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Leadership

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BEACON LIGHTS

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Editor
Tyler Kamps
tylerpkamps@gmail.com

Contents committee
Brad De Vries, Managing Editor
bdv49315@gmail.com
Melanie Hanko, Contributing Writer Correspondent melaniehanko@gmail.com
Charles Potjer, Contributing Writer Correspondent chilipotjer@gmail.com
Jacob VanderKolk, Contributing Writer Correspondent jake.vanderkolk03@gmail.com
Aubrey Hoekstra, Promotions Manager
promotions@beaconlights.org
Ashley Mulder, Archivist/Web Manager
ashleyhuizinga@yahoo.com
Tyler Block, Business Manager
Kristin Marcus, Secretary
kristinmarcus26@gmail.com

Business office and subscriptions
Tyler Block
PO Box 37
Hudsonville, MI 49426-0037
(616) 930-1733
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

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Joel Rau
7343 Sandelwood St.
Jenison, MI 49428

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THE ISSUE AT HAND Tyler Kamps

What comes to mind when you think of leadership? Is it a position you hope to achieve in your career? Does it call to mind stories of heroic leaders throughout history? Do you think of military leaders or government leaders? There is no right or wrong answer to that question, but there are some wrong ways we tend to view leadership.

In society at large, we might not agree with what our government leadership does or how they behave, but we still have the calling to respect our leaders and remember where their authority comes from. In the church, God gives authority to certain individuals, and he calls us to show them respect and hold them in high esteem. Here too, we might not agree with the direction their leadership chooses, but God calls his people to trust their leaders, for he has appointed them. And there is a right way to go about discussing these disagreements, if and when they arise.

It is important that we pray for our leaders, both in the church and outside of the church. First Timothy 2:1–2 exhorts us to pray for our leaders and tells us what we are to pray for. Then in verse 3, we find the motivation, "For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour." It might be difficult to pray for certain leaders or maybe we just don't think to do this often enough, but this is a calling that we shouldn't neglect.

There are many attributes we associate with leadership, such as self-confidence or assertiveness, but do we think of humility as an essential attribute? In Deuteronomy 17:19–20 God instructs leaders to keep the law so that they will not be lifted up in pride. A leader who is humble will consider the needs of others even higher than his or her own needs.

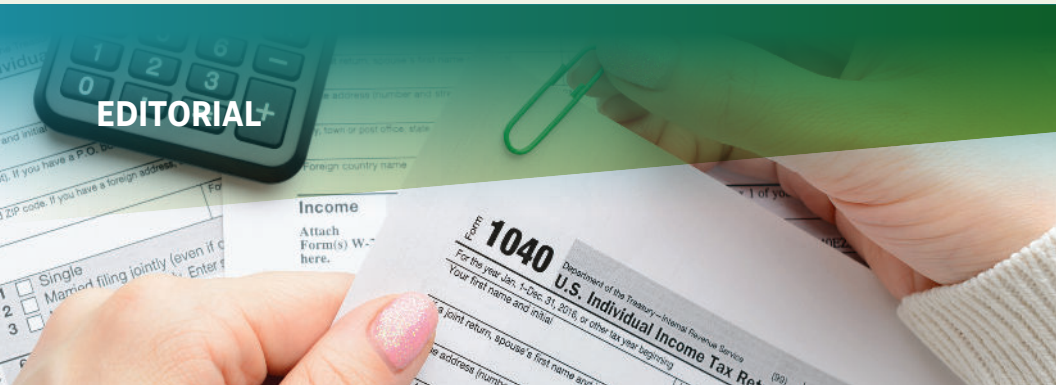
Not every leadership context has to do with high-level government positions, being an elder in the church, or working as a principal in a school. There is also leadership among peers. We should be striving to be good examples to our friends and lead one another to Christ.

As a student, I remember always trying to get our teachers and young people's leaders to go through the book of Revelation. We never succeeded. As Jake VanderKolk mentions in the devotional, this is a difficult book to interpret, but we will have an opportunity to study the first six chapters in this month's issue. Revelation 1:3 warns, "The time is at hand." Are you prepared for the second coming of Christ?

People may see the development of technology as a sign of the end times. Artificial intelligence is viewed skeptically by many and embraced fully by others. Part two

of the current events article on AI and ChatGPT helps to explain this skepticism. It seems we can't escape AI, so maybe it is time to learn how to use it properly. That is a topic for each to ponder on their own.

Last thing, don't forget to sign up for the convention. Registration is now open!



How do we view authority?

Tyler Kamps

As Christians, we are called to live in this world but not be of this world. At times this is easier said than done. The lines get blurry and we don't even realize how much we are influenced by the world. I think this has become especially prevalent in our views of leadership. Our culture puts very little emphasis on submission and obedience to authority, unless, of course, they want someone to agree with their particular views.

Disagreements with the opposing political party, or even one's own political party, now give license to all types of retaliation. The notion of respecting someone you disagree with has been tossed out the window. We see it on social media and hear it from news outlets, friends, and coworkers.

One specific example that has come up over the last few years is the "Let's Go Brandon" flags and stickers. Here is a blatant display of disrespect to the highest level of leadership in our government, and it is excused because "It's only three words" and "I can say Let's Go Brandon just like I can say Let's Go Lions, what's wrong with that?"

Well, God knows the heart, and you can't get out on a loophole with him. How you act and what you say matters, even if you are joking around.

God, as the ultimate giver of authority, put our presidents and other politicians in their position. As Romans 13:1–2 puts it, "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God."

When all is going well and we agree with the higher powers, we can read that verse and think, *No problem, that sounds fair.* But when we disagree with the higher powers or think they make foolish or sinful policy choices, how do we respond? Yes, there are times when it is necessary for a Christian to follow God's word over what an authority figure might tell them, but this is not the case with most of our disagreements with our government. Our opinion about an administration that taxes us in a way we don't like or a leader whom we suspect is power hungry or self-serving doesn't give us license to disobey.

