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THE MESSENGER

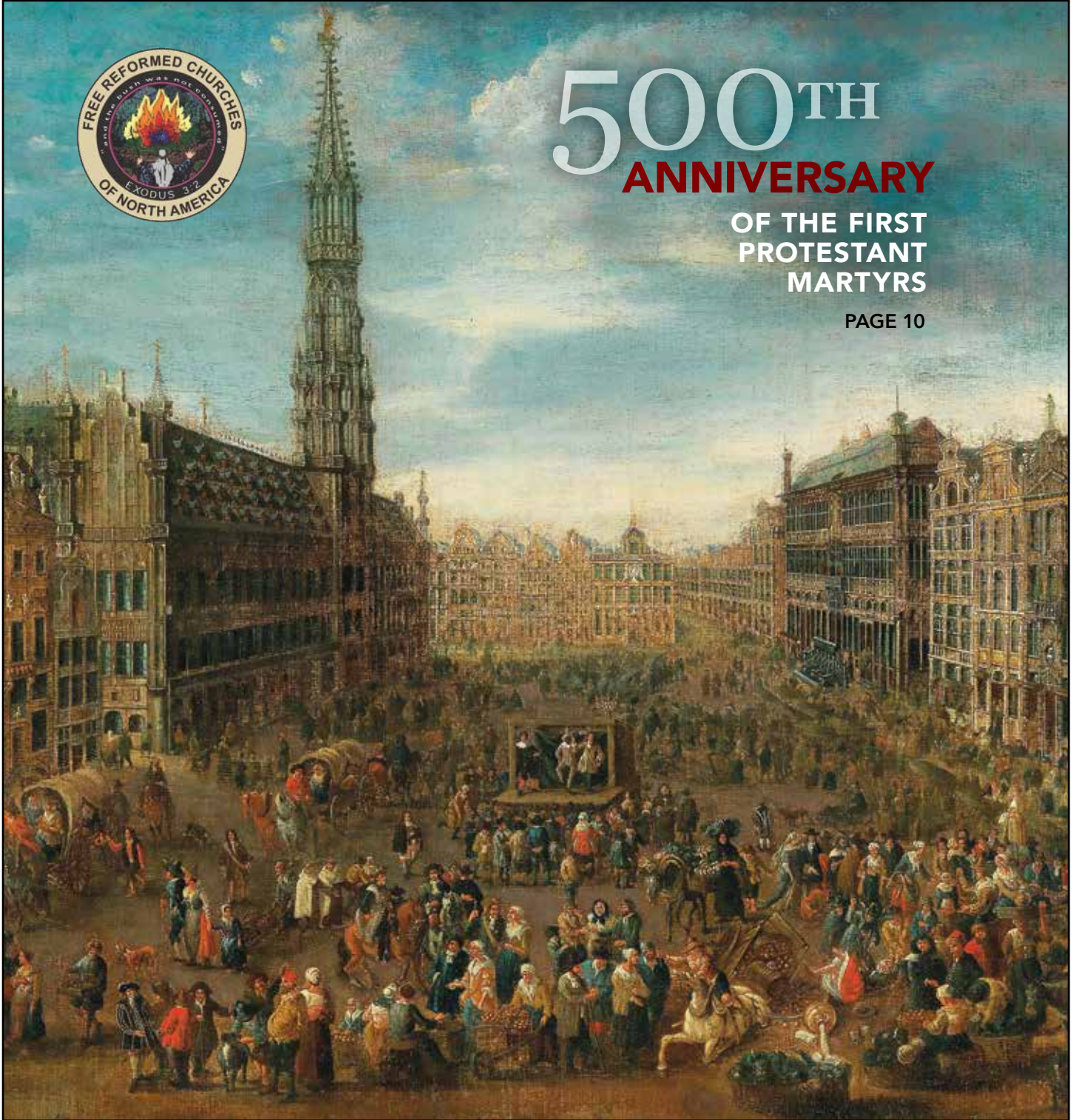
THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE FREE REFORMED CHURCHES OF NORTH AMERICA



500TH ANNIVERSARY

OF THE FIRST
PROTESTANT
MARTYRS

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THE BLESSED PERSECUTED

“Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness’ sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Matthew 5:10

At this point in North America, we as confessing Christians and Christian churches do not know of brutal and vicious persecution as is the case in other countries. Yet, such fierce persecution has so often been encountered and endured by God’s people over the history of the world. I still have vivid memories of attending a meeting with my parents as a teenager in Hamilton (Ontario) to hear the late Rev. Richard Wurmbrand. He and his family suffered severe persecution in Romania for the sake of the gospel. How I so remember too, decades later in a trip to Africa, being privileged to meet an Ethiopian Christian brother who had just fled his village, where the night before at least two Christians had been brutally murdered by enemies of the Christian faith. When embracing that brother, I felt so small before him. That man clearly knew about being persecuted “for righteousness’ sake.” How often are we not urged to pray for those suffering for Jesus’ sake and “to remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them” (Heb. 13:3). Surely, also in our western post-Christian, increasingly secular and pagan world today, are there not foreboding indications of growing intolerance for faithful Christian belief and behavior?

A Concluding Beatitude

To reflect on this concluding beatitude that Jesus gives us is timely. Isn’t it surprising that following the first seven beatitudes, Jesus speaks of Christians being persecuted? You might think if Christians reflect the characteristics of the foregoing seven beatitudes, they surely would be the most loving, gracious, humble, useful, and helpful people around, and therefore so appreciated and respected by everyone around them. But the opposite is the case. The godliest become the reviled, disapproved, and even hated ones. This reality proves the doctrine of mankind’s total depravity since the Fall into sin (Gen. 3). Jesus also said to His disciples: “*If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you....If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you...*” (John 15:18-20).

That said, what are we supposed to make of Jesus’ concluding beatitude in Matthew 5? Note that it follows naturally (though surprisingly, as mentioned above) *after* the first seven beatitudes. Living Christlike in this sin-cursed, devilish, fallen world

will set us apart in a way that brings the enmity of the ungodly world against us. Here let us not forget Satan and his demons either, working ceaselessly against God’s true people and Church throughout the ages (1 Peter 5:8). Added to that, are not all true believers persecuted in a real sense by their old nature which remains with them on this side of heaven (Gal. 5:17)?

In light of this all, how can Jesus yet say: *“Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness’ sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”*? Is Jesus not making clear here that suffering persecution for righteousness’ sake is evidence of truly belonging to Christ and of demonstrating the graces of the first seven beatitudes? Is not this the meaning too of Paul’s words in 2 Timothy 3:12: *“Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution”*? In that regard, is this concluding beatitude not both a summary beatitude and a searching beatitude? If you and I know nothing about being persecuted for righteousness’ sake, do we really know of God’s saving and sanctifying grace as characterized in the seven beatitudes before this concluding one?

Persecution close to home

Here it is important not to think of persecution only as suffered in violent and vicious ways as we hear happening in other countries. Let us not forget or negate the fact that a lot of persecution also comes in the way of verbal harassment, social isolation, economic restrictions, etc. As one said, suchlike persecution for righteousness’ sake “may call for as much heroism as braving an arena of lions.” This concluding beatitude is not saying that we should look for persecution either. Instead, it is teaching us that knowing and showing true grace and godliness as reflected in the first seven beatitudes, we can expect opposition and persecution in one way or another.

Do not Christians suffer persecution in our North American context when they do not compromise their Biblical convictions in our ungodly *woke* culture and maintain Christian morals in our sexually perverse age? When you will not participate in nor allow (as much as you are able to do so in your sphere of authority) something contrary to God’s Word, it can result in suffering persecution even within your family, school, work, or social context, and sometimes even within the visible church context. Considering this all, there is certainly a lot of persecution against true Christianity experienced and endured by Christians also here in our western world.

When reflecting on this beatitude, we should take note that Jesus does not simply say, “Blessed are the persecuted,” but “Blessed are the persecuted *for righteousness’ sake*.” In verse 11, He expands on that meaning suffering “for [His] sake.” We can bring on ourselves a persecution that is not *for righteousness’ sake*, but because of our own foolishness and, in fact, un-Christlike behaviour. As one put it, “there is no promise of happiness and blessing from God for those who are being persecuted for being a nuisance, or for Christians who have shown themselves to be objectionable, or difficult, or foolish and insulting to their non-Christian friends.”

Divine Blessing

Who will not agree that Jesus’ emphasis on suffering persecution for righteousness’ sake is, indeed, a searching and challenging word for us all? It is not easy to suffer persecution, is it? How then can Jesus say, *“Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness’ sake”*? Jesus certainly is not suggesting that anyone should enjoy persecution. No, but suffering persecution for righteousness’ sake has God’s blessing and results by His grace in a joy immeasurable for God’s people. See how Jesus’ concluding beatitude is not only a summary and searching beatitude but a most comforting and promising beatitude too!

