

THE MESSENGER

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE FREE REFORMED CHURCHES OF NORTH AMERICA



Study
TO SHEW THYSELF APPROVED
unto God,
A WORKMAN THAT NEEDETH
not be ashamed,
RIGHTLY DIVIDING THE
word of truth.

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THE FEAR OF THE LORD

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction.” Proverbs 1:7

As the summer fades and the school year begins, families everywhere experience a familiar rhythm: backpacks are filled, pencils are sharpened, and children return to classrooms, whether in a school building or at home. This season is more than a logistical transition — it is a spiritual one, especially for Christian families. The return to school is an annual reminder of our calling to pursue knowledge, not merely for career advancement or personal gain, but as a central part of our walk with the Lord.

The Foundation of Knowledge: The Fear of the Lord

At the heart of Christian education lies a profound truth from Proverbs 1:7: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction.” This “fear” is not terror, but reverence — a deep, joyful awe of God that places Him at the center of all learning. For children returning to school, this means that every subject, every lesson, and every discovery should be understood in the light of God’s presence and purpose.

When we say the fear of the Lord is the “beginning” of knowledge, we mean it is the foundation, the integrating principle that gives meaning to all facts and disciplines. Without God, education becomes a collection of disconnected facts, devoid of ultimate meaning. But when God is acknowledged, all learning comes together in a coherent whole. As children, parents, and teachers approach a new academic year, this principle must guide their studies and aspirations.

Learning as a Lifelong Christian Calling

Education is not simply preparation for a job or a means to material success. It is a lifelong journey of learning to think well, to discern truth, and to grow in wisdom. The book of Proverbs repeatedly exhorts the young to listen, to pay attention, and to seek understanding. This is not just for children; adults, too, are called to continue learning, especially in the knowledge of God and His Word.

For Christian parents, this calling is underscored by the promises made at their children’s baptism: to instruct them in the truths of Scripture to the best of their ability. This responsibility is not fulfilled by sending children to school and hoping for the best. It is an active, intentional process that begins in the home and extends to every area of a child’s life.

The Necessity of True Knowledge

The second half of Proverbs 1:7 warns, “Fools despise wisdom and instruction.” In our culture, there is a tendency to devalue serious

learning, to settle for mediocrity, and to prioritize entertainment over intellectual growth. This attitude can easily seep into Christian homes and churches, leading to a generation that is mentally lazy and spiritually shallow.

True Christian education is not about doing the minimum to get by. It is about cultivating a love for learning, a desire to seek wisdom as one would search for hidden treasure. Proverbs 2:1-5 urges us to receive God’s words, to treasure His commandments, and to seek understanding with all our hearts. This is a discipline that must be taught and modeled, especially as children return to school.

Christ as the incarnation of true wisdom

The book of Proverbs is intended to point to the Lord Jesus Christ, who is wisdom personified. The wisdom described in Proverbs is not just good advice but is ultimately revealed and fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ, who is the living, breathing embodiment of God’s wisdom.

In 1 Corinthians 1:24, the apostle Paul refers to Christ as “the wisdom of God.” This means that Christ embodies the divine wisdom that God has for salvation and life. Paul contrasts this wisdom with human wisdom, explaining that the message of the cross may seem foolish to the world, but to those whom God calls, Jesus is the true power and wisdom of God.

Therefore, true Reformed Christian Education should lead the student to the Lord Jesus Christ in whom is all our wisdom.

Practical Applications for the New School Year

How can families put these truths into practice as their children go back to school?

1. Teach Children the Fear of the Lord from Their Earliest Days

The most important gift parents can give their children is not material wealth or worldly success, but an upbringing in the fear of God. This training begins even before a child can speak. To raise children as if this life is all there is, or as if material success is the highest goal, is to deny them the foundation of true knowledge. Parents are called to care for their children’s spiritual welfare, teaching them that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of all wisdom and leading them to Christ.

2. Provide a Christian Education

Because all knowledge finds its meaning in relationship to God, Christian education —whether at home or in a Christian school — is not optional but essential. This means that parents must be intentional about ensuring that their children’s education is shaped by a biblical worldview. Every subject — history, science, mathematics, literature — should be taught with Christ at the center, which can only be achieved through Christian education.

This is a communal responsibility. Older members of the church can support younger families financially or with their time. Congregations can establish funds to assist those who need help providing Christian education. Everyone has a role to play in ensuring that the next generation is taught to see the world through the lens of God’s truth.

3. Cultivate a Love for Learning

Since only fools despise wisdom and instruction, Christians must foster a love for learning in themselves and their children. This means going beyond the minimum requirements, reading and studying not just for grades or advancement, but for the joy of discovery and the desire to know God more deeply.

Parents should model this by continuing their own education — reading good books, attending Bible studies, and seeking out opportunities to grow intellectually and spiritually. By their example and encouragement, they can inspire their children to delight in learning and to pursue wisdom with passion.

Attention and Discipline in Learning

One of the challenges of modern education is the decline in attention span. Proverbs repeatedly exhorts children to “listen,” “pay attention,” and “incline your ear.” Attention is not merely a natural

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“For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.” 1 Corinthians 2:2

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trait; it is a discipline that must be developed. Parents should train their children to be attentive learners, to listen carefully, and to engage deeply with what they are taught.

The Dangers of Neglecting True Knowledge

When education is severed from its roots in the fear of the Lord, it becomes aimless and even dangerous. Knowledge is then used not for God’s glory, but for selfish or even sinful purposes. The pursuit of knowledge apart from God leads to pride, confusion, and ultimately, folly.

The book of Proverbs is clear: to despise wisdom and instruction is to be a fool. Ignorance is not a virtue, and laziness in learning is a spiritual danger. The church and the family must resist the cultural trend toward anti-intellectualism and instead uphold the value of diligent study and the pursuit of truth.

Encouragement for the New School Year

As children return to school, parents and teachers have a renewed opportunity to shape not only minds but hearts. The goal is not just academic achievement, but the formation of wise, discerning, and godly young people who will stand out in a world that often values pleasure over wisdom.

Children and young people are encouraged to go beyond the bare minimum in their studies, to pursue knowledge for its own sake, and to delight in the process of learning. Adults, too, should continue to grow, reading books that challenge and instruct, studying the Bible, and seeking out opportunities for growth.

The Role of the Church

Education is not just a family matter; it is a covenantal responsibility of the whole church. Congregations should support families in their efforts to provide a Christian education, whether through financial assistance, tutoring, or encouragement. Older members can have a lasting impact by investing in the education of the next generation.

Conclusion: The Eternal Value of Knowledge

The pursuit of knowledge, grounded in the fear of the Lord, brings eternal rewards. Unlike the fleeting pleasures of this world, the knowledge of God leads to lasting joy, deeper love, and a greater desire to serve Him. As we apply ourselves to learning and to the pursuit of wisdom, we grow in our understanding of God’s grace, preparing ourselves for a lifetime —and an eternity — of worship.

As the new school year begins, let us remember that every lesson, every subject, and every moment of study is an opportunity to learn to know Christ and know Him better and serve Him more faithfully. May children, parents, and the whole church embrace this calling with joy, diligence, and reverence, trusting that in the fear of the Lord, we find the true beginning of all knowledge. ①

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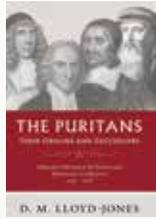
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By Hugh Binning

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John Blanchard (1932-2021) was an internationally known Christian preacher, teacher, apologist, and author. He was the author of thirty books, including two of the most widely used evangelistic presentations. Throughout his more than sixty years of ministry, John Blanchard, author of Ultimate Questions and Does God Believe in Atheists? learned from hundreds of Christian men and women. The Complete Gathered Gold collects more than fifteen thousand of his favorite quotations on over six hundred subjects. Christians can find nuggets of wisdom on every topic, from "adoption" to "zeal." The Complete Gathered Gold is sure to be a treasure trove for preachers, teachers, and everyday believers whenever they want to read a gem of truth. Hardcover, 756 pages, Reformation Heritage Books **RBS Price \$50.00**



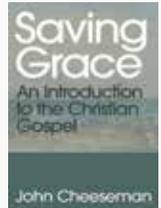
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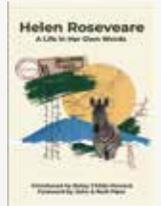
Helen Roseveare: A Life in Her Own Words

By Helen Roseveare

All three volumes of Helen Roseveare's autobiography are combined for the first time, with a foreword by John & Noël Piper and an introduction and afterword by Betsy Childs Howard. Throughout her eight years in training for the mission field and her first twelve years in the Congo, Helen Roseveare had prayed that God would give her a mountain-top experience of His glory and power. God's answers formed the basis of her best-selling autobiography, Give Me This Mountain. However, after enduring civil war, brutal mistreatment, and having to rebuild work from scratch, and later while caring for her elderly mother, she realized that God's work is also done in the valleys. The third of her autobiographies, written after her mother passed away, emphasizes her faithful, daily obedience, digging ditches as God led and trusting Him to fill them with life-giving water in His time. These three books are combined in one volume for the first time, giving an overarching view of the amazing ways God used Helen's life. The book includes the books Give Me This Mountain, He Gave Us a Valley, and Digging Ditches. Helen Roseveare (1925-2016) went to the Congo as a missionary between 1953 and 1973. A pioneer of vital medical work in the rainforests of this region, she had a major impact long after she left. Through many trials, she lived out her life striving to serve her Lord every day and encouraging those around her to do the same.