We do face real issues where authority is abused, but in ancient Rome, during the New Testament times, the government was as corrupt and antichristian as any modern government. Even though he was well aware of how sinful and corrupt the leaders were, Peter still wrote, "Servants, be subject to your masters with all fear; not only to the good and gentle, but also to the froward" (1 Pet. 2:18). Jesus even reinforced the necessity of paying taxes, as we read in Matthew 22:15–22. This is especially impressive considering that tax collectors were known to overtax the citizens and keep some for themselves.

Throughout his earthly life, Jesus was treated unjustly, and he still obeyed those in authority and submitted to the authorities, all to the praise of God. First Peter 2 continues in verses 21–23, "Because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example…who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously." Jesus was our example, but he wasn't just an example, he overcame the power of sin so that we can obey (Rom. 6) and even endure injustice.

Having covered the areas of both unbelievers' and believers' view of leadership in government, we also need to take a look at believers and their view of leadership in the Christian communities in which each lives. What I have in mind is church, school, and home. Here we see a beautiful manifestation of how one ought to view leadership, right? Unfortunately, not always. The world's influence creeps into the Christian's view of leadership too.

I find that the whole topic of respecting leaders is a very agreeable

subject when we hear a sermon inside a sanctuary on a restful Sunday. But when a disagreement arises, we can easily and quickly forget everything we just heard. We are tempted to give ourselves license to conclude that the one in authority is less informed than we are, and in pride, we take a firm stance and demand that others agree. Anyone who disagrees is at risk of being slandered, backstabbed, and ostracized from our fellowship. Satan flourishes and joys in our pride.

Before we let pride rule in our hearts, let's remember who put these leaders in their place and what his purpose is. Acts 20:28–29 gives us the concept of an "undershepherd" and tells us that elders are appointed by the Holy Ghost to be overseers, to feed the church of God, and to protect from wolves that may enter from outside or even from within the church.

Ephesians 4:7–16 tells us that the resurrected Christ "gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers." Parents, teachers, preachers, and elders have been appointed by God to care for the souls of his people and rule in authority. Each of these leaders is there so that we aren't "tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine… and cunning craftiness" (v. 14). We want to believe that we know best and that we are right, but we don't always know the whole picture of every situation. God equips those whom he put in authority to make those decisions and gives grace to the authorities in church, school, and home to rule to the benefit of his people.

Our covenant leaders care about us and about our souls. Elders will even one day have to give an account for our souls (Heb. 13:17). You might be asked by an elder about your church attendance. Before becoming defensive, remember, the goal isn't to bash you or scold you, it is rather to see if there is an underlying spiritual issue that they can help with. In the church community our leaders come from a place of love.

What do we do when we disagree with our parents, elders, or teachers? Before that situation arises, we should first set a few things in order. Lord's Day 39 is a good place to start in these situations. It calls us to submit to "good instruction and correction with due obedience" and also to "patiently bear with their weakness and infirmities."[1] Our leaders are to be held in high esteem. God put them there and he did that for your good. Be grateful to your leaders, pray for them, and follow God's commands to obey them. Remember your place and be submissive to all authority in your life.

1 Heidelberg Catechism A 104, in *The Psalter with Doctrinal Standards, Liturgy, Church Order, and added Chorale Section*, reprinted and revised edition of the 1912 United Presbyterian *Psalter* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1927; rev. ed. 1995).

Then if a disagreement arises, pray about it. If, after prayer, you find that the issue is still pulling at you, talk to your leaders about it. Approach them humbly and with respect. It is possible that they might end up being wrong and you being right, but don't assume that's the way it will go from the outset. And be prepared for the opposite and ready to learn things you hadn't considered before.

Don't try to handle the issue behind their backs. This can often turn into gossip and division, and foster resentment for leadership. The world shows us a thousand ways to disrespect our authorities. Let us instead follow Christ and glorify God in our submitting to authority.

Becoming godly leaders among our peers

Gabriel Overbeek

Imagine you plan on gathering with your friends in a few hours. What will you do together? What will be the topic of your conversations? I fear that many young followers of Christ approach social settings with a sense of spiritual complacency, as if righteousness in Christ does not apply to our leisure activities. I see it in myself, and I see it in others.

Often the tendency of young adult Christians is to be altogether apathetic regarding the content of their fellowship with other believers. So to you, my brother or sister in Christ, I ask this: Does a lack of spiritual discipline and little aspiration for Christlike holiness characterize your friend group? If your answer is yes, does that bother you?

Gabe is an engineering student at Western Michigan University and a confessing member of Byron Center PRC in Byron Center, MI

Let us strive to become leaders who bring our friends and ourselves into closer communion with our Lord.

The apostle Paul is widely regarded by Christians as one of the greatest ministers of the gospel to ever walk this earth in the new dispensation. In his letter to the church in Galatia, he reminds the believers (and us) that he was once a vicious persecutor of all who confessed Jesus Christ. He explains that he was even more passionate in "the traditions of [his] fathers" than most of the other Jews who denied the Messiah (Gal. 1:14).

He then gives his beautiful testimony of his conversion, saying, "But when it pleased God…to reveal his Son in me...immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood" (Gal. 1:15–16). That is the experience of regeneration and sanctification! When God decides to "reveal his Son" in us, then and only then do we truly see our sin for what it is. When we become sensitive to sin, then we have the opportunity to battle against our sin and help our neighbor for the cause of Christ's kingdom.

How wonderful it is that in his grace, Jehovah grants us eyes to see our stains! It is shameful and sorrowful to learn the depths of your sins and miseries, but believer, be "confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6). Misery is not your end, because you are not your own. You belong unto your faithful savior, and he is preparing you for your place in heavenly glory.[1]

Having been regenerated, with the Holy Ghost now reigning in your heart, what is your responsibility? In regard to Christian friendships, our Lord requires of us that we be ambassadors for Christ (2 Cor. 5:20). Not all are necessarily called to be leaders in the literal sense, but we all must uphold the image of him who created us (Eph. 4:23–24). In so doing, God uses us to symbiotically sharpen each other spiritually (Prov. 27:17). Let us therefore examine how the triune God commands us to be leaders for Christ's sake.

