

"Moses' hesitation and even refusal was not humility; it was blatant sin and God was angry with him."  
Prof. Hanko – The Office of Elder

"Afflictions do not just happen; they have their source in God's loving hands!"  
Elder Sonny Umali – Confessing Jehovah's Faithfulness in Our Journey of Grief

"We must bear a good and faithful witness for our Lord in the office, at the factory floor, or at the service front desk."  
Elder Lee Kong Wee – Loving Your Vocation from God



# salt shakers

joel 3:16 matthew 5:16

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## God's Guiding hand in Salt Shakers and reading in CERC

>> Josiah Tan

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*Josiah Tan* is a confessing young adult in CERC and has been Chairman of Salt Shakers since its conception five years ago.

To the Committee, Writers, and Readers

This is the last editorial I will be writing, as I will be stepping down as chairperson of the *Salt Shakers* committee in March 2015. I thank God for Lee Yang who has enthusiastically agreed to take over the role as chairperson with the committee's hearty approval. For the past five months, Lee Yang, Paul Liu, and I have been working together, discussing the future progress of the magazine, handover matters, and the current weaknesses of the magazine.

God's graciousness has been shown to us through Lee Yang's testimony in the work he has already begun to undertake. He has many great ideas on how to develop the magazine and has demonstrated himself to be highly dedicated to the work. I do not forget the rest of the committee, present and past, whom I have had the privilege to work with. I thank God for all of you who cheerfully slog doing Kingdom work. To the many writers—both from here and beyond Singapore's shores—and to the faithful readers who have always supported us and prayed for us, "Thank you!" You have

been greatly used by God to make *Salt Shakers* what it is today—a crucial element in CERC’s organic church-life and a faithful and unashamed witness of the sovereign Gospel of grace—a Gospel that humbles man to the dust and exalts God in the highest.

Over these five years, I have seen my own weaknesses rub off in the magazine and in many more ways onto the committee. I thank you readers and committee members for bearing with the many flaws. I pray that you give Lee Yang that same patience as you work with him. Pray for him, encourage him, and build him up, that he may wisely and humbly wash your feet in service. There were many challenges we endured together for these past five years, and one thing emerges certain: in difficulties and weaknesses, God’s grace will preserve us through it all. Fret not; rejoice in the sweat and blood shed as you further this publication.

These five years seem to go by rather quickly. It seems like just yesterday, that we were “randomly” rounding up as many people as we could to the glass meeting room in the EDB building, asking those who would be interested in starting a church magazine to come forward; it seems like yesterday, that Paul and I held in our hands for the first time, a *Salt Shakers* issue fresh and hot off the press at Upper Serangoon Shopping Centre—and now, I am writing my farewell editorial. “The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever” Isaiah 40:8. To the new chairperson and the committee, God has called you to be faithful servants in *Salt Shakers* now, in this period of however long your service is. But bear in mind: the Word which you serve and publish abroad will stand forever, long after we have withered and faded

in time—after you have come and gone from this committee and from this world. It is the immutable Word which all of *Salt Shakers* is based on. Handle this Word with utmost reverence, caution, and Love.

### **What is *Salt Shakers*?**

“Salt Shakers is so colourful!”; “Salt Shakers has so many words, I was scared when I opened it”; “It is great that Salt Shakers has many local writers writing, and it should have more”; “Salt Shakers is only notable for the foreign pastoral articles inside”; “Salt Shakers have done a great job of balancing doctrine and dealing with current practical life matters”; “Salt Shakers seems to keep harping on the matters like the truth of divorce and remarriage”.

Many people will tell you what they think of *Salt Shakers* and what it should be. Harsh criticisms will flow in, too, when there is the proclamation of the Gospel and its application to every facet of life. Listen to these criticisms carefully and give each of them careful consideration, no matter how much we at first disagree or feel repulsed by it. But more importantly, listen to what God’s Word has to say about what *Salt Shakers* should be. A wise publication is swift to listen to feedback and slow to speak. Ultimately, the eternal Word of God has the final say with regards to the character, content, and spirit of this precious *Salt Shakers* magazine. Do not be ashamed; just like our time on this earth, opposition and cruel words against your faithful service will eventually wither away. God’s Word will stand forever.

For this reason, treasure the church’s history and creeds that God has given us as you navigate your way in this spiritual war; we have been doing that for these past five years. What does God’s Word authoritatively lay out in

the battle plan to *Salt Shakers*? These are some questions we wrestled with over the years with regards to *Salt Shakers*:

Why must she speak the truth even when it hurts? Why is speaking the truth married to speaking in love? What is true unity and peace? Is it truth or false doctrine that divides?

What is her stand on true Christian education? What is her calling in missions and witnessing? What kind of Covenant did God establish with His elect? Is singing Psalms a “cultural” matter? Or one that arises from Biblical principles? What is her relation to other churches and magazines? What kind of entertainment is glorifying to God? What is a true church? How do we relate with other true churches that are growing in the Truth, or that are beginning to deviate from the Truth?

The unchangeable Spirit of Truth dwells in the hearts of all the writers, committee members, and readers so that we, by God’s grace, can know the purpose of *Salt Shakers*. That Spirit of Truth always works the Truth, and not the lie. He always works with the Word of God—never apart from it. *Salt Shakers’* readers and committee members must continue to read God’s Word! Study it! Love the Truth! Buy it—buy it all up. Tell the stall vendor to wait a moment while you call for a lorry to come and load it up full to bring it all home. Sell it not. Sell it not for idle time and sell it not for the blind approval of man. If *Salt Shakers* starts exchanging the Truth for something else, maybe for the approval of man, I would rather our church close down the magazine, lest we waste our readers’ time in reading the worthless, feel-good fluff we dispense.

There are many traps, snares, and mirages in *Salt Shakers’* work. If we do

not love the Truth, study it, listen to it, and meditate on it, the lack of God's Word in our work will quickly turn *Salt Shakers* into a useless magazine. By God's grace, we must stay sharp, even as we face current issues:

What is the basis of missions, and how should CERC engage in missions? Is *Salt Shakers* promoting world-flight when she is against wicked entertainment? Does our calling to raise our children in a God-fearing manner by bringing everything they learn in subjection to God's Word mean that we despise evangelism to non-Christians and seek to isolate ourselves from this world? And how are we to be faithful witnesses in this world? Is personal witnessing something of dire importance to you and me?

Close to my heart is this question: Are we ready to go in faith and make sacrifices for the spread of the Gospel when God calls us and providentially cross our lives with others? Will we follow the good example set by the PRCA in their loving (even if imperfect) sacrifice made for us, the Philippines, Northern Ireland, Myanmar, India, Australia, and their own countrymen for the sake of the spread of the True Gospel? Will *Salt Shakers* also seek to learn these lessons even as we publish about them in the magazine, or does the magazine just offer lip service?

If we in CERC—whom God through good governance, capitalism, and industrialisation has given a healthy amount of disposable income, recreational time, and freedom—do not think that reading God's Word is of utmost importance; if we do not love it and do not press ourselves deeper into the study of God's great and wondrous Truth, we must quickly

go to God in prayer. We must beseech God like Jacob did, and not let go of God until He blesses us with an unquenchable desire for the Word.

Is there grace outside the Cross of Jesus Christ as with the coined term "common grace"? Is God's Covenant breakable or unbreakable? And so, is the marriage bond breakable by man? *Salt Shakers* must not look at culture, Chinese or Western philosophy, humanism, positivism, rationalism, or whatever-isms for answers. We must look simply to God's Word, study it diligently, and cry out to God for wisdom. God will give wisdom to those who by His grace seek it.

### **Singaporeans Struggle with Reading**

It is said in general, that we do not have a good reading culture in Singapore. Should we blame the Singapore government for overemphasising mathematics and the sciences in our education system while neglecting the liberal arts and literature? Singapore is said to spend most of her disposable income and leisure time in the pursuit of the world's entertainment in order to escape reality. Perhaps reading may not be everyone's cup of tea.

Reading was not always my cup of tea too. Even though I see it as intensely important now, I still struggle greatly with reading. When I was young, I hated reading. The fact that I was terrible at it did not help—Dyslexia and ADHD hindered my reading ability. These weaknesses showed up in my work in *Salt Shakers*. Paul, who edits the magazine with me, has ever jokingly told me he spends the same amount of time editing my article as he spends editing the other articles from the rest of the magazine combined. I also take "donkey years" to get through vetting the content of the *Salt Shakers* (now you know why

we keep pressing you writers to submit articles on time).