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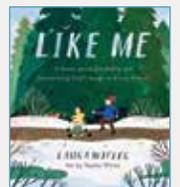
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By Laura Wifler

This children's picture book follows a sibling of a child with a disability as they go through their day. A simple story with an important message, Like Me helps kids recognize the many similarities they share with disabled kids and model a loving and understanding approach to the differences. "God made you, God loves you, God is kind to you." It can be hard for children to take those three life-changing truths into their hearts and treat others with love and understanding, especially when they encounter those whose needs differ drastically from theirs. Through a sibling's eyes, young readers will tag along on the day of a child with a disability. As the two siblings play with friends, go to therapy, and spend time with family, relatable comparisons will help children understand a different type of family life, building empathy for children with disabilities along the way. Like Me opens the door to meaningful talks with your child about empathy, compassion, diversity, and God's love for them and others.

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HOLY BAPTISM: THRILL OR CHILL?

One of the most deeply significant yet often underappreciated moments in the life of the church is the administration of the sacrament of baptism. As with house visitation, which we considered last time, an occurrence of baptism should be a spiritual thrill; however, it seems for many, sadly, to be more of a perfunctory chill. Yet in both Scripture and the confessions, baptism is no light matter. According to the Form for the Administration of Baptism, it is a holy ordinance instituted by God as “a seal and undoubted testimony that we have an eternal covenant of grace with God.” When we think about this reality, isn’t this truly thrilling?

Too often, however, baptism is treated as a mere ceremony for the benefit of the family, a sentimental event involving a cute baby, or even simply a tradition handed down from our forebears. Those who witness it may be distracted or forget what a weighty thing it is to have the name of the Triune God placed upon someone. Yet, Scripture and the confessions call us to see baptism not as ordinary, but as an extraordinary moment when God signifies and seals His promises, whether to children or adults who are being baptized.

A careful review of Scripture, as well as our Three Forms of Unity and the Form for the Administration of Baptism (which Dr. C. Pronk has been explaining in recent issues of *The Messenger*) should prod us, if we have neglected its importance, to stand in awe and be deeply grateful for the sacrament of baptism.

The God of the Covenant

One of the most wonderfully thrilling aspects of the sacrament of baptism is that it signifies and seals the covenant of grace. The Belgic Confession (Article 34) rightly calls baptism a “sacrament of the covenant.” Contrary to what many think, baptism is not first of all about us. It is about the Lord, who makes His gospel visible.

The Lord has always dealt with His people by way of covenant, from the fall into sin until today. Think of our trembling parents after their Fall (Gen. 3:15), and then Noah (Gen. 9:9), Abraham (Gen. 17:7), and others after him. “The covenant made in days of old, with Abraham He doth uphold” (Psalter 425:5). The Catechism (Q&A 74) reminds us that infants, too, are to be baptized because they, like adults, are included in the covenant of grace. Like circumcision, baptism testifies that God binds Himself to sinners – which is what we all are – by gracious promises, and that upon God’s own initiative.

Blessed be God that the covenant of grace is initiated by God Himself. We neither asked for it nor initiated it from our side. One of the blessings of the baptism of infants is to visibly show that

truth. In adult baptism, a believer may ask what hinders them from being baptized (see Acts 8:36), and that is proper and right. Even then, the Lord is the one who has initiated everything. Yet, when a child is brought to the water of baptism, we see so clearly that the child does not initiate anything. Often the child is not even conscious of what is happening. In both adult and infant baptism, we are confronted by the gracious initiative being from God. His promises are “unto you, and to your children” (Acts 2:39). To treat this moment lightly is to mock God’s initiative. Baptism is the Lord reaching from heaven and laying His hand and name upon us. Is that not thrilling?

The Christ of the Covenant

Baptism is appointed as a sign and seal of union with Christ. Scripture makes clear that baptism magnifies Christ’s death and resurrection (Rom. 6:3-4), as well as forgiveness of sins for the sake of Christ (Acts 22:16). In the sacraments, we do not get a better Christ, but “a better hold of Christ than we got in the simple Word” (Robert Bruce). It does not add new promises beyond the Word, but it seals and confirms these promises visibly and sensibly. We may believe that as surely as water washes the body, so surely does Christ cleanse the soul by His blood and Spirit.

In the Word, God speaks; in the sacrament, He swears an oath. He stoops to our weakness by adding visible seals to audible promises (Heb. 6:17–18). Baptism assures us no more than the Word itself, but it assures trembling believers visibly. So low the Lord stoops. So close He is pleased to come. So near He is willing to be, despite all our unbelief and sin. The Heidelberg Catechism says: “I am as certainly washed by His blood and Spirit from all the pollution of my soul, that is, from all my sins, as I am washed externally with water, by which the filthiness of the body is commonly washed away” (Q and A 69). Is there anyone like Christ to thrill our souls? Should not baptism, which speaks of the grace of Christ securing the salvation of countless sinners, thrill our souls?

The Spirit Promised in Baptism

To treat what is holy as if it were common is a profound error. We read how Esau despised his birthright (Gen. 25:34) and Hebrews 12:17 makes clear that Esau “found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears.” Baptism, too, is a birthright of grace – not to be despised or to be lightly esteemed.

Baptism can be lightly esteemed in at least two ways. One way is through presumption, thinking all is well without faith and repentance, to which baptism obliges and calls. This is in essence no different than the indifference in so many in which they don’t care they ever were baptized at all. Then a chill hangs over the whole sacrament of baptism.

How we need the grace of the Holy Spirit, who is no less speaking than the Father and the Son in baptism. As the Form says, the Holy Spirit “assures us, by this holy sacrament, that he will dwell in us, and sanctify us to be members of Christ, applying unto us, that which we have in Christ.” This Spirit “pervades the inmost recesses of the man; He opens the closed, and softens the hardened heart, and circumcises that which was uncircumcised, infuses new qualities into the will, which though heretofore dead, He quickens; from being evil, disobedient and refractory, He renders it good, obedient, and pliable; actuates and strengthens it, that like a good tree, it may bring forth the fruits of good actions” (Canons of Dort, Head III/IV, Art. 11). This grace is what the sacrament speaks of and promises to all those receiving the sign and seal of baptism.

What a thrilling sacrament baptism is! How it obliges to new obedience, to “cleave to this one God ... trust in Him ... love Him with all our hearts, with all our souls, with all our mind, and with all our strength; that we forsake the world, crucify our old nature, and walk in a new and holy life” (Form for the Administration of Baptism).

Recently, I spoke with a man who was baptized as an infant, and yet whose parents did not fulfill their vows properly. They neither brought him regularly under the Word nor taught him “the aforesaid doctrine.” Yet, the Lord in His mercy apprehended him as a young adult by His Word and Spirit. He said to me: “In my baptism, God laid His hand on me, though it took a long time for me to come to realize it and bow under this God. Yet, He was there with His hand when I didn’t ask for Him.” For this man, his baptism was thrilling. And so it should be! ①

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SUBSCRIPTION RATE
Canada & U.S.A. - **\$35.00 ANNUALLY**
Overseas - **\$75.00**
PER SUBSCRIPTION The Messenger is published 11 times per year (July & August issues are combined).

SUBSCRIPTIONS/REMITTANCES
Subscription requests, invoices, and payments should be addressed to:
Janey Slingerland
(Publications Administrator)
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SUBMISSIONS/ANNOUNCEMENTS/NOTICES: All articles, notices for family announcements, obituaries, anniversaries, and non-commercial advertisements for the **OCTOBER 2025** issue should reach the editor no later than **TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 2ND, 2025** and should be sent to:
Mrs. Rhonda Kroesbergen
(Messenger Administrator)
E: messenger@frcna.org

OPEN WINDOWS
This bi-monthly publication for children is under the direction of the Free Reformed Publications Committee:
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THE REFORMED FORM OF BAPTISM

— 7

We now come to what is the most difficult part of our Baptismal Form, namely the Prayer of Thanksgiving. This prayer confesses, “We thank and praise Thee that Thou hast forgiven us and our children all our sins, through the blood of Thy beloved Son Jesus Christ.” Ever since this phrase was included in the Form, people have objected to the strong and positive views expressed here about the children of believers. Is it right to thank the Lord for having forgiven not only believing adults but also their infant children? Furthermore, is it true that both have been received through the Holy Spirit as members of God’s only begotten Son and adopted, sealed, and confirmed to be His children?

