foolish confidence in imagining that God would assist them, so long as the altar and the sacrifices could remain, in which they falsely gloried, and thought that they had fully discharged their duty, though their conduct was base and detestable.” Sing or pray Psalter #253.

**Read Isaiah 30 November 18**

I remember when I went to Dordt College I had a professor who was also a minister. He was explaining these aspects of his life to us, saying he really enjoyed teaching to satisfy his intellectual interests and pastoring for his “touchy-feely” ones. Sadly, that’s what Christianity has become to so many nominal Christians today; it’s just about stirring up the emotions and making us feel good.

This is exactly what Israel was calling for in verse 10, when they asked the prophets to speak to them “smooth things.” They had no interest in hearing about their sins and their need to repent. To them, religion was about seeing what they could get out of it. Ultimately, they worshipped themselves, not God.

In contrast to this, verse 18 brings out that God is a God of judgment. The gospel is a two-edged sword, to strengthen some spiritually and to harden others. God is indeed a God of love towards his
people, but he hates sin and will judge those who reject him. We need to hear this word of judgment to see our unworthiness and give praise to God for the miraculous deliverance that’s ours through Jesus Christ. *Sing or pray Psalter #258.*

**November 19** Read Isaiah 31

What nonbelievers fail to understand is that calling a dream crazy is not an insult, it’s a compliment. Don’t be the fastest runner in your school, or in the world, be the fastest ever. Lose 120 pounds and become an Ironman, after beating a brain tumor. Don’t ask if your dreams are crazy, ask if they’re crazy enough. Believe in something, even if it means sacrificing everything.

These words are taken from Nike’s latest “Just Do It” ad featuring Colin Kaepernick, the NFL player who started kneeling during the national anthem a couple years ago to protest police brutality against black people. I find the tagline, “Believe in something, even if it means sacrificing everything,” quite ironic. What the world believes in is themselves, and what they have sacrificed is everlasting life with God. What nonbelievers fail to understand is that God is all-powerful, and we are nothing of ourselves. Isaiah 31:3 says, “Now the Egyptians are men, and not God; and their horses flesh, and not spirit. When the LORD shall stretch out his hand, both he that helpeth shall fall, and he that is holpen shall fall down, and they all shall fail together.”

*Sing or pray Psalter #256.*

**November 20** Read Isaiah 32

After reading through the chapter, I spent some more time examining the meaning of verses 8 and 9. According to my Bible, verse 8 is at the end of the heading “A King will Reign in Righteousness,” and verse 9 begins the heading, “Complacent Women Warned of Disaster.” Verse 7 talks about the deeds of the wicked, which the liberal in verse 8 are contrasted to. As Calvin describes these liberals, “The Lord makes them truly kind and bountiful, so that they no longer seek their own convenience, but are ready to give assistance to the poor, and not only do this once or oftener, but every day advance more and more in kindness and generosity.”

In contrast, the careless daughters of verse 9 can be seen as those who only care about themselves and don’t heed the warnings of God’s coming judgment. Some interpret these daughters as actually meaning villages, but Calvin believes it should be taken literally. How often are we like these careless daughters, instead of the liberal of verse 8? We must continually pray for grace to be careful in our spiritual fight and give liberally to our fellow saints in need. *Sing or pray Psalter #315.*

**November 21** Read Isaiah 33

Major cities were usually formed around large rivers, but Jerusalem was not. To give you an idea of size difference, the Jordan River that flows through Israel has an average width of about 100 feet, while the Mississippi River here in the U.S. is well over a mile wide in places. This lack of size is addressed in verse 21, where we read that Jerusalem didn’t need a large waterway because God was their river. The downside of living on such a large body of water was that enemies could sail their ships right up to your city, but this verse tells us this can’t be done in God’s river.

