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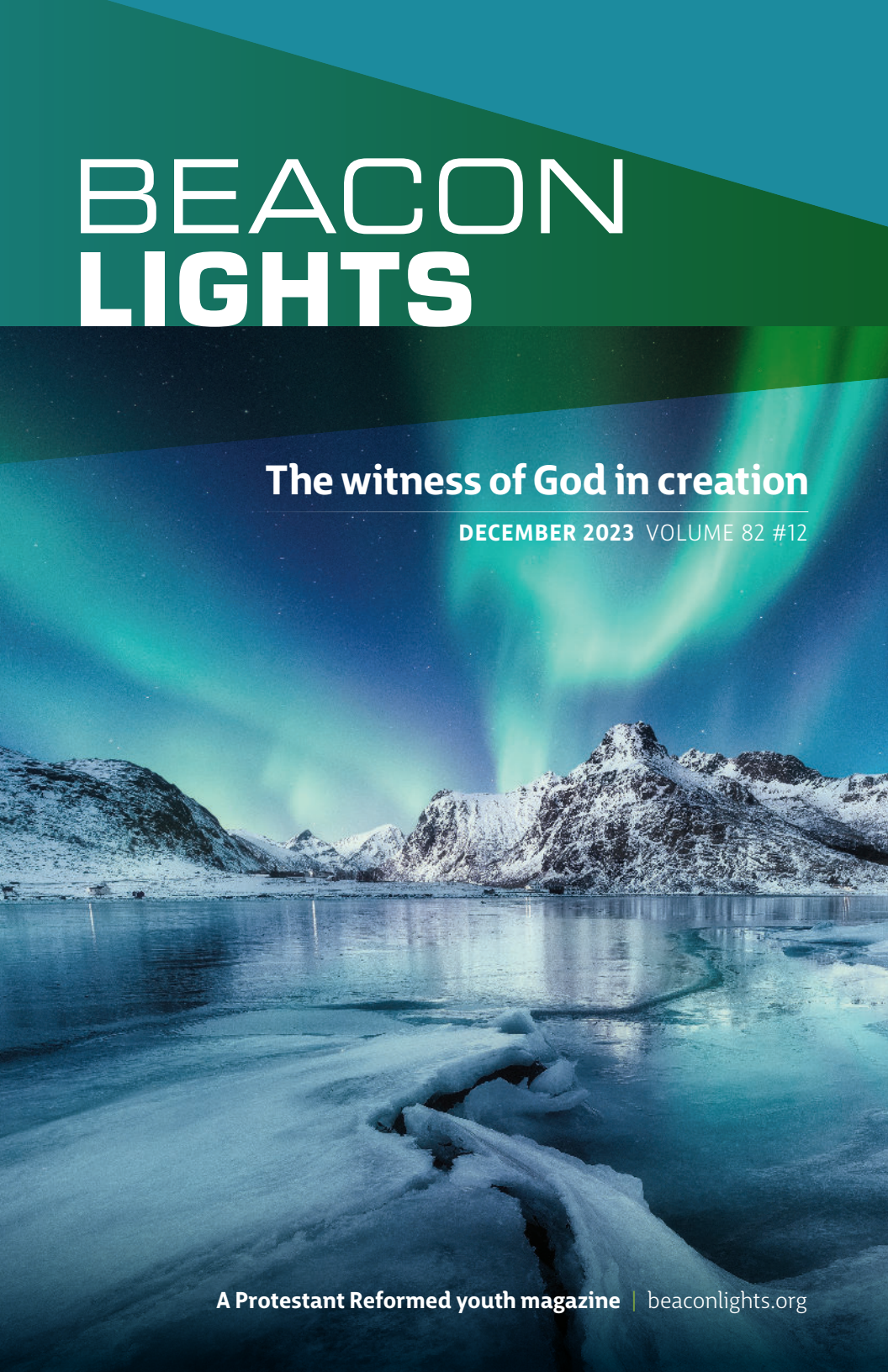

The witness of God in creation

DECEMBER 2023 VOLUME 82 #12

A Protestant Reformed youth magazine | beaconlights.org

BEACON LIGHTS

Beacon Lights magazine is published monthly by the Federation of Protestant Reformed Young People's Societies

Editor
Brendan Looyenga
brendan.looyenga@gmail.com

Contents committee
Dan Gritters, Managing Editor
daniel.gritts@gmail.com
Joshua Harris, Contributing Writer Correspondent harrisj8@mail.gvsu.edu
Charles Potjer, Contributing Writer Correspondent chilipotjer@gmail.com
Jacob VanderKolk, Contributing Writer Correspondent jake.vanderkolk03@gmail.com
Leah Decker, Promotions Manager
promotions@beaconlights.org
Ashley Huizinga, Archivist/Web Manager
ashleyhuizinga@yahoo.com
Jake Dykstra, Business Manager
Kristin Marcus, Secretary
kristinmarcus26@gmail.com

Business office and subscriptions
Jake Dykstra
PO Box 37
Hudsonville, MI 49426-0037
(616) 916-4192
subscriptions@beaconlights.org

Ask de Onderwijzer
Please send questions to askonderwijzer@beaconlights.org. Questions and answers will be published in the next open issue of *Beacon Lights*.

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Church news announcements
Ruth Baas ruthbaas@hotmail.com

Protestant Reformed Scholarship Fund
A function of the Young People's Federation Board. Funds for this scholarship should be sent to the treasurer
Jon Pastoor
7137 Rolling Hills Drive
Hudsonville, MI 49426
(616) 821-8165

Editorial policy
Beacon Lights is published monthly by the Federation of Protestant Reformed Young People's Societies. The annual subscription price is $18 if paid by card online and renewed automatically or $21 if paid by mailed-in check. Please send all business correspondence, address changes, and subscriptions to the business office.

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***Beacon Lights* online**
www.beaconlights.org

Magazine design and typesetting by Erika Kiel

Copy editing by Stephanie Vink

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THE ISSUE AT HAND Brendan Looyenga

The witness of God in creation

One of the more common theological mistakes among Christians today, including Reformed believers, is the error of separating God's gracious work in salvation from his glorious work of creation. Though few would deny that God's singular purpose in both activities is to glorify himself, many nonetheless want to separate the ways in which God is glorified. There is, they say, a common and non-saving way that God is glorified simply because of how his power and wisdom are revealed in the physical creation. This purpose is supposedly separate from the work of revealing his decree of salvation in Christ, which is presented as somewhat of a backup plan for rescuing a creation ruined by sin. God created for his glory, then responded in grace to fix the great mistake of his human creatures.

But this isn't what God tells us about his purpose in creation. The first chapter of Colossians makes abundantly clear that God created everything for the gracious purpose of revealing himself in *all* his glory and fullness. Without Christ this is impossible, "for it pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell" (v. 19). God's ultimate purpose in creation was to reveal Christ. This is why Paul wrote that "all things were created by him, and for him: and he is before all things, and by him all things consist" (vv. 16–17).