Early Questions

When our Baptismal Form first became public, many people were confused by what they read in its Thanksgiving Prayer. So great were their questions about its soundness that they registered their complaints with the ecclesiastical authorities. The result was that Synod commissioned Rev. Casper Vander Heyden (Moderator of the great Dutch Reformed Synods of Emden in 1571 and Dordrecht in 1574) to draw up the following revision of the prayer.

Almighty and merciful God and Father, we thank Thee that Thou hast received us and our children into Thy covenant and that Thou dost seal and confirm this to our bodies with Holy Baptism. We beseech Thee, that Thou wilt wash these children with the blood and Spirit of Christ, that is, for the sake of the shedding of the blood of Jesus Christ, be pleased not to impute their sins unto them and work in them the grace of regeneration and renewal.

This revised version pleased many people because it removed most of their objections to the original form. Yet, as attractive as Vander Heyden’s revision was to his supporters, subsequent synods decided to stay with its original formulation. Why did our forefathers retain the wording of the Thanksgiving Prayer with which so many people disagreed?

To begin with, we must not accuse the original authors of shallow theological thinking. Our Baptismal Form was written by godly men who sought to convey sound biblical doctrines. What they wrote in their Reformed Form of Baptism came from deep convictions regarding the position of covenant children. It is sad but true that many Reformed people no longer understand the sacramental language used in our liturgical forms. They think that when their children are baptized, their sins are actually forgiven. Is this true?

The Promise of Forgiveness

Does the Baptismal Form teach that God declares our baptized children forgiven and regenerated? Admittedly, it does sound like it and many people keep asking questions about their children's spiritual state. But the problem is that we can easily misunderstand what our Reformed fathers actually meant with the forgiveness of sins. They took it in its *objective* rather than a *subjective* sense. Forgiveness for them was a blessing of the covenant of grace, which the Lord promises to us and our children. When in Lord's Day 27 of *The Heidelberg Catechism* the question is asked, "Are infants also to be baptized," the answer is,

Yes, for since they, as well as the adult, are included in the covenant and church of God; and since redemption from sin by the blood of Christ, and the Holy Ghost, the author of faith, is promised to them, no less than to the adult; they must therefore by baptism, as a sign of the covenant, be also admitted into the Christian church, and be distinguished from the children of unbelievers.

What the Catechism stresses here is that through baptism, both parents and their children receive the same *promise* of forgiveness because they are in the same covenant of grace. Just as in the Old Testament, God had entered into covenant with Abraham and his seed, so New Testament believers who, according to Paul possess the same *faith* as Abraham (Gal. 3:7), are promised the same blessings together with their children.

On the Day of Pentecost, the apostle Peter reminds three thousand converts that the promise of forgiveness was given to them and to their children. What was this promise? The forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38-39). What encouragement this was for those sinners who had just been convicted of the worst sin imaginable: the murder of God's Son in the flesh! Peter tells them that this awful sin would be forgiven along with all other sins. So great and so marvelous is God's grace in Jesus Christ!

That grace extended to murderers and their children. These people were very concerned about their children. A few weeks earlier, they had said to Pilate who tried to release Jesus because he found no fault in Him: "Let Him be crucified ..., His blood be on us and on our children" (Matt. 27:23,25). By this they meant, both we and our children will take responsibility for putting Jesus to death.

But Peter assures them that God's pardon covers them *and* their children because "His mercy is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear him, and his righteousness unto children's children" (Ps. 103:17). The authors of the Form of Baptism knew, of course, that babies are too young to believe in God. Therefore, they are blessed with God's *promise* of forgiveness until they understand its meaning and embrace

it in faith by God's grace. The authors of the Form believed in the doctrine of justification by faith and had rejected the Roman Catholic teaching of infused grace whereby God supposedly pours into man forgiveness and other blessings through baptism. Would they now go back to the same error and teach that infants through baptism received the grace of regeneration and its fruits, faith and repentance? Of course not! By forgiveness they meant the granting of the blessing of pardon both to the parents and their children who still had to grow up, understand the gospel of grace, and come to personal faith in Christ.

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God's Covenant of Grace

In 1 John 5:11, the apostle of love writes, "And this is the record, that God hath given unto us eternal life, and that life is in his Son." Eternal life is offered to all sinners but *given* only to those who hear Christ's invitation and accept it in faith. Those who reject it must perish.

What about people who are born and raised in the covenant of grace? Are they automatically saved? No, not automatically. The visible church

is the place where God's Word is taught and the gospel is preached. The Holy Spirit convicts of sin and draws sinners to their Saviour, Jesus Christ. There are many sinners, old and young, whom He loves with a special love, promising both parents and their children a free and full salvation through the forgiveness of all their sins.

The common concerns with the language of our Baptismal Form points to a lack of understanding of the true meaning of the covenant of grace. For the early Reformers, baptism was an ordinance of God whereby He seals to us and our children His promises. In Article 33 of our *Belgic Confession of Faith*, the author, Guido deBres, speaks of the "*pledges* of the good will and grace of God toward us." Who are the "us"? Some say, the elect; those pledges are addressed only to those chosen from eternity. But the early Reformers did not teach this. They believed that in the free offer of the gospel the promises are extended to the entire visible church.

The "us" includes parents and children as members of the same covenant, whether elect or non-elect. The promise of salvation is addressed to all members objectively and outwardly or also by God's grace subjectively and inwardly. Scripture teaches both forms of relationship with Christ in the Parable of the Vine recorded in John 15. In this allegory, some branches in Him are only attached to Him externally, while others are truly or savingly joined to Him. Whether we are inwardly or only outwardly in Christ shows in whether we bring forth saving fruits or not. The question Jesus asks therefore is: Are you a fruit-bearing branch in Me? If not, you will be burned and destroyed. Even if you do bear some fruit, I will use my pruning knife so you may become even more fruitful.



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OUR FORMS

Prayer for the Fulfilment of God's Promises

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We beseech Thee, through the same Son of Thy love, that Thou wilt be pleased always to govern these baptized children by Thy Holy Spirit, that they may be piously and religiously

educated, increase and grow up in the Lord Jesus Christ, that they then may acknowledge Thy fatherly goodness and mercy which Thou hast shown to them and to us and live in all righteousness under our only Teacher, King and High Priest, Jesus Christ; and manfully fight against and overcome sin, the devil and his whole dominion, to the end that they may eternally praise and magnify Thee, and Thy Son Jesus Christ, together with the Holy Ghost, the one only true God. Amen

Our Reformed Form for Baptism is truly a beautiful confessional document which has instructed and comforted many generations of Christians. Let us not dismiss its value because of a few difficult phrases contained in this 17th century explanation of baptism. May we in the 21st century learn from this older Reformation document the true meaning of infant baptism. Matthew Henry remarked, "I look upon infant baptism as the door into the visible church." This is a true statement, but when children born in sin receive eternal life through the miracle of the new birth they share in the grace of the invisible Church and will enjoy the fulfilment of all God's promises.

Dr. C. Pronk is an emeritus Free Reformed pastor residing in Brantford, Ontario.



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CARING FOR AGING PARENTS

Making a Good Return: Biblical Wisdom on Honoring Aging Parents. By Kathleen B. Nielson. P&R Publishing, 2024. Softcover, 144 pages.

The title needs some explanation. It is about caring for aged parents with many practical observations, but it is not simply a “how-to” book. Rather, the author has just finished caring for her ninety-six-year-old mother, and realizes the Bible has much to say about elder care and the process of aging—a process common to all. She has chosen the title, “Making a Good Return” to their parents, from 1 Timothy 5:4. In this chapter, the apostle Paul includes everyone — children, parents, widows, singles, the whole church — in caring for each other. The title implies that “We grown children can ‘make return’ to our aging parents in a way that is pleasing in God’s sight” (p. xi).

She singles out five “big biblical truths” about the process of aging and elder care. These are divided into two parts: the first part presents biblical truth, and the second part sets forth the response to that truth.

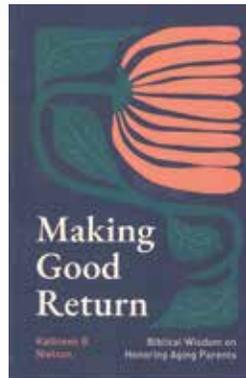
Aging is part of human experience. It is comforting that God’s Word pays a great deal of attention to aging and addresses not just the elderly but *everyone* to prepare for this stage in life. “Aging occurs under God’s sovereign rule” (p. 3). The Lord knows our beginning in the womb to our last breath (Ps. 139:13). He told us how death came into the world and, as early as Genesis 3:15, He made the promise to defeat sin and death.