But, in my weaknesses I see God's grace being always sufficient for me. I am put to shame for my lack of trust that God will help me read and grow. I whine, use the excuse of my lack of ability, and not press on in reading and nurturing the raw ability of literacy. But yet, I know there is an obvious change that has taken place; what is it? God's grace alone worked in me a strong desire to grow in knowing God, and that drove me to the means of grace of reading.

If you are one who is struggling with reading, know that God's grace is surely sufficient for you too. In Singapore, we are "*kanchong spiders*" (impatient to the point of being jittery), we want everything instant, fast, clean, and perfectly cookie-cut. Reading need not be like that. You can read slowly, painfully, and uglily—it does not matter. Just do not let anything hinder the joy of knowing God. If you have to, start with just reading half of an article and slowly work your way to reading more and more each time.

If you can read well and are already reading much in your job or school work, rely not on your own intellect to read Reformed literature. Rely on God to give you the love and discipline to study carefully and deeply into Theology. Do not let our own "clever" selves hinder us from the joy of knowing God.

If we are like the eunuch in Acts 8 that could not understand what he was reading, we do not have to pretend to know. We can pray and ask for a Philip to hop on our chariot and show us the wonders of the truth of God. Commentaries, RFPAs books, the *Salt Shakers*, brothers and sisters in Christ—all help expound the



meaning in Scripture. Do not let setbacks in understanding hinder us from the joy of knowing God.

My advice to people who just cannot get themselves to read? Get someone to read to you. You will not regret it. Know someone whom you love that does not like to read? Offer to read to them! The eunuch was so overjoyed when he read and understood Scripture with the help of Philip. So thankful was he that that he said, “See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptised?” What is hindering you to start reading?

### Closing

*Salt Shakers* is a blessing—one that is distributed to the Philippines, Australia, Canada, Northern Ireland, Malaysia, USA, India, and many more nations in the future, if the Lord wills. *Salt Shakers* is a blessing to all of us reading this for three reasons.

First, it reminds us that we all have the office of believer: prophet, priest, and king (HC LD 12). We all have a duty to be admonished by and admonish fellow brothers and sisters. In fact, if you have not found yourselves being admonished by others who carry the office of believer for some time now, be wary. It may not be because you are as one who is blameless, but rather it may mean that you have many blind spots in your life as you have built walls to keep other believers from faithfully wounding you (Proverbs 27:6,17 and my personal experience while serving in *Salt Shakers*). It is a blessing to be admonished, comforted, reminded, and taught by others through the Truth of God in *Salt Shakers* and in the organic life of the church (James 5:19-20). This glorifies God.

Second, *Salt Shakers* connects those in the office of believer across time and space. In *Salt Shakers* we make it a

point to have an international buffet spread of writers (or, variety like a typical Singaporean food centre). This is because we first of all do not belong to Singapore, South East Asia, Asia, or the East. We first of all belong to the universal church of Jesus Christ that transcends all national boundaries. In this highest reality, tongue, language, and race do not matter one bit. *Salt Shakers* connects and gives expression to the catholicity of the Church. This glorifies God.

Also, like the immense treasure left behind by faithful men and women of God in the now 90 year old Standard Bearer archive (a “must-go-to” for any serious Bible study/workshop leader), we too in the *Salt Shakers* are documenting the mercies of God for our children to read in the future. Young people, consider as you write that your children, Lord willing, will be searching the *Salt Shakers* (webpage archive in the future perhaps?) for material for their Bible studies or for spiritual advice in the personal lives. *Salt Shakers* is a blessing not only for this time, but also for our children’s children. Bear this in mind if you are currently writing for *Salt Shakers* or intend to contribute in the future.

(Note: Future son/daughter if you read this, and you have ADHD and Dyslexia like daddy and is struggling with reading, seek God who gives grace to press on in reading solid Reformed literature!)

Last, in *Salt Shakers* we get to witness something more deafening than a firework that goes off dangerously close to you. In *Salt Shakers*, we witness something more earth-shaking than the greatest earthquake that shook the world. We witness and hear the roar of the Lord out of CERC (Joel 3:16). We rally behind the roar

of Jesus Christ made every Sunday in the preaching of God’s Word. We stand as lively stones in the pillar and ground of the truth and echo that roar in *Salt Shakers*. The roar of this Gospel resonates in the deepest vessels and crevices in our hearts. *Salt Shakers* is a blessing as it serves to point and go with us to the Cross of Jesus Christ. It serves to bring saints closer together in sweeter fellowship in truth. It stings and heals the wound of sin and lies like salt on an ulcer. It melts the cold hearts of strive with the warmth of God’s love. The blessing *Salt Shakers* brings is not in the least bit because of us, but solely because of the roar out of Zion. That shaking shall be terror to the reprobate, but comfort to His people.

I think *Salt Shakers* has grown much in these past five years. I have grown together with *Salt Shakers*, and I think CERC and her readers would agree that we have all grown together. But, we have a long way more to go; much more work and studying to do. God is just too amazing, too deep, too beautiful, and too merciful for even the oldest of members to say “Ah, I think I am done with reading...”

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“Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto thy name give glory, for thy mercy, and for thy truth’s sake.” Psalm 115:1

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# PRCA Psalm Choir

>> Joshua Hoekstra



*Joshua Hoekstra* is a member of Hudsonville Protestant Reformed Church in Hudsonville, Michigan.

The Psalm Choir is starting its 20th year. To date the choir has put out annual concerts and published 18 recordings. The fact that this choir has existed for nearly two decades prompts some interesting questions. What is the history and purpose of the Psalm Choir? What is the difference between singing Psalms and inspiring the use of Psalms? Why is it necessary to promote the singing of Psalms? Is there anything we can learn from the Psalm Choir?

The choir's mission is to promote the singing of the Psalms, especially those found in our own Psalter. More broadly, the mission is to inspire people in their use of the Psalms. This is why the choir exists. It is the reason for every project that the choir has undertaken. This purpose is why the choir produces recordings, why it publishes music on YouTube, and why it works to find and use fitting arrangements from talented artists in our churches. The choir's mission has never wavered since its inception.

It has always been focussed on the Psalms. The choir members are inspired by the Psalms. The choir is passionate about the Psalms.

That passion was noticed from the very first year of the choir's existence. Dan DeMeester was the choir's first director and successfully led the choir for about 15 years. During that time, and under Dan's leadership, the choir honed its purpose, found its voice, and set a cadence of practices, performances, and recordings. The Psalm Choir always strived to remain true to the words of the Psalm and find creative ways to express the words and truths within the Psalm. If you listen to *Fitting Praises Volume 1*, you can hear every one of these elements.

The focus on words is important enough to restate. The Psalm Choir strives to remain true to the words. You will not see the Psalm Choir undertake a project to sing a contemporary arrangement that merely sounds out the theme of a Psalm. The words matter. The words matter more than the tune. The tune must fit the words, and not the other way around. In a day and age driven by feelings and emotion, it is important for us never to forget this. However, this does not mean that the music should not be moving; in the case of the Psalms, the opposite is in fact quite true. The requirement for music that is moving, that fits the words, and that fits the attitude of the Psalm is amplified.

Singing the words of a Psalm in a way that does justice to the Psalm is even more critical than matching the tune and words. This is very hard with the Psalms. Why? The words and tunes are so familiar. That is not why it should be easy; that is precisely why it is so hard. How often do you pray the Lord's Prayer? It is so easy to let the words roll off your tongue and not even think about them; so also with the Psalms. Here are some examples of moving phrases from our own Psalter that are so hard to sing with passion and conviction because they are so familiar:

Psalter 210: "Has God forgotten to be kind?"

Psalter 203: "In sweet communion, Lord, with Thee I constantly abide"

Psalter 29: "To thee, O Lord, I fly and on thy help depend; Thou art my Lord and King Most High"

Psalter 29: "My soul in death's dark pit shall not be left by Thee"

Psalter 400: "Hallelujah, praise Jehovah, O my soul, Jehovah praise; I will sing the glorious praises of my God through all my days."

What wondrous words! What sadness when we, through laziness, simply let the words roll off our tongues with no real thought about them. The purpose of the Psalm Choir is to help us meditate on these words, to see the great truths that they contain, to feel the way the Psalm feels, and to express

these words in a tuneful and God-glorifying way.