Reflect on yourself to see if you have the attitude that it's really not that huge of a deal what I say or do with my friends. Believer, it most certainly *is a huge deal,* if only for the sole reason that the enemy of our God, even Satan himself, desires that we have this exact attitude! One reason we may think this way is because we live in a culture that views being godly as genuinely shameful, and we often inadvertently align ourselves with this opinion.

If we are to be leaders, let us first and foremost set the quintessential standard of godly leadership by adopting the divinely inspired

1 Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 1, in *The Psalter.*

words of Romans 1:16 as our own confession. This powerfully reads, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth." Our Lord wants our unabashed confidence in the gospel to be set on the message of the gospel itself: Jesus Christ saves all who believe in him!

Scripture is overflowing with instruction on how to be godly leaders in social settings. Let us identify the progression of becoming a leader in three main steps using God's word as our guide. First, we must strive to be wise. Proverbs 24:5 says that when we are wise, we are strong, and increasing in the knowledge of God strengthens us. Wisdom renews our minds so that we choose the things that are in line with God's good and perfect will (Rom. 12:2). True wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord (Prov. 9:10), being drawn into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as not only our lord and savior, but also as our closest friend.

Second, we must become people who are deeply concerned with the kingdom of Christ and his glory (Matt. 6:33; Rom. 11:36; 14:17; Col. 3:17). If we confess this truly and sincerely, it is a fact that we *will not* idly stand by or join in with our friends as they indulge themselves in sinful activity. What does this activity look like? Our minds may first think of excessive drinking (or underage drinking), fornication, and/or breaking the law. I encourage you, however, to acknowledge that in our silence, and in our jokes regarding sinful acts, we are also deliberately denying the call of God to be set apart from the world,[2] and therefore sinning against our king.

Third, let us be inspired by the example of godly friends who came before us, namely Daniel and his three friends, David and Jonathan, and Jesus and his disciples, who all led each other to cultivate lives more glorifying to God.

To learn how to seek help from the Lord to become a leader in your friend group, I encourage you to read the first chapter of James, and if you seek direction for how to be a holy example to them in your living, read all three chapters of the book of Titus. You see, God has provided us no shortage of instruction on how we can be godly leaders. But child of God, do not ever forget in whose strength you are able to do these things! See that your humble yet correctly motivated declaration is always: yet not I, but Christ in me!

Moreover, may our basis for driving ourselves and our friends to Christ be love and a true passion to praise his name with our entire beings. Enter into a personal relationship with your Savior, and watch as he transforms you from the

2 Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 99, in *The Psalter*; Lev. 20:26; Eph. 5:4.

lukewarm Christian of Revelation 3 into a godly leader who brings your friends alongside you in an exuberant chase after your glorious lord and savior Jesus Christ, who is worthy of all glory and honor!

Trusting church leaders

Charles Potjer

At the time of the writing of this article, a simple Google search of "church leaders" in the news category yields less than impressive results. Many articles cite various issues with church leadership; others show the ways church leaders are advocating for the newest, often corrupt, social causes. The world, the devil, and our own sinful natures are always trying to sow distrust of church leadership or redefine what church leadership should look like, but as God's people—and especially as young people—we need to learn to trust and respect our church leaders. Thankfully, God gives good instruction in his word, which can and should always be trusted (2 Tim. 3:16).

God's word clearly calls for leadership in the church, a concept instituted in the early New Testament (Acts 6; Rom. 12; 1 Cor. 5, 12; 2 Cor. 2; Titus 1). God gives gifts and callings to certain people whom we call "undershepherds" to carry out the care and discipline of the flock.

In opposition, Satan has always tempted man with the lie that man doesn't need authority and that he would be happier without God's law. He did so already in the garden when he asked Eve, "Hath God said?" (Gen. 3:1). He brings this lie boldly against church leadership for the sake of sowing discord and

Charles Potjer is a contracts analyst and member at Hope PRC in Redlands, CA

rebellion. The world tempts us with new cultural norms and personal preferences, and we are told that truth is a personal standard rather than an objective one.

We are further tempted to distrust church leadership altogether when we see imperfect church leaders sin and sometimes even fall grievously. These temptations can lead us to create our own lists of qualities that our leaders need. Maybe one feels that a prerequisite to becoming an elder should be that these men attend classes on how to counsel. Another feels deacons should have mandatory training in poverty sensitivity and cultural competency.

New standards are always being set in the broader church world, and we can be tempted to follow along. Certainly, it is our desire for church leadership to be good stewards of the flock, illustrating the qualities found in Titus 1. It is desirable that elders and deacons continue to learn and grow in areas where the church has faltered. However, these desires don't give us permission to rewrite God's word with additional qualifications for our church leadership or to dismiss any who don't measure up. God's word is sufficient, and we can trust that the leadership qualities and duties found in his inspired word are enough.

Our church leaders have sinful natures. Past shortcomings and knowing our own sinful natures can cause us to question and can lead to a creeping fear that another problem is always right around the corner. Satan uses these doubts to turn God's people away from the church.

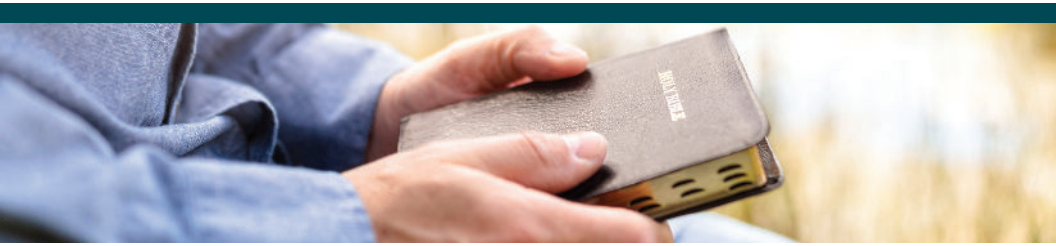
The Israelites, when faced with the discomfort of the wilderness, complained against their God-given leader, Moses (Ex. 16; Num. 11, 14). They concluded that the pleasures of wicked Egypt or even death would be preferable to walking in the way Moses was leading them. Moses showed his sinful nature in lashing out against the people and striking a rock in anger and defiance (Num. 20:7–12). Because of Moses' anger, he could not be the one to lead God's people into Canaan. But God's way for his people, Israel, was not the problem. Even today, it is fallen men—not God's word—who are at fault for problems in the church.