Aging leads to death and is not good in itself; it is a consequence of sin and the Fall. Therefore, for every human being, aging is the precursor to death. “We age under the sovereign hand of a God who has judged this sinful world with the punishment of death” (p. 7). We must “accept this truth humbly, knowing that we are seeing God’s hand of judgment in a fallen world.... It is by trusting in God’s sovereign redemptive plan, walking humbly to the end” (p. 11) that we will have comfort. The aging process is ordained by God as part of his story of redemption.

Mrs. Nielson points out that the issues of aging draw the focus of our minds to our bodies and their needs, rather than on the great sovereign Creator Redeemer God. This is where caregivers can help the elderly to focus on God’s great salvation which He has in store for those who fear Him. Our presence, comforting care, and attitude can help our loved one to focus and humbly accept what God brings. While doing so, we can learn to do the same for ourselves (p. 26).

A second biblical truth we find throughout Scripture is God’s call to honour our elders. By building families where the elderly are honoured according to God’s Word, giving them respect and love, we honour God, thereby serving to implant a godly personal relationship with the Lord. Honouring the elderly and fearing God go together as taught by the Fifth Commandment (Ex. 20:12; cf. Lev. 19:32; Prov. 23:22; Eph. 6:1-4; Titus 1:2-8). When Jesus saw His mother standing by the cross, he respected and honoured her by commending John, one of Jesus’ disciples, to care for her (John 19:26-27). The care we give to our parents honours God, and the world will take notice.

The third big biblical truth is that God sees the suffering of all, including the elderly, as well as that of the caregivers. Among many practical directives, the author saw that one of the saddest parts of this stage of life in her mother’s family was that family members did not see her more often (p. 59).



Therefore, she urges her friends to “weigh carefully the factor of geographical proximity in their decisions regarding how to guide their parents and how much to insist that they be close to family ... one that must be considered as early on as possible in the aging process: with every passing year, it becomes harder and harder for elderly folks to change place” (p. 60). She follows this up with advice for church members. “For the elderly in the church, especially those without children, proximity to loved ones in the church family is equally important. Aging folks need to be seen in the flesh” (p. 60). Caregivers have a task to pass the biblical truths for elder care from generation to generation.

The Bible teaches the young to think about old age. “Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them” (Eccl. 12:1). The poetical picture that follows of an elderly body breaking down is not pretty (12:2-7). How comforting that Scripture assures us that when Christ returns to earth, the bodies of all believers will be resurrected from the grave as Christ’s body was resurrected (1 Cor. 15:20). Nothing, not even death, can separate us from the love of Christ (Rom. 8:38-39).

The fourth biblical truth is that God’s help is there to the very end (p. 87). “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble” (Ps. 46:1). This is an encouragement for the elderly as well as for the caregivers. Only God can meet our deepest needs and answer the prayer: “Cast me not off in the time of old age; forsake me not when my strength faileth” (Ps. 71:9). As the end draws near, it is good to keep in mind that only God can help in our loved one’s deepest need. Preparing our loved ones for that final meeting is of prime importance (p. 93). Comforting them with words such as Isaiah 46:3-4 and praying Psalm 71 is a powerful way for caregivers to support the dying and help the elderly in the final stages of life.

Referring to Hebrews 4:12, the author reminds us that “we must never underestimate the great extent to which we can help an aging person simply by sharing with them the Word of God — reading it aloud, listening with them to the reading and preaching of the Word, singing it in hymns and songs, referring to it in the course of our conversation and our prayers” (p. 107).

The book is enriched by the author’s own experience in caring for her mother in dying and suggests many practical helps, especially from a spiritual and biblical perspective. She ends the book by urging readers, “Let’s be those who ‘make some return to their parents, for this is pleasing in the sight of God’” (1 Tim. 5:4). “Soon, we caregivers will be the aging, dying ones, if Christ does not return first. Fit us for heaven, Lord. Fit all of us for heaven to live with Thee there” (p. 142).

This book is available from Reformed Book Services (info@reformedbook-services.ca) and may also be purchased at Reformed Book Services in Calgary, Alberta, and Reformation Heritage Books, Grand Rapids, Michigan, U.S.A.

Mrs. Ricky (Frederika) Pronk is a member of Grace Free Reformed Church of Brantford, Ontario.

INTRODUCING THE EMMANUEL FREE REFORMED CHURCH OF ABBOTSFORD

With an aim of growing familiarity across our denomination, we are asking each of our congregations to give an introduction to or brief update about their congregation. We hope to do so alphabetically, and thus begin with Abbotsford.
- The Editors.



Introductions are helpful and sometimes even necessary. If you walk into a room full of people you don't know, it's a great relief to have someone introduce you. If you want to meet an important person but he or she does not know who you are, it is helpful to have someone introduce you.

The same is true for churches. In any denomination (including our own), member congregations are separated from each other by many miles. For example, outside Ontario where most of our churches are located, we have a church in New Jersey, two in Grand Rapids, three in Alberta and three in British Columbia (BC). That's quite a distance! From east to west, our churches span an entire continent. Even churches that are relatively close together don't always know each other very well.

So, when the editor of the Messenger, Dr. G.M. Bilkes, asked me to introduce our congregation to the rest of the federation through The Messenger, I was happy to oblige.

Who and where are we? We are a small congregation of around

100 members situated in the middle of the beautiful Fraser Valley of BC. The Fraser Valley is a wide, open and mostly flat plain that extends roughly from east of Chilliwack to Vancouver. It is named after the "mighty" Fraser River which flows through the valley and empties into the Pacific Ocean which is about an hour away from us. The over three million people living in the valley make up over half of the population of BC.

Abbotsford is a city located about a half hour east of the Greater Vancouver area with a population of just under 170,000 people. It is surrounded on both sides by the Coast Mountain range, which straddles the entire western seaboard of our province. The city is surrounded by many acres of blueberries and raspberries. It is also at the heart of the so-called "Bible belt" of BC, home to many evangelical and Mennonite churches.

There are three Free Reformed churches in the Fraser Valley—one in Abbotsford, one in Langley, and one in Chilliwack. Our church is located exactly halfway between Langley and

Abbotsford, which are both about a half hour away. We are also the oldest of the three churches – having been instituted in June of 1955. That makes us 70 years old – a testimony of the Lord’s faithfulness.

We have a beautiful, modern church building which looks out onto Mt. Lehman Rd, which is now one of the busiest roads in Abbotsford. Because of its prominent location, our church is very easy to find and is something of a landmark given its striking architecture and very tall steeple. We are also one of the few churches in the valley to have a pipe organ!

Over the years our congregation was served by several pastors: Rev. J. Overduin (1960-1966), Rev C. Pronk (1968-1973), Rev. A Stehouwer (1975-1982), Rev. C. Bos (1984-1987), Rev. L.W. Bilkes (1988-2004), and Rev. E. Moerdyk (2007-2011). I was installed here in February of 2015, just over ten years ago.

Like most of the early churches in our federation, our congregation was established by Dutch immigrants who settled here after World War II. It retained its largely Dutch character until well into the 1970s and even 80s. Up until recently there was still a monthly Dutch afternoon attended by senior members of the congregation and neighbouring congregations. We still have a good number of families of Dutch descent. After the Christmas Day service, some still sing *Ere Zij God* (Glory to God) in Dutch. We enjoy eating oliebollen after the New Year’s Day service. But we see ourselves as thoroughly “Canadian.” Very few of our members can still speak Dutch.

One of the most significant developments in our church has been the change in our demographics. Thirty or so years ago, our congregation was much larger and younger. We had a good mix of ages and many children. But when I arrived here just over ten years ago, the congregation was small and aging. We had no children in the nursery, very few in the Sunday School, very few young people, and hardly any young families.

There were several reasons for this. Several of our families became members of the FRC in Chilliwack which started as a daughter church of our congregation about 35 years ago. Also, about 20 years ago, our congregation experienced a period of upheaval, which resulted in many people leaving. Finally, the cost of housing in the Greater Vancouver area has also forced younger families to move further east to Chilliwack or beyond, where house prices are slightly more affordable.

Yet, under the blessing of the Lord, over the past ten years, this

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situation had reversed. We now have a good number of young families with children. Our nursery is full again. We have a small but thriving Sunday School. We even have an active homeschool co-op in our church which, under the blessing of the Lord, we hope may develop one day into a Reformed Christian school.

This has been a great blessing for our congregation. It has given us hope for the future.

In addition to this, we have welcomed into our fellowship new families and individuals from outside traditional Reformed circles. Some came to us from a Christian drug and alcohol rehabilitation centre here in Abbotsford called Joshua House. Most, if not all, were not raised in a Christian home or even had any understanding of Christianity at all, but they came to know the Lord at Joshua House. As they grew in their understanding of the Christian faith, they discovered the Reformed faith by watching men like John MacArthur, RC Sproul, and Paul Washer on You Tube. This eventually brought them to our church. Although some have moved on, while they were with us almost all of them took a one-year course on the Belgic Confession of Faith. A few are taking or have taken our confession of faith class and one has made confession of faith.