This ultimately is the difference between singing the Psalms and inspiring the use of the Psalms. This, then, is the challenge as well. If you plan on inspiring anyone, you had better believe the message you are delivering. People are pretty good at seeing a lack of conviction. The Psalm Choir has had some success with inspiring the use of the Psalms. Are we world famous? Not really. Are we the best singers in the world? Not even close. Is the director sought after? No, most people do not even know he exists. In our own churches, I doubt everyone knows who the director even is. How can I claim that the Psalm Choir has had success then? In the very least, the choir members themselves look forward to singing the Psalms. More than that though, there are tangible evidences. Half a world away there are people singing the Psalms (that is you, sitting somewhere in Singapore), and they cared enough to ask an amateur director to write an article about it. YouTube shows evidence as well. One of the largest viewing nations is the Netherlands—and there is not even a Protestant Reformed church there!

There are some things to learn from the Psalm Choir. The Psalm Choir is an amateur choir. Both directors in the history of the choir have not been professionally trained as directors, and as men have many faults and shortcomings. The choir as well is a collection of amateur voices; the voices are old and young; only a few are even close to professional; some struggle to even read music. The accompanists are perhaps the most talented individuals in the choir, but even they are not professionals. There is one thing that brings the choir together: it is their love for the Psalms. This ultimately is what

the choir has to offer that is unique in the world. The unique message that the Psalm Choir brings to the world is a love and passion for the Psalms that is genuine and inspiring. This passion, by God's grace, will inspire people in their love for the Psalms as well.

Regrettably, the Psalm Choir will probably never have a chance to travel to Singapore to provide a concert for you. I can assure you though that it would certainly be the choir's greatest enjoyment to undertake such an effort. As you conduct your own personal worship and as you sing the Psalms in your own home, consider using the choir's YouTube channel. Sing with us around your dinner table. I will certainly enjoy joining you at those times.

If others seek to band together and start a choir, I think the Psalm Choir can provide some advice in this area. The amateur nature of the choir is important for any group of people that desire to start a choir. Remember, the purpose of a choir is to glorify God. When singing in an amateur choir, it is important to enjoy the activity. "Is any merry? Let him sing Psalms." Sing from the heart. You are supposed to mean what you say; you should mean what you sing as well. Do not worry about being perfect. Seriously. You are an amateur; perfection is not an expectation. Always try to get better though: focus on development of just a couple things at a time. Being amateur does not mean there is contentment with mediocrity, and it does not mean opposition to learning new things. Growth is important, growth is continual, and it is not just a spiritual necessity. In all things as Christians, we seek to use our talents to the best of our ability. This means that we need to hone our talents, even in an amateur choir.

To conclude this article it is best to bring us back to the purpose of the Psalm Choir, inspiring the use of the Psalms. I recently reviewed a book for the *Standard Bearer* entitled [Psalms in Worship](#). That book contains a series of speeches that were given when our Psalter was published. I highly recommend this book; you can find it for free as a Google eBook. Due to constraints in that book review, I left out the entirety of my favourite quote from the book:

*There is no tryst (romantic encounter – JWH) that my soul longs for but I find here. There are no deeps in my pain of heart but God's hand reaches right out of this Psalter and drops His plummet far beyond the shallows of my finite thinking. For the wailings of the painrent, whose hearts are torn with the consciousness of sin, here, in these remedial elegies (poems – JWH), God gives His anesthesia. Out of every valley there rise the tableland of His mercy and the peaks of song where the beams of His love never fade. And though the valleys all be desert, with only Marah's unsweetened waters there, yet on the tops of the mountains there is abundance of peace and the glory of His presence waves like Lebanon.*

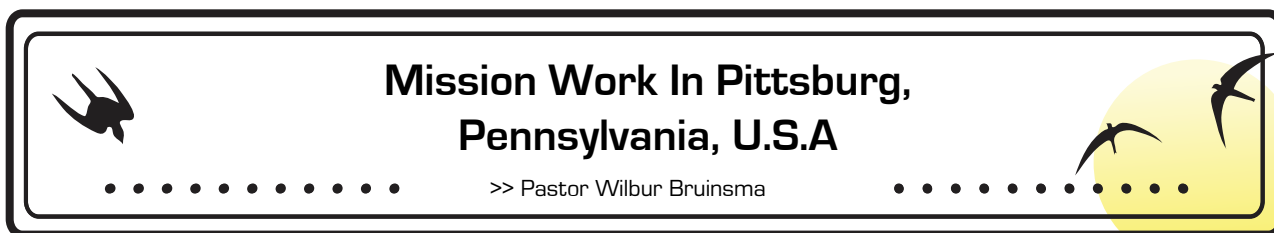
*There is no book of poems so poetical; there is no imagery so grand; there is no pathos so deep; there is no literature so ennobling; there is no wisdom so profound; there is no harmony so enrapturing; there is no place where the noblest measures clasp hands with themes so exalting, and lead us spellbound to the coast line of the Infinite, and tell us just to stand there, be still, think a while, look up and let the soul grow. It gives suggestions innumerable as the sand that is by the seashore; it points to infinities where the vision fails, and tells us to follow the trail if we can. And so I take God at His word, and I climb as high as He gives me strength; and I look as*

*far as my poor vision reaches; and as I stand there dazed in the infinity of what is, and what is to be, bewildered with broken visions, and arcs, and skylines of things indefinite to my mortality, of imperfectly understood revelations, of sapphire truths and amethystine hopes which lie in uplifted ranges far beyond the trail of my exploration - unscalable*

*Sierras of dimly comprehended glories and majesties, I hear the choirs of the land invisible. Their melody is wafted through the gates of pearl and over the crags; the music of the throne-land is in my ears; and the songs that I hear are the lyrics we are singing, the old, old songs which bore the Hebrew hopes to the gates of gold, and strengthened our Saviour's*

*heart in the shadow of the cross – God's songs, the songs of the redeemed, the songs of the covenant, thine and mine and those of the Church triumphant for evermore."*

These songs are the Psalms. They are our songs. What a blessing. What a melody. What a treasure we have been given. Are you merry? Sing Psalms.



*Pastor Wilbur Bruinsma* is a missionary of the Protestant Reformed Churches of America. He is stationed in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and labours in the Eastern U.S.

## History and Development

Although preliminary work was performed in Pittsburgh since 1996, the official labour of the Protestant Reformed Fellowship began in 1998 when Pastor Jai Mahtani was called to labour here. The mission here then totalled five families and two individuals. As you can see, missions in the United States (what we call domestic missions) does not take a large group of people to begin, or continue in the work.

Pastor Mahtani laboured in Pittsburgh for close to seven years before taking a call to another one of our churches. I

took up my labours here in February 2006. The group of saints here has undergone some changes since its inception. Some of the original families have left, but the Lord has replaced them with new families. When I came here, the size of the group was about the same as at the start. Now, after close to nine years of my labour in the Lord, we have seven families and nine individuals. We are encouraged by this growth even if it does not seem significant. Among these families we have fourteen children, some of whom are getting close to teenage years. We are looking for growth not only from outside of our mission but soon from inside of it too. We continue to see a regular flow of visitors to our worship services. For example, presently, we have begun working with a single mother and her three children.

## Challenges

Most people who hear that we have grown over these many years by only two families and six individuals wonder if the work here is worth our while. It is. Not only are we a tremendous witness to the large metropolitan area of Pittsburgh (population of 3

million), but we are also a mission developing in the Gospel of grace. The challenge we face is labouring in a land whose ancestors have heard the Gospel but in their generations have rejected it. God's judgment rests on our nation because of that. However, God still has His church and people here, for sure! This also means that God's elect people must still be gathered out of the generations of those who have departed. But work here is slow and difficult. It is filled with many joys, but those joys are tempered by many disappointments too. We remain optimistic, however. God has given us the blessed task of preaching the Gospel; He has given us an "open door" in Pittsburgh to preach. So, we continue to do with joy what He has called us to do.

Another challenge that confronts us is the prevailing attitude of tolerance of sin, relativism, and the lack of conviction and commitment that characterises our society. We have people attend church for a couple of years, and then disappear soon after. They will agree for a time with the doctrines that are taught, but they



are not convicted of them. Others cannot endure a life of commitment to the church institute or to God's commandments. This, too, makes work difficult. We are convinced that the Gospel can indeed break through sin-hardened hearts and bring God's chosen saints to faith. Again, we hear Christ's command to His church: "preach the Word in season and out of season."

### **Blessings**

We have been greatly blessed by God in our labour. There is a united and committed group of saints with whom we labour. The Fellowship may be small but there is much unity and love found in the communion of the saints. We have joyful children—sons and daughters. Our Bible studies and catechism classes are well attended and the discussion is always lively and edifying. Everyone works together to share the Gospel with others.