In a world where church leadership and church discipline are viewed as abusive by default, let us remember the blessing they are to us. The world's subjective truth limits love to letting others live however they'd like in this life. God's word, the only objective truth, teaches that love is leading others to Christ, who offers eternal life.

Our church leaders diligently labor to show this love of Christ. Pastors show this love in bringing the gospel, the good news of eternal life. Elders show this love in visiting the afflicted with mercy and compassion. Deacons show this love in ministering to the poor and carefully distributing alms. These

men are also called to show this love in correction and discipline. What greater love is there than a love that seeks the saving of a soul? Let us be deeply grateful that God has given us men to care for us in this manner.

Remember that our church leaders, though fallen, are redeemed by Christ and equipped by him to carry out their work in the church. It is by God's grace that they labor on our behalf, and it is Christ himself who strengthens them to shepherd, guide, and correct us in love. Discomfort, disagreements, and hard conversations are not reasons to abandon the faith but opportunities to draw nearer to Christ and trust in his design for the church. Our leaders need our prayers and encouragement as they face the weighty task of caring for our souls. Let us look to them with respect, encourage them in their work, and above all, trust that God is using them to accomplish his purposes for his people.



Leading with humility

Samuel Laning

From my own experience and observations, I have found that young people often think that the concept of leadership is only relevant for those who are much older. Yet young people are very influential on each other. At home, school, playing sports, hanging out, or at their jobs after school, they influence their peers more than they might realize. No matter how young or old any of us are, we are called to be Christlike examples.

We live in a fallen world though, where people are lifted up in pride and selfishness. People only want

Sam is a registered nurse in long-term care at Porter Hills. He attends Hope Protestant Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, MI

to do what pleases and benefits themselves. Christians have a sinful nature and we, too, can fall into these same sins. In fact, we need to fight against them every day, by his grace, through prayer and the putting on of a specific kind of clothing. Peter mentions this in his first epistle: "Likewise, ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder. Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble" (1 Pet. 5:5).

We can spend a lot of time focusing on the clothes we wear, but do we spend enough time putting on the spiritual clothing of humility? This spiritual clothing glorifies God. Jesus showed us how to be the perfect leader by leading with humility. "And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross" (Phil. 2:8). Jesus humbled himself so much that he gave his life for his people, who were clothed in sin. When we wear the clothing of humility, we can become a little more Christlike. Humbling ourselves before God, we are lifted up by his grace and blessings (James 4:10). This is a joy that no earthly treasure can give.

Scripture tells us of the importance of humility in leadership. For example, in Deuteronomy 17 kings are instructed to be submissive to God's word: "Keep all the words of this law and these statutes, to do them" (v. 19). This was to be the way of the king so "that his heart be not lifted up above his brethren" (v. 20). We are all kings by our union to Christ, and this word is applicable to all of us today. We must read and meditate upon God's word each day, and "in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves" (Phil. 2:3).

Satan was once an angel of the Lord until he gave in to the sin of pride, wanting to be exalted like God. Pride brought his downfall as he led other angels to become demons. Satan wants nothing more than to get those who are close to Christ to fall into this sin. He is constantly at work, tempting us.

When we are proud, we become devoured in our sins and suffer consequences as a result. Sin disconnects us from God and the church. Thankfully, God, in his love, chastens his sons and daughters (Heb. 12:7). He does this for our profit (v. 10), and this is a humbling experience. By God's grace and mercy, we grow to be clothed in humility once again.

A spirit of humility helps us to look away from ourselves, and instead we see the needs of others (Phil. 2:4). In love we approach others with a servant's heart and find ways to assist others. When we are motivated by a desire for God's glory and a love for our neighbor, we will find we do not feel burdened or irritated to do so. It is usually when we are overly focused on ourselves

that we find the needs of others to be burdensome. We are to be aware of the needs of other members in the church and ask, "How can I help you?" We are to exert effort to know others personally as friends and get to know their concerns and the challenges they face.

There may be times when a member of the church falls into sin. Others may feel uneasy about talking to this person and end up ignoring him or her. Being clothed with humility in these situations takes courage, and God's grace equips us. By expressing our love to the person and a willingness to talk and pray together, we will show that we esteem that person better than ourselves.

God has richly blessed every church member with their unique gifts and place in the church. We are not to look at ourselves and think, "Oh, look at all these gifts that God has given me," and then look at others and think, "He or she has lesser gifts than me." That is showing pride. We are to appreciate the other members and their gifts. May we remember how each member is valuable and precious in his sight. Glory be to God for the gifts he has bestowed on all of us!

Before we come to church on Sunday to sit under the preaching of the word, we must evaluate ourselves to make sure we are clothed with humility. We are not to come to church thinking about our selfish wants and desires, nor be hating our neighbor, nor are we to reject the preaching with a critical spirit. That is not putting on humility. Instead, we are to go with a spirit of humility, with attentive hearts wishing to learn more of God, being sorry for our sins and thankful for his forgiveness.

A good leader is a humble one, no matter our age. Let's pray together for the grace to be clothed with humility. Christ is our perfect example. This is God's will for us and a blessed life. May we glorify our great God!

What is the meaning of the phrase "baptized for the dead" in 1 Corinthians 15:29? I understand the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (or Mormons) wrongfully has a practice where members can actually be baptized for the deceased. What is the true biblical meaning of this verse and why is this Mormon practice wrong?

