BEACON LIGHTS

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Dear Editor,

I want to thank you for your answer to Jeff Andringa in the "Letters" of the October issue of Beacon Lights. I agree with you that the decision of Synod 2018 requires further study because differences linger in the churches.

You quote a small part of the decision of synod, which reads, “The experience and assurance of justification in one’s consciousness is justification, and justification is by faith alone in Christ alone.” The very next sentence in the decision continues with, “Good works...do not function as helps for finding and maintaining assurance of our justification” (Acts of Synod 2018, p. 69).

In his commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism, Ursinus answers the rhetorical question posed in the decision itself, “How could works help add to that assurance?” when he answers the question of why good works are necessary (part two of Lord’s Day 33). He explains in very simple and understandable sentences: 1. That we may thereby testify our faith and be assured of its existence in us by the fruits which we produce in our lives. 2. That we may be assured of the fact that we have obtained the forgiveness of sins through Christ and that we are justified for his sake. 3. That we may be assured of our election and salvation. 4. That our faith may be exercised, nourished, strengthened, and increased by good works. 5. That we may adorn and commend our profession, life, and calling by our good works. 6. That we may escape temporal and eternal punishment. 7. That we may obtain from God those temporal and spiritual rewards which, according to the divine promise, accompany good works both in this and in a future life (http://www.rcus.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Editor’s Note

This issue includes the articles submitted for this year’s scholarship essay competition by those individuals who aspire to the high calling of teacher or pastor. The two writing prompts that each author could choose from are as follows:

1. Dead orthodoxy is a real threat in our lives and the lives of our youth. Matthew 15:8 teaches us to keep our hearts near to God, not just our lips. In a day and age where lip service is easily paid to the Christian life how do you intend to teach or minister to our children and young people about this threat?

2. Acts 14:22 says, “We must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God,” indicating that the Christian life will be a life of suffering. Identify concrete instances of the ways you will suffer for God’s sake not only as a Christian, but specifically as a pastor or Christian school teacher. How do you intend to provide a Christian example in such suffering for your students and parishioners, particularly in our world of entitlement and pleasure-seeking?

Please also take note of the Scholarship Committee newsletter written by Rev. Holstege. In this newsletter he summarizes well the road to each of those callings, and the rich rewards to be found in them.

May we be always in prayer asking the Lord to give us faithful teachers and pastors, and may we be willing to support them as they pursue this work.

Last, the Beacon Lights staff expresses Christian sympathy to one of our devotional writers, Abby Van Solkema in the death of her father, Leroy De Vries. May her devotional of April 28 serve as a comfort to her and her family, as certainly it did to the reader in the April issue of Beacon Lights: “Our heavenly Father, the creator of the universe, does not make mistakes. Everything that happens is according to his perfect, detailed plan. He has a perfect plan for returning the people of Judah from exile back to the promised land. He has a perfect plan for the salvation of each one of his children. And he has a perfect plan for our eternal home in heaven.” May she and her family find comfort knowing that her father now experiences the joy of that eternal home. “Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also” (John 14: 1–3).
Some of us remember when these things were taught in our churches and explained thoroughly as being all of God; for example, the 34th chapter, “Assurance Through Diligence,” of Herman Hoeksema’s book *Communion With God*. The statement made by synod seems to disagree with what Ursinus and Herman Hoeksema taught in their explanations concerning assurance. If this ancient landmark of Ursinus’ teaching needs to be removed, then I believe our leaders need carefully to explain and show why. If I must believe that Ursinus is wrong with his statements, it may cast doubt on the whole Catechism for myself and possibly others. Maybe this just appears to be two opposing views and there is a way to harmonize them. Perhaps myself and possibly others are just not seeing how they are not different. Any light you can shed on this would be appreciated and helpful.

Sincerely,
Edward Hoekstra

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**Letter of response to Ed Hoekstra**

Dear Mr. Hoekstra,

From a certain perspective, my answer could be very brief. Assurance of salvation belongs to salvation itself, which is by faith alone. Therefore, to say that we enjoy assurance of our salvation by working is to say we are saved by faith and works. When we speak of our justification, namely that we are declared righteous before God, this also includes the assurance of our justification. God does not save objectively and then withhold the subjective knowledge of that justification and make it dependent or conditioned upon the response of man. It was the Arminians who taught that assurance comes by man’s working. The Synod of Dordt rejected this when it wrote in Head One, Rejection of Errors 7: “The Synod rejects the errors of those who teach that there is in this life no fruit and no consciousness of the unchangeable election to glory, nor any certainty, except that which depends on a changeable and uncertain condition.” When a man is saved through faith in Jesus Christ, he is “sealed with that holy Spirit of promise” (Eph. 1:13). That “sealing” is the assurance of his salvation through the work of the Holy Spirit. That a man is assured when he is given the gift of faith is proven by Romans 5:1: “Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Objectively and subjectively (in the consciousness of the believer), justification is by faith alone, in Christ alone, by grace alone.

Your question deals with a statement made by synod, found on page 69 of the *Acts of Synod*, having to do with our assurance of salvation. We have to look at the context where that quotation appears. Synod was responding to a sermon on the Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 23. This Lord’s Day is found in the section titled, “Of Man’s Deliverance” (L.D. 5–31). The question and answer deal with our justification (“How art thou righteous before God?”). The sermon in question taught that some aspect of our justification (in this case our assurance) is based on our good works. Lord’s Day 23 does speak of works, but only negatively. Our consciences accuse us that we have “grossly” violated all of the good commandments of God and have kept none of them. Maybe the thought then arises in us that if we work harder, maybe next week we will be better, and things will be better for us.

The Catechism points out that we are “still inclined to all evil.” There is absolutely no hope for us if we look to our works for any aspect of our justification, including our assurance of justification. The Lord’s Day makes this abundantly clear.

This Lord’s Day does provide us the answer, however, as synod pointed out. It is not only possible, but the reality, that the child of God will have assurance of his salvation. Sinners though we are, it is “as if I never had had nor committed any sin.” And even more than that, it is “as if I had fully accomplished all that obedience which Christ has accomplished for me.” This is a staggering truth! Brother, it’s like we had never committed any sin, and as if we have done all that Christ has done! How can that be true when we know ourselves the way we do? It is true because of faith, and more specifically, because of the one we are united to by faith, namely Jesus Christ (Belgic Confession, Art. 23). All of this is true only because of Jesus Christ. As to works, to this point in the Catechism they only serve to condemn us.

Lord’s Day 23 of the Heidelberg Catechism teaches justification by faith alone. That is why synod had to teach what it did in the section you quote. To say that our works contribute to our assurance is a way would be to compromise the truth of justification by faith alone.

Let’s look to another Lord’s Day in this section dealing with our deliverance. Lord’s Day 7, Q&A 21 asks the question, “What is true faith?” The answer is clear and simple. True faith is not only knowledge but assured confidence. Assurance! Faith is assurance! God, not only to others, but to me also has given “remission of sin, everlasting righteousness,
and salvation.” Where does a treatment of assurance belong? It belongs to true faith, to our deliverance from sin and death, which all find their source in Jesus Christ. When a child of God is given faith so he believes in Jesus Christ, he is given assurance of that salvation, as we have seen in Romans 5:1: “Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” God loves us from eternity, and he will see to it that we know his love, by faith in Jesus Christ.

It is in light of this truth that synod asked the rhetorical question, “How could works help add to that assurance?” (Acts, 69). That question is appropriate, even demanded in the circumstances. After hearing everything that God has done for us in Jesus Christ, am I now going to bring my filthy rags (my righteousesses, according to Isaiah 64:6) before the throne of God and demand something of him in return? To say there is something that I have to do yet to receive any aspect of my salvation, including to receive assurance, would be to say that Christ’s work was not sufficient, which would be a “gross blasphemy” (BC, Art. 22).

We receive all of the gifts of salvation—including assurance—through faith alone in Christ alone.

The Canons teach the same in Head 5, Article 9, where we read that believers “may and do obtain assurance according to the measure of their faith.” Faith and assurance are of the same essence, and to try to separate them is to corrupt a proper understanding of faith itself. In the very next article this is reinforced when it teaches us that this assurance “springs from faith in God’s promises” (Canons, 5/10). How is it that someone loses a sense of God’s favor for a time and begins to doubt? Their “enormous sins” have interrupted the “exercise of faith” (Canons, 5/5). What restores this assurance? Is it working harder? Performing more and better good works? Maybe even repenting and turning from our sins will accomplish this? As necessary as turning and repenting are, the solution is to again turn to the Mediator in faith so that we “may again experience the favor of a reconciled God” (Canons, 5/7).

The Lord’s Day you quote, L.D. 33, belongs to the final section, “Of Thankfulness.”

This is important all by itself. We have left the section that teaches us how it is that we receive anything from God, including escape from punishment (L.D. 5), satisfaction for sin (L.D. 6), restoration of righteousness, life, and assurance (L.D. 7), our salvation (L.D. 11), the favor of God (L.D. 15), heavenly graces (L.D. 19), and so much more. Now we are in the section that teaches us what we give to God. The receiving is over, and we move now into needed instruction on what the child of God does with the knowledge from the previous section.

The answer is again simple and clear—do good works “so we may testify by the whole of our conduct our gratitude to God for His blessings” (L.D. 32). In Christ, we are new creatures! Live out of that new life! The fruits that inevitably flow from a true and living faith do not obtain or merit anything with God, including our assurance. They are fruit and only fruit.

What then of your quotations from Ursinus and Hoeksema that seem to imply, if not state, that our assurance is dependent, at least in some way, upon our good works?

The meditation of Hoeksema to which you draw our attention is explaining 2 Peter 1:10.1 “Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall.” The space does not permit me to go into a detailed explanation of this text, but I do draw your attention to the fact that throughout the meditation Hoeksema speaks of our good works that testify to our faith as fruits: “Only by bearing constantly the fruit of our calling”; “they are constant fruits of your calling”; and he speaks of a life that is “barren of the fruits of grace” (265, 266).