We ask for your continued prayers for us as we remember the church in Singapore in our prayers too.

02:32 PM

**WORD OF THE ISSUE:**  
**Relativism**

**DEFINITION:**  
Any theory holding that truth or moral or aesthetic value, etc., is not universal or absolute but may differ between individuals or cultures

**ORIGIN:**  
First used in 1865 in the subject of Philosophy

Source: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/relativism>



## **Our Children's Education: A Covenant Necessity (Part II)**

>> Aaron Lim



*Aaron Lim* is a confessing young adult in CERC and has been studying in the Protestant Reformed Seminary since August 2013.

### **Part 2 - The Nature of Education in Singapore**

Although minute in land mass and population, Singapore has renowned acclaim for its education system. Countries worldwide have applauded the government's efforts in establishing a strong and effective system which has been the backbone of the nation's economic prosperity.

The education system has been responsible for training productive citizens and developing them to drive the nation's progress.

In a land-scarce country like Singapore which is deprived of natural resources, its citizens are the main resources the government has. Because the government wisely recognises this, extensive efforts have been made to

develop them. The government uses education as its key arm to develop its citizens and sustain the nation's progress. By regulating the education its citizens receive, the government ensures that the knowledge and skills they acquire can be directed to the appropriate sectors in society.

Overseen by the Ministry of Education (MOE), all public schools are stringently regulated. From the teaching faculty to the curriculum, the ministry makes the final decision. Regulation is necessary not only to streamline the instruction students receive but also to siphon them according to their academic abilities. At the end of primary, secondary and junior college standards, students have to sit for national examinations to test their academic proficiency. Their academic grades will determine what kind of schools and courses they can move on to.

After secondary school, the students in polytechnic and the institutions of technical education receive a diploma at the end of their course. Those who move on to junior college after secondary school have the fastest access to university if they qualify for it in the national exams.

To qualify as teacher in a government school, one has to graduate from the National Institute of Education (NIE). Upon graduation from NIE, he or she is subsequently posted to a government school according to his field of discipline and place of residence.

Academic rigor has not only been characteristic of the Singaporean education system but also of the general lifestyle of Singaporeans. From the first day a child enters into a public school in Singapore, his life is subjected to gruelling academic drilling. Almost every teacher he meets

expects him to excel academically because it is critical to moving on to better schools and university courses. A teacher's performance in school is also primarily assessed by the grades his students achieve.

On a larger scale, a student's academic performance also affects the overall performance of his school. To encourage improvement and competition amongst schools, the ministry of education has a ranking system in which each public school is annually rated for its performance. Aside from its academic achievements, other extra-curricular factors like its sports and musical achievements are also taken into consideration. The better a school is ranked, the better the appraisal it receives from the ministry and the public.

Aside from academics, students in the public schools have to participate in co-curricular activities (CCA). These range from sports to musical ensembles and clubs of various activities. Competitions are held every year for these CCA groups so that schools which perform well are recognised for their achievements. All these are part of the ministry's initiative to establish a well-rounded education system.

Interestingly, many of the public schools in Singapore are Christian by name. They were founded by Christian missionaries during the colonial years of the nation. I spent six years attending two Roman Catholic primary schools, and then two years in an Anglican junior college. The Roman Catholic schools held their masses every now and then on special occasions, although non-Catholics were only required to observe. Covenant parents must not be deceived into thinking that there

is any spiritual instruction from these schools. There is nothing religious—nothing Christian—about them.

Every Singaporean parent knows that competition is the driving principle behind our education system. It is a system based solidly on merit, where the best students with the best academic grades get into best schools and best courses. Competition to enter the best schools is extremely fierce, because these schools are famous for churning out top students. With top grades, one has better opportunities to choose the more prospective courses in university. Job opportunities are also usually better for those who come from the top schools.

Being a meritocratic society, rewards are naturally in place for those who perform well. The government, along with many business corporations, offers hundreds of scholarships to those who excel academically. These scholarships range in value and prestige. Some of the most prestigious scholarships include the President's scholarship and the Public Service Commission scholarship. These scholarships are awarded by the government to top students who wish to serve as civil servants. These prestigious scholarships allow and pay for them to study in the world's top universities. Upon the completion of their studies, these scholars return home to serve in various sectors of the government. In many ways their career paths are tightly secured, along with promotion opportunities and well-paying salaries.

Placing the best brains in the highest positions in government and business corporations has worked well for Singapore. Elaborate planning and wise policies have transformed Singapore into one of the finest cities

in the world. That Singaporeans today enjoy high standards of living and technological advancements is beyond doubt due to the wise leadership of their government.

It is not my purpose to examine the

benefits and advantages of our public education system. Our children are fine products of this system. The system has made doctors, lawyers, engineers and other kinds of professionals out of our Covenant children. My

purpose is to demonstrate the spiritual damages this system inflicts upon our Covenant children, in the hope that we as Covenant parents will realize the absolute necessity of giving them a Covenant education. The future of the church depends heavily on this.



## Sola Scriptura and Three Theological Systems (Belgic Confession 7e)

>> Pastor Angus Stewart



Pastor Angus Stewart is Minister of the Word at Covenant Protestant Reformed Church in Northern Ireland ([www.cprc.co.uk](http://www.cprc.co.uk)).

### **Belgic Confession 7: The Sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures to Be the Only Rule of Faith**

*We believe that those Holy Scriptures fully contain the will of God, and that whatsoever man ought to believe unto salvation is sufficiently taught therein. For, since the whole manner of worship which God requires of us is written in them at large, it is unlawful for any one, though an apostle, to teach otherwise than we are now taught in the Holy Scriptures; nay, though it were an angel from heaven, as the apostle Paul saith. For, since it is forbidden to add unto or take away any thing from the Word of God, it doth thereby evidently appear that the doctrine thereof is most perfect and complete in all respects.*

*Neither do we consider of equal value any writing of men, however holy these men may have been, with those divine Scriptures, nor ought we to consider custom, or the great multitude, or antiquity, or succession of times and persons, or councils, decrees, or statutes, as of equal value with the truth of God, for the truth is above all; for all men are of themselves liars and more vain than vanity itself. Therefore we reject with all our hearts whatsoever doth not agree with this infallible rule, which the apostles have taught us, saying, Try the spirits whether they are of God. Likewise, if there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house.*

The second paragraph of *Belgic Confession 7* teaches the truth of sola Scriptura – that God’s Word is above all the writings “of men, however holy these men may have been”. This includes the great theologians of the Christian church, such as Augustine, Calvin and Hoeksema, as well as leaders in false churches or cults, such as Charles Taze Russell, Mother Teresa and Benny Hinn, plus evangelicals, such as C. I. Scofield and John Piper, and indeed everything in the *Salt*

*Shakers*, including this article! The Triune God speaking in Scripture is also the supreme authority over “custom, or the great multitude, or antiquity, or succession of times and persons, or councils, decrees, or statutes”.

### **Roman Catholicism**

What church or system is Belgic Confession 7 especially opposing? Roman Catholicism is particularly targeted here, though the critique would also apply, for example, to Eastern Orthodoxy. A key phrase, mentioned twice in Belgic Confession 7, makes this clear: “equal value.” The Church of Rome places the writings of holy men, “custom,” “antiquity,” “succession of times and persons,” “councils,” “decrees,” etc., on a par with the Word of God. These things Rome embraces under the term tradition, which it makes equal with the Scriptures.

Thus, the Roman Church holds to two equal streams of revelation: Scripture (to which they add the Apocrypha, as we saw when we considered *Belgic Confession 6*) and (Roman Catholic) tradition. This is Rome’s authoritative position according to Vatican II

(1962-1965) and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992). So what happens when Rome's tradition disagrees (as it frequently does) with God's written Word? Which one triumphs over the other? Tradition!

The argument for the supremacy of Scripture in *Belgic Confession* 7 rests upon two crucial truths. The first concerns who *God* is, especially His truthfulness, since the Bible is "the truth of God [and] the truth is above all". The second concerns who *man* is: "all men are of themselves liars and more vain than vanity itself." Thus wherever Scripture and human teachers or writings clash, the Bible is always true and man's views false.

*Belgic Confession* 7 concludes with a two-fold antithetical calling regarding *sola Scriptura*. First, we must repudiate all false teaching, whether concerning doctrine or ethics: "Therefore we reject with all our hearts whatsoever doth not agree with this infallible rule, which the apostles have taught us, saying, Try the spirits whether they are of God." Our creed here quotes 1 John 4:1, which reads in full, "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world." This trying is a testing of the teachers and their writings or preaching, and even of the angelic powers that stand behind them, in the light of holy Scripture.