What then are some of the blessings given God’s people when going through persecution for Jesus’ sake? Think of the blessing of bringing glory to God in the face of trial. Think of the blessing of the LORD using persecution to deepen believers’ awareness of Christ, dependence on Christ, and devotion to Christ. What about the blessing too of being a godly example to oth-

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MEDITATION

ers by God's grace, when remaining steadfast and faithful even when sorely oppressed and persecuted by others for righteousness' sake? God's sovereign grace and Holy Spirit have used the godly example of persevering saints amid trials and tribulations as such an encouragement to other believers and even as the means for the conversion of the unsaved. Thus, the saying, "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church."

We must not forget either what Jesus identifies as the great blessing of those persecuted for righteousness' sake: "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." He even says in verse 12: "Rejoice and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven." Already in this life God's faithful people are rewarded in many ways, especially with peace of conscience, joy of heart, and purpose in life. Yet in heaven, how greater by far will be the blessed portion of all who have persevered unto the end by God's grace (2 Tim. 4:6-8)! Paul exclaims in Romans 8:18: "For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us." Jesus Christ the Lord, through His perfect person and work as the crucified and risen Saviour of sinners, guarantees the believer's hope. What reason to ever trust and follow Jesus Christ and all His word, come what may (see Matt. 16:18 and John 16:33). One day God will set all straight and His reward for His people will be unendingly gracious and great and glorious beyond measure.

Already in this life God's faithful people are rewarded in many ways, especially with peace of conscience, joy of heart, and purpose in life. Yet in heaven, how greater by far will be the blessed portion of all who have persevered unto the end by God's grace (2 Tim. 4:6-8)!

How dreadfully different is the lot of unbelievers. Therefore, those persecuted for righteousness' sake urgently and lovingly appeal to the unrighteous (including their persecutors!) to be converted before it is forever too late!

In true and healthy Christianity then, we do not separate the concluding eighth beatitude in Matthew 5 from the prior seven. Rather, we view it as the climax and not the anti-climax of all the beatitudes. It is Jesus' concluding beatitude! "Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." ¹¹

Rev. Hans Overduin is an emeritus Free Reformed pastor, residing in Calgary, Alberta.

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Softcover, 137 pages, Wipf & Stock

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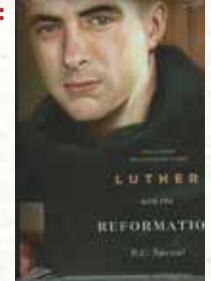
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book of the Bible is the breath of God and the plan of Salvation spans all of Scripture. In this Bible overview, each book of the Bible is summarized; background is given; themes and theology are explained—and it always leads to the Saviour. Written for children, adults will also profit from this book, which is attractively illustrated, with an outline of every Bible book and questions for family devotionals. It is also a great resource for Sunday school teachers and Bible studies. Hardcover, 264 pages, Christian Focus Publications

RBS Price \$29.00



Transforming Homosexuality: What the Bible Says about Sexual Orientation and Change

By Denny Burk & Heath Lambert

Faithful Christians today agree that the Bible forbids homosexual behaviour. But when it comes to underlying desires, the jury is out. Some Christians view homosexual desire as morally neutral, while others believe it calls for repentance and gospel renewal. Is same-sex attraction sinful, even if it is not acted on? How we answer this urgent question determines how we counsel brothers and sisters who wrestle with same-sex desires. Denny Burk and Heath Lambert challenge misconceptions on all sides as they unpack the concepts of same-sex orientation, temptation, and desire. They show that ultimately a biblical view gives hope for profound personal change, with patterns remolded and rethought in faithfulness to Christ. The authors are a theologian and counsellor respectively. The book is endorsed by Rosaria Butterfield. John MacArthur states: "In *Transforming Homosexuality*, Denny Burk and Heath Lambert address that idea with biblical clarity and godly wisdom. This is an important book about an issue that has overwhelmed our culture." Softcover, 135 pages, P&R Publishing **RBS Price \$11.50**



Polly and the Screen Time Overload

By Betsy Childs Howard

Technology can be a helpful tool and source of enjoyment for many families—a way to aid children with learning, to connect with loved ones, and to provide entertainment. But as with many good gifts from God, tech devices are best used in moderation. In this new picture book, readers meet Polly while on a trip to her grandparents' farm. During her visit, she spends all her time on her new tablet instead of enjoying the farm animals and playing with her cousins. A chat with her grandfather teaches her that, though screen time can be good, it can also keep kids away from better things. Using simple language and beautiful illustrations, children ages 3-7 are introduced to the idea that technology is best enjoyed within boundaries. Hardcover, 40 pages, Crossway **RBS Price \$14.00**



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WHY DO PEOPLE SUFFER IN PERSECUTION?

When we think of persecution, we think of suffering. Persecution is about powerful tyrants, lawless mobs, alienated relatives, or calculating governments cruelly inflicting suffering on those they persecute.

We know stories from the past. In the early church, famished lions tore martyrs to pieces before cheering crowds; horses dragged martyrs through the streets to their death; Nero covered them with tar and lit them as torches.

In the time of the Reformation, women were buried alive, others were thrown in dungeons and then tied up in bags with stones and dropped into rivers to drown. Others were tortured on the rack, in boiling oil, or had their tongues cut off and their arms and feet sizzled off with hot tongs. Others were burned at the stake.

Still today, many endure indescribable torture and suffering. Some spend years being worked to death in camps in North Korea; some are shut up in shipping containers under the hot African sun; some are raped and abused; some are held in isolation day after day; some are robbed of all their possessions; some are shunned by their families; some are mutilated by angry mobs. To get into the details of these sufferings would make us dizzy.

Why do people suffer in persecution? Our first answer might be that persecutors are cruel and hate God and His church. That is true. That has been a reality in this world since Cain killed Abel. But there are many prospering people in lands of persecution. They are not hurt by persecutors simply because they are not Christians. When their North Korean government warns about being a Christian, they do not worry because they are not Christians. When a mob of militants comes into a village in Niger and says, “become Muslim or be slaughtered,” they confess Allah is God and are spared from being slaughtered. They remain Muslim and avoid suffering.

The amazing thing is that there are people who are willing to suffer rather than deny Christ, whether in the early church, the time of the Reformation, or today. They continue to confess that Jesus Christ is the only begotten Son of God, and that He is the way, the truth, and the life. They continue to cling to the Word of God amid all the lies and deceptions around them.

Sin Worse than Suffering

They suffer because they would rather suffer than sin and deny Christ. As Guido de Brès wrote to King Philip II in his dedicatory letter for our *Belgic Confession* (1561): “The expulsions, imprisonments, torture racks, seizure of goods, torture and countless other

oppressions prove that our attitude is not fleshly, for according to the flesh we could have had a much easier time if we had not held onto our doctrine. But we hold the fear of God before our eyes, knowing the terror of Jesus Christ, who says that He will deny us before God His Father if we deny Him before men (Mat 10:33, Luk 9:26). We offer our backs to the whips, our tongues to the knives, our mouths to the gags and our whole bodies to be burned at the stake knowing that those who want to follow Christ ‘must take up their cross and deny themselves’ (Mat 16:24, Luk 9:23).”

Does this call not come to us all? To deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Christ? Are we not faced with that same choice daily: to suffer or to sin? We do not have Muslims waving machine guns and saying, “convert or be slaughtered!” But choices come to us: do (unethical) business like others or (do to others as you would have them do to you and) suffer financially, just be quiet (and deny Christ) or (witness and) look odd, have friends (and go along with their sinful ways) or lose friends (and follow Christ). As Jeremiah Burroughs wrote in his book, *The Evil of Evils*, “They could endure all the tortures on their bodies that could be devised rather than to commit any known sin against their consciences, and you will venture to commit a known sin against your conscience rather than to be found out in some fault and have an angry word or a little shame!” (p. 6).

We do not have time to unpack this all, but Christians in persecution are willing to suffer when they know that sin is far worse than suffering. Do we also, with Moses, rather suffer with God’s people than enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season (Heb. 11:24-27)?

God’s Favour is Better than Life

What makes those who are persecuted cling to God’s word and His Christ amid all the pressures to let go and all the promises they would be better off letting go? They have learned to sing: “the lovingkindness of my God is more than life to me” (Psalm 63; Psalter 163). In the 1950s, a Chinese preacher, Wang Ming-Dao, was arrested because he had written a letter attacking the government controlled Three-Self Church and refused to join it. They pressured him and described in detail the torments he would undergo if he did not recant his views and submit to the government. He signed his retraction and promised to join the government church. When he was released, it became so dark in his soul. He felt God withdraw and he could not bear it. He then confessed his sin to God and confessed: “Lord, if I have to go to prison for twenty-five years, that is ok, as long as I may know thy favour.” The Lord did restore him, comforting him with Micah 7:7 and sustaining him through twenty-two years in prison.