We can most clearly see the unity between creation and Christ when we talk about God's attributes. Some of these attributes are more abundantly shown in the context of his creation than apart from it. This is especially true of his graciousness and mercy, which are most clearly displayed in his self-sacrificial love for undeserving sinners redeemed in Christ. God did not *need* his creation to increase his glory. He did not *need* people or the covenant of grace to have perfect fellowship. But in ordaining his creation and making it to be the grand setting for salvation, he revealed Christ, who is Immanuel—God with us!

As you read this issue of *Beacon Lights*, remember this purpose. We rightly speak of God's glory being revealed in what he has made, but a proper view of revelation never forgets that all creation points to Christ "that in all things he might have the preeminence" (v. 18). Reflect on this point with every sunset, mountain, and creature you enjoy, knowing that these, too, were created to draw you closer into the arms of your Lord.

How great the Father's love!

Brendan Looyenga

It is he who made the earth by his power,
who established the world by his wisdom,
and by his understanding stretched out the heavens.
Jeremiah 10:12 (ESV)

A couple of years ago, one of my daughters asked me why God had made such an amazingly large universe when his primary purpose in creation was to save his people in Christ Jesus. This was a good question, and I have to admit it took me a bit of thinking to come up with a good answer for her. If the purpose of creation is to reveal God's grace in Christ, and Christ's work of salvation is restricted to the realm of this earth, then why make so much more?

Before we answer that question, it's worth explaining what "so much more" means in actual dimensions, because our universe is indeed a vast expanse.

We live in a time when distances seem to have shrunk as a result of modern transportation. Few of us think too much about commuting twenty or more miles to work every day or taking a trip across the country by car or airplane. Our family, for instance, logged over four thousand miles during a few weeks of traveling across the western United States a few years ago. More than a few young people get the opportunity to travel even further abroad to places like Europe, which is nearly the same distance away assuming you take a direct flight from Chicago to Berlin. Compared to the lives of our great-grandparents, our world seems to have gotten smaller

as the distances we travel become greater.

But despite all these changes in travel, the distances we are able to cover on Earth are only the tiniest fraction of the distances between the planets in our solar system, not to mention the distances between the stars in our galaxy or between the Milky Way and other galaxies. A trip to Mars—which is a relatively close planet in our solar system—is, on average, a 140-million-mile distance to cover. To get a frame of reference for this distance, consider that the speed of light is about 186,000 miles per second. This means that light generated by a large explosion on the surface of Mars would take over 12.5 minutes for someone on Earth to see, assuming they had a very powerful telescope. The same can be said for electronic communications between Earth and Mars—the very best we could achieve with current technology is a delay of over 12.5 minutes.

Relatively speaking, however, a trip to Mars is just a hop, skip, and a jump compared to the distances between our solar system and our nearest neighboring star. This is where the numbers start to get truly mind-boggling, which is why astronomers switch to units of distance called "light-years" instead of miles or kilometers. As the term implies, a "light-year" is the distance that light can travel across the breadth of outer space in one year. In terms of units we can wrap our minds around, a light-year is equal to 5.88 trillion miles (or 9.46 trillion kilometers). Using these units, the closest (yes, closest!) star to Earth besides the sun is Proxima Centauri, which is 4.25 light-years away from us. That doesn't sound too far in light-years, but in English standard units it works out to about 25 trillion miles.

But we aren't even traveling outside the Milky Way galaxy at this point. To do that would take roughly 24,000 years—if you were moving at the speed of light! This is because our solar system sits about equidistant between the center of the Milky Way and its edge, which is a distance of about 50,000 light-years. If you think of our galaxy as being in the shape of a fried egg, it is estimated to be about 100,000 light-years across and about 2,000 light-years deep. And though this distance is indeed vast, once you are outside the Milky Way, the next closest galaxy to our sun is still 70,000 light-years away! The numbers after that just keep going up. The current (and rather uncertain) estimate of size for the universe is 94 billion light-years from one end to the other.

Just for fun, that's about 552,750,000,000,000,000,000,000 (or 5.53×10^{23}) miles!

Now, back to the question we started with. What possibly could be God's purpose in creating such

an amazingly vast cosmos when his ultimate intention was to reveal salvation in Christ Jesus?

We can begin to find the answer to my daughter's question in Psalm 8, which is a passage where David reflects on the wonder of God's creation of humans in relationship to the rest of his handiwork. Consider especially verses 3–4:

> When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; what is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?

Here David is doing exactly what we just did—considering the creative work of God in the vast expanses of space decorated with sun, moon, and stars. Though David didn't have the same sense of distance we know today, the view of the heavens he could see (even without the aid of a telescope) led him to exclaim, "O LORD our LORD, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!" (v. 1). Psalm 8 therefore reveals two purposes for God's framing of our enormous universe. First, it reminds us of how incredibly small we are amidst the grand expanse of space. And second, it demonstrates to us how great a God we serve.

It's striking how our growing knowledge of the cosmos, which today is far greater than anything David could possibly have imagined, has the same twofold effect as the word of God (Heb. 4:12). For those who grasp it by faith, the unfolding wonders of our vast cosmos give more and more reasons to glorify the Creator who shaped such a marvelous creation. But for those who remain in the darkness of unbelief, every new finding of science gives yet another reason to deny the existence of a Creator. Perhaps this shouldn't surprise us. Faith is, after all, a gift from God, not a result of careful reasoning or intellectual searching. The more we are given to know about the creation around us, the further apart becomes the gulf between faith and unbelief. This, too, is a purpose of God in creating the vastness of our universe.

But there is one more reason, I believe, that God created such a vast and wonderful place in which to work out the story of salvation. That reason comes to us in Paul's prayer for the church found in Ephesians 3. The following verses of that chapter (vv. 14, 17–19) are especially relevant to our discussion:

> For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ…that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God.

Paul's language here is an attempt to communicate just how great the love of Christ is for his church. And because the three basic dimensions of space (height, width, depth) aren't big enough to explain it, he adds a fourth word (breadth) that simply suggests a great extent. In the language of physics, that "fourth dimension" is the dimension of time, which God created along with space when he formed the universe. It is as if Paul is saying that the love of Christ for us is as big as the vast expanses of outer space and as long as time has existed. It is as big and enduring as anything our human minds can imagine!

This, dear children of God, is why our Father created such a vast and wonderful universe. To demonstrate his love for you and to show you that no matter how large this creation might be, his love for you in Christ Jesus is still greater!

The witness of our Creator

Luke Potjer

During a trip to SeaWorld not long ago, I remember being amazed while watching a trainer show off the size and strength of an orca. I sat there, soaked to the bone from the tidal wave caused by the orca's splash, thinking, "Wow, what an amazing creature!"