Now that God has been compared to a river, the wicked are compared to ships. Calvin brings out the analogy that ships may look very formidable, but they have no foundation. The mighty ships of the wicked are nothing before the God of heaven and earth. He destroys them and gives the spoil to his people. We see this in the fact that God works all of history for the good of his people, thereby using the wicked deeds of man to benefit us and lead us to heaven. *Sing or pray Psalter #220.*

**November 22** Read Isaiah 34

On April 25, 1986, a nuclear reactor at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in modern-day Ukraine exploded, spewing huge amounts of radiation into the surrounding countryside. The town of Pripyat, where many of the power plant workers lived, had been heralded as a city of the future, but it had to be quickly evacuated after the blast. To this day, no one can live in the 1000 square miles surrounding the plant. Amazingly, despite the dangerous radiation in the area, the absence of humans has caused wildlife to flourish in abandoned Pripyat and the surrounding villages.

Reading this chapter made me think of the Chernobyl incident we learned about in science class last year. These verses lay out the doom of all nations who are enemies of God’s church. According to Matthew Henry, this chapter can be divided into five parts: a demand for universal attention, a scene of blood and confusion, the reason given for the judgments, the country being destroyed and cities left for the animals, and the solemn ratification of all this. Chernobyl stands as a symbol of what
happens when man rejects God’s law and follows his own way. *Sing or pray Psalter #50.*

**November 23** Read Isaiah 35

In this chapter about God’s blessings upon the church, we read in verse 9 that “no lion shall be there.” This made me think about the different ways the picture of a lion is used in scripture. In Proverbs 28:1 we read that the righteous are bold as a lion. Hosea 11:10 says that God will roar like a lion at those who have rejected him. Revelation 5:5 tells us that Jesus is called the Lion of the Tribe of Judah. The verses above compare God and his people to lions, but there are also verses where the lion pictures our spiritual enemies. 1 Peter 5:8 says the devil prowls like a roaring lion. In Jeremiah 50:44 the Medes and Persians are prophesied to come and conquer Babylon like a lion. Then, Psalm 17:12 compares the wicked to lions ambushing their prey.

Why do you think the same figure is used to symbolize both God and the devil? Maybe it has something to do with the fact that the strength of the lion applies to God and his people, but the savagery of this beast is applicable to the devil and his followers. What are your thoughts? *Sing or pray Psalter #402.*

**November 24** Read Isaiah 36

In this chapter, the Rabshekah comes to Jerusalem demanding Judah’s surrender. Gertrude Hoeksema teaches that Rabshekah is actually the title for the Assyrian king’s chief cupbearer, not a name, and a quick internet search appeared to confirm the idea. Some commentators believe this Rabshekah was an apostate Jew, because the king and nobles rent their clothes when he blasphemed God, which would’ve been an unusual reaction to the words of a Gentile. Whatever the case might be, Rabshekah comes to the Jews with mocking words. He says he’ll give them 2,000 horses if they have 2,000 skilled riders to put on them. Hezekiah makes cute speeches to reassure you, he says, but he’s powerless. They can’t look for aid from Egypt either, because that weak and heathen nation will only hurt them more. Rabshekah shows his ignorance of Jewish religion by stating that Hezekiah showed he didn’t even trust in God by breaking down the high places. He also points out that none of the other nations’ gods helped them, so why should Judah’s God be any better? As we will see in the next chapter, God uses the Assyrians as an example to all those who question him. *Sing or pray Psalter #418.*

**November 25** Read Isaiah 37

This chapter and the previous one mention Shebna the scribe and Eliakim the son of Hilkiah as leaders in Judah. In Isaiah 22:15–25 we learn more about these two men. Judgment is pronounced upon Shebna, because he is wicked and proud. He had a great tomb constructed to honor him after he died. Instead of honor, what he received was death in exile, rejected and forgotten by his countrymen. Eliakim is set forth as the opposite side of the spectrum. He was a very godly man who was given Shebna’s position.

On another note, we left last time with the thought that God was going to make an example of the Assyrians. Hezekiah is told that he will be delivered from them, and then we read towards the end of the chapter that the angel of the Lord came at night and slew 185,000 of them. Then, after Sennacherib retreated and went to worship in the temple of his god, two of his own sons came and murdered him. By this God showed he’s the only one to be feared and that the Assyrian gods were no more powerful than those of the other nations that they had mocked. *Sing or pray Psalter #300.*