Others came to us from a Baptist church in Abbotsford when their own church closed down during Covid. They liked it so much they stayed! Another young man came to us from the interior of BC where there is hardly any sound preaching. He made confession of faith a few years ago and is now an active, contributing member of our congregation.

During the past two years, we have also had several refugee families from Afghanistan worship with us. Most of these came to conversion through the efforts of American missionaries

labouring in Afghanistan before the return of the Taliban. Some of these families came to us because they discovered that we are a Sponsorship Agreement Holder with the federal government with authorization (through City of Refuge) to bring Christian refugees to Canada, and they hoped that we might be able to help them sponsor (Christian) family members who are still in Afghanistan. One of these families is Muslim, but she and her mother regularly attend our services. As a congregation, we have agreed to co-sponsor these families with the understanding that their relatives here in Canada come up with the necessary funds and provide settlement assistance once they arrive. Currently we are co-sponsoring two such families. We are looking forward to their arrival.

As they are still so young in the faith, these families require much instruction and discipleship. This comes with many challenges, but it is wonderful to see how well some of these families are progressing.

We also have several students from India attending our services. For a time, we had a family from Eritrea attending as well. We also allowed an Eritrean church to worship in our building free of charge. For many decades, the Christian church had to send missionaries to far off places

in order to bring the gospel. Now the world is coming to us. How mysterious are the ways of God!

We are not a perfect church. What church is? But after seventy years the candlestick is still burning in our city and for this we may be very thankful. To God be the glory! 🙌

Rev. J. Schoeman serves as pastor of Emmanuel Free Reformed Church in Abbotsford, British Columbia.



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STRESSFUL, NEVER-ENDING, YET WONDERFUL: THE WORK OF A PASTOR



Many people in many different roles are needed for the church to function properly. The church needs elders and deacons, Sunday School teachers, youth leaders, Catechism teachers, organists or pianists, and people with technical abilities to run the sound system and livestream to name only a few.

But of all the roles in the church, the role of the pastor is the most important. That is because it is the pastor's role to equip the members for ministry. In Ephesians 4:11–13, the apostle Paul writes that Christ "gave some, apostles, and some, prophets, and some, evangelists, and some, pastors and teachers." For what purpose? He tells us: "For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ."

Paul clearly teaches that the minister alone is not responsible to do all the work of ministry in the church. All members are to serve. The task of the minister is to equip them for this task. From this, we see how important the task of the minister is. A church without a minister can feel like a car without an engine.

How does a minister equip the members to do the work of ministry? He does that by preaching the Word of God. The pastor has many tasks. He is to teach catechism classes and confession of faith classes. He is to lead the Bible study, chair consistory meetings, visit the sick, provide pastoral counsel, officiate at weddings and funerals, and many other things. But none of these things may take precedence over (much less replace!) his primary task, which is to preach the Word of God. That is because by means of the preaching of the Word sinners are saved and saints are edified and equipped to do the work to which the Lord has called them.

Many years ago, ministers would write after their name the letters V.D.M., which is an abbreviation of the Latin expression *Verbi Dei Minister* (Minister of the Word of God). By means of this expression, they reminded themselves and others that amid their other responsibilities, their primary task was to minister the Word of God.

Needless to say, this is a most glorious work. In Isaiah 52: 7, Isaiah exclaims: "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace, that bringeth good tidings of good, that publisheth salvation, that saith unto Zion, Thy God reigneth!"

Normally, we do not think of feet as being the most beautiful part of the human body. We usually judge beauty by a person's face, not his feet. But Isaiah disagrees. He says the feet of ministers are "beautiful."

Why? Because a minister is a messenger. In ancient times, when a country was at war, people at home would anxiously wait for word from the battlefield. Did they win the battle or lose? Of course, in those days they did not have internet, radio, or cell phones. The only way they could receive news was by a messenger. How relieved the people back home were, therefore, to see a messenger coming from the battlefield. In fact, usually, the watchmen on the walls of a city could tell by how a messenger was running what kind of news he was bringing — even while he was still a great way off. If he ran fast, the news was usually good. If he ran slowly, the message was usually bad.

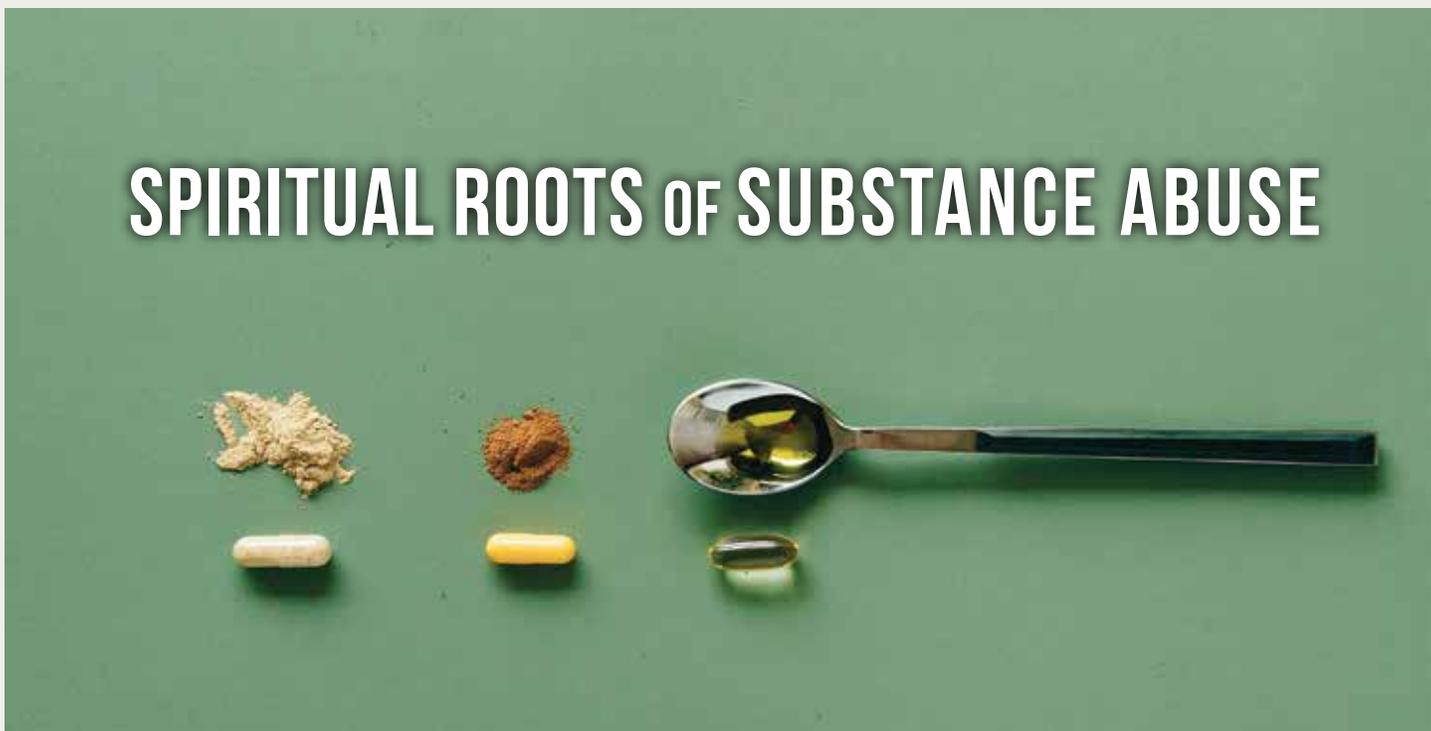
The same is true for ministers of the Word. As messengers, they bring "good news." To be sure, a minister (if he is a true minister) also brings bad news. He must tell the wicked and unbelieving that if they do not repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ they will surely perish in their sins. But his main message is good news. He proclaims on behalf of his Sender that sinners can be reconciled to God. They can have the forgiveness of sins and everlasting life through faith in Jesus Christ. Isaiah understood this. That is why he says that the feet of ministers are "beautiful."

Since that is so, how we need to pray fervently that the Lord would send us more ministers. We currently have a great shortage of ministers in our denomination. What is more, most of the ministers who are serving our churches were not born and raised in our churches. That doesn't matter so long as they preach the truth — which, thankfully, they do. But it begs the question: why are do so few of our own young men apply for the ministry? Young men, are you even considering this? If the Lord has saved you and blessed you with the ability to study, think, read, write, and speak, and if He has placed on your heart a burden for souls, you not only may, but you must at least ask the Lord if He is not calling you into the ministry of the Word.

The work of the minister is not easy. It can be stressful and exhausting. And it never ends. But it is wonderful work. Is the Lord calling you to this work? 

This article is a condensed version of an article available on www.plantsandpillars.net.