The apostle Paul was horrified to learn that in the church in Corinth, some were denying the resurrection of the body, which is the Christian hope. Although the Apostles' Creed was not yet written, some members of the church in Corinth could not confess the final article: "I believe the resurrection of the body." Under divine inspiration Paul applied his keen mind to this denial by drawing out a series of implications. He begins in chapter 15 by summarizing the gospel: "For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures…So we preach, and so ye believed" (1 Cor. 15:3–4, 11).

Crucially, the apostle connects two resurrections: Christ's and ours. He does not permit the Corinthians to separate them. Some Corinthians said, "Of course, *Jesus* rose from the dead, but that does not mean that *we* will rise from the dead." But Paul answered, "If there be no resurrection of the dead, *then is Christ not risen*" (v. 13, emphasis added). That must be so because Christ and his church are one: if the church (the members of his body) do not rise, then Christ (the head of the body) did not rise either.

If Christ did not rise, many horrifying conclusions must be drawn. No Christian can accept these conclusions. "Our preaching [is] vain" (v. 14). "Your faith is also vain" (v. 14). "We [the apostles] are found false witnesses of God" (v. 15). "Ye are yet in your sins" (v. 17). "They also which are fallen asleep [died] in Christ are perished" (v. 18). "We are of all men most miserable" (v. 19). Non-resurrected believers mean a non-resurrected Jesus with damnation for us.

Paul concludes with confidence, however: "But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept" (v. 20). The reference is to an Old Testament feast observed at the beginning of harvest. The first sheaf of an Israelite farmer's crop was dedicated to the Lord. That first sheaf represented two things: the best part of the crop and the promise of the

full harvest to come. Jesus Christ's resurrection is the guarantee of our resurrection on the last day. There is also a long gap between the first sheaf of the firstfruits and the final full harvest. There is a long period of time between the resurrection of Jesus and ours.

That brings us to verse 29, one of the most difficult texts in the New Testament. Obscure texts are usually the playground of heretics, who ignore the rule of using clearer passages to explain less clear ones. Suffice to say that Paul mentions a practice *without his approval* of it that seems to have been present among certain Christians. This may have been observed by those who denied the resurrection of the body. Paul simply points out their inconsistency: "What shall they do which are baptized for the dead, if the dead rise not at all? why are they then baptized for the dead?"

Paul writes, "What shall *they* do?" He does not write, "What shall *we* do?" or "What shall *you* do?" He distances himself from the practice. The practice itself involves someone getting baptized, presumably with water, for (or for the benefit of) the dead. One might imagine a believer has a loved one, a friend, a fellow church member who died before receiving baptism. Another believer might seek baptism for that deceased person to be baptized in his place and for his benefit.

But that is not what Mormons do. Mormons search through genealogies and are baptized for the unbelieving, ungodly dead. They hope that they can be baptized for multitudes of people, their dead, non-Mormon ancestors from perhaps centuries ago. The Corinthians were not seeking to be baptized for their unbelieving ancestors who had died in idolatry and paganism. They were being baptized for believers who had recently died without baptism.

Another possibility, although very unlikely, is that baptism for the dead refers to martyrdom, a baptism with blood. Jesus uses baptism figuratively in that sense in Luke 12:50: "But I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how am I straitened till it be accomplished!" The next verses in 1 Corinthians 15 describe martyrdom for the sake of Christ: "And why stand we in jeopardy every hour? I protest by your rejoicing which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die daily. If after the manner of men I have fought with beasts at Ephesus, what advantageth it me, if the dead rise not? let us eat and drink; for to morrow we die" (vv. 30–32). Then the idea would be, "What is the point in suffering martyrdom if there is no resurrection?" That would be more likely if Paul had written, "baptized for the sake of Jesus," because martyrs die for Jesus, not for the dead.

Baptism is of no value to those who are dead. The practice of baptism for the dead is superstitious and wrong. If a person is not cleansed

from his sins in the blood of Jesus, through faith in him, *in this life,* no amount of water sprinkled or poured upon a relative for him *after his death* will help him. But the point is this: such a practice, even if it was legitimate, is meaningless and inconsistent if there is no resurrection of the body.

Onderwijzer

CURRENT EVENTS

AI and ChatGPT (Part 2 – conclusion)

Justin Koole

Last month, we introduced Artificial Intelligence (AI) and ChatGPT, with definitions and examples of each. Before we proceed to the moral dilemmas and potential capabilities of this technology from a Christ-centered perspective, a quick recap. AI is a technology that can make predictions, recommendations, or decisions to achieve defined goals. ChatGPT is computer software that is being used to think and respond like a human mind. ChatGPT can create letters, resumes, poetry, music/songs, YouTube videos, and documentaries, and also analyze financial statements. Obviously, this is a very brief listing, and the potential capabilities seem nearly endless and are only increasing by the month.

I left readers with this question: "Why are we trusting of computers, but skeptical of AI?" When computers first became mainstream, there was definitely a distrust by many users. They were powerful machines that could quickly perform basic functions that would take humans hours, even weeks, to achieve. Now, no one thinks twice about turning their computer or cell phone on to contact their friends, browse the internet, and use an app.

Justin is the head of finance for Speed Wrench, Inc. in Hudsonville, MI. He worships with his family at Zion Protestant Reformed Church

So, what do the tech experts say? And what do the theologians and church leaders think? Or what is the opinion of school administrators and teachers? Will these groups of people utilize or even embrace this technology?

Fact: AI is not going away. Rev. David Noorman states it well: "Some of us might be happy to let technological developments leave us in the dust, content to remain in the stone age of the basic search engine. In all likelihood, future generations will not have the luxury of that option. AI is here to stay and our children are going to need to learn how to use it wisely. So, it is time to become acquainted with AI and ChatGPT. If not for ourselves, then for the sake of our children and grandchildren."[1]

The skepticism comes from the ability of AI to perform functions that, until recently, only humans could accomplish. The "fear of the unknown" is why many people hesitate to embrace and utilize this technology. Broadly speaking, computers perform tasks on a one-to-one basis; the user needs to prompt a specific task in order for the computer to complete that task. Yes, users can stack multiple tasks, but once the tasks are completed, the computer ends its requested function.