Also, Hoeksema immediately at the beginning of the meditation, writing about the “unspeakably joyous certainty of mind and heart,” writes that it is “not because of works.”2 He goes on to say our election includes “the blessed confidence that your own personal part” is with those who are elected to eternal glory. Because Hoeksema includes our “blessed confidence” as part of our election, will we then suggest that Hoeksema would have our works play a role in our election? Hoeksema is carefully and beautifully calling us to be diligent in our Christian life, always laboring to bear fruit (and it is labor, because of our old man which hates the beautiful fruit of good works), which fruit is itself an evidence of the new life of Christ in us.

John Calvin’s explanation of the text in his commentary is helpful: “purity of life is not improperly called the evidence and proof of election, by which the faithful may not only testify to others that they are the children of God, but also confirm themselves

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1 Herman Hoeksema, Communion with God, ed. David J. Engelsma (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2011), 260–266.
2 Ibid., 260.
in this confidence, in such a manner, however, *that they fix their solid foundation on something else*” (emphasis mine).\(^3\)

Good works can and do provide evidence of our faith, as L.D. 32 teaches (“assured in himself of his faith”). There is a confirming aspect to our good works, as there is a confirming aspect to the apple hanging off the apple tree. We can look at those good works, and they can provide us evidence that we have faith. If these good works are absent, we do well to question the liveliness of our faith in Jesus Christ (or even the existence of our faith), because faith will always produce good works. Indeed, it is what we were created unto (Rom. 7:6; Eph. 2:10; Titus 2:14). A faith that produces no good works is no faith at all (James 2:17).

Our good works are fruit, and only fruit, that proceed from true faith and are done out of gratitude. The answer to the Catechism’s question on good works points this out: “also, that every one may be assured in himself of his faith *by the fruits thereof*” (L.D. 32).

I contend that this is the view of Ursinus as well, which explains his language in the section you quoted. Later, Ursinus disavows the fact that our works might in any way earn or merit with God (and to say that our assurance is dependent on our working is to say that that working merits with God). Ursinus himself points out the danger of looking to our works (or the law) to obtain any aspect of our justification. When a believer hears the commands of the law as being something he must do for salvation, the words of Deuteronomy 27:26 terrify him.

“Cursed be he that confirmeth not all the words of this law to do them.” Hearing that, according to Ursinus, believers would then “consider their own imperfection, [and] their conscience tells them that they can never perform all these things, so that they are continually led to cherish doubts, and to live in dread of the curse of the law.” “What then?!” the believer cries out in anguish. Ursinus replies with the balm of Gilead: “Faith, however, imparts sure and solid comfort to the conscience, because it grounds itself in the promise of God, which cannot disappoint the soul. ‘The inheritance of is faith, that it might be by grace, to the end the promise might be sure to all the seed.’ (Rom. 4:16).”\(^5\)

As to Hoeksema, there is a better place to find his teaching on assurance than in his meditation on 2 Peter 1:10, as beautiful as that is. We should look to his explanation of Romans 5:1 (“Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ”). He provides a lovely definition of assurance: “This means that if we place ourselves before God with our whole being, in the consciousness of who and what He is, then there is no fear in our heart.” He goes on to say that when someone has faith, he has assurance, fully and completely. “The same faith by which we are justified carries with it this peace because it brings to us the consciousness of the peace of God towards us. By this faith I lay hold on the peace that is in God’s heart towards me.” How do we obtain this peace? “Our justification by faith is the objective basis of this peace. Subjectively, justification by faith is the way to this peace.”\(^8\)

That is why Synod 2018 *had* to say what it did—it was defending nothing less than justification by faith alone. How is the righteousness of Christ imputed to us? It is by faith alone. How are we made partakers of all of the benefits of salvation, including assurance? It is by faith alone. Recognizing that I now repeat myself from my October editorial, it is not faith itself that provides all of these benefits, but it is merely the instrument. How do I have assurance of my salvation? Don’t look to yourself; look to the object of your faith, Jesus Christ, as Hoeksema himself teaches: “That is, as long as I look only at Christ, there is an undisturbed consciousness in my soul that I am righteous. The moment I look at myself, this consciousness is gone. But as long as I look at Christ, there is an undisturbed consciousness of justification, and therefore of peace.”\(^9\)

If I am ever in doubt of my salvation for whatever reason, be it my sin or the vicissitudes of life, and you are in a position to counsel me, feel free, if you feel so compelled, to point out the good works that you see in me as evidence of my faith. That may be a good start. But don’t stay there too long. Point my

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5 Ibid., 487.


7 Ibid., 184.

8 Ibid., 182.

9 Ibid., 186–187.
How can I become a Christian school teacher?

A Christian teacher is full of knowledge he is bursting to communicate with simple words, relatable illustrations, and practical implications. She is the paragon of nurturing stability and personal godliness. He is a mentor as well as instructor. She is a guide, an example, a molder and a shaper of minds and hearts. Effective teaching is a priceless skill not to be compared to the staccato motions of any modern device or software. A teacher cannot be programmed or manufactured on an assembly line, but must be trained and refined through diligent labor and experience. The young person who desires to become a Christian school teacher can expect a few years in the institutions of higher learning.

What about a minister of the gospel?

The ears of many young men surely perk up when the preacher makes the regular petition for pastors and shepherds. We hope some of those young men feel called at least to begin pursuing the course that ends with ordination. But where does that course begin and how do I follow it? The young man who desires the office of minister desires a good thing, but he can also expect years of rigorous testing in the seminary. Even before the doors of seminary open to him, he too must walk in the halls of college or university for a time.

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Sincerely, your brother in Christ,
Dewey Engelsma

Rev. Joe Holstege

SCHOLARSHIP COMMITTEE NEWSLETTER

How can I become a Christian school teacher?

A Christian teacher is full of knowledge he is bursting to communicate with simple words, relatable illustrations, and practical implications. She is the paragon of nurturing stability and personal godliness. He is a mentor as well as instructor. She is a guide, an example, a molder and a shaper of minds and hearts. Effective teaching is a priceless skill not to be compared to the staccato motions of any modern device or software. A teacher cannot be programmed or manufactured on an assembly line, but must be trained and refined through diligent labor and experience. The young person who desires to become a Christian school teacher can expect a few years in the institutions of higher learning.

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We need ministers and teachers, of course. Jesus taught us long ago that we should always be praying the Lord to send laborers into his harvest (Matt. 9:38). It does not matter whether the church is flourishing, languishing, prosperous, or lean at any given time in her history. The harvest is always white and ready, and “he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap” (Eccl. 11:4). The need for ministers is an ever-present reality in the church, but felt especially acutely at present in light of the repeated urging of our synod. And if school building projects and the establishment of new schools are any indicator, the need for good Christian school teachers is at an all-time high.

But the need for ministers and teachers comes at a cost. It comes at the cost of long hours spent behind books and desks, receiving back papers meticulously marked with red ink, tremulously taking the first steps behind a podium in a classroom with a freshly made lesson plan. It comes at the cost of intense effort, discipline, and time. But there is another cost as well, much more tangible, which is measured in dollars and cents. We can say we need ministers and teachers. We can pray for them knowing our heavenly Father will much less deny us what we ask in true faith than our parents will deny us earthly things (LD 46). But as with most of his gifts, Father is pleased to provide this gift also through means, in this case the means of careful training. In our day and age, proper training includes the financial burden which inevitably comes along with it.

The Federation Board of Protestant Reformed Young People’s Societies, with a sincere desire to promote the pursuit of such training, once instituted a committee called the Protestant Reformed Scholarship Fund Committee. This scholarship committee becomes visible only once a year when a number of highly scored essays are published in Beacon Lights magazine, such as the issue currently in your hands. But behind that visible climax of its labors is the organization by the committee of

attention away from me and on to something else. As Calvin wrote, we must fix our solid foundation on something else, or to put it differently, on someone else. And that someone else is Jesus Christ. There, and only there, will I find assurance of my salvation.

You need not fear that any ancient landmarks were removed, neither do you need to doubt the Catechism. That was another beautiful aspect of Synod 2018. The decision taken at that assembly was faithful to our fathers and our “ancient landmarks.” In fact, our leaders took us back over 500 years to the most ancient of landmarks—the Solas of the Reformation: salvation is by faith alone, in Christ alone, by grace alone. If proof is going to be demanded of someone, it must be demanded of those who wish to alter the landmarks, not of those who faithfully defended them.

Sincerely, your brother in Christ,
Dewey Engelsma

Rev. Joe Holstege
the annual writing contest, whereupon financial rewards are granted on the basis of the quality of writing and reported needs. All essays are read multiple times by the six committee members who score the essays according to the criteria of a pre-approved grading rubric. This year those six committee members included Joel Bodbyl as president, Justin Van Dyke as secretary, Emily Kuiper as treasurer, Mr. Brian Dykstra from Hope PRC school as teaching advisor, Mr. Tom Pastoor as business advisor, and Rev. Joe Holstege of Zion PRC as spiritual advisor. Thanks especially to Justin Van Dyke and Mr. Brian Dykstra for their labors over the last three years, as their terms have now expired. Thanks also to the twenty-seven applicants who submitted essays to the scholarship committee this year! It is heartening to know the Lord is answering our prayers for spiritually-minded, academically gifted, and mature young men and women to pursue these important callings. Please continue to take advantage of the scholarship committee as a resource that is designed for your use and benefit!

It may be of interest to the readers of Beacon Lights that the scholarship committee grants its rewards out of an account supplied by church collections, private donations, and from the capital earned by its investments. The current financial situation of the scholarship committee enabled it to distribute $38,600 of financial assistance to this year’s applicants. We are thankful for the opportunity to assist these students with the heavy costs of tuition, textbooks, supplies, and every-day living expenses.

However, if you do the math, $38,600 distributed to 27 applicants averages to about $1,430 per applicant. In reality, some applicants were rewarded more and some less than the average. Surely every little bit of assistance counts. But it should not be lost on us that in comparison to the days when the cost of college tuition could be covered by a summer’s work in the fields, today’s prospective teachers and ministers are faced with a serious financial obstacle. Barring any grants or scholarships, four years at Grand Valley State University will run a young man or woman more than $40,000 in tuition expenses alone. The private Christian colleges many of our young people desire and are encouraged to attend will run them close to that amount in one simple year. As great as our need for teachers and ministers is at present, so high are the costs associated with acquiring the necessary training for those callings.