But I also recall being bothered at this moment—and not only because I would be wet the rest of the day. The thing that really bothered me was that my ears witnessed something completely contrary to what my eyes beheld in the amazing power of God on display in

Luke is an elementary teacher at Hope Christian School and a member of Hope Protestant Reformed Church in Redlands, CA

the magnificent creature we were watching. What I heard was the trainer and the audience applauding the orca as if by its own power it adapted and evolved to become the strongest predator of the sea. The world is bold to proclaim their theory of how all things came to be. Do we, who know the truth about creation, speak with such boldness? When we see God's handiwork in his creation, how quickly do we applaud his power, glory, and wisdom both in our hearts and with our mouths?

Looking around us, we readily see *power* in the creation. The Bible speaks about the creation's might many times. But notice how every time the Bible speaks of the mighty creation, it is making these points as mere pictures of God's much greater power: "The LORD on high is mightier than the noise of many waters, yea, than the mighty waves of the sea" (Ps. 93:4). Twice this verse calls the sea mighty. Twice this verse also proclaims that our God is mightier than this force because he created it. In a similar way, we also know the sun to be very powerful. The Bible states that nothing is hid from the heat of the sun (Ps. 19:6). Imagine having that great a power! Yet the Bible over and over again speaks of the sun as a mere creature controlled by God's hand (Gen. 1:16–18; Job 9:7–9). When we witness the strength of these creatures, we ought to recognize it as a symbol of God's even greater strength. We should also recognize that they have this power only because God gave it to them.

Not only does the creation show God's power, but it also shows his *glory*. The word "glory" in the Bible "refers to a thing of heft or weight," something that we might describe as "massive, important, substantial, abundant, or considerable, thus honorable, splendid, magnificent, and awesome to see, experience, or contemplate."[1] Men spend a great deal of time and energy studying the creation because it is awesome to experience and to contemplate. They do not, however, give God the praise he deserves for his glory and his magnificence as God Almighty. Instead, men try to rob God of his glory. We see this when they praise and worship "mother nature" instead of the great Creator (Rom. 1:18–25). The creation does not deserve the honor and praise itself; rather, it urges us to praise our God. Our mouths should echo David's words: "The heavens declare the glory of God" (Ps. 19:1).

Last, as we are able to experience God's creation on a daily basis, we ought to recognize the *wisdom* of God in how he created all things. The psalmist acknowledges this in Psalm 104: "O Lord, how manifold

1 William Langerak, "Glory," *Word Studies*, PRCA Resources, accessed October 19, 2023, https://www.prca.org/resources/worship-devotional/word-studies/item/1682-glory.

are thy works! in wisdom hast thou made them all: the earth is full of thy riches" (v. 24). When we study any one of God's marvelous creatures, we should be stunned by the intricacy with which he made it to function within its environment. Men can spend years studying just one organ of our body in an attempt to understand it. They may come to a great knowledge of its function and relationship to other parts of the body. But do they see that God has made this perfect unity of parts within the body to function together? What great wisdom is on display! Truly one must respond by saying, "I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made: marvellous are thy works; and that my soul knoweth right well" (Ps. 139:14).

As we see God's works on display in the creation all around us, we are reminded of his power, glory, and wisdom. These are three ways the Christian can bear witness to the evidence of the Creator in his creation. But are we bold enough to point this out to others? We all have to admit that it can be uncomfortable to make comments besides, "Wow, isn't that amazing!" Our natural inclination is to avoid making our Christian faith obvious to others or, worse yet, to claim attention for ourselves through the unique observations we make about the creation. We must fight the urge to hide our faith or take glory for ourselves in order to tell others of God's power, wisdom, and glory when he enables us to observe it clearly.

A way to get more comfortable with this practice is to start doing it in our own homes. We need to speak more of the creation's witness to our God with our own family members. Then, as we grow in comfort, it can become a normal part of our communication with other brothers and sisters in Christ. We must not stop there, however, but keep pushing past our complacency until we can faithfully witness to those who have no knowledge of God as Creator. This does not mean that you need to give a lecture on all the relevant verses in Scripture when you see the sun rise, but it should involve the work of consciously cultivating awe in your heart as you see God's handiwork. Strive to glorify our God in your attitudes and amazement as you see him holding all of his creation in the palm of his hand. Then share that awe with others as he gives you opportunity.

God's attributes evident in creation

Kirsten Brands

The creation that we see all around us gives evidence of God's many attributes. Two years ago, my family had the opportunity to go on an RV trip out west, where we visited several of the state and national parks. During this trip, we saw many breathtaking sights all around us, but the one thing that stood out to me were the characteristics of God seen in his creation. At each stop in our itinerary, God's attributes were on display.

Rocky Mountain National Park

We started our trip in Colorado, where we drove Trail Ridge Road up to the top of Rocky Mountain National Park. An amazing sight along this drive was the tree-covered mountains capped with snow. It is incredible how trees, shrubs, and bushes can grow on the tops of these mountains where the air is thin and there is little soil for their roots to take hold. There were even flowers growing straight out of hard rocks. God is clearly seen in these grand mountains. He is all powerful as the majestic God in heaven! When you stand at the top of a mountain and look out over everything that surrounds you, you can feel the power of God. Psalm 19:1 says, "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork."

Black Canyon, Gunnison National Park

Most people have not heard of the Black Canyon in Gunnison National Park, yet it ended up being a favorite among the sites we visited. Though similar to the Grand Canyon, the sheer walls of this gorge are made of a pure black rock. As we leaned over the railing, a fog from the recent rain

Kirsten is an elementary teacher at Redeemer Christian School in Zeeland, MI. She is a member of Grandville Protestant Reformed Church

loomed over the canyon, causing it to appear hazy. The haziness held a sense of mystery and unknown. I was reminded that God is a spiritual and heavenly being whom we cannot fully understand on this earth (Isa. 55:8–9).

Arches National Park

As we traveled into Utah, the landscape started to change drastically. Rolling hills covered with trees merged into red rock desert with sparse foliage. The large, rusty rocks were piled precariously on top of each other, apparently close to tumbling, but still solidly in place. Arches was the hottest national park that we visited, and also the most unusual. The Colorado River flows along the edge of this park. At the time of our visit, it was a dark chocolate color due to rainfall stirring up minerals and sediments. The red rock stretching over many miles of empty desert provides a constant reminder of God's omnipresence. Just as we could see for miles, we know that God is everywhere, always present with us (Jer. 23:24).