Not all those in persecution are filled with the enjoyment of comfort. They may face times of darkness, discouragement, or simply mind-numbing pain. But many have testified of God’s gracious comfort amid their sufferings. From a dark dungeon cell, Guido de Brès could write: “I am happy; my heart is cheerful and it lacks nothing in my afflictions. I am so filled with the abundance of the richness of my God! Yes, I am so comforted that I have enough for myself and all those to whom I can speak. So I pray my God that he will continue his kindness to me, his prisoner. The One in whom I have trusted will do it, for I have found by experience that He will never leave those who have trusted in Him. I would never have thought that God would have been so kind to such a poor creature as I. I feel the faithfulness of my Lord Jesus Christ.”

Is this not what Paul meant when he spoke of “this light affliction which is but for a moment” (2 Cor. 4:17)? A foretaste of God’s love in suffering or even the anticipation of that full enjoyment of it in the pain of suffering is worth more than all the ease secured by compromise. The knowledge of God’s favour enables Christians to endure suffering amid persecution. Christ is their life, and suffering does not take Christ away. That is why Open Doors could report of pastor Gideon in Eritrea who has been imprisoned for over six years saying, “Even when we are in suffering, we rejoice. Our happiness is not based on what we have or do not have.”

We do not have time to unpack this all, but Christians in persecution are willing to suffer when they know that sin is far worse than suffering.

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What a message for us: do we also understand what we confess: “to behold [God’s gracious countenance] is to the godly dearer than life: the withdrawing thereof is more bitter than death” (Canons of Dort, V.13)?

God’s Grace is More Powerful than All

The real reason people are willing to endure suffering in persecution rather than let that persecution drive them from Christ is the power of God’s grace in them. Paul, who suffered much for the cause of Christ, could confess: “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me” (Phil. 4:13). Martyrs are not super-people. They are weak people in whom Christ’s

strength is perfected (2 Cor. 12:9). On their own, they are no match for the world’s pressures and enticements, but Christ testifies to them: “Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world” (1 John 4:4).

Christ Jesus lives to persevere in giving His persevering grace to His people. He persevered in willingness to die under God’s wrath rather than disobey His Father and He gives that perseverance by His Spirit. A true Christian is one who shares in Christ’s anointing with the Holy Spirit. No persecuting power can break that bond with Christ. Through union with Christ, they are reconciled to the almighty God who will not let His enemies triumph and will not let anyone pluck His sheep out of His hands (John 10:29). What you see in Christians being strengthened to endure suffering rather than turn away from God is the power of God’s grace.


All who belong to Christ share in that grace. God may show that grace in special ways in the midst of great sufferings under persecution, but it is not different grace than the grace we need to be willing to suffer rather than sin, to esteem His favour better than the pleasures of sin, and to live out of the grace and strength of Christ.

In the West, we sometimes talk about persecution and what it must be like for others or might be like for us in the future. More important than speculation about elsewhere or the future is to know the gracious Saviour in our present situation in a world of pressures and temptations.

The point is not just that we will need great grace if we will be persecuted. We need great grace now – an almighty Spirit working within us now, a gracious Saviour ministering to us now, a caring Father watching over us now. He gives that grace through His Word. He convicts of the exceeding sinfulness of sin against His law, his character, and His Son, so that sin becomes worse than suffering. He reveals His love in Christ Jesus whereby God’s favour becomes more precious than life. He exalts His gracious power enabling to hope in Him, and not lean on our own understanding, listen to the world’s suggestions, or give in to the devil’s logic. ①

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PURITAN REFORMED CONNECTIONS WITH PERSECUTION

At Puritan Reformed seminary every Thursday we pray for an area undergoing persecution. We also have students on campus, students following courses by distance, and alumni who have or are enduring various forms of persecution. Here are some brief interviews of some Puritan Reformed students and alumni.



JEFF, a Puritan Reformed Student from India

1. What types of persecution does the church in your country face?

I find it critical to begin by noting that not all regions or states in India are persecuted. Some regions have a Christian majority, and thus they have complete freedom when it comes to worship in churches and preaching the gospel, and usually with less hindrance. Another factor concerning persecution is what political party is ruling the state. In states where ruling parties hold to a Hindutva ideology, Christian persecution is usually more severe. Usually, the government does not directly persecute Christians, as the India constitution upholds freedom to practice, profess, and propagate one's religion, but the government does to varying degrees let radical Hindu groups persecute. Persecuted Christians are usually threatened for their faith in Christ by family members, society, or the radical groups. They are mocked for accepting a western faith and leaving their traditional religion and called 'Rice-Bag covert' (claiming they've been bribed to convert to Christianity). Some are pressured to return to Hinduism; some get beaten for evangelizing the lost. Churches and properties in some regions are vandalized by mobs on the grounds of religious conversion. Some families or individuals are treated as societal outcasts and denied basic amenities. Christians when arrested for their faith are often falsely charged with "forceful conversions."

2. How has persecution come closest to home for you? How has that impacted you?

Just recently, one of our local pastor's daughters, her husband, and six other people, including a local pastor (five men and three women in total), were beaten by some radical Hindus and handed over to the police for arrest. They were arrested for the charges of forceful religious conversions because they held prayer meeting in a Hindu home which had come to profess faith in Jesus Christ. Though they got bail and were released for medical attention, this was the closest experience of persecution for me as this place is only two and half hours from the church I hope to serve in the future. I was personally shocked to hear this (as this is a new experience for our area). I was fearful of what the future would look like for us. This incident also called for counting the cost for following Christ, prayer for the persecuted and persecutors, and remaining faithful to the gospel and submitting to the Lordship of Christ even if that means arrest, beatings, or even death. Fundamentally, it is to depend on the Lord Jesus Christ for strength and perseverance in hard times.

3. In what ways does persecution affect missions?

Usually, seeds of fear and doubt are planted when one hears such news. You question, what would happen to my family? My fellow-believers? My church? Fear can make you less bold in taking the gospel to the people around you. Positively, this danger creates dependence upon the Lord and a resting on His strength. Also, when doors, which were once open, get shut because of public threats or persecution, the question often comes: What is next? How do we now take the gospel to the people around us? This calls for much wisdom and balance concerning how to preach the gospel faithfully by making sure you don't create unnecessary problems. Strategies may have to change. For example, we may need to go to where there is more freedom, or meet less publicly with individuals, or go to Muslim villages if Hindu villages are closed to us. Positively, in moments of darkness, fear, and timidness, it is the "love of Christ" that compels one to take the gospel to the lost.

4. What message do you have for the churches of North America?

I think North America is blessed with a lot of sound churches, solid seminaries, and men and women who love God truly and seek to submit to Christ's Lordship. But sometimes I think we can lose our missional focus of taking the gospel to the people around us and to the nations. I think when we have the privilege and freedom to do so, we must make the best use of every opportunity we get to preach Jesus and Him crucified to the lost around us. Secondly, I encourage you to pray for our brothers and sisters in Christ who suffer persecution. Thirdly, ask yourself in what capacity can I serve, assist, or take part in global missions.

DENNIS, a Puritan Reformed Alumnus in Kazakhstan

1. What types of persecution does the church in your country face?

2. How has persecution come closest to home for you? How has that impacted you?

3. What effect does persecution have on the churches you serve?
4. What message do you have for the churches in North America?



Street evangelism and distribution of tracts is prohibited in Kazakhstan. Protestant evangelical churches are looked down upon due to some financial embezzlement scandals in big charismatic churches in the past. It is hard to get officially registered as a church unless you reach a certain number of members and submit their personal information. Local Kazakhs who convert to Christianity are usually harassed by their Muslim relatives. All the mentioned above is not persecution in a strict sense of the word, for we are not killed or thrown into jail for our faith. The government tries to control church pastors and their activities like in Soviet times. Having said all of that, I need to state that there are ways to stay faithful to the calling of preaching the Word and living lives in the manner worthy of God's calling. Becoming a Christian is not cultural or fashionable in Kazakhstan; it is costly and therefore false conversions are possible but rare.

There were verbal threats to some of the members of our church. There were threats from some of the unbelievers who attended the church to report to the police on us. None of that led to anything that threatened our lives or livelihoods. In general, pastors are considered as spies who work for foreign governments. That is because most of the population consider themselves to be Muslims, who are truly rooted in the history of the country. Christianity is seen as something foreign, whether Russian or Western.