The scholarship committee would love, if possible, to help our prospective teachers and ministers more significantly in the future. Naturally, the implication is that the bottom line of the scholarship committee’s fund must grow. The higher the fund, the higher the awards to be distributed. We are thankful to the members of the Protestant Reformed Churches who consider this worthy cause when the collection plate passes and when year-end donations are made. Please continue to consider this cause in your giving, along with your prayers to the Lord of his harvest, who alone can provide us with capable teachers and ministers.

Rev. Joe Holstege is the pastor of Zion Protestant Reformed Church in Jenison, Michigan.

Scholarship Essay Tori Mowery

DEAD ORTHODOXY

The Christian church has been fighting for nearly two thousand years: battling heresy, writing canons, forming creeds. What more could the devil throw at us? It may not seem like it here in the United States of America, but we are under a severe attack, an attack crafted ever so slyly by our adversary, the devil, that we hardly even notice it. Try as we might, our human strength, writings, and intellect cannot win us this victory. This is not a battle Satan levels at just any Christian church. It is a temptation set only before those who have extensive knowledge, right theology, and a firm belief and understanding of the doctrines contained in the holy scriptures. This battle we fight today as Protestant Reformed believers is that of dead orthodoxy. Dead orthodoxy is a lifelong battle of every member of the instituted church that can only be fought and won by the power of Christ in one’s heart.

To discern and understand the danger of dead orthodoxy, it is important to define it properly. Orthodoxy, by definition, means “sound or correct in...doctrine, especially theological or religious
doctrine” (“Orthodox”). Professor Gritters defines orthodoxy by dividing its common definition into two words, orthodoxy and orthopraxy. He defines orthopraxy as “living uprightly” and orthodoxy as “straight doctrine.” He does this to show that being a Reformed believer is both confessing truth and living rightly. This is orthodox, correct, and sound doctrine. Being an orthodox, Reformed believer is confessing truth and living in accordance with it. Dead orthodoxy, then, is faithfulness to the doctrines by way of confessing them, but not living those doctrines confessed.

It is an easy trap into which a person can fall. Being raised as we have in the Protestant Reformed Churches, we have been taught Bible stories and doctrines in our homes, in catechism, and in our schools since our earliest ages. Whether we are age 16, 20, or 57, we have learned so much. Being raised in the Protestant Reformed Churches with this knowledge equips any young person for college or the work world. We know what we believe and are convicted of Biblical truths that many other young people do not even begin to consider until they are older. The devil does not like this. He sees how much we know, and it makes him angry, maybe even a little afraid. So Satan uses this knowledge against us.

He cannot direct us away from God’s truths by way of fragile beliefs, because we stand on firm ground rooted in biblical truth. Instead, he tempts us to think that knowledge is enough. “You know quite a lot,” he says, “and that is enough to make you a Christian. You really don’t have to do anything else.” And so many give in. It is easier to assume salvation based on our own pitiful knowledge than sacrifice our comforts to live for God.

Rev. Bruinsma refers to dead orthodoxy as “mere head knowledge.” Intellectual knowledge is a necessary part of knowing God and being a believer, but with no heart knowledge, it is mere lip service. God knows this is a problem for his children. Look at 1 John 3:18: “My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth” (emphasis added). In a sermon Rev. Slopsema preached on this verse, he said that love is the fruit of God in us. Only in loving do we live our theology. We love by action. If our actions show love, and love is living our theology, then head knowledge is not an option for God’s people.

The knowledge we have in the Reformed churches stems from hundreds of years of searching scripture, battling heresy, holding synods, and writing canons, all by God’s amazing grace. These victories strengthened our knowledge of God and gave us foundational creeds and doctrines on which we are able to stand and teach truth. We have truth! Do we live it? Are we different than anyone else because of it? We should be!

We have so much knowledge, but if this knowledge does not inspire us to live differently, we have fallen into dead orthodoxy (Bruinsma). But it is not so easy as to say, “Knowledge and right living makes a Christian.” Someone may seem to know God’s truths and may seem to live according to them, but we do not know all whom God has chosen to be his children. Romans 9:6 comforts and warns, “Not as though the word of God hath taken none effect. For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel.” God’s word does not fail to accomplish his will, but not every person in the instituted church is a true believer and a chosen child of God.

This fact makes dead orthodoxy a much more dangerous threat. We do not always know, perhaps may never know, that someone in the pew beside us is only there because it is tradition. In the face of this attack, how can we know true believers from those who are guilty of dead orthodoxy? It begins by looking at our own hearts.

How do I view God? What do I profess? What do I believe? These are questions we ought to ask ourselves often. Most of the articles of the Belgic Confession of Faith begin with, “We believe…” Do you believe? “We believe…the Holy Ghost kindleth in our hearts an upright faith…” (Art. 22). “We believe that our salvation consists in the remission of our sins for Jesus Christ’s sake…” (Art. 23). Page through the back of the Psalter before church. Is this what you know and believe?

Rev. Decker preached a sermon on the virgin birth of Jesus. In this sermon, he explained faith not as simply believing that the events of the Bible took place, but as believing they happened for me. I know my sins. I know my evil thoughts, deeds, and motives. I know I am dead in my sin and cannot and will not reach up to God, but I believe Jesus, the sinless Son of God, came down for me.

As I am aspiring to be a teacher in our Protestant Reformed schools, it is necessary first for me to know, understand, and believe this. I must really believe it and live it. I must strive to make it a subjective part of my life. It is my faith. It is what I believe. To be able to teach about the threat of dead orthodoxy, I have to live my life showing the living word in me. I will teach rooted in the objective truth of God’s word but live it subjectively. The knowledge with which we are blessed in our churches ought to

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inspire us to live according to it, but I know it is the work of the Holy Spirit that inspires us. I cannot teach God's covenant children without the work of the Holy Spirit in my heart.

In his book *Humble Orthodoxy*, Joshua Harris writes about sharing truth. “We must care deeply about truth, and we must also defend and share this truth with compassion and humility” (p. 5). I know the truths I have been taught since I was young. I know many of our creeds and doctrines, and I believe them as well. In order to teach them, though, I must have compassion and humility. No one can properly learn from a proud and arrogant teacher.

With compassion and humility, it is necessary for me to share these dangers of dead orthodoxy with children in the classroom. However, I believe it to be equally important to manifest the goodness of a life lived with God. It does not fall only on the teachers and ministers to educate the youth about dead orthodoxy. It is the responsibility of every Christian, young and old, to battle this temptation the devil sets before us. It is easy to go through the motions, but the youth and young people are watching, and many can tell the difference.

This threat of dead orthodoxy must be fought in each individual’s heart. The battle can only be won by the power of God’s transforming grace. I know the truth preached in the Protestant Reformed Churches. You know it, too. But what good is this knowledge if it remains only in our heads? By the work of the Holy Spirit, this knowledge transforms our lives and inspires us to “confess His name, and present [ourselves] a living sacrifice of thankfulness to Him...” (Heidelberg Catechism, L.D. 12, Q&A 32).

The purpose of our lives is not money, happiness, or greatness. We are not here for ourselves. Our purpose is to magnify Jesus Christ in our daily living, to praise him in the morning, to speak of him and to him throughout the day, and to meditate daily on his words to us (Deut. 11:18–19). The only way to battle dead orthodoxy is to renew our minds each day (Rom. 12:2), set our eyes on God above (Col. 3:1), and rest in his strength alone (Ps. 46:1–3).

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recited the ten commandments, many did reflect how well they had kept the law the previous week, but their focus on the worship diminished when the prelude for the next song was begun. Movie scenes were replayed in their minds throughout congregational prayer, the latest shopping splurges during offertory. That morning the preaching was based on Amos 6. “Woe to them that are at ease in Zion,” the pastor declared, “and trust in the mountain of Samaria! People of God, let us heed this divine pronouncement of dire woe upon those self-proclaimed believers who thought themselves to be safe within the fortitude of God’s kingdom while disgusting God with continual lukewarm service in their lives. Being neither hot nor cold, God judges such people worthy of nothing more than to be spewed from his holy mouth.” Spasms of guilt shook the congregants, but rather than weep, they stopped their ears. Men and women muttered to themselves, “Does this man have any clue to whom he is speaking? Our minister knows we believe; he doesn’t need to waste his breath on such irrelevant warnings!” The noxious gas of dead orthodoxy had filled the lungs of Laodicea. It seeped from her pores.

Though an exaggerated example of a fictional church service, the dead orthodoxy depicted above is a real danger for any professing Christian. It’s a condition typified by the figless tree that Jesus uncovered that he bears no glorifying fruit to God. But rather, the source of a person’s dead orthodoxy is a perpetuating pride and sluggish satisfaction in mere confession of truth. Let us further consider this deadly condition, how it has manifested itself in the biblical church, and how a prospective pastor of God’s people ought to prepare himself, particularly with respect to the children and young people, for dealing with the pernicious disease of dead orthodoxy that very likely will threaten to spread throughout his field of labor.

To grasp completely what dead orthodoxy is, I will explain what stands in diametric opposition to the spirit of dead orthodoxy: a living faith. A living faith is true faith, and it is rooted in a right knowledge (Heidelberg Catechism, L.D. 7, Q&A 21). It believes from the heart and confesses with the mouth that there is only one God, who is “eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, immutable, infinite, almighty, perfectly wise, just, good, and the overflowing fountain of all good” (Belgic Confession, Art. 1). In addition to a complete understanding of this glorious and holy God, a living faith also knows that natural man stands in opposition against God, for it believes that God created man in honor, “but [he] willfully subjected himself to sin, and consequently to death and the curse,” transgressing the commandment of life that he had received from God, separating himself from life with God by sin, corrupting his whole nature, and making himself liable to corporal and spiritual death. This living faith then plainly sees that man “hath lost all his excellent gifts which he had received from God” in creation, becoming “wicked, perverse, and corrupt in all his ways” (Belgic Confession, Art. 14). When the gospel comes and testifies that God “sent His Son to assume that nature in which the disobedience was committed, to make satisfaction in the same [nature], and to bear the punishment of sin by His most bitter passion and death” (Belgic Confession, Art. 20), a living faith is kindled and awakened to these marvelous truths. Such a faith is deeply moved by this awesome knowledge and wonders along with the psalmist, “What shall I render unto the Lord for all his benefits toward me?” (Ps. 116:12). When God’s word responds, “Drink the cup of salvation! Offer unto God the sacrifice of thanksgiving! Pay your vows in the courts of God’s house among all his people!” a living faith exclaims, “I will, with all my heart!” When the word responds, “Love one another, just as Jesus demonstrated his love for you!” a living faith exclaims, “I will, with all my heart!”