SPIRITUAL ROOTS OF SUBSTANCE ABUSE



Our society has a growing problem with substance abuse. In many provinces and states, drugs have been legalized or decriminalized. It has become common to smell or see the effects of drugs in public places. We see sad scenes on city streets, where some are dazed, unpredictable, or lie motionless. Statistics tell us that overdose deaths in the United States have more than doubled in the last 10 years, and that this problem is even worse in Canada. Attempts to address the issue through education, lenient courts, or “harm reduction” seem to only increase the problem. But do we remember that the church of Christ has been given the keys to freedom from these sins? Are we willing to speak about the spiritual roots of this issue?

Understanding why many people abuse substances is one key to the solution. When people abuse substances, they are often seeking an experience, trying to fix their feelings, or escape suffering. Some may begin using drugs out of curiosity or due to peer-pressure. But in many cases, substance abusers are anxious people who are trying to relax. They may use marijuana, alcohol, painkillers, or narcotics to escape from their problems. Many have experienced abuse or tragedy and are using substances to try to mask the memories. Tired and depressed people seek energy or joy and may use stimulants like amphetamines, cocaine, or even a combination of caffeine and alcohol to feel alive. In addition, there has been a trend of experimentation with psychedelics derived from mushrooms, fungi, and even venom. Witch doctors and shamans are being consulted. Recent studies have shown that frequent users of social media are far more likely to experiment. Even within many churches, this problem seems to be growing. Many of us have friends or family members who have been affected.

Some of our young people speak of being tempted to try these substances.

When we think about these reasons for these practices, we can see that there are spiritual issues beneath the surface. People are discontent with the life God has given them and are seeking a new experience or knowledge (Gen. 3:5). Others are seeking, and finding, experiences that falsely mimic joy, peace, patience, or self-control (Gal. 5:22). They briefly escape pain, guilt, fear, boredom, or despair. Some, especially those using psychedelics, even recount apparent meetings with beautiful spiritual beings. They speak of strange hallucinations and changes in their mental condition which may last for months or years. Some online influencers have gathered many followers by recounting their “profound” spiritual experiences with these substances.

We should not be surprised at these experiences, “Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light.” (2 Cor. 11:14). Substance abusers are opening themselves up to satanic or demonic influences; their words, lifestyles, and actions betray this. We should expect that users may at first have beautiful, relaxing, or exciting experiences. This is what takes them back again and again, until they find that they cannot find “joy” or “peace” without the substance. The guilt, and even the physiological effects, of coming off of the substance only lead them to want more. Satan’s grip on them tightens, and they become willing to sacrifice family, home, and morality. Eventually, even the substance no longer has the desired effect, and suicide often follows. “There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death” (Prov. 14:12).

God's Word warns repeatedly against reaching out to substances as a means to new experiences. The language of Satan's temptation and Eve's desire are applicable (Gen. 3:1-5). Both Noah and Lot's examples show how substance abuse can corrupt families. Proverbs (23:30-35) and the prophets (Isa. 5:22, 28:7-8) warn about alcohol abuse. These passages warn about a "mixed wine," which was prepared for maximum effect and at times included ancient versions of drugs, leading to woe. Even though it "bites like a serpent," Proverbs warns the abuser that they will "...seek it yet again" (23:35). When there is temptation to partake in or misuse mind-altering substances, these truths need to be reaffirmed. The darkness of our culture, and the sorrows on our streets, can help illustrate this. Parents need to have conversations about why people are tempted, and how Satan uses substances to enslave.

We need to adjust to this new reality. A culture which recently called for prohibition has been replaced with one which now calls for experimentation. Most substances are now readily

available, even in small towns. Parents need to realize that our youth now wrestle in a new arena. How do we work through this? On the one hand, a wise individual or family may look at their situation and decide to make a personal decision to not use alcohol at all (Jer. 35:1-11). On the other hand, we need to recognize that the Bible does not call for an absolute ban on wine or certain foods (Col. 2:20-23). When used moderately, wine may legitimately make glad the heart of man (Ps. 104:15). During recovery from an injury or surgery, properly regulated substances may have a legitimate place. The problem with seeing all substances as inherently evil is that it is an ascetic rather than a Biblical solution. The "ascetic" religion claimed that self-denial in itself saves from sin. We do well to reflect on the reality that some of the most prohibitionist and fundamentalist regions, even former Bible belts, are now struggling with some of the highest rates of substance abuse. Complete abstinence may be part of the solution for some, but it cannot be applied to all. It does not address the root of the problem.

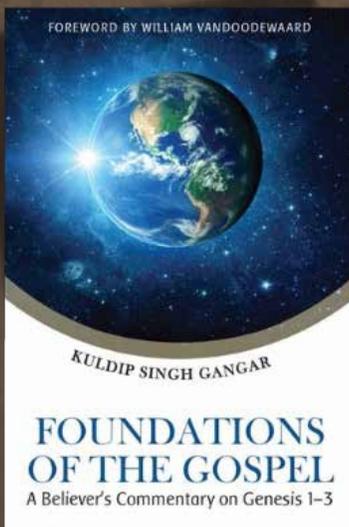
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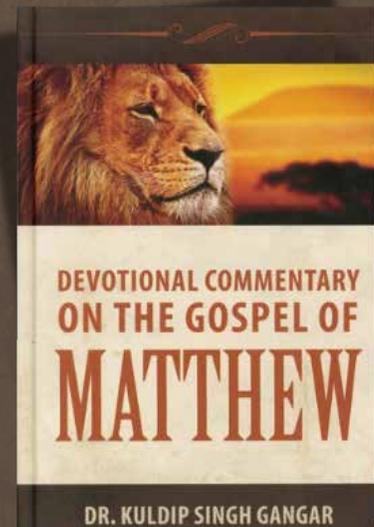
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Ps 78: 4, 7

What can be done to address this? A helpful command is found in Ephesians 5:18: "be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit." Substance abuse seeks intoxication. The mind is altered. Many drugs, even in the smallest quantities, lead to sudden "drunkenness." People become forgetful, they become overly relaxed, they begin to say things they ordinarily would not. Or they become hyper-active and impulsive. Their ordinary senses and restraints are dulled. Recreational marijuana use is in this category. Seeking these effects is the whole reason for use. Even for those that use prescription drugs, the question should be asked, is this causing you to escape God's reality? Is it a restorative help that you are legitimately seeking healing through, or is it escapism? Do you find yourself more sanctified while using your prescription, or less sanctified? Can it be used at a level that aids you in thinking clearly and making good decisions?

When a substance clouds the mind or causes intoxication, it will open the door to evil. Those that have been around alcohol or drug abusers will know that speech patterns change. As time passes, sins like foolishness, laziness, perversion, or anger are multiplied. Beneath this is a spiritual reality. Intoxication means that the restraint of the Holy Spirit is being cast off. There is a sense in which the Holy Spirit interacts with and ordinarily restrains all of mankind, even the unconverted (Gen. 6:3). They may not realize this, but people get intoxicated by alcohol or drugs to escape from God, from His judgements, from conscience, or from His difficult providences. They do not like to retain God in their knowledge, and so God gives them over to a reprobate mind (Rom. 1:28). The substance abuse epidemic should be seen, on one level, as a judgement of God on our civilization.

Notice the contrast of Ephesians 5:18-19 which believers are called to, "be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit; Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs...." To be filled with the Spirit is indeed comforting but also leads to conviction of sin and a battle with the flesh (John 16:8, Acts 2:37, Gal. 5:17). It is to know the reality of our condition, to admit we are guilty of sin, and to grow in hatred of sin and addiction. It is to turn to the Word of the Lord. It means to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the one who resisted all temptations, and who submitted Himself to the bitter reality of the cross, taking the place of sinners there. Trust in Him leads to thankful hearts and minds filled with worship and delight in singing the Word of God.

It is no coincidence that a generation which has walked away from God and the church has filled their lives with substances. Sadly, those who have been in the church but then struggle with substances often find excuses not to listen, not to worship, and not to sing. They bitterly attack the very gospel that they need. They become impatient with flawed believers or struggling churches. They no longer have patience or love



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Colossians 3:17

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for their former covenant community. They are filled with substances, rather than the Spirit. They seek their own will rather than the worship of God.

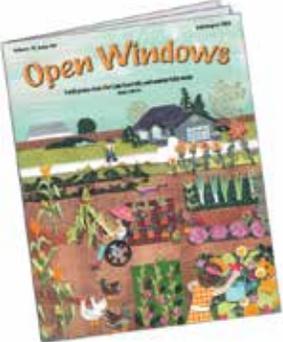
If you struggle with addiction to substances, or any besetting sin, what you need is the Word and Spirit. The guilt cycles of abuse must be replaced with a clear conscience in Christ. If you have endured abuse, trauma, or trials, consider that He endured the same, and more. Learn to hope in His promises that He will redeem from all evil (Rom. 8:26-28, 37-39, Rev. 21:4). Pray for the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will give to those who ask (Luke 11:13). The accountability of counsellors, friends, programs, or pastors must be embraced. Minds and lives must be filled with the use of the means of grace, which are praying, Bible reading, singing, and especially corporate worship.