Canyonlands National Park

Once again, it was raining as we explored this national park, one containing a beautiful red rock canyon. Many of our hikes led to overlooks of the canyon, showing a beautiful view with a faint line where a river had previously run. The sunset in Canyonlands National Park was stunning! Each sunset demonstrates God's constant love for his creation. The sun always rises, and the sun always sets, which reminds us that God's love constantly surrounds us. Lamentations 3:22–23 says, "It is of the LORD's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness."

Zion National Park

The Narrows is a popular hike through the Virgin River in the central canyon of Zion National Park. We were warned to watch for flooding as the steep sides of the canyon would make it very difficult to escape. The path is a treacherous, seven-mile hike through turbulent water on slippery rocks. To help us avoid stumbling in the riverbed, we rented specific hiking shoes and walking sticks. This experience reminded me that God faithfully guides his people when they go through the rough waters of life. He leads his people through these trials and even strengthens their faith through these difficulties (1 Pet. 1:6–7).

Bryce Canyon National Park

A hike up to the cliff's edge of this park presented us with an image similar to wet sand dripping down to make the towers of a beachside sandcastle. These unique towers are precariously balanced with beautiful striped colors ranging from tan

to dark orange and red. The deep red rocks remind us that no matter how much our sins compound on top of each other, we have the assurance that Christ's blood is always enough to pay for them all (Eph. 1:7).

Grand Canyon National Park

The view over the rim of the Grand Canyon is a sight that cannot be adequately described. The numerous overlooks offer views rich with scenery and color. However, storms in the Grand Canyon come up quickly and can be extremely dangerous. Scripture reminds us that storms are evidence of God's sovereignty. He controls everything, even the most violent storms. Job 37:5 says, "God thundereth marvellously with his voice; great things doeth he, which we cannot comprehend."

Saguaro National Park

The landscape in Saguaro National Park was riddled with cacti. Cacti come in a variety of shapes and sizes with different flowers or prickers. Most of the large saguaro cacti are hundreds of years old, visible in their height and width. One of the best ways we can learn as young adults is by seeking the wisdom of those older than us, who have experienced life circumstances. God gives these people the knowledge and wisdom to lead the youth in the way of truth (Prov. 16:31).

Carlsbad Caverns National Park

One of the most amazing experiences we had was visiting Carlsbad Caverns at sunset when three hundred thousand bats flew out of the cavern to feed at night. We hiked down to the bottom of the cave, which took over three hours. As we descended over three miles to the bottom, we saw an underground lake decorated with stalagmites and stalactites. An attribute we can see here is God's mercy toward his people. He could have crushed us under the heaviness of our sins (Ps. 38:4), but in his grace and mercy, he sent his Son to die on the cross and atone for them.

God's creation is one of the best ways we can see the attributes of God. He is all powerful, causing the storms to rage. He is omnipresent, always caring for his people. He is merciful and gracious, sending his only begotten Son to bear the heavy weight of our sin. He guides us through the trials in our lives and has given us good examples of wisdom to live by. We should praise God every day for revealing himself to us in his creation. Go out into creation today and see what attributes of God you can see in his wonderful creation!

God upholding his most elegant creation

Travis Lubbers

Our God is a sovereign God. He is far greater than any human mind can possibly comprehend. This is the recurring theme that crosses my mind every time I think about the witness of God in creation, particularly in the realm of the sciences. God makes himself known to us in his creation, which the Belgic Confession calls "a most elegant book, wherein all creatures, great and small, are as so many characters leading us to contemplate the invisible things of God."[1] In all aspects and levels of God's creation, there are many ways we can praise God for what he has so elegantly created.

Imagine it's nighttime, and you are in a vehicle driving to the beach. As you drive, consider how far your traveling distance truly is relative to the size of the United States. If you don't think that's very impressive, what about the distance you went relative to the size of the entire Earth? Glance out your window now and see the multitude of stars. This can lead to two thoughts for the child of God. The first thought is the sheer sense of smallness you feel with the realization that these stars and planets are millions of miles away and are just a small part of our Milky Way galaxy. That Milky Way is just one of billions of galaxies across the entire universe. As you think about each increasing level of the universe, the distance you travel to the beach seems smaller, smaller, and smaller each time.

This leads right into our second thought, which inevitably follows the first. This second thought is

1 Belgic Confession 2, in *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005), 24.

Travis is a first-year graduate student in the biochemistry program at Purdue University in West Lafayette, IN. He is a member at Byron Center Protestant Reformed Church

Psalm 8:4, saying, "What is man, that thou art mindful of him?" We, as a human race, are mere specks of dust compared to our eternal Father. Of all the vast expanse of the universe and of all the light-years of space to choose from, God ordained that he would have his chosen people on this planet—Earth. He decreed that we would fall into sin and that he would save a covenant seed who are as many as the stars in the sky! The fact that God rules over such a tremendous creation and *still* decides to love us is so comforting to the child of God. So, reader, go for a drive at night, look up at the stars, and think of all the fascinating aspects of the universe that lie behind what's visible to the naked eye. Be thankful to God that he chooses to care for specks of dust like us.

Now imagine you've completed your drive and have arrived at the beach. You walk to the shore, lie down in the cool sand, and look up at the night sky. As you reconsider how vast the universe is and how small we as humans must be, you glance to your right, pick up a handful of sand, and throw it into the water. Your train of thought now shifts—*Wait, if I'm so small compared to God, what about things like sand that I think are small?* As you pick up another handful of sand and let the individual grains run through your fingers, think of God's promise to Abraham: "I will surely do thee good, and make thy seed as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude" (Gen. 32:12).

After the sand runs through your fingers, you're now probably thinking, *What possibly is there that can be that much smaller than sand?* However, as soon as the waves roll up on shore and the water chills your feet, you get a flashback to your science classes and remember that water is made up of H_2O molecules. But just how small are these molecules? Just as a store uses a dozen as a unit of measurement to measure 12 eggs per dozen, there is a unit of measurement in chemistry known as the mole, which consists of 6.02×10^{23} molecules per mole. That's an absurd number! Remember, one billion is 10^9, one trillion is 10^{12}, and so on. One mole is a little less than one trillion *times* one trillion!

But how much water is in one mole? Take out a small cup and measure out 18 milliliters, or about 1.2 tablespoons. In those 18 milliliters, or one mole, you have more water molecules than our human minds can possibly fathom. Now you look out into the lake. The vast size of the lake may shock you when you put it into terms of moles. How many tablespoons of water can you scoop out of that lake? That is how many moles upon moles of water molecules God has ordained to be in this exact location.

But God governs much more than just the existence and positions of individual water molecules in a lake. Think of the trillions of cells that make up your body and some of the intricate components that are in them. Consider, for instance, the six feet of DNA that is tightly coiled within every individual cell in your body to encode your genome. This chemical code provides instructions for the physical make-up and function of your body, including all the involuntary metabolic and respiratory processes that take place in it every moment! Be thankful to God that you don't have to remind yourself to breathe or tell your heart to beat all day long! Each of these processes serve their God-ordained purpose in keeping us alive and allowing us to bring praise to our God each day. God put every single living creature and every specific cell in its perfect place in creation and constantly governs them by his providence every day.