The worst effect of constant government and societal pressures is that some churches succumb to a version of the Gospel that is no Gospel at all. Most of the religious people, including Christians, are encouraged to be silent about the exclusivity of their religion. The government and society around us tolerate us as long as we don't say things like, "Christ is the only way of salvation. Christ is the only Saviour." Many churches are shallow in their messages and heavy on social work rather than evangelistic work.

Please pray that we would stay faithful to the Gospel. Please pray that we would preach the Gospel to the people around us and unapologetically proclaim Christ as Lord. Please pray that we wouldn't succumb to ecumenical movement in Kazakhstan which spends most of its time talking about friendship, not the truth.

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THE EVENT: HENDRIK VOES AND JOHANNES VAN ESSEN BURNED

In the late morning of July 1, 1523, a crowd gathered at the Grand Place of Brussels, the stately, Gothic city hall. They strained to see a solemn procession. First came the grey-clad Franciscans holding high a cross-embazoned banner, then the black and white Dominicans, then other monks. Behind the monks came dignified theologians from the University of Leuven, wearing their academic regalia, followed by Abbots and Bishops with their high miters on their heads and ornamented staves in their hands. Out of the city hall proceeded also high government officials.

Once these assembled on a platform in front of the city hall, a young Augustinian monk in full priestly vestments was brought onto the platform. He looked so young. He hardly had a beard. He was made to kneel before an altar erected on the platform. While a Franciscan friar preached a long sermon to the gathered spectators about the danger of damnable Lutheran heresies, a bishop slowly stripped this young monk of his clerical vestments as a public degradation or defrocking.

One eyewitness reported, “Since I could not understand the preacher due to the commotion, which was also the case for others, I was focusing entirely on the accused. Why would we try to hide what is well established to be true? His face was composed and calm. He was displaying not only scorn for death, but also the utmost modesty and gentleness. He looked like a man intent on prayers and sacred contemplations.” After this ceremony he was led away, and we do not know what happened to him.

Two other fellow Augustinian monks, Hendrik Voes and Johannes van Essen, were then brought to the platform and received the same treatment. They were “rougher in appearance, truly bearded” but were “with facial expressions attesting the same steadfastness and cheerfulness.” Having been “removed from the sacred and rendered profane” and dressed in black, they were also given over to the civil authorities and led away.



After a while, these two re-entered the market square and were led to the pyre set up where the magistrates gave them over to the executioners. They were accompanied by four father confessors, including the head inquisitor from Cologne, who urged them to recant their heretical views and be cured of the Lutheran infection that had diseased them. “They said, ‘We believe in God and in one Christian church. But your church we do not believe.’ They stood in the middle of the wood like this a good half hour before it was kindled. During that time, they continually said that they were willing

to die in the name of Christ. Then the four father confessors called out to them that they should convert or they would go to the devil and they would die in the devil’s name. Then the two men said they were willing to die for the sake of the evangelical truth, as pious Christians.”

Bound to the stake, they were given around half an hour to still recant and then the fire was kindled and slowly began to burn.


An eye witness was amazed: “If it is appropriate to judge from gestures, eyebrows, eyes, and finally from the entire face—which all do a sort of talking, and not infrequently disclose what is in the heart more surely and with better reliability than the tongue—confidence, steadfastness, and cheerfulness, which had always been very high, appeared to receive a boost! And then there was the joyfulness, of a kind I do not know, that was especially springing up within them, to such an extent that they seemed to many people to be laughing! Among other things, they were reciting the Apostles’ Creed and the ecclesiastical song, “We Praise Thee, O God [*Te Deum laudamus*],” and this they were saying in turns.”

The eyewitness continued: “Then the one finally fell to his knees in the fire, put his hands together, and cried out, “Lord Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on us!” After that they both

passed away and were completely burned to ashes. This event lasted nearly four hours.”

So ended the lives of these two first protestant martyrs in Europe.

The next day was dedicated to the Virgin Mary and in church the people heard: “that if someone should happen to ask them how the men they had seen being burned had met their end, they should say that they had died in the erroneous faith of Luther. At the same time, he was repeatedly asserting that he had learned from certain men that they had abandoned their errors at the last moment, which he said had in fact happened by the prayers of certain people and by the help of the divine Virgin,

who had performed a miracle.” Clearly, the Roman Catholic church wanted to mitigate any “negative” consequences of these executions. 

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PURITAN REFORMED CONNECTIONS WITH PERSECUTION *Continued...*

PETER, a Puritan Reformed Student in China

Q. What types of persecution does the church in your country face?

A. In China, the communist faith is the only correct truth. The Communist Party is pretending to be God. One person governs the party and one party governs the whole country. Any individuals, organizations, or communities have to obey and dare not disobey.

However, in Chinese society, the disobedient individual is the true Christian, and the disobedient community is the true church. Of course, “disobedience” means disobeying evil laws, disobeying false gods, and resisting sin. The Communist Party persecutes churches in four ways:

- 1) Coercing and luring churches to join the “Three-Self Church” led by the ruling party;
- 2) Dissolving “house churches” in which only the Bible is supreme and Christ is the sole head of the church;
- 3) Using state resources and machinery against churches and pastors, enacting evil religious laws, suppressing pastors and members of house churches;
- 4) Fabricating reasons to arrest, fine, and imprison Christians, when the actual problem is their adherence to the faith of the Scriptures alone.

Q. How has persecution come closest to home for you? How has that impacted you?

A. Persecution will come to me,

- 1) The more the church insists on the truth;
- 2) The larger the church is;
- 3) The more disciplined the church is; and
- 4) The greater the testimony of the church has in society.

Persecution has impacted me in various ways:

- 1) If I look at the situation, I will become weaker and weaker; if I look to God, I will grow stronger. Persecution prompts a true Christian not to leave God for a moment and draw closer to God.
- 2) Bible reading, devotional, and prayer are more diligent and profound.
- 3) I become more certain and convinced;
- 4) I am stirred to be trained to be wiser and more insightful.

My approach to the world is to believe what I know and to do what I believe. My approach to my situation is to live as usual, until persecution is extreme, and in extraordinary circumstances, to serve as usual.

Q. How do you deal with persecution?

I seek to live by several principles:

- 1) Show unconditional respect for the personality and position of law enforcers;
- 2) Adhere to the principles and positions of truth;
- 3) Give limited cooperation with their work in the situation;
- 4) Clarify the identity and function of the church, obey authority, and disobey evil laws.

I regard the conflict between the church and state as an opportunity for evangelism and apologetics. The task of every interview with authorities is to preach. As we do so, we should:

- 1) Respect each other as God’s creatures and avoid verbal or physical conflicts.
- 2) Defend rights in accordance with the law, government stipulations, and law enforcement authority and scope.
- 3) Use logic to rebut irrational messages of law enforcers.
- 4) Truly love them. Why? They are human beings, noble people, people who have fallen like me, who do not know the truth, do not know God (just like me at one point).
- 5) Remember God is judge and give the outcome over to God.

Q. What effect does persecution have on the churches you serve?

A.

- 1) Persecution will cleanse the church - some people leave, some join.
- 2) Persecution purifies faith - some retreat, some stand strong.
- 3) Persecution promotes the closeness of the community of faith and strengthens bonds of love.
- 4) Persecution raises up workers - while some workers retreat, God will raise up others.
- 5) Persecution will make the vision of the church and the evangelical culture more evident.

Q. What message do you have for the churches in North America?

A.

- 1) Both North American churches and Chinese churches need to constantly repent and convert, constantly return in life and doctrine to the Bible, walk in the old paths, and break away from the “welfare” of “eating bread and getting full” and enter the “gospel” of “sacrificing and giving one’s life.”
- 2) North American churches should pay more attention to God’s churches around the world, including Chinese house churches, in the kingdom of Christ, and show Christ’s love in prayer and love.
- 3) North American churches should also deeply recognize the various challenges hidden in a free society, such as the deceptive temptations of “sugar-coated shells” such as materialism, hedonism, secularism, and liberalism. Do not neglect your responsibility as a citizen of heaven to evangelize, and do not fail to watch over your brothers in Christ around the world.
- 4) We have been praying for the North American churches, hoping that the North American churches will be a blessing to the churches around the world.

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THE BACKGROUND: THE ANTWERP AUGUSTINIAN MONASTERY



That the first martyrdoms occurred in the Lowlands need not be a surprise. At the time, modern-day Belgium, The Netherlands, and Luxembourg were all part of what were known as the Lowlands or “Nederlanden,” ruled by Charles V. He was determined to maintain his control of this territory and safeguard it against heresy. When his son, Philip II, succeeded him, the persecution only intensified. During the Reformation, more martyrs were executed in the small territory of the Netherlands than any other country.