When you know that your Redeemer lives, then thankful worship becomes your reason for living. When it is your joy to seek the Lord's face, you will find experiences far better, and more satisfying, than any substance can offer. "Be filled with the Spirit" - Ephesians 5:18. ¹¹

Rev. R. VanDoodewaard serves as pastor of the Free Reformed Church in Powassan, Ontario.

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RESPONDING TO ABUSE (3)

PRACTICAL COUNSEL TO HELP THE PERPETRATOR



This is the third article in a series in which we explore how the church should be *Responding to Abuse*. These articles are not exhaustive but are intended to give some practical guidance for addressing abuse biblically and practically. Previously, Dr. G.M. Bilkes wrote three valuable articles on the sin of abuse in which he highlighted several biblical principles.¹ Our focus in this latest series of articles has been on providing practical counsel to help us respond properly.

In the first article, we considered the role of Matthew 18:15-17 when becoming aware of cases of abuse. In that article, we learned that the goal of Matthew 18 was both the protection and care of the 'little ones,' and the sincere repentance of the offender. In our last article, we considered how we can practically help the victim, highlighting the need to carefully support and protect the victim. In this article, we will consider how we can practically help the perpetrator of abuse. We must recognize that the abuser also has an eternal soul and needs spiritual care. If an abuser remains unrepentant, they stand under God's judgement. Our goal in dealing with the abuser is to bring him to true repentance over his sin, seeking forgiveness in Jesus Christ.

Abuse is a serious sin against the 6th (and often the 7th) commandment. Ignoring or minimizing is never an option. Love for both the victim and perpetrator requires us to confront these serious sins in the church. Failure to do so means we are being unfaithful to the very nature of the church (Belgic Confession #29). The church is called to speak the truth in love, to expose sin rather than conceal it, and to hold the perpetrator accountable (Ephesians 5:11-13; Galatians 6:1-2; Matthew 18:1-17). This may include church discipline, public censure if necessary, and establishing proper boundaries. Historically, churches sometimes protected abusers to preserve reputations, causing further harm to victims and failing the perpetrator by enabling ongoing sin. Silence or concealment is not God's way; bringing sin into the light is necessary for both truth and justice.

Practical counsel when approaching the abuser

Before approaching the abuser, prepare yourself prayerfully. Ask God for wisdom, humility, and the ability to be firm yet gentle (Galatians 6:1). Pray that your words may lead to genuine repentance.

Timing

Do not rush to confront the abuser immediately upon hearing allegations. Premature contact may increase danger to the victim, especially in ongoing domestic violence cases. Often the victim needs months of counselling before feeling safe for such confrontation. Always ensure the victim has a safe place and proper support before addressing the abuser. Generally, any contact with the abuser can be delayed until such a time the victim is comfortable for that to take place. That can often take months of counselling before a victim is comfortable having someone address her abuser.

It is also important that the facts are well established before meeting with the perpetrator. If a crime has been committed, and many kinds of abuse are criminal offenses, unwise contact with the perpetrator might also undermine the legal case. Each situation is different; yet because of our love and concern for both the victim and perpetrator, we must address such a heinous sin of abuse in a wise and orderly manner with the goal of sincere repentance.

Involvement of others

In our first article, we learned that because of the seriousness and nature of the sin, it cannot be expected that the victim addresses her perpetrator directly before involving others. He should be confronted by a 'helper' such as a pastor, elder or counsellor. In fact, there is wisdom in involving officebearers of the church to assist, because abuse is a gross and serious sin. However, this does not mean the entire consistory needs to be aware of the details of the abuse,

since that is usually unnecessary and unhelpful. Even in cases of discipline, consistories are wise to entrust this to the pastor and an elder who can report in general to the consistory. A consistory may have to administer silent censure² rather quickly during the time of consideration of the allegations. One of the uses of silent censure is for a period of investigation when a serious allegation has been made against someone.

Confrontation meeting

When meeting with an abuser, inform them of the alleged abuse against them without giving many details. How he responds will already give you hints of his spiritual condition. If he is defensive and argumentative, you know that he is quite hardened in his sin. Sometimes, when informing him that physical or sexual abuse is a criminal offense, he might be encouraged to be honest. Allow the abuser to describe their own actions rather than giving details of the allegations. This allows you to compare these details with the victim's statements to validate the accusations.

Ask calmly and persistently if there are others they have abused, as abuse often involves multiple victims. This is particularly true in cases of sexual abuse. Encourage transparency as part of genuine repentance. When you conclude this session with him, ask him to go home and write out all the occasions and individuals he has abused. Tell him to be specific and to give it to you to review at their next session. Be careful about hastily accepting his confession, for he may shed many tears because of the consequences of his sin, but we want a sincere confession that leads to true repentance, not merely a worldly sorrow. The Bible does teach that we can distinguish between sincere and false repentance. Paul speaks about godly sorrow and worldly sorrow in **2 Corinthians 7:10**.

For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation, not to be repented of; but the sorrow of the world worketh death.

Therefore, there is a sorrow which is of the world and does not lead to life but to death! This shows the importance of discerning godly repentance.

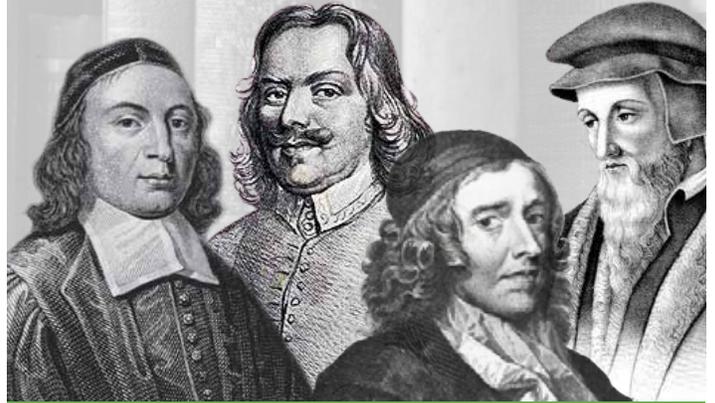
Practical counsel in evaluating sorrow and confession³

Like every age, the heart of man is deceitful and desperately wicked. This means that we often have difficulty discerning whether our own repentance is sincere, let alone the repentance of others! It is possible that externally a person is saying the right things; doing the right things; and even thinking they are truly repentant, but in reality, they are yet hardened in their sin. This makes the task of discerning biblical repentance more difficult. However, we must challenge them on the sincerity of their repentance so that in the end they will not be eternally lost!

However, there are a number of clear signs of true repentance before God and man. Let's consider a few of the fruits.

First, there must be hatred over the sin, which will show itself in various ways. A repentant person is appalled by sin. Horrified by what they've done, they'll humble themselves, grieve the pain they've caused, and are cut to the heart in their conviction. As the prophet mourned in Isaiah 6:5 - *"Woe is me, for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips."* A repentant person will not try to minimize, downplay,

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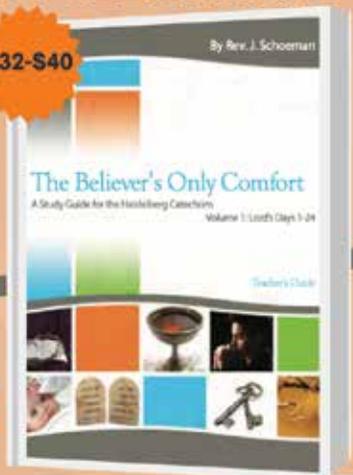
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or excuse what they've done. They will not point to all their good works as if those actions somehow outweigh or cancel out the bad. They'll view even their "righteous acts" as "filthy rags" (Isa. 64:6). They won't shame the offended party for being hurt or angry. They won't blame their victims or other people for making them sin. Rather, they'll take responsibility, acknowledge the damage they've done, and express remorse.

Second, true repentance results in **humility before God & man!**

There is a certain fear of God – a godly fear – where there is an acknowledgement of the majesty and glory of God. Think of how David addresses the LORD in 2 Samuel 7:18-29 with humility and reverence. Godly sorrow is a form of holy reverence only found in those who fear the Lord. If a person only fears man, they may grieve over how their sin has affected others but fail to view their sin as an offense against God. But if a person fears God, then they grieve over their sin because they recognize that it was against a holy God. When David was confronted by Nathan, his response was "I have sinned against the LORD." He understood that sin is primarily against God. There is a humility before the Lord!

If you are trying to discern between true and false repentance, this is a good question to ask: "Is the person sorry they sinned against God, or sorry that their sin has been exposed?" In response to their sin being exposed, are they repenting like they fear God, or are they in damage control because they fear the world? True repentance will result in humility.