**November 26** Read Isaiah 38

There are a number of questions that come up when examining this story. First, why did God say Hezekiah would die when he ended up extending his life? Calvin says that God did this so that Hezekiah would believe it and not look around for some means of escape. Second, how can Hezekiah say that he had a perfect heart? Calvin tells us that the Hebrew word translated perfect here simply means integrity, as contrasted with hypocrisy. As a side note, do you think there’s any significance to the number 15? Why did God choose that number to be added to Hezekiah’s life? Another question I had while reading the chapter was why Hezekiah started talking about being oppressed right after he had been healed, but it appears that he was talking about his feelings before he was healed. Last, why the lump of figs? Calvin says that some think this was used because it would naturally make the affliction worse, and God wanted to clearly show the healing was a wonder, but he thinks figs do indeed have some medicinal qualities in situations like these. Using qualities of his creation doesn’t lessen the power of God’s work. *Sing or pray Psalter #291.*
I found the end of this chapter a little puzzling. Isaiah has just prophesied the judgment of the Babylonian captivity on Hezekiah and Judah for his sin. Hezekiah humbly responds that the word of the Lord is good and follows it with the statement, “For there shall be peace and truth in my days.” What does that mean? He couldn’t be expressing relief that it’s going to happen in the lifetimes of his children and not his own, could he?

In answering this, I read what Matthew Henry and John Calvin had to say. Henry says, “Though we must not be regardless of those that come after us, yet we must reckon ourselves well done by if there be peace and truth in our days, and better than we had reason to expect.” Calvin takes a similar stance and includes the following by way of explanation: “While he (Hezekiah) wished well to those who should live after him, yet it would have been un- tiful to disregard that token of forbearance which God gave by delaying his vengeance; for he might have been led by it to hope that this mercy would, in some degree, be extended to posterity.”

My Bible has as the heading to this chapter, “Who can stand before you?” These verses are all about God’s power and complete control over the wicked. The chapter ends, “He shall cut off the spirit of princes: he is terrible to the kings of the earth.”

There are many examples of this throughout scripture. There’s Pharaoh with the ten plagues and the destruction in the Red Sea. There’s the story of Balak, who hired Balaam to curse Israel, but God forced him to bless them instead. There’s the story we read a few days ago, about how the angel of the Lord came and slew 185,000 Assyrian soldiers, and King Sennacherib himself was murdered by his own sons soon after. There’s the time Israel and Judah were encamped against an enormous Moabite force, and God instructed them to dig ditches and fill them with water. The people must have been confused, but the rising sun shone over the water, making it look like blood. The Moabites joyfully concluded that their opponents had killed one another, and ran unarmed into the trap God had laid. Can you think of other examples where God was terrible to wicked kings?

The final verse here will always stick out to me. “But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.” When I was in high school, a classmate of mine died at a school function. On our senior class trip his parents gave us bookmarks with this verse on it. As a high schooler, I struggled to wait on the Lord. I was always extremely worried what everyone thought about me, all while working my tail off to appear as if I couldn’t care less. As I’ve grown older, the worrying has become more serious, but it hasn’t gone away. I worry about the signs of the times I see around us. I worry about my children and students and whether or not I’m being a good leader for them. I worry and forget to wait on the Lord. What an amazing comfort it is for us to be assured that God will always supply us with the strength for each trial. It’s only through believing that, that we can walk and not be faint.

When we studied ancient world history in school, we learned about the practices of flailing and winnowing. After the grain is cut down it’s laid on the threshing floor, where it can be flailed. This is done by taking two sticks attached with a string, holding on to one end, and using the other to beat the grain. This begins to separate the kernels from the chaff. This process gets rid of the large pieces, but winnowing is still needed to get rid of the chaff completely. To do this, the grain/chaff mixture is lightly tossed into the air. Since the chaff is so light it quickly blows away, and you are left with pure grain.

This grain harvesting analogy is used throughout scripture and again in this chapter. In verse 15, God tells Israel he will make them “a new threshing instrument having teeth,” which they will use to beat the mountains and “make the hills as chaff.” The next verse then talks about winnowing when it says of the wicked, “the whirlwind will scatter them.” At the last day, God’s enemies will be utterly destroyed like chaff beaten and blown away in the wind.