The one martyr, Johannes Van den Esschen, appears to have come from the place named Essen, located in Belgium, or from just west of that in Zeeland. He appears to have been born around 1494. In 1513, at the age of 20, he was involved in establishing an Augustinian monastery in Antwerp, the leading trade center in Europe. This Augustinian monastery was marked by a stress on discipline and morality that was present in many older

monastic orders, and also was involved in intense study of the Scriptures. Hendrik Voes seems to have been born around 1499 in ‘s-Hertogenbosch, in present-day southern Netherlands and at some point joined this same monastery in Antwerp.

Soon after Luther published his 95 Theses in 1517, his writings reached this monastery. Luther being an Augustinian monk himself gave a natural connection with this Augustinian monastery in Antwerp. The Antwerp monastery Prior, Jacob Probst (Praepositus), had served in the Augustinian monastery in Wittenburg from 1515-1518. In 1519 already, Erasmus wrote to Luther that Probst was “a genuinely Christian man, who has a strong singular affection for you.... he is almost the only one who preaches Christ out of all the preachers.” His preaching was so popular that the monastery had to build a larger chapel to fit the crowds.

Antwerp was quickly becoming a printing and distribution cen-

ter for many of Luther's books. On a warm Saturday market day in July of 1521, many came to witness a great book-burning in the central market plain of Antwerp. Authorities had gathered a collection of over 300 books which were burnt after all were warned about the strong punishments against possessing such books.

In late 1521, the Roman Catholic authorities arrested Probst for his teaching and reassured him, "You will not be burned unless you are stubborn." In the end, Probst renounced Luther from the pulpit of the Brussels cathedral, though he later continued preaching Christ.

In 1522, Hendrik van Zuptphen, who had been studying with Luther in Wittenberg, returned to Antwerp and became Prior of the Augustinian monastery. When he began preaching against a visiting indulgence salesman, he was arrested, but a massive mob of primarily women battered the doors of his place of confinement and set him free. A week later, the authorities arrested all the monks in this monastery. After interrogations, most were released; eight were thrown in jail in the Vilvoorde Castle, investigated by inquisitors, and threatened with execution. Five of those eight recanted and three refused, including Voets and van Esschen.

We still have a document prepared by the inquisitors listing sixty-two "Articles Asserted by Brother Hendrik and the Others." These include statements such as:

2. Those commanding us to abstain from reading the books of Luther are acting contrary to the Scripture passages, "Test everything" [1 Thess. 5:21], and "Test the spirits and see whether they are from God" [1 John 4:1].
12. All people are priests before God.
19. Nothing should be believed, at risk to the conscience, except what is recorded in the words of God, or what can be drawn out from the words of God.
38. The true, Christian, and catholic faith is not able to be separated from love, since love is a fruit of faith, and Christian faith without love is dead.
40. When God releases the sinner from his sins, then for the sake of Christ's death he also releases him from every penalty his sins deserve. And he devoutly believes this.
59. The pope does not have any other authority than to preach God's word and to feed his sheep with the preaching of God's word.

The inquisition did all it could to get these prisoners to recant. Methods ranged from friendly one-on-one conversations to intimidating appearances before the entire Inquisition, from flattery to bullying, enticements to threats, as well as times of isolation with the hope that fears would break them. But due to their persistence in "soul-destroying heresy," the authorities decided there was nothing left but to execute the death sentence on them to prevent them from infecting others. ①

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PURITAN REFORMED CONNECTIONS WITH PERSECUTION *Continued...*

Puritan Reformed Alumni in Nigeria

Several Puritan Reformed alumni are serving in the Nigeria Reformed Church. In 2021 these churches in the southern part of Nigeria suffered from sudden

attacks on their villages by around 300 Fulani tribesmen. These tribesmen swept through the area, starting at 3:00 AM, killing at least 140 people with guns and machetes, injuring many more, and destroying seven villages. Among the victims were members of the Nigeria Reformed Church, including women, children, and babies.

Traditionally the nomadic Fulani herdsman tended to be in the north, but have been moving south in search for land for their flocks and herds. When they have met government and local resistance to their presence, they have resorted to violence to get what they want. In contrast to the more Christian population of farmers in southern Nigeria, the Fulani are Muslim. Muslim militants seem to be stirring them up to gain control of more territory for Allah. In this case a neighbouring tribe appears to have been involved as well.

This attack sent shockwaves through the churches in this area and created a lot of fear and confusion. People gather early in the morning to pray in the churches before going to work. Pastors feel the load of showing care for those who lost loved ones, their possessions, or their health, and are traumatized by these attacks. As one alumnus said himself recently, "I still have trauma, but am gradually recovering."

This spring, one puritan Reformed alumnus was going to his church in this area as usual, when a group of men suddenly kidnapped him. Later that day security personnel were able to intercept the kidnappers' vehicles. The men abandoned them and sought to flee, while exchanging gunshots with the police. One kidnapper was shot dead, two others were arrested, more weapons were confiscated, and the pastor was freed. After being examined at the police station for information about the kidnappers, he was able to return home late afternoon, where he was met by not only his family, but many church members who had gathered to pray for him. This event showed non-Christians that God hears prayer and is more powerful than the evil man who had orchestrated this kidnapping to draw people away from the church.

Through these events, there are reports of local people coming with questions about this God of the Christians and desire to learn from God's Word. Pray God to overrule these attacks of Satan for the display of his powerful grace in gathering and preserving his church.



THE EFFECT: LUTHER'S RESPONSE TO THE FIRST NETHERLANDISH MARTYRS



News of these first “Lutheran” martyrdoms in the Netherlands deeply moved Martin Luther. His immediate reaction was to weep and say: “I thought I would be the first one to be martyred by the holy gospel, but I am not worthy.”

A Song

He also composed a twelve-stanza ballad. This appears to be the first hymn he ever wrote.

“A new song be by us begun,
God help us tell the story,
To sing what our Lord God hath done
Unto His praise and glory.
At Brussels in the Netherlands
Hath He made known His wonders
Through two mere boys, right youthful lads,
Whom He with heav’nly treasures
So richly hath adornèd.

The first right fitly John was named,
So rich he in God’s favour;
A Christian true and free from blame
Was Henry, his dear brother.
Out from this world they both have trod;
Their heav’nly crowns they cherished;
Like any pious child of God,
For His Word have they perished.
His martyrs they have become.

He proceeds to tell of how “the ancient Foe did have them bound, With terrors to enwrap them” and how “From Louvain many sophists came,” “But God, the tables turning, Denied them all victory.” Their steadfastness provoked their enemies to commit them to the flames.

Why were they persecuted?
Their greatest fault was to proclaim:
*“We ought to trust God solely,
For men are naught but liars vain;
We should distrust them wholly.”
For this they must both be burned!*

Their death did not silence them, for:
*He who did seek with murd’rous hand
To silence them while living
Now in their death through ev’ry land
Must hear men praises giving
And singing right joyfully.*

Their death could not stop God’s work, for:
*He who hath begun it
Will surely complete His work.*



A Letter

Around a month after they were executed, Luther also wrote a letter “to all dear brothers in Christ in Holland, Brabant, and Flanders, together with all believers in Christ.” Here it is in full.

Open Letter to Christians in the Low Countries

Martin Luther, churchman in Wittenberg,

To all dear brothers in Christ in Holland,² Brabant,³ and Flanders,⁴ together with all believers in Christ,

Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Praise and thanks be to the Father of all mercy, who once again in these days lets us see his marvelous light, which up till now was hidden on account of our sin. In the past he let us be subject to the horrible authority of the darkness and let us serve such disgraceful errors and the Antichrist. But now the time has come again for us to hear the voice of the turtledove, and the flowers are springing up in our land [Song of Sol. 2:12].

What joy, my dearest friends, you have not only taken part in, but have become its foremost partakers—a joy from which we ourselves have derived great joy and delight! For before all the world, you have been given the honor not only to hear the gospel and to acknowledge Christ, but also to be the first who now suffer shame and injury, apprehension and distress, imprisonment and danger for Christ’s sake, and have now matured into such ripe fruit and become so strong that you have also watered and confirmed it with your own blood, since the two noble jewels of Christ among you, Hinricus and Johannes, thought nothing of their life in Brussels, so that Christ would be praised with his word.

Oh, how despicably those two souls were executed! Yet how gloriously and in eternal joy they will return with Christ and justly judge those by whom they have now been unjustly judged! Ah, how very inconsequential a thing it is to be disgraced and killed by the world for those who know that their blood and their death are precious



PURITAN REFORMED CONNECTIONS WITH PERSECUTION

Continued....

ÇAĞDAŞ, Puritan Reformed Alumnus in Smyrna

My name is Çağdaş Çoşkun. I am the assistant pastor of the Protestant Church of Smyrna in İzmir (Smyrna), Turkey. I was ordained by the URCA and sent back to my local church as a missionary in 2022, after finishing my MDiv degree at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary.