Warring against this living faith are men of dead orthodoxy whom Paul, in his list of evil men that will arise in the last days, identified as “[having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof” (2 Tim. 3:5). Where such fools claim to believe in God, there is no deep and abiding fear of him. Where such corrupt minds claim to serve God, there is no purposeful glorifying of him in every department of life, no unrestrained speaking about his greatness.

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1 Orthodoxy is from the Greek orthódoxos, orthós (straight, right, true) + dóxa (teaching, belief); orthodontics contains the same Greek prefix + odoús (teeth).

2 The term “living faith” is selected carefully, using Canons of Dordt, Head 1, Article 4.
and glory, nor a careful avoidance of any dishonor to his name. Although such men may be present for every Sunday worship service, there is no frequenting the house of God in order to offer exuberant praise and to be refreshed with the pulpit’s bread and water of life. Instead of weighty sorrow and fervent repentance for highly offensive sin against God, they boast about their abilities and worthiness. Instead of a prudent, spiritual fleeing from the world’s deceitful pleasures and practices, they relish sin. Furthermore, men of dead orthodoxy are not bothered by such crooked practices, for they assure themselves that a cold and mechanical assent to the truth is a sufficient testimony of their faith. They only wish to hear that there is peace for them in Zion.

Such a gross unrighteousness is unfortunately very familiar to the church even now, as it has been throughout its history. As with all sin, the terrible grip of dead orthodoxy seized man through his willful heeding of the serpent’s lie in the garden. While Eve pondered the serpent’s sly twisting of God’s word, her view of God’s prohibition not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was distorted and separated from his good command to trust and obey him. She then became suspicious of God’s gracious character, “abstracting His law from His loving and generous person,” which consequently resulted in her adding “neither shall ye touch it” to God’s good command and ultimately in her rebellious disobedience (Ferguson, 82–86). This manner in which the human race was plunged into depravity is very significant, for it testifies that wickedness inevitably results when man claims in pride to know what is better for himself and discards God’s revealed will.

This disregard for God’s revealed will was exemplified by the practices of the scribes and Pharisees that Jesus exposed in Matthew 23. Those Jewish rulers were master intellectuals in the law, “sit[ting] in Moses’ seat” (v. 2), yet Jesus commanded his disciples and the multitude around him, “[D]o not ye after their works.” Why? “[F]or they say, and do not” (v. 3). The scribes and Pharisees revered the law not as a mirror that revealed their iniquity before the radiant reflection of God’s righteousness so that they found salvation in the Messiah, not as a means of justice against the lawless and disobedient so that there could be a deterrent to evil, nor as an excellent instrument for knowing what was honorable and glorifying to a God whom they aspired to follow (Calvin, 222–25). Rather, their knowledge of the law was used to honor and glorify themselves, while they bound grievous burdens of guilt upon their nation’s shoulders and shut up the kingdom of heaven against their brethren (vv. 4, 13). The most esteemed places at feasts and the chiefest seats in the synagogues they sought; homage to their own name in public places they lusted after (vv. 6–7). Being experts in the law and the prophets, they taught orthodoxy, but behind their long prayers, precise tithing, and careful avoidance of ceremonial uncleanness, they devoured widows’ houses and scorned true religion (vv. 14, 23–28). So Jesus exposed their dead orthodoxy with these words: “[Y]e are like unto whitened sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men’s bones, and of all uncleanness” (v. 27).

A vigilant prospective pastor of God is militant against this historical threat, knowing its fleshly ease within himself, and he prepares himself in several ways to be able to defend against such wily wolves that would seek to devour the life from his Savior’s little lambs. First, so that these little ones might come to a true knowledge of the Father and Jesus Christ by his preaching and catechetical instruction, this man consumes and commits to memory the word of God and the wonderful things that Jehovah has done to maintain his covenant. He pleads with his heavenly Father to bestow upon him understanding, sound judgment, and sanctified utterance, so that he might capably teach (Martin, 127–59). Second, he strives as a good disciple of Jesus to glorify God in all his thoughts, words, and deeds. In doing this, he not only keeps himself blameless for the ministry, but also provides for the eyes of all the young ones a dutiful example of godliness and sobriety. Finally, even before he is ordained to the ministry or receives an official call, he seeks to befriend Jesus’ precious children and young people, learning their names and acquainting himself with their struggles, desires, and temptations. He is not haughty but rather speaks together with his Master, “Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not,” so they may see and receive the kingdom of God (Mark 10:13–15). The prospective pastor might then teach Sunday school and chaperone at young people’s gatherings on a more thorough study on this matter.

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3 The root of both legalism and antinomianism are evidenced here when Eve added to God’s command and then disobeyed his command, respectively. See Ferguson for a more thorough study on this matter.

4 I am making use of Calvin’s “Threefold Use of the Law.”
conventions.

In doing these things, a prospective minister cultivates an ability to speak through the mind unto the heart of a child or young person. In his teaching, he is not interested in merely filling the minds of these little ones with doctrine alone, for then he has left them yet blind to the gospel, serving a very subtle idol consisting only of words about the Christ, and forsaken his calling to show them the love of their Father through Christ, stripping them of the very weapons and armor with which to combat dead orthodoxy (Wangerin, 102–5). Yet he trusts that the pure preaching of the gospel is sufficient of itself to stir up all of God’s elect unto living faith and against dead orthodoxy (Bekkering, 5). “Abide in your life-giving Vine!” he instructs them. “Depend on him alone for the strengthening sap that you need in times of discouragement, fear, or pride. Know that his promise is that he will abide in you! Know that he will make you fruitful!” (McGeown, 7–8). He keeps his focus and the focus of the youth upon Jesus Christ, and by the grace of God he will be able to apply to their hearts and demonstrate by example all the blessed benefits of their Savior.

May God bless this prospective pastor and, if he is called to labor in the word, prosper his field of labor, that it never may be said to him and his congregation, “Because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.”

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WHAT’S LEFT TO TEACH?

As a prospective teacher, my thoughts extend far beyond things like how I might arrange my classroom or how I might balance friendship and authority in the classroom. While these are some factors that are crucial to bring into consideration, an even greater concern of mine is the possibility of my own students becoming prey to the all-too-real threat of dead orthodoxy. I firmly believe that it is every regenerated believer’s desire to know about God in their minds and also to know God personally in their hearts; yet the question remains how to encourage the people truly to show this in their lives. It is incredibly necessary to understand and teach about God, but the issue lies in the lack of experiential application, which often does not follow. After doctrine is presented and explained, cemented and maintained, even understood and believed, what’s left to teach? In efforts to combat dead orthodoxy, our schools must be supported by teachers who impress the need for the truths of God to be manifested in the very hearts of our young people through six different ways: consistent discipline, redirection of praise, excitement in knowledge, showing by example, leading in prayer, and providing a biblical basis.

In order for teachers to recognize the danger that exists in solely having proper head knowledge without heart knowledge, they must be diligent in the discipline of their students. Although there is a difference in how teachers and parents ought to discipline, it is nonetheless understood that teachers are entrusted with the raising and educating of the children while in school. The first two questions and answers of the Heidelberg Catechism state it clearly and beautifully—three things are necessary for us to know as children of God that we might enjoy our only comfort, the first being how great our sins and miseries are (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 1). Teachers within God’s kingdom hold a delightful status and blessed calling—to walk alongside a child and to help him or her see and acknowledge her sin. As friend-servants of God, teachers must be the same for their students, making it such that “iron sharpeneth iron” as they grow together in the way of discipline (John 15:13; Prov. 27:17). Ephesians 6 speaks to fathers about rearing their children, but it can also be a command for teachers in relation to their students to “bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord” while filling the role of parents (Eph. 6:4). When students are properly admonished and instructed in reasons as to why their obedience matters and how God blesses them in it, their hearts will be more inclined to know that God.

A different approach in fighting against dead orthodoxy is regularly to redirect students to praise God alone, specifically with regard to their abilities. Often, Philippians 4:13 comes to our lips flippantly and mindlessly. “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.” If God’s people truly took to heart the fact that the ability to perform any good work would be impossible if not for God’s perfect work, what a blessed life that would be! So must teachers ensure that this is what their students really believe. The opportunities are endless—a good grade earned on an assignment, an outpouring of praise received for a well-written paper, a skilled performance glorified in a presentation. Teachers must be ready and willing to remind the students that these abilities are a result of the Spirit working in and through them so that they might proclaim with Paul, “But by the grace of God I am what I am” (1 Cor. 15:10). Students should be encouraged that as people placed here by God on this earthly pilgrimage, “if God is truly our God, we must also serve Him” (denHartog). It is neither morally proper nor even logical that the one who gave us life is not the one to whom we seek to reflect all the glory! Proper redirection of glory and acknowledgment will go a long way in encouraging students to seek the Lord first with their hearts through all of their actions.

The practice of spurring on excitement about God and his work in their lives is yet another opportunity to acknowledge and warn against dead orthodoxy. While the content is important, the manner in which teachers present it must be one of awe and wonder. We need to get students excited about the doctrine of forgiveness—that God sent a righteous savior to die for ungodly sinners like us (Rom. 5:6–8)! How many times do we sing “Amazing Grace,” in awe of
the work of Christ saving wretches like us, and then the next moment gossip about the sin or wrongdoing of our neighbor? Praise the Lord that they are forgiven in Christ! We need to get students excited about the doctrine of providence—that God directs each and every moment for our good so that nothing befalls us by chance (Rom. 8:28, Belgic Confession, Article 13)! How often do we thank God for his sovereignty over all things, and then later worry about and sorrow over the hardships that we face? Praise the Lord that we are upheld by his hand! It must not be true of anyone that “you’ve loved what you’ve learned about God more than God Himself” (Segal). Even with regard to those doctrines which we simply cannot fathom as mere creatures, teachers must encourage a “holy adoration of these mysteries” so that they then, together with their students, exclaim with passion and joy, “Oh the depths of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!” (Canons of Dordt, Head I, Article 18; Rom. 11:33). Then and only then will students yearn to know God in their hearts and live in the world as true children of the God in whom they believe.