Alex McFarland, on an interview with CBN News, concisely points out the difference between technology in general and AI: "Technology is generally amoral; computers aren't necessarily good or bad, but what you do with them. You know, on the moral issues, Christians need to be very concerned about AI because so much of the code and the algorithms that run the internet come from the souls and minds of Silicon Valley [see note below] liberals."[2] As Dr. Michael Finch says on a recent World Magazine podcast: "We have technology that can think or that can do tasks without us instructing it in some way."[3] Dr. Finch's statement is spot-on. The primary fear of the average human regarding this mysterious technology is the power of this software to perform tasks that go beyond the scope of the user's request. There is even a fear, which I believe is warranted, that this software will get out of control, become smarter than humans, and perform devastating or deadly acts;

1 David Noorman, "Catching up with AI and ChatGPT," *Standard Bearer* 99, no. 20 (September 1, 2023): 463.

2 CBN News, "Why the Explosion of Artificial Intelligence Should Have Christians on Alert," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EyAFeW9irr8, September 12, 2023. "Silicon Valley" refers to a region in Northern California (just south of San Francisco) that is the global center for technology and high-tech innovation.

3 Kelsey Reed and Jonathan Boes, hosts, Concurrently, podcast, "Understanding artificial intelligence (with Dr. Michael Finch)," January 3, 2024, WORLD radio, https://wng.org/podcasts/understanding-artificial-intelligence-with-dr-michael-finch-1704228710.

acts not originally intended by the developer/user. And, since it's smarter than humans, humans will be unable to immediately stop it. That far-fetched fantasy might not be too far from becoming reality.

The obvious and primary concern for school administration and teachers is student plagiarism. And the secondary concern, directly tied to the primary concern, is the students not doing the work, but having a software program write their essay or complete their homework. What about teachers using the software to prepare lesson plans? For many readers, the classroom is the arena where the rubber meets the road.

So, some final thoughts. Outright banning the utilization of AI seems like the way of the Anabaptists. As Professor David Engelsma states, "We fully agree with [Abraham] Kuyper that the world-flight of Anabaptism is forbidden to the disciple of Jesus Christ. Indeed, world-flight is impossible. World-flight, as represented in the Anabaptist radicals and heretics at the time of the Reformation, is the attempt to live, as much as possible, in physical separation both from ungodly people and from the ordinances and spheres of creation."[4] We do not live, as much as possible, in physical separation from the world. And, as the saying goes, we are not ostriches who stick our heads in the sand hoping and wishing this technology will just disappear. As was stated earlier, AI is not going away. Yet we do not deny there is real potential for massive abuse and gross misuse of this powerful technology. Proper use will take deep spiritual discernment.

There are many sincere Christians who think worldwide adoption of this technology is a major step toward the beginning of the end of time. Remember the words of 1 Peter 4:7: "But the end of all things is at hand: be ye therefore sober, and watch unto prayer."

4 David J. Engelsma, "Worldview, not World-Flight," *Standard Bearer* 75, no. 1 (October 1, 1998): 5.

Seven letters, four beasts, and one book: Revelation 1–6

Jake VanderKolk

Revelation, like other books with symbols and prophecies, can be difficult to interpret. Because of this difficulty, I will focus only on the first six chapters. I will not be covering the remaining chapters of Revelation, as I am not sure that I could do them justice. However, the entire book of Revelation is an immensely profitable book to study, as it prophesies of the last things. Perhaps a study of the first six chapters will encourage you to read further on your own.

Let's start with a bit about how the book is divided. In Revelation's first chapter, John writes his initial address and then introduces his vision. Chapters 2–3 record the letters that Jesus gives to John to deliver to the seven churches in Asia. Chapter 4 pictures heavenly worship; chapter 5 describes a book with seven seals, which no one except the lamb, Jesus Christ, could open; chapter 6 then describes the opening of six of those seals. That is as far as we will cover here. It is important to note a few events that Revelation ends with: Satan being overthrown and cast into a lake of burning fire (ch. 19), the wedding feast, which symbolizes the church being married to Christ, and a glimpse of the new heavens and new earth. Ultimately, Christ conquers all evil, preparing a way for his people to inherit eternal life.

Like other parts of the Bible that speak about the end times, Revelation claims "the time is at hand" (Rev. 1:3). This is a recurring theme throughout the entire book, but especially in the letters addressed to the seven churches. Throughout these letters, Jesus constantly focuses on the authenticity of their faith. Along with some encouragement, he warns Ephesus, saying, "Thou hast left thy first love"

Jake is enrolled in a teaching program at Western Governor's University and is a member of Hudsonville Protestant Reformed Church

(2:4). He advises them to return to their first works, and if they do not, he will remove the candlestick (their church) from Ephesus.

Later, to the Laodiceans, Christ warns against being lukewarm. The analogy implies that both cold and hot water have a use, but lukewarm water is worthless. In these letters, Jesus commands them to live in light of the second coming, giving his blessings to "those who overcome" and ending each letter by saying, "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches."

After these letters, Revelation depicts four beasts and twenty-four elders worshiping around a throne. We can infer that God is seated on the throne, although it is not explicitly mentioned. All the elders worshiped God, saying, "Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created" (Rev. 4:11). John then saw a book with seven seals, representing God's plan for history and the secrets of his will. Only the Lamb (Christ) is able to open the book, and as each of the seals is opened, more of God's secret plan is revealed. Each of the first four seals is accompanied by a horseman, representing Christ, war, famine, and death, respectively.

Through this first part of Revelation, God warns us to be faithful in our calling as Christians. He provides a vision of worship in heaven and tells us (through symbolism) that Jesus is the only way for his plans to be revealed. Christ continues to conquer, each and every day, represented in the white horseman.