1. What types of persecution does the church in your country face?

Being a Muslim is being Turkish and being a Turkish is being a Muslim. These two cannot be separated from each other unless the Holy Spirit intervenes and changes a person’s heart. At that point, the new convert begins the face persecution from his/her family and friends because he/she doesn’t fit the formula of being Turkish. The new convert is a traitor —a traitor who stands by the historical enemy of the Turkish people and the Muslim world. So the new convert, most of the time, loses his family and friends, and is declared an unwelcome stranger. The Turkish government also does not hire Christians because Christians are not trustworthy. If new converts work for the government, they may lose their job.

2. How has persecution come closest to home for you? How has that impacted you?

My mother was arrested during a Sunday service, but they did not arrest me because I was fourteen years old. This situation only encouraged us to go to church even more every Sunday. Also, one of our neighbors had become a Christian. His name was Necati. He was originally from Antakya (Antioch), so he wanted to go back to the east of Turkey and share the gospel with people there, because the gospel was like a treasure he found (Matthew 13:44-46) and wanted to share. But he was killed, alongside two of our brothers in the east of Turkey by fanatic Muslims on April 18, 2007. I was a college student at that time and decided to give all my time to the church. I became the youth leader and evangelist of the local church for the next eight years.

3. What effect does persecution have on the churches you serve?

It affects us in two ways: it either scares people off and they stop coming to church or it strengthens our faith. The Lord refines His church through persecution.

4. What message do you have for the churches in North America?

Do not keep the treasure for yourselves alone. Share it and invite others to participate in this wonderful treasure. “And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt. 10:28). Do not be tolerant of sins of the twenty-first century but be gracious and merciful to sinners so they might hear the hope of salvation. Be strong and of a good courage, the Lord is in control. For His glory alone!

in God's sight, as the psalms sing [Psalm 9:12; 116:15]. What is the world in comparison with God? What great pleasure and joy all the angels have taken in the sight of these two souls! How gladly the fire must have helped them to their eternal life from this sinful life, to eternal glory from this shame! God be praised and blessed into eternity, that we have lived to see and to hear true saints and genuine martyrs, we who have previously extolled and adored so many false saints.

We up here have not yet been worthy to become such a precious and worthy offering to Christ, although many of our ranks have not escaped persecution and are still being persecuted. Therefore, my very dearest friends, take heart and be joyful in Christ, and let us give thanks for his great signs and wonders, which he has begun to do among us. Here he has set before us brand-new examples of his life. Now it is time for the kingdom of God not to consist in words but in power [1 Cor. 4:10; cf. 1 Thess. 1:5].

Here we are being taught what the saying means: "Be joyful in distress" [cf. Rom. 12:12]. Isaiah says, "For a little while I forsake you, but with eternal mercy I will take you in" [Isa. 54:7]. And God says in Psalm 91, "I am with him in distress, I will deliver him and will honor him, for he has acknowledged my name" [Ps. 91:15, 14]. So then, since we see the present distress, and have such powerful



and comforting promises, let us revive our heart, be of good cheer, and joyfully let ourselves be slaughtered for the Lord. It is he who has said it; he will not lie. "Even the hairs on your head are all numbered" [Matt. 10:30].

And although the adversaries will decry these saints as Hussites, Wycliffites, and Lutherans, and will take pride in their murder, this should not amaze us but strengthen us all the more. For the cross of Christ must have blasphemers. But our judge is not far off. He will render a different verdict. We know this, and are certain of it. Pray for us, dear brothers, and pray for and with each other, so that we extend one another a helping hand and all of us cling in one spirit to our head, Jesus Christ. May he strengthen and fully equip you with grace to bring glory to his holy name. To him be honour, praise, and thanks among you and all creatures into eternity. Amen.

The Articles for Which the Two Christian Augustinian Monks Were Burned to Death in Brussels

The above-mentioned Christian men were interrogated by [Jacob van] Hoogstraten and several other heretic-masters (who mainly because of [*von groß wegen*] their unchristian malice are rightly called masters over other heretics), and they answered their questions as follows:

Question: What do you believe?

Answer: The twelve articles of the Christian faith, the books of the Bible and evangelical writings, also one holy Christian Church, but not the church you inquisitors believe in.

The second question: Do you believe in the laws of the councils and ancient fathers?

Answer: We believe them so far as their precepts are in line with divine Scripture and not contrary to it.

The third question: Do you believe that those who transgress the laws of the pope and the church fathers are committing mortal or damnable sin?

Answer: We believe that divine commands and prohibitions, and not human laws, are what save and condemn.

Verdict: On this basis the above-mentioned interrogators, being men who cannot tolerate divine doctrine because of the practice of their malice, pronounced the two above-mentioned pious Christian men to be heretics and handed them over to the secular authorities for execution (just as the Jews handed Christ over to the heathens). From there they were unjustly condemned to the fire.

Now although it is just and fair for everyone's crime to be publicly read at their execution, and this is the practice especially in Brussels, this was not done in this case out of shame at the great injustice. But those who were in Brussels at the time learned exactly what these articles were from certain individuals.

Likewise, when Hoogstraten assured the condemned men that if they would recant the above-cited Christian truth, he had the authority or power to set them free, one of them answered him, “Those are the words of Pilate, and you would have no authority over me, if it were not given to you from above,” and both men publicly said that they thanked God for the privilege to die for the sake of his word. And they not only suffered this innocent martyrdom and death willingly, eagerly, joyfully, and resolutely, but besides that they gave, admonished, and taught many good Christian answers during their execution. They also praised God by singing some of the holy psalms and other songs, and they devoutly called upon Christ our Lord, as a Son of David, for grace and mercy as long as they were able to speak, before the fire began to do them serious harm. For such Christian perseverance, it is right for all pious Christians to give praise and thanks to God the almighty (who has bestowed such great grace on these martyrs and all his other holy martyrs) and, if divine honor and Christian necessity call for it, to desire to endure the same way they have. Amen. ①


DID YOU SEE HOW:

- He begins not with condolences but with praise to God for His grace given through the light of the gospel and confirmed in the light of the fires of martyrdom?
- He directs them away from the present sufferings to contemplate the eternal glory these martyrs inherited?
- He directs them forward beyond the present injustices to the day of judgment when Christ will set everything straight?
- He exhorts not just to be comforted in sorrow but to rejoice amid distress?
- He urges prayer and commends them to the faithful Saviour?
- He corrects the Romish account of their last-minute recantation and stressed they were simply Christians and not followers of a man, Martin Luther?

Sources:

Hans Wiersma, “The First Martyrs of the Reformation,” *Lutheran Forum* (Fall 2011): 27-31 (quoting WA 12:74). *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 12:77-80 (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau, 1891); translation by Nathaniel Biebert available at <https://redbrickparsonage.wordpress.com/2023/07/03/martin-luthers-letter-to-christians-in-the-low-countries/>.

“A New Song Be By Us Begun,” *The Free Lutheran Chorale-Book*; <https://www.lutheranchoralebook.com/texts/A-New-Song-Be-By-Us-Begun/>



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REJOICING IN CHRISTIAN SUFFERING



Many Christians are facing new dilemmas in this decade. Some refuse to use progressive language in their workplace and are forced to take diversity training or even lose their jobs. Shops are expected to place certain stickers on the door, or perhaps face a boycott. Contractors are being told that they need an up to date “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion” statement to bid on a contract. Some families have been divided over the lifestyle of a relative. It is hard for others to survive on a single income and getting harder to keep a roof over their heads. What the future brings in these areas is uncertain, but there is a growing sense that our faith is being associated with bigotry, racism, sexism, or even abuse. How should we respond to these pressures? What would we do if persecution flared up once again?

First, we should not claim to know what the future will bring. There may yet be times of broad revival ahead, and times of relative peace for Christians. Yet even if there are to be difficult times ahead, God’s Word does not leave us without instruction or hope. The apostle Peter, by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, taught the Christian church how to rejoice when hard times would come upon them:

Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ’s sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy. If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye; for the spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you: on their part he is evil spoken of, but on your part he is glorified. But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men’s matters. Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf. For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God: and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God? And if the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear? - 1 Peter 4:12-18

When Peter wrote to the churches, it seems that Christians were just coming on to the “radar” of Roman leaders. Their claim that Jesus Christ was the Son of God and died for their sins upon a cross was seen as foolishness. Unwillingness to bow to idols, to join in pagan feasts, or to worship the emperor caused rifts with their communities. Their insistence on Christian morality, and their dedication to loving the poor, weak, slaves, and various ethnicities made them a community set apart. There were many rumors and misconceptions about what Christians believed. Suspicion and hatred grew, and there was growing persecution. At some times, and in some cities, that persecution grew very harsh.