Our second antithetical calling is not to fellowship with the false teacher or help him disseminate his false teaching: "Likewise, if there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house," to which 2 John 10 adds, "neither bid him God speed."

## Anabaptism

There is a second theological system that is condemned in *Belgic Confession* paragraph 2: Anabaptism. Again, the key phrase is "equal value." Very carefully, our creed does not say that the writings of men or "antiquity" or "councils" or "statutes," etc., are of no value or very little worth. The sixteenth-century Anabaptists held that the historic church, the church fathers and the creeds were of little or no use, for they were largely irrelevant or even a hindrance. The Anabaptist Bernhard Rothman in the 1530s declared that "for fourteen hundred years there have been no Christians on earth."

Thus, the Anabaptist goal and agenda was restoration not reformation. They wanted to leap over a millennium and a half to get back to what they thought was pristine apostolic Christianity, dismissing virtually everything from the death of the Apostle John to their own time.

Much of evangelicalism today is nearer to the Anabaptists than the Reformers and their successors. They misunderstand *sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone) as if it meant *solo Scriptura* (only the Scriptures). That is, instead of viewing the Word of God as the highest authority, leaving a significant role for writings and creeds that faithfully explain and apply the Bible, they reckon that only the Scriptures are of any use. Their misinterpretation of "Scripture alone" often degenerates into "me alone," that is, I can interpret Holy Writ all by myself and without any regard to the history of the church or its councils, etc.

Some of them even proclaim, "No creed but Christ," not knowing that this is historically the slogan of

liberalism, and that the Reformers who rediscovered and developed the truth of *sola Scriptura* were also the greatest creed-writers in the history of the Christian church. Many have no interest in the history of the church and a despicably low view of Christ's church, as if the church had no authority in any shape or form.

Whether or not they are conscious of it, instead of a biblical ecclesiology or doctrine of the church, they hold to the autonomy of the individual. This is especially seen when they get in a snit, either over something in which they are in the wrong or over something trivial. They leave the church in a huff and either simply stay at home on the Lord's Day or join a departing church or set up a little splinter group.

## The Reformed Faith

Finally, we come to the third, and the true, view: *sola Scriptura* as it is taught by the Reformed faith. Over against Roman Catholicism, God's infallible Word is the supreme and final judge over all things. Nothing is its equal.

Over against all Anabaptist tendencies, the Bible itself teaches that we need the church (Psalm 87; 1 Timothy 3:16), church order (Romans 12:8; 1 Corinthians 12:28; 14:33, 40) and church assemblies, which make decisions and adjudicate controversies on the basis of Scripture (Acts 15). The Bible itself insists that we need preaching and preachers of the Word (1 Timothy 4:13-16; 2 Timothy 4:2) and thus Scripture is not only to be read and studied by us individually and in our homes. The Word itself requires the use of the two Christian sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper as means of grace (Matthew 28:19; 1 Corinthians 11:23-34). Scripture calls for church officer-bearers (pastors, elders and deacons),



as in Ephesians 4:11 and 1 Timothy 3, and church discipline as a key of the kingdom of heaven, so that when sins are bound or loosed by the church in accordance with God's Word, they are bound or loosed by Christ Himself in heaven (Matthew 18:15-18; 1 Corinthians 5). The Bible itself commands that the church, as well as parents, must teach the children of believers – "Feed my lambs" (John 21:15). Scripture itself teaches that we need creeds (1 Timothy 3:16) which possess derivative (not original) authority.

Of course, the Bible itself is the supreme judge over all of the institutions, people and activities that it authorises: the church, church order, church assemblies, preaching, sacraments, office-bearers, church discipline and creeds. The Triune God, through the Scriptures He inspired, calls all who err to reformation, for His Word judges everybody, not only on the last day (John 12:48), but also today. Thus the Scriptures and all those who stand with Jehovah's truth issue the call to reformation. All those who believe

and practice *sola Scriptura*, given the blindness and sinfulness of man, thus realise that *ecclesia semper reformanda* (the church is always to be reformed).

#### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

How do Roman Catholicism and Anabaptism oppose the Reformed truth of *sola Scriptura*?

What examples of the Anabaptist view of *sola Scriptura* have you come across?

What examples could you give of both right and wrong applications of *ecclesia semper reformanda*?



## Book Review on Just Dad: Stories of Herman Hoeksema (2015)

>> Lim Yang Zhi



Yang Zhi Lim is a confessing young adult in CERC.

"A book of tales for the telling and for remembering Dad with love": that is the book in review. *Just Dad: Stories of Herman Hoeksema* is a petite biography by Mrs Lois Kregel of her father, Rev. Herman Hoeksema. We review this book—and so urge our readers to read it.

But first, a brief description of the book. Mrs Lois Kregel tells the history of her father—starting from

his childhood in the Netherlands, and through his ministry in First PRC, Grand Rapids. Throughout the biography, Mrs Kregel recalls various details she as his child knew of her father. Hence, many details reveal the fatherly side of Rev. Hoeksema. What are these details? Read and find out for yourself!

However, there may be some of us who have a natural apprehension to history, and hence, avoid books like *Just Dad* because it is about history.

To that apprehension we respond by recognising the book's spiritual worth. History retold with the spectacles of Scripture is history that strengthens us in this life. Throughout the book, Mrs Kregel sheds the light of God's Word on her anecdotes. For example, Mrs Kregel affirms that her father in the Protestant Reformed Churches was nothing but the instrument of God's

sovereign work in His church—a work of which we are a fruit. This recognition of God's sovereignty causes us during our reading to reflect on the unfailing work of God for His church throughout the ages—certainly our comfort in this age of apostasy. With a God-centred view, the book feeds and strengthens our souls.

The book's spiritual worth is further enhanced by the perspectives from which Mrs Kregel recounts her father life. Mrs Kregel primarily portrays Rev. Hoeksema as "dad"—dad who loves and disciplines his children, and dad who mourns when his children stray. Mrs Kregel also describes Rev. Hoeksema as preacher—preacher that is jealous over the sheep of Christ, and preacher that loves His Lord and Shepherd. Mrs Kregel also deliberately recounts instances of Rev. Hoeksema as a man—a man weak in his sinful

flesh. All these perspectives set before us an example to learn from—qualities to acquire, and weaknesses to beware of.

Another “additive” in the book is the information of our sister’s (PRCA’s) history. Certainly, Mrs Kregel does not give a detailed explanation of that history (neither was that her intention). Nonetheless, she succinctly retells important parts of the history; that history is, after all, where her father’s history is embedded in. For us who are unfamiliar with our sister’s history, the book will freshen us with an introduction to it. For us who know the history well, the book will *refresh* our knowledge of history from the perspective of Hoeksema’s daughter.

The encouragement for us is, therefore, to read. Enjoy the book before going to bed or on a long bus or MRT ride. Wherever, the book will prove itself to be a spiritual delight.

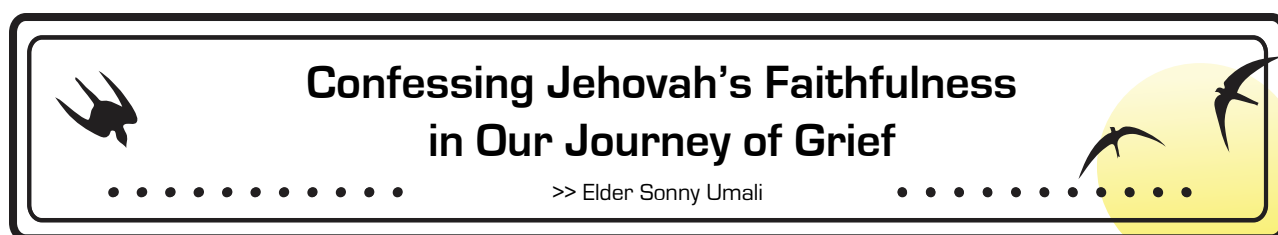
Perhaps the greatest delight we in Singapore will get from reading the book is remembrance that God nurtured us into a Reformed church through the Protestant Reformed churches. The Lord worked through Hoeksema for the PRCA, and through the PRCA, for us! As Mrs Kregel narrates, the Lord faced Hoeksema with the question of the Covenant: how must My people define, understand, and confess My Covenant? Hoeksema could not preach and teach until the Lord’s question in his heart was answered firmly in Scripture. At this crucial time, the Lord showed His servant the proper understanding of the Covenant. This same understanding we proclaim—through our preaching, in the catechism room, during Sunday school, and amidst our youth-group activities. This is the truth God has given to us through Hoeksema and the PRCA. For them, we are thankful—

and above all, we are thankful to our merciful God who has given us this truth to declare in continuing generations.