In each of these levels of creation, from the cosmos to the molecular level, I find Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 1 and Lord's Day 10 to be so applicable. Lord's Day 1 talks about how God so preserves us that "without the will of my heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from my head."[2] Lord's Day 10 talks about the providence of God, which is how by his "almighty and everywhere present power" he "upholds and governs heaven, earth, and all creatures."[3] Think about the intelligence and wisdom that God shows in his design of the elegant vastness that we call his creation. Not a single atom can move without the will of God. Whether it is the millions of galaxies, billions of stars, moles upon moles of sand grains or water molecules, or all the biological processes of living creatures, stand in awe of the power of our heavenly Father who always upholds and governs all these things throughout history!

2 Heidelberg Catechism A 1, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 83.

3 Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 27, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 93–94.

God's judgment on the wicked for their unbelief

Thomas VanOverloop

In Romans 1:18–32, the apostle Paul describes a fearful example of God's judgment. He explains that the wicked see the creatures of this world and all the amazing landscapes that cover the face of this earth, and although God is clearly displayed in the creation, they deny just that in their wickedness. As Herman Hoeksema puts it, this unbelief of the wicked world is "inexcusable madness."[1] When the wicked deny the Creator who made the world in all its grandeur, God in his wrath will judge them.

When we talk about seeing God in creation, we do not mean that we see him physically. God is a spiritual being and cannot be viewed with the naked eye. The apostle John tells us this in John 4:24 when he plainly says, "God is a Spirit." So how can it be said that God is *seen* in creation? Romans 1:20 tells us that we see "the invisible things of him...even his eternal power and Godhead." What Paul is referring to here is the power through which God created the world and brought all things into existence. The universe is so large, magnificent, and complex that even the wicked know in their hearts that it could only have been created by a divine being, and not by some event of chance.

Just as creation shows that God is all powerful, it also reveals his "Godhead." This is the divinity of God, which distinguishes him from every creature. As the divine God of heaven and earth, Jehovah demands to be praised and worshiped alone. In their hearts the wicked know this because God's presence is "clearly seen" (Rom. 1:20), but they refuse to acknowledge it. This is not out of ignorance, for the creation is a

1 Herman Hoeksema, "Inexcusable Madness," *Standard Bearer* 73, no. 8 (January 1997): 171–73.

Thomas is a confessing member at Hudsonville Protestant Reformed Church. He is currently a freshman in the secondary education program at Cornerstone University in Grand Rapids, MI

living testimony of our great God that is undeniably visible to all people on this earth. It is through the gift of faith, however, that God works believing knowledge in the hearts of his elect people so that when they see the various aspects of creation they acknowledge and praise him.[2]

Despite the witness of creation, unbelievers refuse to glorify God for his marvelous acts. Why is this? Romans 1:18 reveals that in their wickedness, they "hold the truth in unrighteousness." Hoeksema explains this phrase by noting that as unbelievers begin to investigate and discuss the marvels of creation, they actively try to come up with explanations that take God out of the equation.[3] And as they do this, they begin to look at the creatures of the world and glorify these worldly and corruptible creatures instead of God (vv. 21–25). But their foolishness is shown when they try to produce "wise" theories about the world and its creatures apart from the Creator. God's response to this idolatry is found in verse 18 when it says, "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men."

How does God reveal his wrath upon the wicked for their unbelief? Hoeksema states that as soon as the wicked pervert the truth in unrighteousness, the wrath of God is revealed against them. This is shown in the fact that the hearts of the ungodly are darkened: "Having made these images (of the creatures of the earth), they went on; and their hearts became more darkened, until finally they believed that these images they made were actually God."[4] When men in wickedness deny God's power and divinity, God says, "Go ahead." In his power, God allows sin to progress. Sin is punished with more sin.

A specific sin that man then enters into through the denial of God is the sin of lust. By nature, our hearts all have desires, and sinful desire leads to lust. Author James Smith makes this point in his book *You Are What You Love*.[5] Throughout the book Smith emphasizes that our desires shape us and lead us onward in life. Paul is saying this, too, in Romans 1. When unbelievers deny God, he gives them over to uncleanness. As the wicked chase their desires, they become what they love. A love for uncleanness gives rise only to more uncleanness, which in this passage refers to moral and sexual uncleanness. They "dishonour their own bodies between themselves" (v. 24) and

2 Herman Hoeksema, *Righteous by Faith Alone: A Devotional Commentary on Romans*, ed. David Engelsma (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2002), 26–29.

3 Hoeksema, *Righteous by Faith Alone*, 29.

4 Hoeksema, *Righteous by Faith Alone*, 33.

5 James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016).

are given "up unto vile affections" (v. 26). These affections even go against the laws of nature so that men lust after men, and women lust after women.

Sins of moral and sexual impropriety, however, are not the only sins that the wicked are given over to by God. The unbelieving heart is also given over to covetousness, spitefulness, violence, deception, and disobedience, to name a few of the sins listed in Romans 1:28–31. We see here that unbelief and denial of God leads to an endless cycle of sins being committed and punished by more sin in God's just judgment. To be clear, however, God is not the initiator or instigator of sin. The wicked bring all this upon themselves through the lusts of their own heart, all because of the initial sin of unbelief.

In a perfect world, the desire of our hearts would lead us to pursue a closer relationship with God without ceasing. But this world is not a perfect world, nor are God's people perfect in their desires. God in his love has saved his elect children and makes a place for them in heaven. This is only possible through Christ, in whom God's wrath is turned to love. Being united to him by faith is the only true pathway to happiness in this life and the next.

But God does have a purpose for his people in the fearful example of Romans 1. This purpose is to show the relationship between unbelief and the consequences it brings. The consequences of unbelief show us that those who live for him by his mercy and grace will have a happiness that cannot be experienced by those who are given over to the lusts of their heart. There is no happiness and fulfillment to be found in the evil lusts of the heart, and those who refuse to believe in the God who reveals himself in creation will experience lives of wretchedness and sorrow. This is truly "inexcusable madness."