Peter’s letter was preemptively preparing the church for persecution by warning them not to be surprised by it. This is important for Christians to realize. Church history is filled with cycles of relative peace followed by tyranny and persecution. If Peter had not prepared us, we might have despaired, or assumed that God had abandoned us. We may have been confused and thought that such trials were unfitting for a Christian. But this is not the case at all! We should not be surprised! The first key to being prepared for persecution is to not think of it as strange, but to think of it as a recurring theme in church history. These times are under the control of our sovereign God and will only benefit His church in the end.

Fiery trials, including persecutions, have positive effects on Christians. They test, and then strengthen, the faith of God’s children (1 Peter 1:6-7). Just as gold is purified by fire, the faith of Daniel’s three friends was proved by fire (Daniel 3:18). Trials even make believers “partakers of Christ’s sufferings” (1 Peter 4:13). This does not mean we somehow earn forgiveness through suffering, as Christ’s work of reconciliation is finished (1 Peter 3:18, 4:1). Rather, there is a sense in which our suffering is a “communion” with His sufferings. Through testing and trials, a believer is part of the body of Christ on earth that is being made more like Him. This is why many Christians who were under the heavy hand of communism in the mid-1900s found joy in prisons and concentration camps. This is why the ancient Church father Ignatius was said to hasten along the Roman soldiers guarding him, leading them to his martyrdom in Rome around 140 A.D. He was

eager to meet His Lord. Many of the most inspiring, hope-filled, and glorious stories of church history occurred in times of persecution. Many were given a beautiful strength and a joy in Christ that they had never experienced before. Perhaps you too will have that privilege one day, and that is not something to think of as strange. We must trust that the Lord will give what is necessary to persevere through such times. His strength is made perfect in weakness, He will commune with His children through trials, and even through the valley of the shadow of death!

Now this call to glory in suffering does come with a caution in verse 15: "...let none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men's matters." It is possible that a church member actually suffers because they have been living a selfish and sinful lifestyle. It is their sins and evil habits that lead to their being shunned by the broader community. Sadly, this has often happened in church history as well. Abusers, violent criminals, swindlers, and gossips have often tried to cloak themselves, or even find their victims, in the church. Harsh and overcritical Christians may tend to slip into being "busybodies" who are unable to see the "log in their own eye." These are also reasons, sadly, that the reputation of the church in the West is currently in tatters; in too many cases, "churches" have become dens of iniquity. If this leads to suffering, it is not the kind of suffering that Peter spoke of.

When one suffers as a Christian for their faith, love, and testimony, this brings glory to God. In the times that are ahead, Christians ought to only be "...reproached for the name of Christ." This is not shameful, but glorious. What did the apostle mean, however, when he said that the "...time is come that judgement must begin at the house of God?" (v. 17) It is a difficult passage, and there are different views about it. It seems best to understand this to mean that Roman civilization was entering a phase of increasing judgement. God was punishing sin by giving people over to more sin. They had been given over to idolatry, then lust, then debased minds, and then criminality. (Romans 1:18-32) As God gives a civilization over to sin, it begins to collapse. Many lose all sense of right and wrong and lose any understanding of who God is. Good is called evil, and evil is called good. The hatred of such people in collapsing empires has often been turned on those that are righteous and bear the true image of God. Criticism of Christian living begins to grow, and eventually leads to persecution. It may become difficult for the church during a collapse before it becomes hard for others.

Such a time should first lead us to sober self-examination. Where might we have failed as churches and Christians? Has there perhaps been a lack of love that might only be filled up in harder times? Is the selfishness, or perhaps the materialism, of many Christians being challenged? Have we lived in hypocrisy of one kind or another? Have we torn down without building up? The benefit of going through a phase, though it may be painful, is that it will expose and correct such sins. This must lead us back to humble confession of sin and weakness, and back to the Lord Je-


sus Christ. Such times should stir us up to seek His righteousness.

Many Christians are convinced that we have already entered a time of judgement. Though this should be sobering and lead to humbling self-examination, it must also lead us to rejoicing. Notice the emphasis of verses 13-15: the call to "rejoice," "be glad also with exceeding joy," and "happy are ye; for the spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you." This is indeed *very* positive language! If we lose a job for righteousness' sake, or suffer financial hardship, or experience a relationship breakdown, we might be tempted to be ashamed. How can we rejoice? We can rejoice because the Lord promises to be near to His people in such times. He will commune with them, cause His Spirit to rest on them, and will give joy. He uses such trials to purify His church, His bride, and to prepare them for eternal glory. The Lord will help us! ❶

Rev. Rob VanDoodewaard is pastor of the Free Reformed Church of Powassan, Ontario.

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Free Reformed Refugee Committee Update

City of Refuge is a Sponsorship Agreement Holder with Immigration, Refugee & Citizenship Canada. As a Free Reformed denominational committee, it serves to facilitate the reception of Christian Refugees by churches in Canada. Sponsorship is a commitment to working alongside refugees in order to ensure they have the necessary support to successfully integrate into life in Canada. As an official sponsor, a local church usually establishes a team of members to be the support network for the welcomed refugees.

The steps in a refugee sponsorship are as follows:

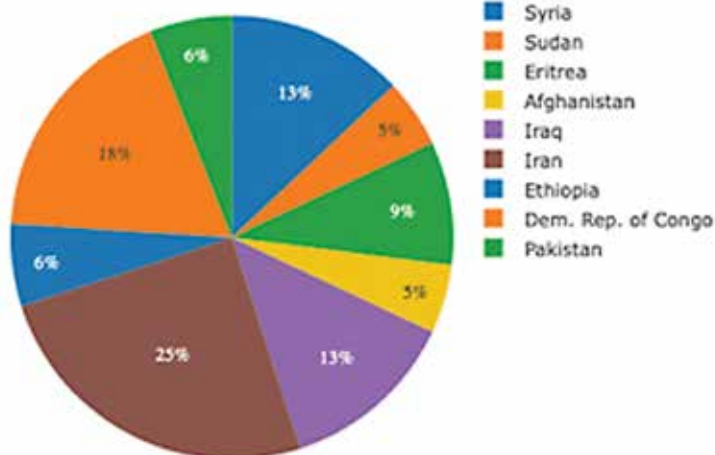
1. Form a team of members who share an interest in this ministry of compassion.
2. Contact a Coordinator to view profiles from the City of Refuge database of persecuted Christian refugees in need of resettlement.
3. Once your team has selected a refugee family or individual, a Coordinator will prepare the required documents for the sponsor and the refugee(s) and walk you through the process.
4. Once the application is submitted, it could take 2-3 years before the refugee(s) arrives in Canada.
5. The sponsor is responsible for the financial and resettlement needs of the refugee(s) for one year after arrival. The goal is for the refugee(s) to be self-sufficient by the end of the sponsorship period.

City of Refuge comes into contact with refugees in many ways. Often, we receive requests from family members wishing to help their refugee family or friends overseas. We have missionary and church contacts in different parts of the world that will refer refugee families to us. There is a list of refugee sponsors on the Canadian Government's website that refugees can access and contact us that way. Canadian churches will also present refugee families to us, who are usually associated with someone in their congregation, for sponsorship.

We are happy to partner with churches who come forward with a refugee(s) in mind but are also in great need of churches who come forward and ask to choose a refugee(s) from our database. We have hundreds of persecuted Christian refugees waiting for a sponsor, some who have been waiting for years. We would love to work on getting those families and individuals sponsored as soon as possible, especially since they are at risk of deportation and safety threats in their country of asylum.

Currently, the sponsored refugees come mainly from the Middle East and Africa. The application process is often a lengthy one, but they are thankful to report that this year to date they have submitted 35 applications for 93 people. So far this year, 79 people have arrived in Canada.

Country of Origin



Maral's story

My name is Maral and I am from Iran. I have a wonderful family, my mother, two sisters and a brother. I am the youngest of the family. I was born a Muslim, a serious Muslim. After we gave our hearts to the Lord,



we had many challenges, but we trusted Him because His gate is narrow, and the way is hard that leads to life (Matt. 7:13). Jesus told us this in the gospel, so we knew that we had a difficult path.

We worshiped in an underground church. The government recognized me and arrested me when I was 27 years old. Every day they interrogated me. They would blindfold me and question me from early morning to night. I experienced the promise of Lord in Luke 12:11-12 in those times. I used to worship God loudly in my cell. I was sure that I would not be the last person to be arrested for his or her faith, so I found a small stone in my cell and began to write Psalm 23 on my cell wall. Finally, when the police officials could not reach a conclusion about me, they decided to send me to the general women's prison. They told me that I must not talk about Christianity to anyone. I was happy that they sent me to prison because I could evangelise other women. I was in prison for 36 days and nine people believed in Christ. I started to write verses from the Bible that I had memorized in a notebook that I bought from the prison. I used to teach the new believers with the verses of God's word. I wrote the

verses for them, and we prayed and worshiped together.