This biography will remind us of God’s work among us, and through the reminder, quicken us to joy. Undoubtedly, this book is worth reading.

Before we leave this review, I take the liberty to recommend another book in connection to *Just Dad*. A reading of Mrs Kregel’s preface will acquaint you with another biography of Hoeksema: *Therefore Have I Spoken*, by Mrs Gertrude Hoeksema. That biography is twice as long as *Just Dad*, but is, nonetheless, another delightful read. Though out of print, you may find the book (two copies) in our church’s (CERC’s) library. A reading of both *Therefore Have I Spoken* and *Just Dad* will render us great spiritual profit.

So, brethren, read!



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Even though time has gone by so fast, it still seems to my wife and I as if everything had just happened a few days ago. Every minute detail of the events that transpired on the morning of May 17th still lingers vividly in our minds. There, in the hospital, was the sight of our daughter—pitifully

moaning in pain, desperately gasping for breath, faintly crying, and begging heartrendingly for another chance to live a bit longer. There, too, were her unforgettable litanies of last words of love and endearment for us, until she was finally silent in the embrace of our Lord’s loving arms, with complete submission and acceptance of her lot.

My hurting thoughts cannot help but ponder and wander through the painful and agonising experiences

that my daughter, Bernadette Mary, went through from the very first day she was diagnosed with the dreaded myelodysplastic syndrome disease (MDS) in February 2013 until her death a year later. Here begins our pilgrimage, our journey in grief.

### **Our Journey in Grief**

When she passed away, a vital part of our family—a limb or an arm, as it were—was permanently amputated. The wound that will surely last for a

lifetime had brought us down to tears and deep personal distresses. The loss left a wide vacuum of emptiness in our life. Not only did we lose our one and only beloved daughter, but also the delight of our home—a sweet, lively, witty, amiable, and courageous young lady whose simple hope and aspiration for herself, for us her parents, and for the church she loved so much will never be realised anymore. The loss was almost unbearable. It hurt to the very core of our hearts.

As parents, we cannot imagine anything more traumatic and painful than the experience of losing a child in such an agonising way. We weren't ready yet. Naturally, we did not expect to outlive her. It was our hope that in God's providence, at our own "appointed departure", we would see her settled and fulfilled. But she's gone. Losing her brought us an overwhelming sense of pain and lingering grief. Realizing God's hand pressed upon us, we turned to Him in humble submission to His wise and sovereign will. With our eyes blinded with tears, we fell on our knees expressing our bereavement before His throne of mercy, pouring out our deep sorrow and awareness of great loss. We bared our hearts before Him without murmuring, doubting, or questioning, and confessed His faithfulness and merciful love toward us in the midst of afflictions. We also confessed that what had happened was going to work for her good and our good in time and in eternity in accordance to His will and purpose.

Expectedly, our first year without our daughter was very tough and difficult to handle and bear, especially our going through the many "firsts" in our family's journey. Spending our first birthdays, first Christmas and New Year, first family reunion

and church activities—without her lively company—triggered a lot of lamentation and tears. All our memories of her since her infancy were wrapped in both joy and sorrows, and in both laughter and tears.

Much has changed since the loss, because a great and vital part of our family existence and relationship is gone: Coming home from a day's work and hearing her cheery "Papa! Mama! I have something for you!" is no more to be heard. Her cheery "Happy Lord's Day!" greetings to everyone every Sunday morning will be dearly missed. Her constant Mother's Day, Father's Day and happy birthday greetings are now history. Each time we reminisce about our fun together—her funny stories, pranks and jokes; her works; her confiding of problems and inquiry about our faith and family worship and devotions—we always find ourselves having a deep sense of sorrow. Each time we open her diaries, each page reveals a sweet, thoughtful, and loving young lady whose heart was determined to lead a life within the fold of the church, whether in a married state or in single life. There is not a day that passes without our minds lingering in memories of her. Our loss is not something we want to quickly get over with, but something we need to learn to go through patiently and circumspectly.

### **Our Journey with Hope**

The experience of grief in this journey teaches us that loss is part and parcel of our earthly existence. Death is something we cannot prevent nor ignore. This fact led us to accept the truth that our dear Bernadette is no longer around with us here in time, and bringing her back will only prolong our pain and sorrow unnecessarily. It is sufficient for us to

believe that this is just a temporary separation, that she is now without pain and sin in eternal glory, having sweet communion with the Lord and praising the triune God in perfection; and that in that great day of God in heaven, we will be able to see her again and fellowship with her in glory. In this hope, God comes to us with an all-sufficient word of comfort, "Wait on the Lord, be of good courage, and He shall strengthen thine heart: wait, I say, on the Lord" (Psalm 27:14).

The pain, though, wears off slowly with the passage of time. The familiar comforting phrases "time heals" and "she's in a better (or, the best) place now" are somehow true in our case. Although her memories occasionally hurt us to the core, we recover little by little and begin to cherish them, and they even bring back the usual smile and joy to our hearts. Crucial to our moving on and getting through are the patient, sympathetic and comforting company of the household of faith, of our family, and of friends by our side; also, the condolences, well wishes and words of encouragement from brethren worldwide through emails, facebook, cards and letters. It is such a great blessing from God to have believing people around us who constantly motivate us and cheer us up through the pains and sorrows, accompanying us in this journey with one common, sure, and certain word for us—Jehovah's faithfulness in His promises. Our journey now gradually shifts its focus away from the pains of death towards the hope of a new life; a life that is eternal, heavenly, peaceful, and glorious; a life that is free from pain, tears and sin, as promised by our gracious and faithful Saviour Jesus Christ in His own suffering and death on the cross and glorious resurrection from the dead.

“ Through the way of afflictions, God prepares us for the highest good in the presence of the Lord in His kingdom in heaven. For our afflictions work for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory [2 Corinthians 4:17-18]. ”

Our experience of grief has brought us face to face with the ultimate reality that Jehovah is the living God who gives life and takes it back through death by His power. The ultimate end is that death in a believing family strengthens faith and hope, and loosens the grip of fears, anxiety, sorrow, and despair in our hearts, “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21). As believers, we look at suffering and death in a different light from the rest of the world because of the Cross; the living Spirit who resides within us causes us to mourn in hope and faith because of the sure promise of eternal rest and the resurrection for those who die in Christ.

God hides His purposes in many things, but we are assured that His purpose in every event in our lives, suffering and death included, is ultimately for our good (Romans 8:28, 38-39). Our Lord Jesus, in Psalm 22, identifies Himself with every believer who has been devastated by extreme afflictions. He was moved with grief and sorrow in the death of His friend Lazarus. Although He knows that resurrection is Lazarus’ blessed reward, He nevertheless partook of that deep emotion of grief in that moment (John 11). He was hurt and is able to sympathise with our own weaknesses (Hebrews 4:15). No one

on this earth has ever suffered more painfully than Jesus, particularly on His Cross, but the pain He went through sanctifies and gives purpose to our own sufferings. He is with us in the valley of the shadow of death (Psalm 23:4). He sees our grief and anguish and symbolically catches our tears and does not disdain it (Psalm 56:8). In all our experiences of pains and sorrows, He is teaching us a great lesson in life that He makes all things work together for good to those who love God and are called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28). This is our hope. Our Lord Jesus Christ is strong enough to carry us through in His bosom, for solace and comfort in all trials and adversities in life. He cares for us with His voice ringing through our ears, “Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest (Matthew 11:28-30).

### **Our Confession in the Journey**

The comforting fact is the reality that we are not alone in our journey. We have, in our midst, our God whose mercy endures forever—and He is carrying us through. We immerse ourselves in the hope of His promised resurrection, building a new life around our loss. He enables us to accept, in faith and hope, the reality of our loss and frees us to go on living toward normalcy with our eyes steadfastly fixed on Him who

is faithful. With confidence on His faithfulness, we learn to turn the things that we cannot change and alter loose. Now, all is well with our souls. In this assurance we rest, stand, and confess.

We solemnly confess that God in Christ is steadfastly faithful in moments of intense grief and deep afflictions. We confess that no matter how far down we may go into the abyss of suffering, He will be there for us, accomplishing His promised comfort and rest for our weary and tired souls.