In keeping away from the danger of dead orthodoxy, teachers must also be constantly showing examples of the attributes of God seen in the classroom. The simplest way for any teacher to do this is to live out her own convictions, revealing the righteousness of God “from faith to faith” and showing herself as putting on the new man, “which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness” (Rom. 1:17; Eph. 4:24). Being unashamed to speak of their God, confident about their faith in God, and ecstatic to share what God has done in their lives are some aspects of how the God of scripture can be shown experientially by teachers. As a result, students will see in their teachers a strong passion for the truth of God’s word—“a pattern of good works” to follow and imitate in their own lives (Titus 2:7–8). Another way could be as simple as engaging the class in a field trip, musical piece, or text that sheds light on the doctrine of providence —that God directs each and every moment for our good so that nothing befalls us by chance (Rom. 8:28, Belgic Confession, Article 13)! How often do we thank God for his sovereignty over all things, and then later worry about and sorrow over the hardships that we face? Praise the Lord that we are upheld by his hand! It must not be true of anyone that “you’ve loved what you’ve learned about God more than God Himself” (Segal). Even with regard to those doctrines which we simply cannot fathom as mere creatures, teachers must encourage a “holy adoration of these mysteries” so that they then, together with their students, exclaim with passion and joy, “Oh the depths of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!” (Canons of Dordt, Head I, Article 18; Rom. 11:33).

A final and yet most important course of action in warning against this serious threat is to provide a clear and biblical basis for why believers ought to heed this command of God to draw near to him. Jehovah tells us in his word, “I love them that love me; and those that seek me early shall find me” (Prov. 8:17). What more could a child of God need than to hear this comforting promise? The influence that teachers have on students can and in fact should be grounded in how scripture speaks to those in the covenant. The Heidelberg Catechism reiterates this thought, supplying the answers “patient in adversity” and “thankful in prosperity” to the question of what advantage the Christian has in knowing the providence of God…all these things teach our children the meaning of true godliness” (denHartog). Although this speaks to parents specifically, it most assuredly can be a calling to teachers as substitutes in the classroom. Students will then see in their teachers a respect for God and a desire for their own hearts to be near to him as well.

While it may be uncomfortable or difficult at times, the prayers of teachers over and with students are immensely impactful. “The reverence we show for God, the sincerity and earnestness of our prayers, the interest in the regular study of God’s word in the daily life of our covenant families, understanding the application of the word of God…all these things teach our children the meaning of true godliness” (denHartog). Although this speaks to parents specifically, it most assuredly can be a calling to teachers as substitutes in the classroom. Students will then see in their teachers a respect for God and a desire for their own hearts to be near to him as well.
CHRIST pleading our cause! What greater balm for discouragement is there than that?!” (Heb. 9:24; Mingerink). Taking scripture and unfolding it for covenant children in the schools can have a lasting effect on how they serve God with their minds and also come to know him fully in their hearts.

So that dead orthodoxy does not run rampant in our denomination, teachers must be persistent in encouraging students to beware of this evil by not only teaching them the truths of scripture but by entreating them to a heartfelt walk with Christ, to which they are called. Their fight in this battle and their deeper understanding of how to know God more fully through their knowledge of him will surely draw them closer to their Lord and Savior. Let it never be said of us—neither teachers nor students—that “they knew so much about God, and yet they knew him so little” (Segal). As God continues to gather and preserve his church, we must altogether strive to keep our focus proper and balanced—having both a knowledge of God on our lips and an obvious application in our hearts. Then will God’s people with joy take comfort in the covenant he has made with us—“I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Jer. 31:33).

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Scholarship Essay Aaron Van Dyke

SERVING AMONG THE SUFFERING

There are many things that a young man who desires to be a pastor does not know. If it is God’s will that he be called to office, the young man does not know where the Lord will call him to labor. He does not know the circumstances that God may bring to his ministry or the specific strengths and needs of the congregation he will serve. Amid the uncertainty, however, such a young man can be certain that he will be called to serve amid suffering people. He will suffer for God’s sake. His flock will suffer for God’s sake. The Bible tells him so. In Acts 14:22 we read, “[W]e must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God;” 2 Corinthians 1:5 makes the striking statement that “the sufferings of Christ abound in us”; and in John 16:33 Jesus himself assures us that “[i]n the world ye shall have tribulation.” While on earth, our Lord suffered. As his children, we share in the fellowship of his sufferings.1

As we examine concrete examples of the suffering that a pastor and the congregation he serves endure, we will first note the suffering that God’s people undergo due to the sins of others. We will then consider the suffering that the children of God experience when they sin. Finally, we will examine suffering that we will broadly categorize as “painful providence”: suffering that God is pleased to send that cannot be traced to the actions of ourselves or of others. In every season of suffering, a pastor must be ready to open scripture to the Lord’s flock. He must expose the temptations that arise amid suffering, deliver the word that God would have his suffering people hear, and live himself as a godly example of suffering for Christ’s sake.

God’s people suffer because of the sins of others. This was the experience of Timothy, who suffered reproach for his godliness and trust in the living God (1 Tim. 4:8–10). This truth was borne out in the life David, who cried for deliverance from those who would “tear [his soul like a lion, rending it in pieces” (Ps. 7:1–2). This suffering was felt by Daniel,

1 Herman Hoeksema, Peace for the Troubled Heart (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2010), 73–76.
whose enemies sought to tear like a lion not only his soul but his body as well (Dan. 6:7). Christ himself foretold of men reviling, persecuting, and saying all manner of evil against his people falsely for his sake (Matt. 5:11). No one can number the great crowd of saints in scripture and the history books which have suffered because of the sins of others (Rev. 7:9, 14).

Members of the church today share in the persecutions of the church triumphant. They suffer when they live in a manner that is consistent with their profession and are made the butt of jokes at work. When a young person refuses to join crass joking and wild gatherings, his name may be smeared, and his popularity may wane. He suffers for God’s sake. God’s people suffer when people take advantage of the fact that Christians will turn their cheeks, give up their cloaks, and go the extra mile (Matt. 5:39–44). When a man leaves the church and abandons his believing wife and children with it, they suffer for God’s sake. Believing families suffer long nights crying over the unrepentant sin of a child or sibling. Instead of allowing the sin to go unaddressed, they warn their loved one of impending danger. Their warnings alienate; fellowship is lost. They suffer for God’s sake. In some nations God’s people are physically attacked, imprisoned, and killed for daring to name the name of Christ.

Besides the empathetic tears a pastor sheds with the people of God in their suffering, he will experience his own suffering for Christ’s sake as well. A pastor is not exempt from suffering at the hands of sinners; he works with them every day. Living in his glass parsonage, a pastor can expect to be unfairly criticized from time to time, regardless of how well he performs his duties. The pastor will suffer when he chooses to preach the whole counsel of God in a biblical manner, rather than choosing to play politics in his church. When influential men in the congregation try to cozy up to him, and he refuses to be a respecter of persons, he will suffer. As an undershepherd, a faithful pastor will spend days untangling knots of sin within the flock. He will spend nights praying over sheep who are straying. He suffers because of the sins of others.

Amid these sufferings, there are two dangers against which a pastor must guard himself and his flock. The first danger is that the members of the church blur antithetical lines between themselves and those who would persecute them for their godly walk in an effort to minimize their suffering. The leisurely path of no resistance is tempting. The ability to conform oneself to this world and to run with them to the same excess of riot (1 Pet. 4:4) is easy in an increasingly connected society. Likewise, a pastor may be tempted to soft-peddle the sharp word of God and to cater to itching ears (2 Tim. 4:1–4). His fear of suffering may tempt him to favor certain segments of the congregation over others (Gal. 2:11–12).

The second danger is for God’s people sinfully to call down fire from heaven upon the heads of those who sin against them (Luke 9:54). The devil whispers, “An eye for an eye,” and we are tempted to indulge indignation, to lift up unholy swords, and to start swinging (John 18:10). A pastor’s old man of sin can be attracted to this. When he is sinned against, his first reaction can be to begin striking rocks from the pulpit, with the pen, or in private discussions, instead of speaking the words of God (Num. 20:10–11).

A pastor must be on guard against these two ditches. When members of his congregation cry out the words of Psalm 13:2, “[H]ow long shall mine enemy be exalted over me?” the pastor must bring Christ’s words of peace to them: “be of good cheer; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). The pastor must give and share in the comfort that God’s people are blessed by the Lord when they suffer the sins of others for his sake (Matt. 5:11–12). A pastor must preach the truth that the apparent prosperity of the church’s persecutors dulls, blinds, and hardens them unto destruction, and that those who curse the people of God are themselves cursed (Gen. 12:3). The pastor must exhibit the demeanor of Christ, “[w]ho, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously” (1 Pet. 2:23). God’s people who suffer because of the sins of others must hear God’s clear voice say through the preacher, “Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord” (Rom. 12:19).

God’s people do not only suffer for Christ’s sake because of the sins of others. They also suffer because of their own sins. They do not suffer God’s curse for their sins; Christ has borne away all of the curse for our sins. Nevertheless, the sins of God’s people are the occasion for much suffering in their lives.

2 David Engelsma, Prosperous Wicked and Plagued Saints; An Exposition of Psalm 73 (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association. 2007), 84–85.
3 Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 15, Q&A 39 in The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches (Grandville, MI: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005), 99.
A great internal battle wages in every regenerate heart. We hate evil, and yet our old man loves evil; our new man and old man are in constant, mortal combat. As covenant children of God, it hurts us when we realize that we have lost another battle and have sinned against our Father...again. We exclaim with Paul in frustration and sorrow, “[T]he good that I would I do: but the evil which I would not, that I do”! (Rom. 7:19). This sorrow and heartache are worked by the Holy Spirit. This pain is a suffering for Jesus’ sake.