In our lives, we need to make sure that our focus is not on this earth. We should be preparing for the second coming of Christ. Remember, the time is at hand. Jesus blesses his people, saying, "To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne" (Rev. 3:21).

Date	Read	Study	Psalter
Mar. 8	Rev. 1:1–3	Although it has been roughly two thousand years since the writing of this letter, the time is still "at hand" (v. 3). How is this idea important today?	249
Mar. 9	Rev. 1:4–5	How is Jesus our "faithful witness"?	66
Mar. 10	Rev. 1:6–8	What are some implications of the idea that Jesus is the Alpha and Omega?	49
Mar. 11	Rev. 1:9–12	Why does John say that he wrote this letter (v. 11)?	382

Mar. 12	Rev. 1:13–16	What did Jesus look like when he appeared to John?	50
Mar. 13	Rev. 1:17–20	What do the seven stars and seven candlesticks represent (v. 20)?	15
Mar. 14	Rev. 2:1–3	What positive things are written about the church of Ephesus?	13 vv. 5, 7
Mar. 15	Rev. 2:4–7	What negative things are written about the church of Ephesus?	342 vv. 1, 4
Mar. 16	Rev. 2:8–11	What does Jesus warn the church of Smyrna about? What comfort does he give to them?	149
Mar. 17	Rev. 2:12–13	Why does Jesus encourage Pergamos?	98
Mar. 18	Rev. 2:14–17	What was the church of Pergamos doing wrong?	82
Mar. 19	Rev. 2:18–19	Jesus encourages Thyatira saying that he knows their "works, and charity, and service." How is it comforting to know that he also sees and knows all our good works?	201
Mar. 20	Rev. 2:20–25	What is Jesus' warning to those like Jezebel who spread lies in the church (vv. 20–23)?	93
Mar. 21	Rev. 2:26–29	Jesus continues to give blessings upon those who "overcome" or, in some translations, "conquer." What does it mean to overcome?	100
Mar. 22	Rev. 3:1–3	How can Jesus' warning to Sardis be applicable to us (especially if we are not taking our faith seriously)?	31
Mar. 23	Rev. 3:4–6	Why do you think the phrase "He that hath an ear, let him hear" is repeated after every letter?	168
Mar. 24	Rev. 3:7–10	What encouragement does Jesus offer the church in Philadelphia?	25
Mar. 25	Rev. 3:11–13	How should we hold fast as we near Christ's second coming (v. 11)?	351
Mar. 26	Rev. 3:14–18	How could we be lukewarm in our faith? What are some areas in your own life that could use some improvement?	140

Mar. 27	Rev. 3:19–22	Why does Jesus rebuke and chasten those whom he loves?	12
Mar. 28	Rev. 4:1–4	What does John see in his vision?	270
Mar. 29	Rev. 4:5–8	What do the four beasts surrounding the throne say in worship (v. 8)?	49
Mar. 30	Rev. 4:9–11	What do the twenty-four elders say in worship?	256
Mar. 31	Rev. 5:1–4	Why could no one in heaven or on earth open the book?	251
Apr. 1	Rev. 5:5–7	What does the book symbolize/ represent?	28
Apr. 2	Rev. 5:8–10	What is the significance of becoming "kings and priests" (v. 10)?	259
Apr. 3	Rev. 5:11–14	In these verses, how do the angels praise Christ (who sits on the throne)?	200
Apr. 4	Rev. 6:1–2	The white horse's rider is Christ. How is Christ conquering today?	182
Apr. 5	Rev. 6:3–8	The last three horses are judgments given to unbelievers. How do they come to ruin?	48
Apr. 6	Rev. 6:9–11	The martyrs under the altar receive white robes and are told to rest for a season. What does this symbolize?	221
Apr. 7	Rev. 6:12–17	What does John see that will come to pass at the end of the world?	265

The Hittites: Abraham's northern neighbors

Dr. Brendan Looyenga

Last month we began the story of Old Testament Israel with Abraham's departure from the great city of Ur. Journeying northwest along the Euphrates River out of Sumer, he and his extended family arrived at the ancient town of Haran, which was located in a region the Bible calls "Padan-aram" (Gen. 25:20) along the border of modern-day Turkey and Syria.

Haran was a place of considerable significance in Abraham's day, serving as a key trading hub along the major trade routes connecting the Mediterranean Sea and Mesopotamia. Although this town would become home to Abraham's brother Nahor, and the resting place of his father, Terah (Gen. 11:32), it was not here that God intended for Abraham to dwell. Instead, God called him to spend his life "in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise" (Heb. 11:9).

The *promise* to which the author of Hebrews refers is the covenant of grace that God established with Abraham and his descendants (Gen. 12:2–3, 7). Exactly how God would fulfill his covenant promises, which included giving Abraham's offspring the land of Canaan, could not have been obvious since Abraham was already seventy-five and still childless. Nonetheless, by faith he obeyed God and headed south through Syria into the land of Canaan.

The traditional date given to Abraham's departure from Haran is 1885 BC. At this point in ancient history, the population of Canaan was divided into two groups. One group lived in independent city-states, like Damascus and Jericho, while the other lived as nomadic pastoralists, meaning that their

Brendan is a member of Faith Protestant Reformed Church in Jenison, MI. He works as a research and development scientist for Empirical Bioscience

primary occupation was raising cattle, sheep, or goats. The history of Genesis indicates that the patriarchs belonged to this second group of people, though they interacted broadly with the city-dwellers through trade and political alliances, which we'll discuss a bit more next month.

Scripture gives us the names of many of the people groups with whom the patriarchs interacted. Their names in the Bible almost all end with "*-ite*," which simply indicates a place or family to which they belonged. Though they likely spoke a variety of language dialects, it seems that the people of Canaan could understand one another through a common (Semitic) language used throughout the region. Abraham must have known or learned this language because he interacted with many of the other people in the land.