But it will not only result in humility before God but also in humility before man. They humbly acknowledge the fact that they are sinners and have caused grief and troubles for others as well. There will be a humble acknowledgement of this reality! If someone is defensive about their sin – blaming their circumstances or others – you may be sure this isn't true repentance. If you receive a violent backlash from someone because you question their repentance, this is already a sign of their insincerity. When there is humility before man, there will also be a humble acceptance of the consequences of their sin in their relationships with others.

Thirdly, where true repentance is present there will be a Christ-centredness in their confession as well as their attitude! This is because the repentant sinner realizes that his only hope is in Christ! He sees the Lord Jesus as the one who perfectly pays for his transgressions and therefore Christ becomes overwhelmingly sweet to him. It's interesting that this is not often considered in evaluating true repentance – but it is an essential part of it, isn't it? Some might see this as the other side of the coin – repentance on the one side and faith on the other side. However, true repentance always includes an expression of faith – and also a Christ-centredness to their repentance, realizing that it was their sin which contributed to the death of Christ on the cross.

For further in-depth study, see Thomas Watson's book titled: *The Doctrine of Repentance* or John Colquhoun's book simply titled: *Repentance*.

Practical counsel on consequences, forgiveness and reconciliation

Our goals are forgiveness and reconciliation with God for both the victim and the abuser grounded in the finished work of Christ. This

means we are not satisfied when justice has been simply administered. Our aim is that both the victim and abuser would be fully resting in the finished work of Jesus Christ. This is the reason why we carefully evaluate the sincerity of the abuser's confession of their sin and whether it is an expression of true repentance.

Consequences

However, a truly repentant person understands that there will be consequences to their actions. They will accept the loss of trust, the need for accountability, and even legal or church discipline as just and necessary. These may include losing the trust of others, relinquishing a position of authority, and having a quiet disposition before others. Perpetrators must be held accountable both within the church and, where appropriate, by civil authorities. There should be no effort to shield them from the legal consequences of their actions. The church must not seek lighter sentences or advocate for leniency simply because the perpetrator expresses remorse. Justice requires that the wrongdoer faces the full weight of their actions. When the thief on the cross repented, he said to his companion, "Do you not fear God? We are punished

justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve" (Luke 23:40–41). And Jesus commended his repentance by assuring him of his salvation: "Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). Attempts to avoid consequences, manipulate forgiveness, or demand restoration are signs of false repentance.

Forgiveness

We must be careful about demanding that the victim immediately forgive their abusers at the first expression of their repentance. Often, cases of abuse have taken place over many years, and trust has been broken hundreds of times. They have been lied to repeatedly by the abuser, have been manipulated into silence repeatedly, perhaps have even been threatened with physical harm. Therefore, it is only after repentance has been convincingly demonstrated that victims should be counselled to forgive their abusers. Now, this does not mean that victims should live in bitterness or anger but instead always be ready to forgive. However, requiring sincere repentance is appropriate before issuing any declaration of forgiveness.⁴

Reconciliation

We must also recognize that the path to true restoration and reconciliation might very well be slow and long. Setting boundaries is not unchristian; it is wise and loving. Victims must be encouraged to protect themselves, and the church must support these boundaries and not pressure victims to reconcile prematurely. Only when the perpetrator has demonstrated trustworthiness and a transformed character can reconciliation be considered, and even then, it may not mean restoration of the previous relationship.

Conclusion

Clearly, there is much more that needs to be said on this topic which can be done in various contexts. The church must be a safe place, committed to protecting the vulnerable and holding abusers

If you are trying to discern between true and false repentance, this is a good question to ask: "Is the person sorry they sinned against God, or sorry that their sin has been exposed?"

accountable. Ultimately, God promises to heal the brokenhearted and bind up their wounds (Psalm 147:3, Psalm 10:17-18). Let us pray that the gospel would so flourish in our churches that the burdened ones would find refuge in Christ (Matthew 11:28). May the Lord give us wisdom and insight in how we might also be used so the wickedness would be restrained, and truth and love would prosper. ^M

Endnotes

1. These articles are found online in the Messengers of November 2022 – January 2023. They are highly recommended as additional reading.
2. Church Order, Article 76
3. Watson, Thomas. *The Doctrine of Repentance*. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987. Colquhoun, John. *Repentance*. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965
4. Consult the following books on the topic of forgiveness. Brauns, Chris. *Unpacking Forgiveness: Biblical Answers for Complex Questions and Deep Wounds*, MacArthur, John. *The Freedom and Power of Forgiveness*, Adams, Jay. *From Forgiven to Forgiving*

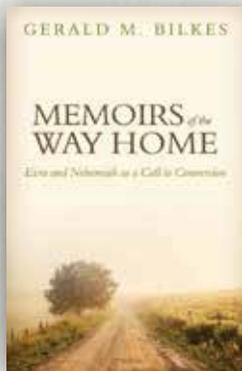
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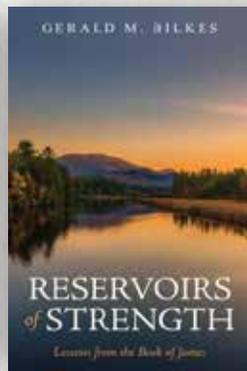


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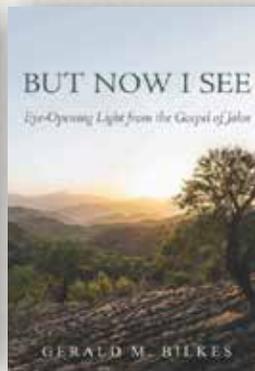
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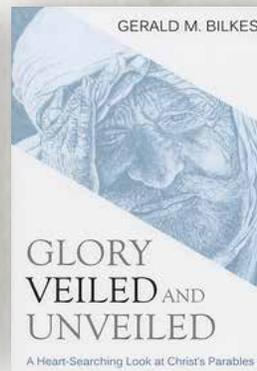
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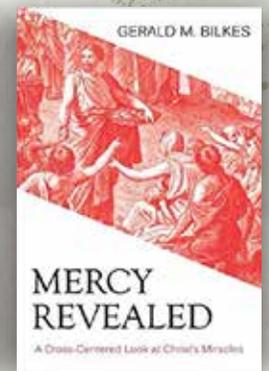
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Arend will also be missed by his brothers, sisters, brother in laws, sister in laws, and many nieces and nephews.

Funeral service was held on July 24, 2025, in the Zion Free Reformed Church with Pastor Mark Wagenaar officiating.

Mailing address
1025 Boyle Rd, Fenwick, ON L0S 1C0

OBITUARY



Lamentations 3:22,23

PAUL C. VANDER SLOOT

age 83 of Coopersville, went home to be with his Lord and Savior on July 23, 2025.

Paul was preceded in death by his beloved wife, Laurina;
and his brothers,
Jack and David Vander Sloom.

Paul was quick to start a conversation and was never shy from sharing his love of Jesus. His heart's deepest desire was for everyone to know his Jesus! Paul was a faithful prayer warrior. Paul dearly loved his family, and had a heart for missions.

He is survived by his children:
Paul & Laurie Vander Sloom,
Mary Jo Vander West
Karen Vander Sloom
Mark & Michelle Vander Sloom

Grandchildren: *Jennifer (Tony) Scheidel,*
Corey (Melissa) Vander Sloom, Caleb
(Stephanie) Vander West, Victoria (Riley) Fish,
Rebecca, Anna, Stephen (Kristina) and Abigail
Vander Sloom; great-grandchildren Ajay (Ally)
Scheidel, Halia Scheidel, Letty and Graham
Vander Sloom, Bristol Vander West, Easton,
Sayler and Ensley Fish;

Great-great granddaughter *Amelia;*

Sister, *Jane (John) Koomans;*
Sisters-in-law and Brothers-in-law:
Jan Vander Sloom, Marlene Vander Sloom,
Pete & Minnie Van Kempen, Johanna & Ben
Schipper, Pauline & Dave Wallinga; as well as
many *nieces, nephews, cousins and friends.*

His funeral service was held
Saturday, July 26, 2025
at the Grand Rapids Free Reformed Church.

ANNIVERSARY

July 25, 1975 - July 25, 2025

With praise and honour to our Heavenly Father, we are thankful to celebrate the **50th Wedding Anniversary** of our parents

BERT & JOYCE OTTEN



1 Corinthians 13:13

"And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love."

Marcia & Eugene Gritter - Calgary, AB
Bryce, Tiara and Ethan Van Hoffen
(*Evangeline*), *Keagan, Judah, Tiernyn, Ezra*

Karen & Roeloff Postmus - Lacombe, AB
Braeden and Raya, Carmen and Rik
Oostercamp, Jordana, Titus, Marshall

David & Sarah Otten - Red Deer, AB
Jonah, Oliver, Caleb, Charlie, Willow

Rick & Kimber Otten - St. Catharines, ON
Joshua, Carter, Benjamin

Jeremy & Rachel Otten - Bashaw, AB
Mikayla, Matthew, Joni

**O LORD,
THOU HAST
SEARCHED ME
& KNOWN ME**

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