A pastor experiences this suffering when he walks into the parsonage on Sunday evening after the service and commits the sin that he had condemned in that night’s sermon. He experiences this suffering when he is counseling a young person who is ailing from a particular sin and realizes that he himself is riddled from head to toe with that sin. As one who is called to exhibit particular blamelessness, vigilance, sobriety, and good behavior (1 Tim. 3:2), the pastor’s conscience is pricked a little more deeply when he lays his head down at night and thinks about how he has treated his wife and children that day.

God does not will that his people wallow in this suffering. Rather, he uses this particular form of suffering to bring us into a humbled state in which we more fully glorify God and are enabled to enjoy his gracious mercy. Though a pastor grieves and suffers in his heart over his sins, it would be inappropriate for him constantly to go about with a dour face, lamenting his sinfulness. Rather, he must be the joyful mouthpiece of the voice of God, which proclaims from heaven, “Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the Lord’s hand double for all her sins” (Isa. 40:1–2). He must try to reflect the warmth and grace of God, which comes to repentant church members and assures them: “I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely: for mine iniquity is pardoned: for when I was sick my heart was troubled: but when I said, ‘How long?’ then was mine iniquity purged” (Hos. 14:4).

God’s people do not only suffer in connection with the sins of others or themselves. Often God is pleased to send trials and suffering into the lives of his people entirely apart from specific sins that are committed. We are all familiar with such circumstances. Perhaps the Lord sends some type of disappointment into the dating life, the work-life, or the social life of one of his children. Perhaps he frustrates some goal that his child had been working toward for years. God’s people suffer when they are forced to watch those whom they love struggle with disease or some special need. God’s people suffer when they themselves are touched with disease or some special need. In the valley of the shadow of death, God’s people suffer. This painful providence is sent for the spiritual advantage of God’s people. God orders it for the perfecting of his saints and the ultimate glorification of his name; we can say then that this suffering is undergone for God’s sake.

A pastor can, of course, be touched with the same types of suffering as his flock. However, though all God’s people hurt when one member hurts (1 Cor. 12:26), a pastor’s suffering for God’s sake in this way can be unique. The pastor is usually present with God’s people during their most difficult times. He calls on troubled spouses and distraught parents; he sits by the bedsides of God’s people and walks with them to their gravesides. In empathy and an undershepherd’s love, the many burdens of God’s flock weigh on a pastor’s mind. He suffers under the painful providence of God.

When painful providence arises in congregations that confess the truth of God’s omnipotence and sovereignty, the danger is not so much that we doubt God’s abilities, but rather that we doubt God’s motives. In moments of weakness, we may ask amid our suffering, “Is the Lord punishing me?” “Is he setting his face against me?” or even: “Does God

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5 Form for the Administration of Baptism, in The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches (Grandville, MI: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005), 258.

**Devotional** Abby Van Solkema

**THE DAILY PRESS**

“press toward the mark...”

(Philippians 3:14)

December 8  Read 2 Corinthians 1

Paul was not ashamed or discouraged by his sufferings, but rather he gloriied in them. How could this be? He recognized that the various types of trials that we experience in this life are valuable lessons from God which serve to strengthen our faith. When we experience discomfort in this life because of the loss of earthly goods, opportunities, health, or relationships, we learn that the only source of true comfort is our heavenly Father. Seeking comfort in anything other than him can only provide temporary relief and distraction.

Paul also recognized that the sorrow we experience on this earth can benefit our fellow Christians.

By the grace of God, the testimony of our conduct in the face of severe trials can serve as an example for others. In addition, the trials that we go through enable us better to understand the suffering of others and cultivate our ability to offer consolation to others who are enduring their own trials. Because of our own suffering, we are further equipped humbly to use the gospel message in order to lead others to the only source of genuine, lasting comfort. *Sing or pray Psalter #255.*

December 9  Read 2 Corinthians 2

Paul had previously written a letter to the Corinthian churches instructing them on how they were to deal...
with one of their members who had fallen into sin (1 Cor. 5). It brought great sorrow to Paul to write this, but he recognized that the discipline of this erring member was necessary. The church leaders had obeyed his instructions and appropriately disciplined the member, and he had repented. There was a time for discipline, but now was a time for forgiveness. Yet the church was having difficulty moving past the discipline stage to the goal of forgiveness and reconciliation.

How often are we also reluctant to offer love and forgiveness to our fellow believers who have repented of a sin? As Paul points out in verse 11, we must not be ignorant of Satan’s devices. When he fails to get a child of God to continue in a particular sin, Satan continues the attack from a different angle by keeping other believers from truly forgiving their brother or sister in Christ. Forgiving but not forgetting, holding grudges, and being overly suspicious of others are all things that serve to undermine our fellowship in the church and destroy relationships between fellow believers. Do you genuinely forgive others “even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you” (Eph. 4:32)?

Sing or pray Psalter #257.

December 12  Read 2 Corinthians 5

Every day we are confronted with the fact that our earthly bodies are weak and feeble, and this becomes increasingly clear as we get older. These bodies are only temporary dwellings, susceptible to disease and aging. Paul was very aware of the weaknesses of his earthly body. He ached in anticipation of the deliverance of death, just as the whole creation groans for deliverance from the effects of sin (Rom. 8:19–23).

When the failings of our earthly bodies leave us discouraged, we can find assurance in the promise of a new body, just as Paul did. The temporary hope that modern medical advances or the latest anti-aging procedure give us fades quickly. But the new, heavenly body that God’s people are promised is “an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you” (1 Pet. 1:4). This hope keeps us from seeing death as something to be feared. Instead, we recognize that it is a means of deliverance from the pain of this sinful world to perfect, eternal glory. Sing or pray Psalter #265.

Sing or pray Psalter #262.

December 13  Read 2 Corinthians 6

Although Paul is speaking specifically about ministers of the gospel in the first half of 2 Corinthians 6, this section of verses also paints a striking picture of suffering in this life, and ministers of the gospel are no exception. Like Paul, they may face internal battles against emotional weakness or false motivation. And they must constantly fight against the attacks of Satan, who hates true gospel ministers and seeks to hinder their work in all different ways. But despite all the difficulties that Paul encountered in his ministry, he was thankful that he had been called to be a minister of the gospel and rejoiced in what God had done through his life.

Young men, I ask you seriously to consider whether God is calling you to be a minister of the gospel. The church is in desperate need of faithful ministers to be lights in the spiritual darkness of this world, to shine the knowledge of God into the hearts of the people. Are you worried that you will not be able to handle the work? Although even the greatest of men are only weak vessels, God uses these vessels to show his infinite power. There will be struggles, but there will also be victory. The light, momentary affliction of earthly ministry “worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory” (v. 17). Sing or pray Psalter #262.

Sing or pray Psalter #265.
what a genuine Christian life looks like. It is a paradox, a series of beautiful contradictions that reflects both the brokenness of this fallen world and the joy and hope of the gospel. There is persecution and affliction to be faced from every side, but the Holy Spirit gives us provision to endure these attacks and promises that we will ultimately triumph.

Our earthly bodies and emotions also exhibit these contradictions. As our bodies age, we are actively dying, yet we live. We are chastened by the suffering that we endure, but it does not kill us. We are sorrowful, yet always rejoicing. In the face of sickness, trials, and the death of ourselves or a loved one, we experience pain and grief because we are only human. But yet we still rejoice because we have the hope of everlasting life and a joy that cannot be extinguished! Sing or pray Psalter #268.

December 14 Read 2 Corinthians 7

In verse 6 of this chapter we read that Paul was greatly comforted by the coming of Titus, a dear friend and fellow laborer in the gospel. He speaks in some of his other letters as well, such as 1 Corinthians and 2 Timothy, about being reassured by the presence of certain people at difficult times in his ministry. Although all true comfort for Christians has its source in God, he does often use human means to bring consolation to his people.

Can you think of a time in your life when the presence of Christian friends brought you joy and relief even though you were going through a difficult trial? In our increasingly individualistic culture, it can be tempting to isolate yourself when you are having a hard time. However, God has placed believers on this earth not to exist in isolation, but in community within the church. Of course, these relationships will be troubled at times because of the effects of sin, but we must not overlook the great blessing of Christian community. Follow the example of Paul and seek comfort in good friends who will bring you the consolation of the gospel. Sing or pray Psalter #271.

December 15 Read 2 Corinthians 8

These next two chapters of 2 Corinthians comprise a section of the letter where Paul is encouraging the Corinthian church to contribute to a relief fund for the poor Christians in Jerusalem. Today, I would like to focus on the differences between biblical giving and the worldly practice of philanthropy. There are many generous ungodly people in the world that will give millions of dollars to charity over their lifetimes. But even though giving all this money away may give them a good feeling or other benefits, they will never experience the true contentment that comes from giving with the correct motivation of bringing glory to God.

Philanthropy is simply the practice of people giving to other people, while biblical giving is the practice of people showing the love of God to other people by giving. Worldly giving is all about bringing glory to yourself and receiving the recognition of others, while biblical giving is about bringing honor to God without expectation of getting anything in return. Is your giving marked by the pride of worldly philanthropy or the humility of biblical giving? Sing or pray Psalter #275.

December 16 Read 2 Corinthians 9

As we continue with the theme of Christian giving, ask yourself this question: Are you hesitant to give openhandedly to the causes of the church because you think you will not have enough left over for what you “need”? This reservation is a symptom of a lack of faith in God’s ability to care for your needs. Philippians 4:19 reminds us that “God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus.” Christians must be careful not to let a desire for financial security result in anxiety about giving and about money in general. If we give generously and cheerfully, God will bless us by graciously working contentment in our hearts and helping us to find satisfaction in spiritual treasures instead of earthly treasures.

Nothing that we have accumulated in our time on this earth really belongs to us. We are simply stewarding money and possessions that actually belong to God. How much of it will you keep for yourself? How much will you give to others? Think about how seeing yourself as an instrument of God to supply the needs of others could change your perspective on giving. Sing or pray Psalter #283.