Read verses 18 and 19 once again. Who are the blind and deaf mentioned here? Calvin says some
interpret this as Isaiah describing the insults that wicked men throw at the prophets, but that can’t be correct when you examine the context. Instead, Calvin believes that all men are being accused of blindness, but especially the Jews. Matthew Henry adds that verse 18 might be interpreted as directed at the Gentiles, and verse 19 as stating that the Jews are even worse than the heathen around them. The Jews ought to have seen more clearly because God had given them the scriptures and cared for them all throughout their history.

This made me think about how we often willingly make ourselves blind and deaf. I was watching a football game this weekend, and an insurance commercial came with a song in it about heaven being a place on earth. Later that evening I caught myself singing that line without even thinking about the words I was saying. God has revealed himself to us, and that gives us a responsibility to spread the gospel and be on guard against sin. Sing or pray Psalter #403.

At the beginning of this chapter, God is reassuring his people that he is always with them. He tells the elect that he will not let the waters overflow them or allow the fire to burn them. In this connection, some examples come to mind. Of course, there’s the story of Israel crossing the Red Sea. God caused the water to part so that Israel crossed through on dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to follow the water crashed back over them. Another instance with water is when Peter walked on the water. God gave him the power to do this by faith, and he only started to sink when he became afraid and stopped trusting. Paul was caught in a major storm at sea when he was being brought to Rome, and the crew despaired of surviving it, but Paul told them an angel had appeared to him and said they would not die. An example that comes to mind with fire is when Daniel’s three friends were thrown in the fiery furnace, and the king saw the angel of Jehovah walking around in the furnace with them. Can you think of any other examples? Sing or pray Psalter #397.

We know everything belongs to God, but how often do we live otherwise? We decide to exercise and lose weight, not because we want to care for God’s property, but because we want to impress others. We use God’s money on toys and vacation get-a-ways we “need,” instead of giving more for the cause of the kingdom. We waste our time in pleasure-seeking and unprofitable activities, instead of using each moment to serve the creator of time. We use our talents for own benefit and forget that God gave them to us to serve him. We make decisions in our life based on what we’d rather do, instead of prayerfully considering what God’s will is for our life. Simply put, to our shame we often live for self.

Isaiah 44:15–16 talk about how foolish it is for us to use God’s gifts and not think to thank him for them. We bake our bread, cook our meat, worship the sustenance that has satisfied our bodies, and start thinking about what else we can get out of life. How foolish we can be! May we come to the cross daily, praising the God from whom all blessings flow. Sing or pray Psalter #306.

Isaiah 45:7 reads, “I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the Lord do all these things.” We know that God isn’t the author of sin, so how can it be true that God creates evil? Calvin explains that this can be easily explained by looking at the context. Notice that evil is contrasted with peace here, not righteousness. From this we see the evil mentioned refers to wars and unrest in the world, not sin itself. Calvin also takes this opportunity to speak out against the Sophists, Greek philosophy teachers of his day. This group acknowledged that wars and other calamities came from God but refused to say persecution of Christians was under his control. Calvin states clearly, “We ought therefore to hold this doctrine, that God alone is the author of all events; that is, that adverse and prosperous events are sent by him, even though he makes use of the agency of men, that none may attribute it to fortune, or to any other cause.” Our comfort isn’t found in claiming those things are outside God’s control, but in understanding that he will work even those things for our profit. Sing or pray Psalter #252.

In verse 10, God says he declares “the things that are not yet done.” Right now in Bible class we are studying the birth of Christ and all of the prophecies that were fulfilled. There are scores of prophecies we could look at, but here are a few of them. Already in Genesis 12:3 we have a prophecy where God tells Abraham that all the families of the earth will be blessed in him. Acts 3:25–26 reveals that this was fulfilled when Christ came to save and bless his
people from all nations. Genesis 49:10 says that the Savior would come from the tribe of Judah. God tells David in 2 Samuel 7:12–13 that the Messiah would come from his line and establish his throne forever. Then, in Isaiah 7:14 it’s revealed that Christ will be born of a virgin. Micah 5:2 goes on to explain that this wonder birth will occur in Bethlehem, a very insignificant city. Finally, Isaiah 25:8 states that Jesus will “swallow up death in victory” and wipe all tears from the eyes of his people by saving them from their sins. Sing or pray Psalter #195.