A nation and world in turmoil

Scott Van Uffelen

Headlines in early October were full of gloom and doom. Day after week after month expressed the same theme: we are living in a world of chaos and uncertainty. Besides the world's focus on military conflicts, earthquakes and hurricanes, global debt, and rising inflation, there were also stories of uncertainty and turmoil within our nation. David Leonhardt and Peter Baker of the *New York Times* took an interesting approach to giving some perspective about the state of our nation. It is worth our time to briefly consider and hear voices that challenge what we might be prone to think.[1,2]

Imagine you were a foreign leader surveying the political chaos in the United States:

- For the first time in history, a party has just fired its own Speaker of the House in the middle of a term (a speaker that it took fifteen votes to approve only months earlier).
- In the Senate, one of the two party leaders, who is eighty-one years old, has twice recently frozen in public, unable to speak.
- A Supreme Court justice has just allowed wealthy political donors to finance a lavish lifestyle for him and his wife.
- A likely nominee in the upcoming presidential election faces four criminal trials and regularly speaks in apocalyptic terms about his country's future.
- That nominee is tied in the polls with an eighty-year-old current president who many voters worry is too old to serve a second term.

Conclusion 1: If you were an ally of the United States, you'd

1 David Leonhardt, "America's Political Turmoil," *New York Times*, October 5, 2023.

2 Peter Baker, "To the World, McCarthy's Exit Is Just Another Example of U.S. Disarray," *New York Times*, October 5, 2023.

Scott is a teacher at Covenant Christian High School in Walker, MI. He worships with his family at Zion Protestant Reformed Church in Jenison

be worried; if you were an enemy, you'd be pleased. Conclusion 2: To many watching at home and abroad, the "American Way" no longer seems to offer a case study in effective representative democracy. Instead, it has become an example of disarray and discord, one that rewards extremism and threatens to divide a polarized country even further.

What has caused, or at least contributed to, this turmoil?

Leonhardt and Baker point fingers at decades of unimproved living standards that have caused voter frustration. Social media and the rise of cable television networks willing to promote falsehoods continue to inflame all discussion. The decline of institutions (including churches) has left Americans feeling disconnected. Aging political leaders have failed to groom strong successors. In other words, many factors have contributed to this turmoil. But the single largest source of chaos, according to the authors, is the Republican Party.

These are strong words that potentially sting the ears of readers more than we would like. Before quickly dismissing their point and assuming they are biased liberals (consider their decades-long careers covering presidents, finance, and American politics, as well as their follow-up articles explaining how the Republican Party is the best hope for turning America around), we should hear and evaluate the basis of their claim.

Baker explains that there is plenty of evidence that the Democratic Party also has problems. It has struggled in recent years to come up with effective policies for COVID-related school closures, illegal immigration, and several other issues. Every major political party has weaknesses. Despite theirs, the Democrats remain a functional party by most standards. Their moderate and progressive factions frequently work together. President Biden, like Barack Obama before him, has passed a long list of substantive legislation. Congressional Democrats have remained impressively united for almost two decades.

The Republican Party, by contrast, is both fractured and increasingly extreme. Tens of millions of Republican voters have embraced beliefs and ideas that are demonstrably wrong, including bizarre conspiracy theories like QAnon. Prominent Republican politicians, including Trump, have spoken positively about the January 6 riots in Washington, D.C., and more generally about the need for political violence. Kevin McCarthy's downfall as speaker is the latest sign of the party's drift toward radical activism. He lost his job because a group of hard-right House members were furious with him for conducting policy negotiations that are a part of democratic government. The

Wall Street Journal editorial board, a reliable voice of conservatism, agreed with this assessment and quipped, "The ouster captures the degraded state of the Republican Party in this era of rage."[3]

With their words and views before us, we must address the root of their argument and not get too distracted by the talking points used to prove it. American democracy has been built on the premise that we need two functioning parties. To the naked eye, one appears to be fractured and extreme. "A democracy on the verge of veering out of control is the consequence when one of the major political players in the democratic process won't accept the basic rules of the game," said Daniel Ziblatt, a Harvard professor who recently published *Tyranny of the Minority*, a sequel to his groundbreaking book, *How Democracies Die*.[4]

Of general note to our readers, a "far-right faction" in the House is not the same as a conservative-right group. Conservatives, by definition, uphold the Constitution of the United States and demand that law and order be the hallmark of any functioning society. Conservatives uphold the government and its authority, even in times when opposing parties are in the driver's seat, because the threat of anarchy, chaos, and lawlessness is more dangerous than opposing political views.

The American public has been souring on the state of our country for a remarkably long stretch. This has taken a toll on American institutions. Fewer than half of Americans express confidence in the police, the medical system, organized religion, the Supreme Court, banks, public schools, the presidency, technology companies, the media, the criminal justice system, big business, or Congress.[5]

Even with all these problems, there are reasons for optimism. The Republican caucus in the Senate is more functional than in the House. Nature abhors a vacuum, and the leadership seat in the House has recently been filled. It's possible that a more functional Republican Party, committed to both conservatism and American democracy, will emerge in the coming years. The war between Israel and Hamas, which is quickly becoming a world war, has forced the two major American parties to come together with a unified voice against political terrorism and the anti-Semitic language that was manifested in our major cities. These developments are encouraging.

Above all else, however, our nation and its government are in the hands of our almighty Lord, who is pleased to use these deeply flawed means for the sake of his

3 The Editorial Board, "Republicans Cut Off Their Own Heads," *Wall Street Journal*, October 3, 2023.

4 Baker, "McCarthy's Exit," October 5, 2023.

5 Baker, "McCarthy's Exit," October 5, 2023.

elect people (Isa. 45:1–6). Though our natural eyes are distracted by the turmoil around us, may our spiritual eyes see the comfort of Scripture in 2 Corinthians 1:3–4: "Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God."

The Creator: Worthy of our worship

Rebekah Buiter

Popular culture is heavily influenced by New Age ideas. Is the word "vibes" a regular word in your everyday speech? One might use that word to describe a certain "energy" they feel coming from a person. "He had good vibes" generally means that an individual perceived friendliness and a level of ethical and moral goodness from another person. In the context that young people typically use the word, it is relatively harmless. The word, however, finds its origin and meaning in New Age beliefs and practices. The word "vibes" or "vibrations" refers to the vibrational frequency another person is emitting. According to New Age belief, the higher the frequency at which someone vibrates, the more enlightened they are, or the closer they are to achieving the highest spiritual level.

As another example of New Age influence, a Christian might be tempted to take control of the future through "manifesting," or other such "name it and claim it" beliefs. However, when one attempts to

Rebekah is a wife and mother in the home. She attends Hope Protestant Reformed Church in Redlands, CA, with her family

control his future, he is denying that God is the Creator, not only of this present reality, but also of the future. We must confess, "My times are in thy hand" (Ps. 31:15).

In contrast to us mere creatures, Jehovah God is the all-powerful Creator who governs and upholds his creation. All that happens in our lives and the history of the world comes about because of his providential hand. Furthermore, because he is sovereign, no one can influence God's hand. Not even our prayers can cause God to act contrary to what he has already purposed in his will. We may not pray with the intent to manipulate God to act according to our desires. Since we do not understand how everything fits within God's counsel, we must pray, "Nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done" (Luke 22:42).