December 17 Read 2 Corinthians 10

As Paul goes about proving his apostolic authority against the claims of the Judaizers, he makes clear that he is carrying out his apostolic office according to God’s specifications, not other people’s desires. He rejects foolish human comparison and criticism as he defends his activities, characteristics, and authority. Paul is confident that the Lord approves of his ministry.
Are you unsure of what God’s will is for your life? Follow Paul’s example and do not let comparison to what others have accomplished or a desire to earn the commendations of men determine your path. Instead, focus on living your life in accordance with scripture, and the path you should follow will be made clear. In light of eternity, the esteem of other people does not really matter. But what God thinks about you is of eternal importance. “For not he that commendeth himself is approved, but whom the Lord commendeth” (v. 18). 

Sing or pray Psalter #286.

Sing or pray Psalter #289.

Read 2 Corinthians 12

December 19

Satan is often given permission by God to afflict the saints at certain times. Therefore, even when we face lingering physical or spiritual trials as ‘messengers of Satan’ (v. 7) such as Paul did, we still must be aware that these ailments ultimately come from God and are consequently for our good. Although we may certainly pray for the Lord to take away our problems, we must also pray for his will to be done. And it is not always his will to take our afflictions away. But even when our minds and bodies are weak, by God’s grace his strength will sustain us.

Paul ultimately came to be at peace with his affliction. He did not just endure it, but even gloried and took pleasure in it. Are you struggling with a lingering physical or spiritual trial? Ask God to work this same peace in your heart so that you are able to praise and thank him not just in times of strength but also in times of weakness. Sing or pray Psalter #291.

Sing or pray Psalter #293.

Read Romans 1

December 21

Paul proclaims boldly to the believers in the church at Rome that he is not ashamed to preach the gospel of Christ (v. 16). This gospel, which he summarized in the previous verses, is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that hears and believes it. When God works in the hearts of his people and declares the gospel to them by means of his written word and his messengers, then they believe, are justified by faith, and have peace with God.

Are you sometimes scared to share the gospel with others? It is helpful to remember that we are not simply offering the gospel to people and hoping they will accept it. Also, the spread of the gospel does not depend on our eloquence or theological knowledge. We are merely instruments of God to proclaim the living, transforming power of the gospel. Do not be ashamed of the gospel of Christ! Pray that God...
will use you as a chosen vessel in the service of the gospel despite your sins and weaknesses. Sing or pray Psalter #298.

**December 22**

**Read Romans 2**

As human beings, we love to be appreciated and feel the approval of others. Social media feeds this desire by giving us a way almost instantly to receive affirmation from others based on what we post. But when our actions and posts show that we love the approval of man more than we love the approval of God, that is a sign of sin. Romans 2 reminds us that the judgment of men according to their arbitrary standards does not matter in the end, but the judgment of God according to the truth is of eternal importance. We cannot escape this judgment.

God’s love and approval of us is so much more important and fulfilling than any approval that we get from our social media followers. Gaining approval and fame on this earth pales in comparison to wearing a crown of righteousness for all eternity. The notifications of likes or comments that pop up on our phones are like candy: they bring us pleasure in the moment but ultimately leave us unsatisfied and longing for more. But when we strive to lead a life that glorifies and honors God, we will be fed and filled eternally. Sing or pray Psalter #301.

**December 23**

**Read Romans 3**

God fully accomplished our salvation without any help from us. He sent his Son to save ungodly, proud sinners in order to uphold his own glory. Because of this work, we are declared righteous in Christ. But we certainly cannot boast that we had anything to do with it. We are justified apart from our works, not because of them. “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God” (Eph. 2:8).

Boasting is an outward expression of pride, the greatest problem of man. Pride can take many forms, but it is essentially the glorification of ourselves as greater than God. It is self-worship instead of worshipping the one, true God. But those who have genuine faith will not boast of themselves. 1 Corinthians 4:7 reminds us, “For who maketh thee to differ from another? and what hast thou that thou didst not receive? now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it?” Sing or pray The Song of Zacharias.

**December 24**

**Read Romans 4**

Abraham is one of the great heroes of faith described in Hebrews 11. His amazing faith during all the events of his life, such as packing up his entire household and leaving for an unknown country, childlessness for many years, and being commanded to sacrifice the son that he had finally received, seems impossible. How could he have such faith? Well, Abraham believed in the God of impossible things, a God who brings the dead back to life and created everything out of nothing, a God who saves his people who are hopelessly dead in sin and makes them alive again in Christ.

Do you believe in the living God? Do you have confidence that he will carry out all his promises? The things that Christians believe do not make sense to the rest of the world, and sometimes they don’t even make sense to us. How could a child be born of a virgin? How could God come to earth as a man? But the word of God testifies to us that the God who was faithful to his people in the past will be faithful in the future as well. So, by the faith that God has implanted in our hearts, we have hope. We believe in the impossible. Sing or pray The Song of Mary.

**December 25**

**Read Romans 5**

It is easy to think that we are strong. It is easy to think that we can survive whatever difficulties are sent our way by taking refuge in the promises that this world has to offer. But when we are given a life-shattering trial all of our false self-confidence is stripped away, and we realize that we are unable to endure suffering in our own strength. We are made aware of our own weakness.

When God’s people experience difficult trials that they never thought they would be able to endure, they also experience his provision of the strength that he has promised and that they so desperately need. God uses these trials to produce endurance and character in us by his power. And this gives us great hope (vv. 3–4).

We rest in God. We rest in his constant presence. We rest in his promises, especially the promise that he would send his only begotten Son to conquer death and save his people from their sins. As we commemorate the birth of Christ today, we are reminded of God’s great love for his people and the certainty of God’s promises. This is the hope that will carry us through any trials that we face. Sing or pray The Song of Simeon.
December 26  Read Romans 6

If salvation is all of grace and justification is by faith alone, can a child of God continue in his sin unrepentantly and still call himself a believer? Paul gives us the answer here: “God forbid” (v. 2)! No truly regenerated child of God would genuinely ask this question. Because of our union with Christ, we have been freed from the prison of only being able to sin. But we are not set free in order to live for ourselves. Living for ourselves would just put us right back in slavery to sin. We have been set free to live for Christ. Are you living like one who has been set free from sin to be able to serve God?

Although we will never be able fully to shed our old, sinful human nature on this side of the grave, it no longer has the power to dominate our thoughts and actions. Instead, there is a war going on in our hearts between the old and the new man. Are you actively fighting this war by putting on the whole armor of God? Even though the struggle is difficult, we can go into battle against Satan with confidence by remembering that we already know who is going to win this war. Sing or pray Psalter #302.

December 27  Read Romans 7

Our natural inclination is to love this life and its myriad temptations. The pleasure of accumulating earthly luxuries can be intoxicating. The excitement of accomplishing our goals and receiving the praise of men is powerful. The mind-numbing effects of worldly entertainment are addicting. But for the grace of God we would not even be aware that there is something infinitely better.

But when we think about heavenly life, we begin to see just how empty and misery-filled our life on this earth really is. We say along with Paul, “O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?” (v. 24). It is necessary for us to serve God in our lives on this earth, but we must do so in a way that shows that what we are really looking forward to is our heavenly home. Do you live your life in a way that shows that your ultimate desire is to be in heaven, not to reach peak living on this earth? When we contemplate eternal glory, we do not dread death, but rather long for it. Sing or pray Psalter #304.

December 28  Read Romans 8

Over and over scripture draws our attention away from the things that we see on this earth to the things that we cannot see. We are instructed to find our hope in the unseen things of God (v. 24). This is what true faith is, “the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1). Even the creation that we can see, when properly regarded in the light of scripture, still points us to the unseen glories of the new heavens and new earth that it foreshadows.

Your attention will be captured by what your heart loves. Are you drawn to all the things you can see in this world? Are these images what consume your thoughts and steal your time? Do you find it difficult to look away? There are so many tempting sights that Satan uses to capture our attention by means of our smartphones, computer screens, televisions, billboards, magazines, and any other way that he can reach us. We must pray with the psalmist, “Turn away mine eyes from beholding vanity; and quicken thou me in thy way” (Ps. 119:37). Sing or pray Psalter #305.

December 29  Read Romans 9

In this section of his letter to the Romans, Paul expresses his great compassion and grief for his fellow Jews who did not believe in the truth of the gospel. Even though Israel had been given so many spiritual privileges, as a whole they still rejected God and crucified the promised Messiah. Does this mean that God was not faithful to his promises to save his people? Can we still believe in the reassuring promises of the previous chapter? Romans 9:6 answers this question when it reminds us that it is “[n]ot as though the word of God hath taken none effect.” Not all those who belong to the nation of Israel in their generations are the chosen people of God. But verse 27 reminds us that he will still save a remnant. And in his sovereignty, he chose many Gentiles to become his people as well. These are the true, spiritual descendants of Abraham. As spiritual descendants of Abraham we can be confident in the promises of his word. Sing or pray Psalter #306.

December 30  Read Romans 10

On my first reading of verse 3 of this chapter, I thought that “God’s righteousness” was referring to one of his chief attributes, that he is free from guilt and sin. But after hearing a sermon recently by Prof. Cammenga on this text, I learned that it is actually referring to the righteousness that God has worked out for his people in Jesus Christ by means
of his perfect obedience and death on the cross. God imputes this righteousness to his children because we desperately need it and are unable to earn or buy it for ourselves.

As you read on in the chapter, Paul explains that many people (including the Jews of his day) had refused to submit to this righteousness. Blinded by their pride, they willfully ignored all the signs and Old Testament scriptures and tried to earn righteousness for themselves instead. All these efforts were futile and wicked. The only way to submit to the righteousness of God is by faith in Jesus Christ. Justification is by faith alone. We may try to find justification in excuses, self-justification, blaming others, or the distractions of work and pleasure. But these things can never give us true, lasting assurance. Do you live in the consciousness of this truth? Sing or pray Psalter #307.