We heartily confess a sovereign God who controls and rules our afflictions which He sends into our life with a view of His faithfulness (Psalm 119:71,75-76). He sends them to us. Afflictions do not just happen; they have their source in God’s loving hands. He sends them in order to attain His purposes in us and to show His faithfulness. Though they may be heartrending, we see His caring hands faithfully moulding us after the image of His Son Jesus Christ. That is His righteous and wise way of weaning us away from our own pride, waywardness, and sinful inclinations in order to lead and keep us on the path of life and glory. In humbling us through grief and sorrow, He is preparing us to be fit for our glorious place in His dwelling. The blessed



way of afflictions—even death—is the design of God for the accomplishment of His purpose in us. It is the Lord’s desire that we may be with Him (John 17:24).

Going through these painful experiences, we confess that afflictions are necessary (1 Peter 1:6-7). My wife and I needed them. My child needed them. All God’s children need them. Afflictions are necessary for our good and spiritual growth. In our afflictions, we experience His merciful loving kindness in Jesus Christ. Through the way of afflictions, God prepares us for the highest good in the presence of the Lord in His kingdom in heaven. For our afflictions work for us a far more

exceeding and eternal weight of glory (2 Corinthians 4:17-18).

We may not fully comprehend how that will be because we live in time and are limited by our finite minds. However, just a thought of the promise is enough to bring us comfort and patient endurance until the end. When we see the Lord in His glory, all our sorrows, pains, and sense of loss will be no more; and all tears will be wiped away (John 16:22).

Continuing in our journey, may all of us lean on the preserving grace of the loving arms of our ever merciful and ever faithful Father in heaven, committing and trusting all our lives unto His care (Psalm 37:5). Yet, even

though at times we may find ourselves in ways of darkness, suffering, and death, His comfort is with us always: “That I with body and soul, both in life and in death, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ; who, with His precious blood, hath fully satisfied for all my sins, and delivered me from all the power of the devil; and so preserves me that without the will of my heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from my head; yea, that all things must be subservient to my salvation, and therefore, by His Holy Spirit, He also assures me of eternal life, and makes me sincerely willing and ready, henceforth, to live unto Him” (Heidelberg Catechism Lord’s Day 1).

## Biblical Principles of Proper Judgement (Part II)

>> Matt Kortus



*Matt Kortus* is a member of Faith Protestant Reformed Church in Jenison, Michigan.

In the previous article, we analyzed the mantra of tolerance in light of Matthew 7:1-5. We asked whether Jesus forbids judging of any sort. And if we are permitted to judge, what does Jesus forbid? We concluded the last time that Jesus does not prohibit

us from making judgment. Rather, we are not only permitted, but also called as Christians to make judgments about sin and doctrine. However, Jesus does forbid us from making pharisaical judgments, which are characterised by a wrong standard (man’s own law), an improper spirit (condemning hatred), a failed self-examination (hypocrisy), and a sinful motive (self-righteousness). By incorporating this into the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus exposes both the Pharisees’, as well as our own, sinful tendency to judge in this manner. God’s people need this prohibition against pharisaical judging.

Not only does this passage establish the negative aspects of judging that

Jesus forbids, but it also gives positive principles that ought to govern the judgments that we do make. In this second article, we examine those positive principles.

In contrast to the sinful judging that God forbids, we will establish four governing principles for judging: our *standard* for making judgments, our *spirit and attitude* in making judgments, our *self-examination* before making judgments, and our *motivation* for making judgments.

First, implied in the text is the standard we must use in making any judgments. Our standard must be the Word of God. This stands in contrast to the standard of the Pharisees who judged according to their own law, rather than

the law of God. Any reproof we might offer must be thoroughly rooted in Scripture. Any stand we make against false doctrine requires proper evidence from God's Word.

Second, the text addresses our spirit and attitude in making such judgments. We must judge with a heart of mercy! When we judge others according to our own standards, we can expect God to judge us similarly (Matthew 7:2). We can readily recognise that if God, the just Judge of the whole earth, judged us according to the way we judge others, then we would all be condemned. James 2:13a gives expression of this truth: "For he shall have judgment without mercy, that hath shewed no mercy." Praise be to God that He judges His people in mercy! God's mercy is an expression of His love and manifests itself in forgiving us our sins. Implied in the idea of mercy is that the subject of God's mercy does not deserve the favour extended to them. We stand before God as wretched sinners who deserve eternal condemnation, rather than life with Jesus. Knowing our spiritual bankruptcy, we must have a lowly view of ourselves. In other words, we must be characterised by the fruit of meekness. Therefore, as we offer reproof to another or speak out against an erroneous doctrine, we must extend the same mercy, love, and forgiveness that Christ has shown to us. In addition, we must come in a spirit of meekness and humility, knowing we too are prone to sin and error.

Knowing the standard whereby we may make judgments about sin or doctrine, as well as the spirit we must possess while doing so, we may be tempted to think we are ready to begin calling out the errors of others. However, we must see the third

principle governing the concepts of judgment and reproof: self-examination. We must examine our own lives for sin, before we speak out about the sins of others. To prevent us from hastily making judgments, Jesus uses the illustration of a man who notices a speck or mote in the eye of another and goes to him with intentions of pulling it out. However, this individual fails to recognise that an entire beam or log protrudes out of his own eye, clouding his vision (Matthew 7:3-4). We must first tend to our own sins before offering reproof to our brethren. This requires a proper knowledge of our sins. To use the example from above, we must use the binoculars of God's Word to clearly point out our own sins, while also granting us charity in judging the sins of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Finally, we must see the fourth principle that governs the concept of judgment and reproof: our motivation. In contrast to the sinful pride of the Pharisees, we have the two-fold motivation of praising God and serving the brother. By making judgments based on God's Word, we aim to display the righteousness and holiness of God, rather than our own righteousness and holiness. God will not tolerate sin. God will not tolerate any doctrine that teaches justification by works. By reproofing sin and speaking out against false doctrine we seek to glorify God.

In addition, our judgments must tend to the spiritual welfare of our brethren. Matthew 18 teaches us to go to a brother who has sinned against us, not to make ourselves appear more righteous, but to help him see the sin that may be plaguing his life. James 5:19-20 calls us to convert any who err from the truth. By doing this, the

soul of a sinner is saved from death. We make judgments about sin in order to direct sinners to the grace of God.

Therefore, in answer to the question: Can we judge the lives and beliefs of others? Yes, we ought to speak out against the sinful actions of others. Yes, we speak out against doctrines and beliefs that directly contradict God's Word. Jesus commands us to determine who will receive reproof. Jesus calls us to seek out the false prophets dressed in sheep's clothing. However, in doing both of these, we must take the utmost care to avoid pharisaical judgment as characterised by legalism, condemnation, hypocrisy, and self-righteousness. Instead, we follow the command of Jesus by judging with God's Word as our standard, in a spirit of mercy, after proper self-examination, and for God's glory and the brother's spiritual welfare. May God grant us grace to follow this command.

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By making judgments based on God's Word, we aim to display the righteousness and holiness of God, rather than our own righteousness and holiness.

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# Loving Your Vocation from God



>> Elder Lee Kong Wee



Lee Kong Wee is an Elder in CERC. He is married to Dorcas and their family is blessed with two children.

## Introduction

Man is called to work. He is not to be an idle creature. One of the first things we learn about Adam as God's creation is that he was called to work. *"And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the Garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it."* (Genesis 2:15) In his beautiful and perfect home of the Garden of Eden, Adam had to work to obtain his daily food and drink. When Adam and Eve disobeyed the Lord and brought the curse of sin into the hitherto perfect creation, the mandate to work was not abrogated. Man was still called to work, but instead of his daily work being that joyful and delightful activity in which he served God, it became fraught with much difficulty, frustration, weariness and sorrow. Now his work would not only produce satisfying food, but also thorns and thistles—*'...cursed is the ground for thy sake: in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground...'* (Genesis 3:17-19) Now instead of labouring to the glory of God, the ungodly use their work as avenues to sin and rebel against God.