God is also the all-wise Creator. He ordered history so that his will comes to pass in the best way possible. In the beginning, God created everything in a perfect order. God created dry land, air, water, and light before the plants were created so that they could thrive. Ultimately, it is his will that his church be saved and brought to heaven for his glory. Thus, everything that God does in the history of the world and our lives is for our spiritual good and for his glory. We do not possess innate wisdom to guide us through life. Our ancestors and the angels are not the source of knowledge and wisdom to guide us. God alone is the all-wise one to whom we must look for guidance (Ps. 48:14). God provides us that wisdom in his word, which reveals to us God's will so that we are able to seek his glory in every aspect of our lives (2 Tim. 3:16–17).

Furthermore, God is a gracious and loving Creator. He works all things for the spiritual benefit of his people. Satan tries to deceive us into thinking that it would be better to listen to him, but he does not have our spiritual welfare in mind. His motive is selfish, personal advancement. All that he needs to overthrow God from his throne in heaven is to cause one of God's sheep to fall from grace. When God brings us through hard times and we are tempted by Satan to complain or to abandon our calling, we must remember that it is God who loves us and his Son Jesus Christ who gave himself for us (John 10:11). "When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee" (Isa. 43:2). As we walk the difficult road to heaven, God promises that he will never leave us nor forsake us (Heb. 13:5).

Therefore, the Creator alone is worthy of our worship. We are always beholden to the one who

made us (Ps. 100), provides for us (23:1), rules us (103:19), and loves us (Rom. 5:8). This is our covenant God—not political leaders, church elders, husbands, fathers, or ourselves. Certainly, this is not Satan, although he will tempt us, as he did Jesus, to worship him in order to receive earthly power. Satan has a level of power to give and to do certain things, but it is always to the spiritual destruction of the soul. In stark contrast, Jesus our mediator ascended to the right hand of God and was given the power to rule as Lord of lords and King of kings. Through his Holy Spirit, he gives us all things for our spiritual benefit and the salvation of our souls (2 Pet. 1:3).

Date	Read	Study	Psalter
Dec 8	Gen. 1:1–8	What is included in the creation of "heaven"?	14 (vv. 1–3)
Dec 9	Gen. 1:9–19	Why did God wait until after the creation of plants to create the sun (which plants need to grow)?	193 (vv. 1–2, 4–6)
Dec 10	Gen. 1:20–25	What brought forth the animals made on days five and six of creation?	57 (v. 1)
Dec 11	Gen. 1:26–31	How is man different from the rest of God's creatures?	14 (vv. 4–7)
Dec 12	Gen. 2:1–7	What is the significance of God forming man from the dust of the ground?	236 (vv. 1, 4)
Dec 13	Gen. 2:8–17	What purpose did the garden of Eden serve for man?	226 (vv. 2–3)
Dec 14	Gen. 2:18–25	Why was the woman the last creature to be created?	360 (vv. 1–3)
Dec 15	Job 38:1–7	Why is it important to be reminded that man wasn't even present when God created?	59 (vv. 1–3)
Dec 16	Job 38:8–21	Is this still true of man today with all of his scientific advances?	256 (vv. 3–5)
Dec 17	Job 38:22–30	Is God still sovereign over natural phenomena even if man can influence them?	402 (vv. 1, 3, 5)
Dec 18	Job 38:31–41; Ps. 104:21; Matt. 6:25–32	How do these passages disprove the idea that God created the world, set it in motion, and then is no longer personally involved?	167

Dec 19	Job 39:1–8	How do the wild goats show how man is unable to govern and uphold all things?	105
Dec 20	Job 39:9–18	Why did God create seemingly foolish animals?	288 (vv. 1–2)
Dec 21	Job 39:19–30	How does God show that man is not wise nor creative enough to have come up with all the different creatures?	286 (v. 5)
Dec 22	Job 40:1–5	What is Job's answer?	104 (vv. 1–3)
Dec 23	Job 40:6–14	Why does God use the truth that he is Creator as a starting point to show Job's foolishness in asking God to explain himself in afflicting Job?	104 (vv. 4–8)
Dec 24	Job 40:15–24	How does the behemoth show God's power and glory?	35 (v. 5)
Dec 25	Job 41:1–34	How does the creature leviathan show God is not to be contended with (40:2)?	257
Dec 26	Ps. 8	What is your response to God considering insignificant man?	15
Dec 27	Ps. 19:1–6	What can we learn about God when we look up at the sun and stars?	39
Dec 28	Ps. 33:6–9	How did God create the heaven and earth?	86 (v. 1)
Dec 29	Ps. 100	What do you believe about the origin of man?	400
Dec 30	Ps. 104:1–18	What aspect of God's providence is showcased here?	286 (vv. 1–2)
Dec 31	Ps. 104:19–35	What should be our response when we see God's handiwork in creation?	287
Jan 1	Rom. 1:20–21	How are all men without excuse if not all men have heard the gospel?	139 (vv. 1–2, 4, 6)
Jan 2	Rom. 1:22–25	What happens when we take God out of the study of science?	123 (v. 1)
Jan 3	Rom. 1:26–32	How does God punish men who refuse to acknowledge God as Creator?	13 (v. 6)
Jan 4	John 1:1–5	How was Jesus active in the work of creation?	85
Jan 5	Col. 1:15–17	What is the purpose of the creation?	137

Jan 6	2 Pet. 3:5–7	What false teaching concerning the creation is Peter writing against?	285 (v. 3)
Jan 7	2 Pet. 3:10–14	Since this creation is being destroyed, where is our hope?	274

Augustine

Prof. Doug Kuiper

Throughout this year we have surveyed how sixteen early church fathers contributed to the church's understanding of truth during the years AD 100–420. Some defended the teachings of Scripture as the foundation of the Christian faith in a day when Christians were persecuted. Others defended Christianity against the attacks of paganism. Several men we studied helped the church understand the Trinity. None of these men were unimportant.

And yet, towering above them all, is Augustine.

The man

Augustine was born in 354. To put this date in context, the Council of Nicea (AD 325) had already met and drafted its creed about the triune God, but the Council of Constantinople (AD 381) had not yet met to face further questions about the doctrine of the Trinity. The church was continuing to discuss the matter.

Augustine was born to a pagan father and Christian mother in Tagaste, North Africa, near the present-day Souk Ahras, Algeria. Alexandria, Egypt, was a notable

Prof. Kuiper is the professor of Church History & New Testament Studies at the Protestant Reformed Theological School and a member of Trinity Protestant Reformed Church

center of Christianity, but Tagaste was 1,600 miles to the west, south of the western tip of Italy. Unlike today, much of northern Africa at this time was Christian.