**December 6**  
Read Isaiah 47

In verses 8 and 10 Babylon makes the blasphemous claim, “I am, and none else beside me.” God stated this himself in verse 9 of the previous chapter and in verses 5, 6, 14, 18, 21, and 22 of Isaiah 45. Babylon convinces herself that she is God. She’s in complete control, and no one will ever be able to destroy her. In verse 7 she boasts, “I shall be a lady forever.” She wallows in pleasure and pride. This attitude is seen throughout world history. Nearly every empire has fallen apart because those in power completely gave themselves over to the lusts of this life. Instead of governing the people and protecting their borders, they wasted away in gluttonous and sexual entertainment. The same thing can be seen today. We live in the days of the last empire, the clay and iron feet of Daniel's image. Wicked man with his technology believes he can do anything, even conquer death itself. He is in control of his own destiny. Yet, it only takes a moment for God to remind them that he’s the one in control and he’s directing all things towards Christ’s return on the clouds of glory. Sing or pray Psalter #128.

**December 7**  
Read Isaiah 48

In Deuteronomy 32:29 God through Moses says of the Israelites, “O that they were wise, that they understood this, that they would consider their latter end!” God speaks this way again in Isaiah 48:18, where we read, “O that thou hadst hearkened to my commandments! then had thy peace been as a river, and thy righteousness as the waves of the sea.” These verses make it sound like God is wishing the people would do something that he’s unable to force them to do, but we know that’s not the case. We’ve discussed other passages even within the book of Isaiah that make it clear God is in complete control and is all-powerful. Calvin says we must not try to penetrate into God's secret counsel and ask why he didn’t make these people repent and follow him. However, there are some conclusions we can make when examining this history. When the Israelites went into captivity, it was a picture of the bondage of sin. Also, it led to the gospel going to all the nations. In addition, it glorifies God the most to choose a particular people. Can you think of other reasons for the Israelites' rejection? Sing or pray Psalter #44.

**The Unpardonable Sin**

What is the meaning of the unpardonable sin, or the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Matt. 12, Mark 3, Luke 12)? How does the unpardonable sin relate to the exhortation of Ephesians 4:30 not to grieve the Holy Spirit, and the exhortation of 1 Thessalonians 5:19 not to quench the Spirit?

Thank you!

**The Unpardonable Sin**

The question of the unpardonable sin has puzzled and troubled Christians for some time. With the biblical emphasis on the greatness of God’s mercy to penitent sinners, it seems out of place to speak of a sin that God will not forgive. For example, in Isaiah 55:7 we read, “Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.” In the Old Testament God forgives his people of dreadful sins: David is perhaps the most famous example, for he was forgiven of adultery and murder (Psalms 32 and 51). In the New Testament Jesus prays for, and obtains, pardon for those who crucified him (Luke 23:34), he pardons the dying thief (v. 43), and some 3,000 souls are pardoned at Pentecost (Acts 2:38, 41). In Corinth there were some who were “washed, sanctified, and justified” from a whole litany of sins: adultery, fornication, homosexuality, theft, drunkenness, and the like (1
sons of the Trinity: blasphemy against God (the
is come unto you.”

devils by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God
rather than to the workings of the Spirit. In verse
the miracles of Jesus to the operation of the devil,
of committing this sin by their wicked attribution of
context shows that the Pharisees were in danger
paragingly of, the Holy Spirit. Third, this blasphemy
speak against, or to speak contemptuously or dis-
against the Holy Ghost.” Therefore, blasphemy is to
it involves wicked speech. In verse 31 Jesus speaks of
“all manner of sin and blasphemy,” which he
then defines in verse 32: “but whosoever speaketh
against the Holy Ghost.” Therefore, blasphemy is to
speak against, or to speak contemptuously or dis-
disparsingly of, the Holy Spirit. Third, this blasphemy
against the Holy Spirit is not unrelated to Jesus, for
the context shows that the Pharisees were in danger
of committing this sin by their wicked attribution of
the miracles of Jesus to the operation of the devil,
rather than to the workings of the Spirit. In verse
28 Jesus challenges their unbelief, “But if I cast out
devils by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God
is come unto you.”