December 31  Read Romans 11

*Soli Deo Gloria* is a Latin phrase meaning “Glory to God alone.” You may recognize this phrase as one of the tenets of the Reformation. It is illustrated in the beautiful doxology found in verse 36 of this chapter. But what does it mean?

The glory of God is the radiance of his holiness, put on display for all people to see. It is a display of his infinite perfection and beauty. It is a reminder that his greatness is beyond our comprehension. Since God created all things, the entire creation reflects his glory. The glory of God is the goal of all things. Yet the glory of the creator puts all of creation to shame. Our reaction to beholding this glory in creation and God’s word is to fall on our knees and worship, and to declare his glory to all nations. Our ultimate hope is that we will someday be in the presence of God’s glory for all eternity and be partakers of it as well. Do you treasure the glory of God? Sing or pray Psalter #308.

January 1  Read Romans 12

The apparent love that ungodly people have for each other is a very hypocritical type of love. It may look like love on the surface, but underneath it is not really love at all. Sincere, Christian love is only possible as a result of Jesus Christ’s death on the cross for our sins, the ultimate example of love. The knowledge of our sin and salvation, combined with the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, allows us to show a small beginning of this love to others. Romans 12 describes what it means to show love without “dissimulation” (v. 9), another word for hypocrisy.

True love hates evil; it does not tolerate or celebrate it. True love exists in the community of fellow believers, not in isolation. True love shows itself in a zeal for serving the Lord and serving others, not in complaining or laziness. True love causes us to be patient when things do not go our way and to rejoice in every circumstance, not to wallow in self-pity. True love leads us to offer hospitality and assistance to others without being stingy or selfish. True love gives us humility and sympathy in our dealings with those around us. Do you show true love to your neighbors? Sing or pray Psalter #307.

January 2  Read Romans 13

We are currently living in the darkness and night of this sinful, fallen world. Most of the world stumbles around in the darkness, going about their business, unaware that light even exists. But by faith, we are able to see the day of the Lord arising even though it is not quite here yet. For God’s people, it is dawn. That is why we say that the day of the Lord is at hand. How will this knowledge impact the way that we conduct ourselves as we begin another year on this earth?

First, we must awake! We must put off our nightclothes, the works of darkness—rioting, drunkenness, sexual immorality, debauchery, strife, and envying. Second, we must put on our day clothes, the armor of God—truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, and the word of God. But we will not be able to do this on our own. We need the power of the Holy Spirit in our hearts in order to awaken from the sleep of sin. Pray for new mercies every morning so that you are able to lay off the works of darkness and live in the light. Sing or pray Psalter #315.

January 3  Read Romans 14

Clean eating, exercise plans, supplements, and alternative medicine are all very popular trends right now both in the world around us and in the church community. But as Christians we must be cautious about how much emphasis we place on these lifestyle choices. It can be tempting to look down on our fellow Christians who do not follow our health principles, or believe that others’ choices are sinful. The Bible does not specifically tell us what diet we should follow or what types of medicine we should use. But Romans 14 does address the gray area of
health choices by reminding us that they are exactly that—choices.

Paul emphasizes that restrictions we place on ourselves that are not specifically addressed in scripture do not make us more or less righteous. Therefore, we must not place more importance on these things than they deserve. If you recognize that this is a temptation for you, ask yourself these questions: Do you find your hope in your health and fitness methods, or in the gospel? Are you as passionate about pointing others to Christ as you are about converting them to your diet or exercise plan? Sing or pray Psalter #319.

January 4 Read Romans 15

Have you ever been reading a particularly tedious section of the Old Testament and wondered, how is reading any of this beneficial for me? Well, Romans 15:4 reminds us that it is important to read the Bible, the whole Bible. Every single part of it is profitable for both learning and encouragement, even all those difficult parts of the Old Testament that you are tempted just to skip over. “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16).

Regular, in-depth study of the word of God is the best way for us to learn about our heavenly Father. And in doing so, we also learn how we must live a thankful life according to his commands. Learning about the attributes of God also brings us great comfort. When we recall the stories of his faithfulness to saints in the Old and New Testaments and how he always kept his promises to them, we can have hope. What a comfort and encouragement it is to read over and over again in the scriptures that God will always keep his promises to his people! Sing or pray Psalter #325.

January 5 Read Romans 16

As Paul’s letter draws to a close, he gives some final warnings to the Roman church. In verse 17 he cautions them to identify and avoid false teachers who seek to cause division in the church. Those who make it their business to do this serve only themselves, not Christ (v. 18). They may appear on the outside to be noble, but this is simply a mask for selfish motives of pride and ambition.

We must beware of these dividers and deceivers as well, and the dangerous threat they pose to the preservation of the truth and the unity of the church.

In order to be able to recognize false teachers, even young people must be diligent in studying the truth of scripture and in prayer. Pray that God will give the leaders of your church wisdom to deal with these matters in a way that limits the destructive power of heresy. Sing or pray Psalter #343.

January 6 Read Acts 20

In his final address to the elders of the church at Ephesus, Paul reminds them again of an important teaching: “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (v. 35). Paul’s own earthly ministry exemplified this principle. He showed no love of money or fine clothing. He had a heart of sacrifice and lived with only the bare necessities so that he was better able to share the message of the gospel with his flock. He was more concerned about what he could give the people than what they could give him.

What is the purpose of your labors? Do you faithfully do your work so that you are able to support the poor and needy? Or do you feel entitled to spend your money on whatever you want because you earned it? Pray that God will work a spirit of cheerful giving in your heart so that you are able to remain faithful to Jesus’ command. Sing or pray Psalter #346.

January 7 Read Acts 21

Agabus’ prophecy at Caesarea made it clear that Paul was going to experience suffering and imprisonment if he decided to continue on to Jerusalem. But even in the face of certain persecution, God gave Paul the courage to say, “I am ready not to be bound only, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus” (v. 13).

Do you have anxiety about the increased persecution that is coming for the church? Do you doubt whether you would really be able to give up your life for the service and honor of Christ? Being a Christian is not about intentionally choosing suffering and hardship, but it is about choosing God’s will instead of our own, whether it means suffering or not. You can rest assured that the same God who gave Paul the courage to make his bold confession will also give you the strength to pray in the face of unknown suffering, “Thy will be done.” Sing or pray Psalter #349.
The Psalter (5): The 1912 Psalter

As Reformed Christians immigrated to North America, they established Presbyterian and Reformed churches and brought their versions of psalter numbers with them. By the late 1800s, many English psalter versions existed from a number of different sources.

In 1893, the United Presbyterian Church in North America started a project to collect all these various English psalters, many of them haphazard updates of the Scottish Psalter, into one Psalter for use in North American Reformed churches. They gathered nine denominations together, including the Christian Reformed Church.

The goal was to create a Psalter that was easy to sing and yet remain true to the Psalms. They also wanted to match each psalter number to its own tune. At that time, it was often the case that tunes were reused for a number of psalter numbers. The goal for this new, updated Psalter was to make memorization easier with each tune used only once.

Many tunes from American composers were added, such as those by Lowell Mason and William B. Bradbury. In the 1800s, Lowell Mason wrote simple tunes that were easy for a congregation to sing, and he was often criticized for not writing more complicated songs for choirs. William B. Bradbury lived at the same time as Lowell Mason and also wrote songs for congregations to sing. He is known as the composer of the tune for the children’s song Jesus Loves Me as well as several tunes to traditional hymns. Fifty-six tunes in the 1912 Psalter are from these two composers.

The committee put together by the nine denominations worked on this psalter revision from 1895 until 1909, a total of 14 years. From there, an editorial committee made final revisions and tune selections until, finally, the Psalter was published in 1912.

Two years later, the Christian Reformed Church approved the Psalter for use in its English speaking churches. Only ten years later, when the Protestant Reformed Churches split from the CRC, the founders of the PRC brought the Psalter with them into their new denomination.
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:
Owen Michael, son of Mr. & Mrs. Tad Landheer—Byron Center, MI
Evelyn Faith, daughter of Rev. & Mrs. Josh & Courtney Engelsma—Doon, IA
Davis John, son of Mr. & Mrs. Joey & Sherry Mantel—Doon, IA
Jaxton Lee, son of Mr. & Mrs. Zach & Kelsi Start—Georgetown, MI
Kinsley Marie, daughter of Mr. & Mrs. Justin & Kim Kiel—Kalamazoo, MI
David Cooper, son of Mr. & Mrs. Joel & Caitlyn Krygsheld—Peace, IL
Landon Cody, son of Mr. & Mrs. Tim & Sarah Dykstra—Providence, MI
Thomas Henry, son of Mr. & Mrs. Charlie & Monica Hoekstra—Southeast, MI
Pearl Grace, daughter of Mr. & Mrs. Brad & Taylor Ophoff—Southeast, MI
Eden Lael, daughter of Mr. & Mrs. Taylor & Erin Dykstra—Trinity, MI
Avah Lynne, daughter of Mr. & Mrs. Ethan & Lindsey Hassevoort—Trinity, MI
Charlie Jordan, son of Mr. & Mrs. Jason & Bethany Koole—Trinity, MI.
Charity Anne, daughter of Mr. & Mrs. Daniel & Rachel Miersma—Trinity, MI
Jackson Arnold and Marcus Bradley, sons of Mr. & Mrs. Jacob & Laura Vander Wall—Zion, MI
Emmett Karl, son of Mr. & Mrs. Brandon & Macy Kaptein—Zion, MI

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:
Kara Lubbers—Byron Center, MI
Samantha Velthouse—Byron Center, MI
Zachary Lubbers—Georgetown, MI
Danielle Lubbers—Georgetown, MI
Ross Kuiper—Trinity, MI
Sarah Kuiper—Trinity, MI
Annika Potjer—Zion, MI
Cassandra Potjer—Zion, MI
Zachary Potjer—Zion, MI

MARRIAGES
“For this God is our God for ever and ever: he will be our guide even unto death.” Psalm 48:14
Mr. Ryan Vitale and Miss Taylor Engelsma—Georgetown, MI
Mr. Carter Dykstra and Miss Kara Zwak—Hudsonville, MI
Mr. Andrew Timmer and Miss Hannah Nagelkerke—Hudsonville, MI