Among the various people with whom Abraham interacted were the Hittites, who are also called the sons or daughters of Heth (Gen. 23:3; 27:46). Those who belonged to this people group were from a place called "Hatti," which lay far to the north in the region of Anatolia (modern Turkey). While many of the Canaanite tribes mentioned in the Old Testament were relatively small, localized groups of people, the Hittites were a significant Bronze Age civilization that in time would come to rival the Egyptians and Assyrians in military power. Although this rise to greatness would not happen until the Israelites were slaves in Egypt, the Hittite culture was already present in Canaan during Abraham's day (ch. 23). Unbelieving Esau even married two Hittite women, which was a source of grief for his believing parents (26:34–35).

Most of what we know about the Hittites comes from archaeological discoveries made since the mid-nineteenth century. The most significant of these finds came when archaeologists realized that an ancient city being excavated in north-central Turkey was the Hittite imperial capital, Hattusa. Within the city were housed the royal archives, which included thousands of clay tablets inscribed with cuneiform writing that record the history, religious practices, and laws of the Hittites. These documents give us broad insights into life in the Hittite empire, as well as its relationships with other Bronze Age powers like Egypt and Babylon.

One of the things that the Hittites are best known for is their highly detailed peace treaties. These documents had multiple sections that usually included a preamble, a historical introduction, terms and obligations, a list of blessings and curses, and an invocation of the Hittite gods as witnesses.[1] The

1 For examples, see Julian Spriggs, "Examples of Hittite Suzerainty Treaties," Bringing God's Word to the Nations,

treaties that the Hittites made with other cities or nations during the time of the judges are remarkably similar in structure and wording to the covenant language God used in Deuteronomy 29, which tells us something important about how God chose to speak with his people.

The Westminster Confession of Faith uses the helpful term "voluntary condescension" to explain why it is that God's covenant language sometimes looks similar to the secular treaties of a Canaanite people.[2] The idea behind this term is captured in Psalm 113:5–6, which states that God "humbleth himself to behold the things that are in heaven, and in the earth!" What this text shows us is that God willingly brings himself down to the level of his creatures in order to dwell with them in covenant fellowship. When God speaks to his people in Scripture, he often adopts language or symbols that they can understand in order to communicate the nature of his covenant.

Genesis 15 provides a striking example of God's voluntary condescension that once again references Hittite culture of Abraham's day. In this passage, God repeats his covenant promises to Abraham (vv. 1–7) and then reinforces the certainty of his word through a ritual that seems bizarre to our modern sensibilities (vv. 9–17). In this ritual Abraham was commanded to take several animals, cut them in half, and then lay each piece of the animal opposite the other with a path running between. While Abraham waited for God to appear, he fell asleep. In a dream the Lord appeared to him, passing between the pieces of animals in the form of a burning lamp. The passage concludes, "In the same day the LORD made a covenant with Abram" (v. 18).

Though the meaning of this ritual is foreign to us, the point God was making would have been obvious to Abraham. This is because the practice of "cutting a covenant" (the literal Hebrew wording of verse 18) was exactly how a Hittite peace treaty was concluded. Having made their promises in writing, the two parties of the treaty would walk between a row of bloody animal carcasses to visually illustrate the threat of what would happen if one of the parties violated the treaty.

What is striking about Genesis 15, however, is that Abraham didn't walk side-by-side with God through the bloody pathway of the covenant—God did it alone. This, too, would have spoken volumes to Abraham! The covenant that God made with him wasn't like human covenants. Instead of being dependent on the integrity and faithfulness of *both* parties,

accessed January 7, 2025, https://www.julianspriggs.co.uk/pages/HittiteTreaty.

2 The Westminster Confession of Faith 7.1, https://thewestminsterstandard.org/the-westminster-confession/.

God's covenant depended on him *alone*. God made the promise, and he intended to fulfill it even to the extent of spilling his own blood to ensure the covenant would be kept.

In a remarkable form of prophecy, Genesis 15 points us to Jesus Christ and the bloody cross upon which he would suffer. Though Abraham didn't have a complete understanding of the incarnation or the atonement that would be required to pay for his sins, he must have clearly understood the extent that God would go to ensure his covenant would stand forever. Through the forms and figures of the Hittite culture, God helped Abraham understand his covenant promises. And by faith Abraham "believed in the Lord; and [God] counted it to him for righteousness" (v. 6).

Abraham's journey into Hittite lands

Abraham's journey in response to God's calling brought him from the trading center of Haran in northern Syria to the southern Canaanite town of Hebron, where he met the local Hittite people. Although the primary region dominated by the Hittites (orange highlight) was far to the north in Anatolia (modern Turkey), they exerted significant cultural influence throughout Canaan for several centuries (about 2000 to 1245 BC).[3]

3 Map adapted from © Sémhur, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=7585278.

Church news

Ruth Baas

Baptisms

Luka Jay, son of Steven & Jori Brummel Calvary, IA

Luke Henry, son of James & Hannah Warntjes Calvary, IA

Walter Dewey, son of Luke & Courtney Huizenga Crete, IL

Daxton Jon, son of Triston & Kalie VanBeek Doon, IA

Alyssa Mae, daughter of Rev. Joe & Lisa Holstege First GR, MI

Arlo Ellis, son of Elliot & Andrea Ensink First GR, MI

Lenora Jeremy, daughter of Matt & Nicole Meulenberg Georgetown, MI

Lochlan Thomas, son of Chad & Kezia VanBaren Grace, MI

Levi David, son of Jesse & Lily Kamps Hope GR, MI

Leo Benjamin, son of Karl & Hillary Schwarz Loveland, CO

Asher Joel, son of Joel & Elizabeth Koerner Southeast, MI

Madilynn Grace, daughter of Daniel & Rachael Miersma Trinity, MI

Confessions of faith

Myron Langerak, Kenton VanOverloop Holland, MI

Everett Pipe Providence, MI

Caleb Drnek, Michael DeVries Trinity, MI

Kodie Klamer Unity, MI

Weddings

Sam Ophoff & Faith Hoksbergen Crete, IL

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