But we need to say more about this sin. Jesus
seems to make a difference between the three per-
sons of the Trinity: blasphemy against God (the
Father) and against the Son is pardonable (v. 32), but
blasphemy against the Spirit is unpardonable? And
what kind of blasphemy does Jesus have in mind?
What of the former cult member, such as a Jehovah’s
Witness, who denied the deity and personality of the
Spirit? If he comes to faith in the triune God, is he
not pardoned of his former transgressions?

This is where a second principle of Bible inter-
pretation is useful. We have examined the context,
and now we compare scripture with scripture. Are
there any other passages that speak of unpardon-
able sins or sins from which a person cannot repent?
The reader suggests Ephesians 4:30 (“Grieve not
the Holy Spirit of God”) and 1 Thessalonians 5:19
(“Quench not the Spirit”), but I would suggest a
couple of passages from Hebrews: “For it is impos-
sible for those who…were made partakers of the
Holy Ghost…if they shall fall away, to renew them
again unto repentance” (6:4–6) and “Of how much
sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought
worthy, who hath...done despite unto the Spirit of
grace?” (10:29). In the Hebrews passages we have
clear references to people who partook of spiritual
privileges, but they despised them. We have a fearful
description of people who came very, very close to
the kingdom of God, but who perish. Such people
blaspheme the Holy Spirit and commit the unpardon-
able sin, that is, the sin from which there is no
repentance, a sin in which God hardens them and
destroys them.

Arminians appeal to these two passages in sup-
port of their heresy of the falling away of true
saints. In so doing, they teach that the people in
Hebrews 6 and 10 are true believers. According to
the Arminian these people were regenerate, justified,
and sanctified, but they did not persevere in faith
and good works. Therefore, they perished. But that
is not what the two passages say: the writer carefully
avoids the language of regeneration, justification,
and salvation. Instead, he speaks of enlightenment,
tasting the heavenly gift, tasting the good word of
God, tasting the powers of the world to come, and
partaking of the Holy Spirit (6:4–5), from which they
“fall away” (6:6). In Hebrews 10:29 he speaks
of being “sanctified” (but not washed or redeemed)
by the blood of the covenant. These expressions fall
short of actual, spiritual salvation, God’s grace, the
forgiveness of sins, and everlasting life. In addition,
the context of Hebrews 6 helpfully contrasts what
the apostates had with what true believers enjoy:
“But, beloved, we are persuaded better things of
you, and...we thus speak” (v. 9).

Therefore, we understand what the writer to the
Hebrews writes about: he writes of church members, who enjoy very elevated spiritual experiences in the church, who come very close to the work of the Spirit in the church, but who are not truly converted, and who never believe. Such people make an external profession of faith for a time: they are baptized, they partake of the Supper, they hear the preaching and it even moves them, they occupy ecclesiastical office, and they even exercise some of the extraordinary gifts of the Spirit: they perform miracles, or miracles are performed on them; they prophesy; and they speak in tongues.

Nevertheless, they fall away. For despite all of their vaunted experiences, they merely “tasted” these things. And having tasted them, they reject them. And having departed from the church, where the Spirit works, they speak evil against the Spirit: they tread Christ’s blood underfoot and they do despite to the Spirit (10:29); they crucify to themselves (to their own hurt) the Son of God afresh and put him to an open shame (6:6). They blaspheme by their life and lip the Spirit of God: they mock their earlier Christian profession and became avowed enemies of the gospel and of the church. Now we understand that Jesus does not make the Spirit more glorious than the Father or the Son (as if blaspheming him were more serious than blasphehming the other two persons of the Trinity): he speaks of the Spirit because the Spirit works salvation in God’s children. To blaspheme the Spirit’s work is to blaspheme the work of the Father and the Son, whose work it is. And that is exactly what the people in Hebrews 6 and 10 do; and that is exactly what the Pharisees were in danger of doing.

Such people commit the unpardonable sin: “It is impossible...if they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance” (Heb. 6:4, 6). They cannot repent because they are hardened in sin; no one can persuade them to repent, not even the elders who work with them before they depart from the church; and God himself does not grant them repentance. For them “there remaineth no more sacrifice for sin, but a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries” (Heb. 10:26–27).