Augustine lived a wanton life as a teenager, became a father at age eighteen, and cohabited with his son's mother for years, though he never married her. Later he joined the Manichaean sect, which was a Persian mystery cult that combined ideas from a variety of other religions. Augustine was highly educated and taught rhetoric (public speaking), eventually crossing the Mediterranean Sea to teach in Rome. Hearing the church father Ambrose preach in the city of Milan, he became a *catechumen* (one who studied with a view to entering the church). In 388 he returned to Africa, in 389 was made a presbyter (against his will), and from 396 to 430 was the Bishop of Hippo.

When Augustine died in August 430, the city of Hippo was besieged by a barbarian tribe called the Vandals. They would soon capture the city and destroy much of it. Few remnants of a strong Christian community survived. But many of Augustine's writings did.

His writings

Augustine wrote extensively. His book *Confessions* is a well-known spiritual biography in which he expresses his soul's reliance on God. This book is foundational to Western literature in its introspective approach to inner turmoil and personal faith.

Many of Augustine's writings showed the error of wrong views. Having been a member of the sect of the Manichaeans, he exposed their errors in writing. He also turned his attention to the Donatists, who had formed their own church because they didn't like some of the decisions of Rome regarding how to receive back into the church those who left while under persecution. For being on the "right side" of an issue, they claimed to be a purer church than Rome. Augustine ably answered them: the Romish church was the one, holy, catholic church to which all belonged; to separate from her was to sinfully divide the church. The church's holiness, said Augustine, was not a matter of her making a decision that everyone liked or thought best in a particular circumstance. Remember that at this time, the Western, Roman church was *not* a false church.

Augustine also responded to Pelagius, a British monk who taught that humans are basically good. He agreed that Adam and Eve sinned but taught that their sin did not corrupt the entire human race. According to Pelagius, we sin when we commit transgressions; but we are able to avoid acts of sin and to live good lives by our own free will. When we sin, we are able

to overcome the effects of that sin by obedience.

Augustine knew this was not true. He had not been able to overcome his own sexual temptations in his own power. Rather, he had needed grace—an irresistible, divine, transforming power—to overcome sin. All humans need grace, because apart from it we are spiritually dead, and sin brings even our will into bondage. A man who is not spiritually dead can choose to obey and do good; but a sinner can will only to do evil. So Augustine wrote about the bondage of the will in his book *The Spirit and the Letter*, a book that Martin Luther later read with great profit.

His legacy

The Roman Catholic Church still remembers Augustine as a great church man. His view of human nature and divine grace, she has forgotten; but she remembers his defense of membership in the one, holy, catholic, apostolic church.

For Reformed believers, Augustine's real legacy is his opposition to Pelagianism. While other church fathers were busy addressing the trinitarian and Christological controversies, Augustine turned his attention to an entirely different doctrine. Almost single-handedly, he paved the way for a right view of fallen humanity (totally depraved) and of grace (particular, sovereign, and irresistible).

Young people, you know that Augustine was right. We are sinners, unable to overcome sin in our own power. Christ is not just a good example for us to follow, as Pelagius said. Rather, he atoned for our sins, bearing God's wrath so that we can be reconciled to God. Arising from the dead, he renews us and spiritually empowers us to begin to obey God again.

That was the Christ of Augustine.

Church news

Ruth Baas

Baptisms

Ellie Renae, daughter of Caden & Alyssa Vis Calvary, IA

Briella Kate, daughter of Tim & Kathryn Bruinsma Crete, IL

Shane Elmer, son of Paul & Erin DeJong Doon, IA

Leland Michael, son of Michael & Lauren Pastoor Faith, MI

Weston Lee, son of Brad & Jessica Ellerbroek Georgetown, MI

Averley Rayne, daughter of Mike & Alyssa Laning Hull, IA

Eleanore Marie, daughter of Nick & Nicole Cammenga Southwest, MI

Brynn Noelle, daughter of Grant & Lindsey Kamps Southwest, MI

Otis Martin, son of Tedd & Abby VanSolkema Trinity, MI

Louisa Jo, daughter of Jake & Katelyn Dykstra Unity, MI

Charlotte Elizabeth, daughter of Nick & Kathryn Elzinga Unity, MI

Kayson Mark, son of Jeremy & Emily Cnossen Unity, MI

Keagan Daniel, son of Alex & Natalie VanOverloop Zion, MI

Naveah Beth, daughter of Collin & Arianne VanOverloop Zion, MI

Confessions of faith

Breck Brummel, Alex DeBoer, Eli Klein Calvary, IA

Rebecca Block Cornerstone, IN

Seth Smit Doon, IA

Tessa Byker, McKenna VanDyke Faith, MI

Shane Burchette Georgetown, MI

Cody Koole Grace, MI

Shelby Andringa, Emily Groeneweg, Keahna Heynen, Kelsey Uittenbogaard, Julia VanMaanen, Braxton Kooiker, Joshua Kooiker, Conner Kooima, Nathan Kooima, Blake Moss, Drew Poppema, Nick VanEngen Hull, IA

Melody denHartog, Isaac Gritters Redlands, CA

Jared Kuiper, Morgan Kuiper, Ben VanderKolk Trinity, MI

Sam VanPutten, Dale VanBaren Unity, MI

Weddings

Sam Dykstra & Kayla Velthouse Byron Center, MI

Jorden Moelker & Jodi Holstege Faith, MI

Shane Burchette & Macy Schimmel Georgetown, MI

Jordin France & Alyssa Mastbergen Grace, MI

Jed Ophoff & Chloe Kaptein
Grace, MI

Calvin DeJong & Mary Schwarz
Loveland, CO

Colin Riemersma & Maddie Prince
Southeast, MI

Dylan Lubbers & Taylor Koole
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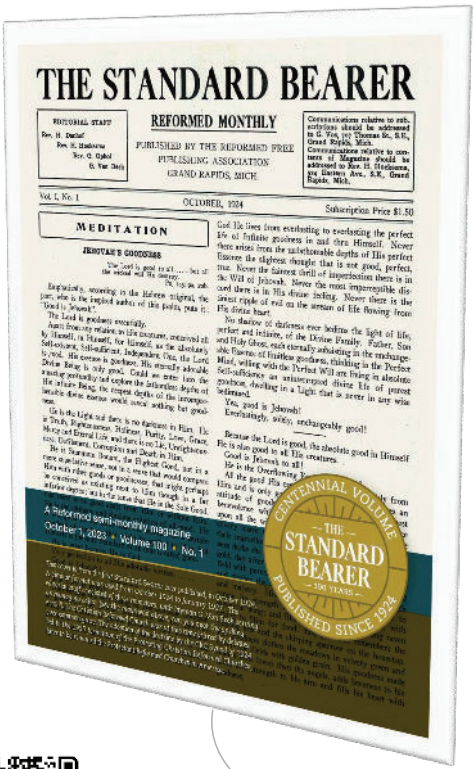

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