Maral was eventually released and fled Iran to seek asylum in Turkey.

What were your emotions when you arrived in Canada?

I will never forget the first day we walked into Ancaster Church, being able to take our Bibles with us without fear, and freely worship with the rest of our brothers and sisters and listen to the sermon and have communion together was unforgettable for me. It was unique to me that we can work in Canada without fear of discrimination for being Christians, that I can continue my education in Canada, that I can serve God in Canada and speak freely about God. In Iran, the police constantly chased us, but I know that I am safe here, and this gives me and my family peace.

Maral's encouragement:

I want to encourage you to trust God in whatever situation you are in and consult Him and think about the expansion of God's kingdom and He will provide all your needs.

People in persecuted countries wish to go to church and wish to have the word of God in their homes without fear. Be thankful for being in church.

Pray for the persecuted churches and do whatever you can to help them: if you can sponsor them, great! If you can donate for their support, good! Please pray for them regularly. They worship God with a true heart, and they need your help.

And finally, according to the command of Jesus in Acts chapter 1, verse 8: with the power of the Holy Spirit, we must evangelize the people – in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the world. Our Jerusalem was Iran, our Judea was Turkey, and Samaria is Canada, and to the ends of the world is I don't know how far. With the power of the Holy Spirit, I have to testify about Jesus Christ.

Submitted by the Free Reformed Refugee Committee.

If your church is interested in sponsoring or would like more information about a specific profile, please contact us. For more information visit www.cityofrefuge.ca

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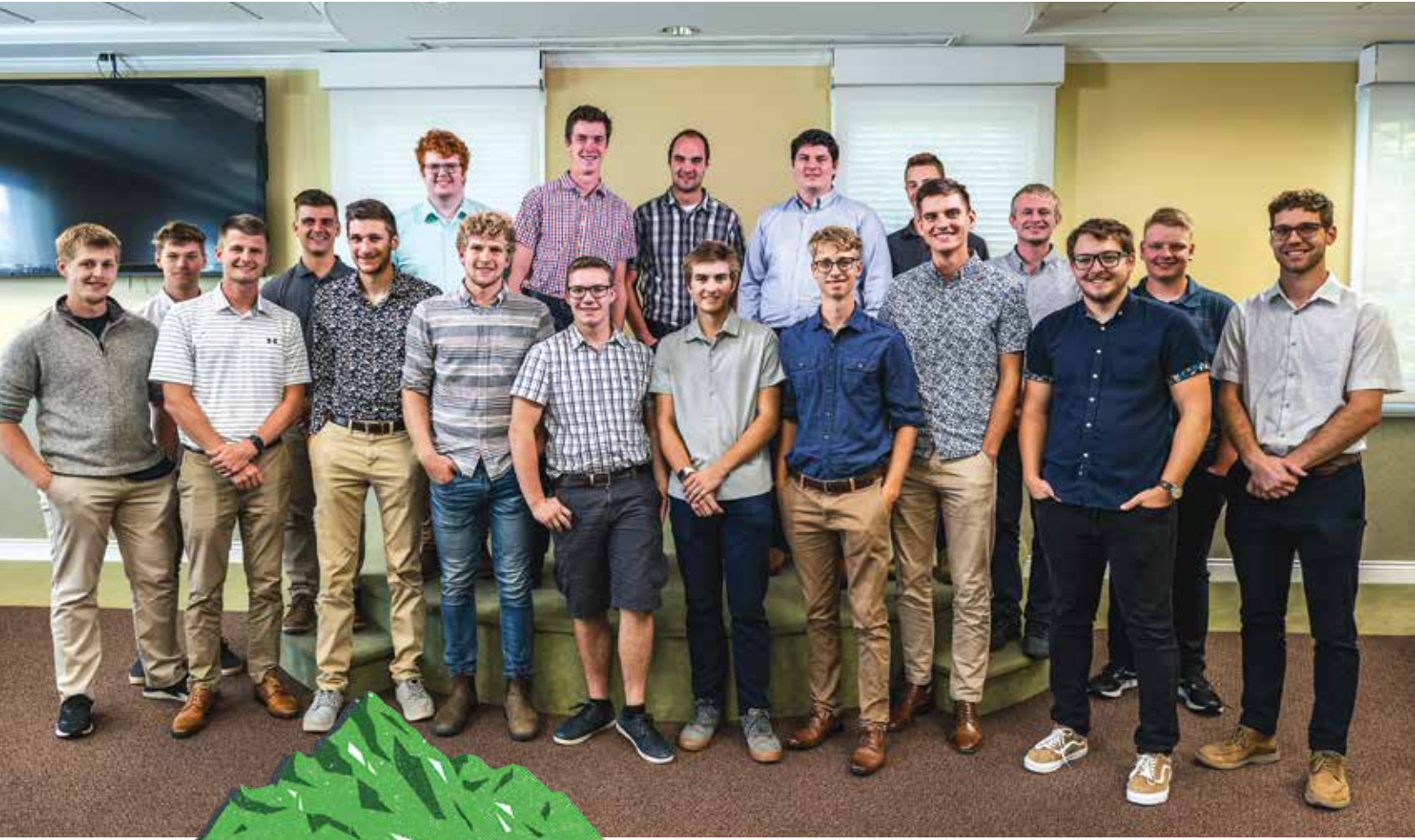
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The FRC Young Men's Summit



The Young Men's Summit

With God's blessing, the inaugural FRC Young Men's Summit took place in Grand Rapids, Michigan on August 22-24, 2023. From across the denomination, twenty young men, aged 16 to 25, flew or drove to the Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, where the event was hosted by the FRC Youth and Education Committee. The vision of the Summit is to strengthen young men who desire to serve the Lord in their relationships, homes, churches, and denomination, while also building camaraderie between each other.

In an increasingly hostile culture, the church has a responsibility to uphold the biblical mandate for men as Christ-like, humble-minded, servant-leaders. The Summit theme, "See your calling, brethren" (1 Cor. 1:26), focused on challenging and equipping young men in various "callings" in their lives.

On Tuesday night, Dr. Kranendonk laid the foundation in the first session, speaking on Christ's call to "Follow Me" (Mark

8:34). Being a follower of Christ is essential for heeding all His other calls. After breakfast on Wednesday morning, Rev. Morderyk spoke on "Called to Integrity" by addressing four biblical examples and Psalm 25:21. After that, Dr. Bilkes addressed the topic "Called to an Office," and provided an alphabet of practical points to begin preparing for an office in the church if called in the future. In the afternoon, Dr. Barrett led a workshop on "Called to Daily Bible Reading," while elder Mr. Henk Kleyn led a workshop on "Called to a Focused Prayer Life." On Thursday morning, elder Mr. Henry Vanderveen spoke from 1 Timothy 4:7-8 about disciplining and exercising ourselves towards godliness under the theme "Called to Godly Character." The final session provided an opportunity to ask questions of Mr. Vanderveen, Mr. Kleyn, and a surprise guest, Dr. Ian Hamilton from the United Kingdom.

The young men were encouraged, convicted, and grateful for the speeches. There was time for questions after each speech, allowing for more intimacy and discussion. Following the Summit, a survey was taken with one of the questions being, "What is one area you would like to change in your spiritual life when returning home?" Here are a few responses: increase and im-



prove Bible reading; more consistent prayer life (x6); live with integrity in the church of Christ; reach out to more people in my church and encourage others; more serious pursuit of godliness; waste less time; decrease social media; and live in the light of eternity.

The men also had the opportunity to play icebreaker games, go out for burgers, tour the seminary, visit downtown Holland, play volleyball, jump in Lake Michigan, sing hymns at sunset, and get to know each other in our generous hosts' homes. They prayed for each other, challenged each other, and sang together. Half of the young men were able to stay and attend the PRTS Conference the following three days.

We pray the Summit impacted the hearts of these young men by God's grace. The intention is to make this event a regular occurrence in the future. We are thankful to PRTS Seminary for the venue, for all the host families from the Grand Rapids churches, and all the volunteers who helped with food and logistics. A special thank you to Corbin Prince for organising many of the details. Ultimately, we praise God from whom all blessings flow. May He continue to build His Church and receive the worship He deserves for purchasing His bride. ①

Scott Dekorte is a member of the Youth & Education Committee, serves at Word & Deed Ministries, and attends Zion Free Reformed Church in Fenwick, Ontario.

The Young Men's Summit recordings are now available on Youtube.

Please visit the Plants & Pillars Youtube channel or scan the QR code below.

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(Psalm 84: 11, 12)

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