You see, of course, that the texts in Hebrews prove too much for the Arminian: he needs a text where a saint falls away, perhaps multiple times in a lifetime, but is restored time and time again. Here we have a text that teaches irreversible, irrevocable apostasy, for the apostate is not a saint, but a hypocrite.

Therefore, blasphemy against the Spirit is never an accidental sin, a slip of the tongue as it were. Nobody who commits this sin calls the pastor worried about his soul, for such a person is hardened in sin: he does not want to repent; he mocks the very idea of repentance. Sensitive souls sometimes think that they might be guilty of this sin, but if you think you have committed this sin, and the thought troubles you, know of a certainty that you have not committed this sin. God will keep you, beloved Christian, from this sin! Therefore, do not despair, but believe. He that believes will be forgiven, no matter what sins he has committed, even if he thinks (wrongly) that he has committed this sin.

To commit this sin requires knowledge, which is why Jesus warns the Pharisees: they had seen his miracles; they had even experienced something of his own power “up close and personal,” as it were. Their contemptuous words and thoughts brought them very close to this sin. They must repent! One today in the church who despises the work of Christ, which is the work of the Spirit, needs to be warned against this sin: do not continue along that road, lest you reach the point of no return, when you fall away from the good things that you have tasted in his church. God will use such warnings to keep his people from that sin. The reprobate in the church will despise such warnings to their eternal ruin.

Therefore, the unpardonable sin is not the “griev- ing” or the “quenching” of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 4:30 and 1 Thess. 5:19). While these are sins against the Holy Spirit, they are not unpardonable sins against the Holy Spirit, nor do they constitute blasphemy against him. In both cases, Paul warns against sins that the saints in those churches were already committing (the Greek uses the present tense). If they were committing the unpardonable sin, he would not address them as saints, not would they have any interest in reading his letter. The context of Ephesians 4 shows that “corrupt communication,” “bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, evil speaking, and malice” grieve the Holy Spirit. In Canons 5:5 we learn that by our “enormous sins” we “grieve the Holy Spirit,” yet the next article promises deliverance from such sins (Canons 5:6). Quenching the Holy Spirit is related to the despising of prophesying (1 Thess. 5:20), which in our modern context is the despising of the faithful preaching of the gospel. We despise the preaching by refusing to listen to and obey the preaching. We despise the preaching by criticizing and judging it instead of humbling ourselves under it and seeking to learn from it.

Grieving and quenching the Spirit are serious sins from which we must repent (from which we can and do repent by the grace of God), but they are not the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

Schuyler
Writing contest

TOPICS & PRIZES

Junior High (Grades 7–9 during the 2018–19 school year)
In an essay of 4–5 pages, explain
• What the Canons of Dordt are
• What doctrines they teach and what doctrines they oppose
• Why they had to be written out
• Why they are important for the church today
1st place: $300 • 2nd place: $200 • 3rd place: $100

Senior High (Grades 10–12 during the 2018–19 school year)
Choose any one of the five main doctrines to which the five heads of the Canons are devoted.
In an essay of 6–7 pages, explain
• What that doctrine is and how the Canons prove it
• What wrong doctrine the right doctrine opposes
• Why today we must still promote the right doctrine and oppose the wrong
1st place: $400 • 2nd place: $300 • 3rd place: $200

Post High (those who graduated in the years 2011–18)
Pick one of the following topics
• The Canons’ position on common grace
• The Canons’ teaching regarding the preaching of the gospel/well meant offer
• The Canons as a positive example of polemics, both as regards content and method
In an essay of 8–10 pages, explain
• What the Canons teach/demonstrate about the point you chose
• What the Canons oppose or are not teaching
• Why this is relevant to us today
1st place: $500 • 2nd place: $400 • 3rd place: $300

GENERAL RULES

• All essays should be typed, double-spaced, using Times New Roman 12 point font, with one inch margins, and adhere to the page limits. The essayist’s name should appear on the front page with the essay’s title.
• All essays should give evidence that the writer has done some research and should include citation of sources.
• Emailed essays are due January 15, 2019. They may be emailed in Word or PDF format to writingcontest@dordt400.org.
• Mailed essays must be postmarked by January 15, 2019. Submit three copies, printed on white paper, each copy separately stapled, to Protestant Reformed Seminary Writing Contest, 4949 Ivanrest Ave. S.W., Wyoming, MI 49418.

Sponsored by the Protestant Reformed Theological School in conjunction with the 2019 Conference commemorating the 400th anniversary of the Synod of Dordt
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: Kade Michael, son of Mr. & Mrs. Bryan & Elisabeth Landheer—Byron Center, MI Sally Jo, daughter of Mr. & Mrs. Jeff & Sarah VanTil—Byron Center, MI Trenton Lee, son of Mr. & Mrs. Cody & Mariah Hoekstra—Doon, IA Rosemary Sue, daughter of Mr. & Mrs. Jeremy & Hannah Monsma—First, MI Zachary Augustine, son of Mr. & Mrs. Tom & Shauna Spriensma—Georgetown, MI Amber Raelyn, daughter of Mr. & Mrs. Aaron & Rachael VanDonselaar—Georgetown, MI Zachary Richard, son of Mr. & Mrs. Daniel & Rachelle Wierenga—Immanuel, Lacombe, Canada Dylan Henry, son of Mr. & Mrs. Jeff & Roseanne DeVries—Southwest, MI Beckett Lewis, son of Mr. & Mrs. Preston & Karissa Crich—Wingham, Canada Adult baptism: Chester Mansona and Dale Mansona—Limerick, Wales

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: Erin Ferguson—Edmonton, Canada Zander Groenhof—Georgetown, MI Samantha Engelsma—Hope, MI Samuel Bomers—Hope, MI Jake DeVries—Hope, MI Erika Grieß—Loveland, CO Grant Kamps—Southwest, MI Alana Schipper—Southwest, MI Deneka Crich—Wingham, Canada Emma Kikkert—Wingham, Canada Evan Kikkert—Wingham, Canada Haley Kikkert—Wingham, Canada

MARRIAGES
“For this God is our God forever and ever: he will be our guide even unto death.” Psalm 48:14
Mr. Jared Cammenga and Miss Taylor Dommisse—Byron Center, MI Mr. Aaron Talsma and Miss Tessa Hunderman—Byron Center, MI Mr. Jonathon Moore and Miss Brenda Kleyn—Grace, MI Rev. Jonathan Langerak and Miss Sarah Kleyn—Spokane, WA Mr. Matt DeVries and Miss Heidi Potjer—Southwest, MI
SYNOD OF DORDT PART 10: THE CANONS OF DORDT

The Synod of Dordt officially began on November 13, 1618 in the city of Dordrecht. It lasted through 154 meetings and ended on May 9, 1619. In a little less than six months, the delegates came to the decision that the Bible taught that all men are totally depraved, God’s election isn’t based on any conditions man has to fulfill, Jesus’s death on the cross was only for the elect, grace cannot be resisted, and once a person is saved, they cannot fall from God’s grace and be unsaved. These are the points that we call the five points of Calvinism.

By the time the synod finished, the delegates had written the *Canons of Dordt*, a creed still used as one of the Three Forms of Unity in the Protestant Reformed Churches today, making it the second creed along with the Belgic Confession to come out of the Netherlands during this time. It is also unique among the three forms of unity since it focuses only on upholding the five points of Calvinism and refuting the five points of the Remonstrants, instead of providing a summary of the entire Reformed doctrine the way the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism do.

As we celebrate the 400th anniversary of the Synod of Dordt this November, we can be thankful for the many means God used to bring about this Synod and uphold biblical doctrines. The synod came about after years of struggle, hardship, war, persecution, and political strife in the Netherlands. Many times it looked like Calvinism would be wiped out in the Netherlands. Yet God still used that same persecution and political schemes to preserve his church and his truth.

*Tricia is a member of Byron Center Protestant Reformed Church in Byron Center, Michigan.*
HIS MERCY ENDURETH FOREVER

— PSALM 136 —

Illustrated by Kathleen DeJong

O give thanks unto the Lord; for he is good: for his mercy endureth for ever. To him that by wisdom made the heavens: for his mercy endureth for ever. —Psalm 136:1, 5

The familiar words of Psalm 136 and engaging illustrations will inspire covenant children and their parents to thank God each day for his unending mercies!

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