The child of God is not exempt from the effect of the curse of sin on his work. Often, he experiences hardship, frustration and sorrows in his daily occupation, be it in the field or in the office. Nevertheless, for him, his work is redeemed, too, in Jesus Christ. In spite of the thorns and the thistles in his labour, he can find joy and purpose in performing it, for he knows that his labour serves the higher and greater

purpose of the glory of God in Jesus Christ, being ordained by his heavenly Master that he should perform it in gratitude for his salvation. The Biblical doctrine of work (or vocation) was recovered during the Reformation when the Reformers refuted Rome's teaching that priests, monks and nuns are higher or more 'spiritual' callings than ordinary farmers and craftsmen. The Reformation teaching of the 'priesthood of all believers' not only countered Rome's false teaching and system of salvation by works, with all its elaborate hierarchy of holy orders to support it, but also propagated a new Protestant work ethic that turned every kind of ordinary labour into a sacred calling. Not only full-time work in the church, but every and any kind of work *is* an occasion for exercising holy, spiritual service to God and one's neighbour, and hence is filled with meaning, significance and value as we perform it to the glory of God. Some of you young people have entered working adulthood and many would be finishing your tertiary studies soon and entering the workforce. Hence, it is timely and relevant that we consider this matter of occupation or vocation. Because we spend a large proportion of our adult life working, it is important for us as children of God to have a proper understanding of our earthly work or occupation. Consider how much time we spend on work. For almost all of us to whom the Lord gives a regular job, we spend half, if not more than half of our waking hours working. And we do that daily for probably half, if not more, of our entire life! Yet, we probably do not give much thought to our daily routine work other than



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“...We must first understand that our primary and fundamental vocation or calling in this life is essentially not something we do, but something we are.”

viewing it as something necessary to make a living, support a family and a means of acquiring earthly goods. My prayer is that through reading this article, you would be renewed in your sense of purpose and calling in whatever area and sphere the Lord has called you to labour in, and that you would labour with increased consciousness that your work carries spiritual and eternal significance.

### The Fundamental Calling

As we approach this subject of our job or occupation, we must first understand that our primary and fundamental vocation or calling in this life is essentially not something we *do*, but something we *are*. That is, it is a matter of our *identity*, not our *activity*. That fundamental calling is the identity that we are children adopted into the Covenant family of God; we are citizens of the kingdom of Heaven. We have been bought with a price, and we belong, body and soul, to our faithful Saviour Jesus Christ. The Word of God grounds our entire life in every sphere and relationship upon this identity. In Ephesians 5:22 and 25, wives are to submit to their husbands “*as unto the Lord*” and husbands are to love their wives “*as Christ loved the church*”. *Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right. And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.*” (Ephesians 6:1,4) “*Servants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh; not with eyeservice, as*

*menpleasers; but in singleness of heart, fearing God: And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men; Knowing that of the Lord ye shall receive the reward of the inheritance: for ye serve the Lord Christ.*” (Colossians 3:22-24) In giving the Ten Commandments as the rule for all of life for Israel, whether individually, at home, or as a nation, Jehovah prefaced those commandments with the declaration of His relationship to Israel as their God and they as His redeemed people—“*I am the Lord thy God, which has brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage.*” (Exodus 20:1) In keeping the commandments, Israel is to bear in mind that they do so as a redeemed people. In other words, our entire life is a calling to live a certain way, by certain principles, with a certain goal—*because* of our *identity* as children of God. This reality and perspective permeates every aspect of our lives. Whatever God may call me to do, at home, in school, in the office, in church, it stands upon this foundation, it flows out of this fountain, it grows out of this root—that **I am a Christian before and above all else**. It is in understanding *this* calling, in living each day in the consciousness of *this* calling, that we properly live out all our other callings or vocations in this life to the glory of God, including the calling of our daily occupation and job.

### ‘Finding’ our Calling

How do I find my calling or vocation

in the area of work? Probably as children, we have all been asked the question “What do you want to be when you grow up?” Perhaps some of you who are finishing your tertiary studies very soon are asking yourself the question “What work shall I choose to do after I graduate from my studies?” But the question we ought to be asking ourselves is really “what is **God calling** me to do?” The question ought to be asked that way because our work or vocation is NOT something we choose for ourselves, but rather, it is something to which we are called—called through who we are, the circumstances God has put us in, the opportunities He opens and denies to us, the needs He places before us, etc. God has ordained every detail of our lives: the country and family we are born in, the school we go to, the circumstances and environment we grow up in, our abilities and weaknesses, our life’s experiences, etc.—so that we are ‘prepared’ for, and even ‘confined to’ a particular calling. In a sense, we have no choice! Many things in our lives are outside of our control so that we are limited in the choices we have and restricted in what we can do. A young boy may say, “I want to be a firefighter when I grow up”, but he realises when he is seventeen that he has a heart defect that renders him physically unfit to undergo the training required to be a fire-fighter. But every single thing that happens to us in our lives, without exception, are ordained of God so that we are prepared to serve



in the particular vocation which He has determined for us, which will most glorify Him. Yes, we must plan for the future, and it is legitimate to have ambitions, but we must do so with the consciousness, as well as with confidence, that God is working in our lives and circumstances to call us to *His* purpose. In ‘finding’ our calling, we must consciously and earnestly pray ‘Not my will, but *Thine* be done, Lord’.

### Behaving in Our Calling

Because the Bible is not a manual or handbook on work and work ethics, it does not spell out guidelines on how to deal with specific issues that may arise at the workplace. But it does give principles that can be applied to whatever work we do or situation we find ourselves in at work so that we know how we ought to behave at our work. “*Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path*” (Psalm 119:105)—this is true also in the area of our work.

### ***The first and fundamental principle is that we work with the consciousness that we are ‘Christian’ workers.***

This follows from the fundamental calling of our identity as children of God. It may sound like stating the obvious, but that we forget this most fundamental principle is evident from the fact that we often behave, talk, think and operate like unbelievers at our work. Among our colleagues, we need to make conscious effort to stand

by our Christian principles and values as we work and interact with them day to day, and live our calling visibly and unashamedly as Christians.

This principle means, in the first place, that *our guiding principle and standard for our behaviour at work is the Bible*. We do not conform ourselves to the thinking and standards of the world which our employers or companies may subscribe to. We abide by the rules and regulations of our workplace, as long as they do not require us to transgress the Word of God. We do not engage in office politics for that is sin against the 6th and 9th Commandments. As an employee, we respect and honour our bosses and others who exercise authority within our sphere of work because we are mindful that they are appointed of God over us (Romans 13:1-7, 5th Commandment). We answer to them for the work assigned to us. We do not murmur against them, or speak evil of them to others. In serving them and submitting to them, we know we are really serving and submitting to our Master in heaven ultimately. As an employer or supervisor, we treat our employees with respect and fairness, not abusing our authority or talking down to them, because we are conscious that we have a Master over us, and we have to answer to Him. “*Masters, give unto your servants that which is just and equal; knowing that ye also have a Master in heaven.*” (Colossians 4:1)

Second, this principle also means that in our work, we *seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness*” (Matthew 6:33). As important and necessary as our work is, we must not let it consume us. We must not get so caught up with our work that we neglect our families and the church, and harm our spiritual lives. We must not lose sight of the fact that we are pilgrims and strangers on this earth, and that this world is not our home. Our priorities are spiritual. One particular area we must guard against is missing Sunday worship because of our work. It has become increasingly common for businesses and companies to require their employees to work on weekends in the name of improving service levels or profits. Many Christians today are not disturbed by this while others justify their working on the Lord’s day as something that ‘the Lord would understand’ so long as they still try their best to attend at least one worship service and keep up with their personal devotions. Sadly, keeping the 4th Commandment is optional at best, or irrelevant at worst in most of Christendom today. If we are expected to travel frequently over weekends or work regularly on Sundays so that we miss corporate worship as a norm, we must seriously consider finding another occupation. Such work is highly damaging to our spiritual health and detrimental to the communion of saints. If we seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, then we will put

“ As important and necessary as our work is, we must not let it consume us. We must not get so caught up with our work that we neglect our families and the church, and harm our spiritual lives. ”

“ We are faithful, diligent, reliable, conscientious, and responsible workers because we seek God’s approval, not man’s. ”

congregational worship as the top priority in our lives. Everything else is subordinate to it, including our work.

In the third and final place, this principle means we are conscious that we are *salt and light* at our workplace. We must bear a good and faithful witness for our Lord in the office, at the factory floor, or at the service front desk. We are known for our integrity and honesty in dealing with people. We are helpful, considerate and compassionate towards others. We do not participate in gossiping or rumour-mongering, but speak graciously, and only the truth. We are not proud or self-righteous, as though we are always right, but are willing to listen and ready to esteem others better than ourselves. Above all, we are known to be people who fear God, love the church and love our families. In all our conduct and speech, we testify of God’s grace in our lives and give Him the glory, even in something as simple as giving thanks before we eat a meal. When opportunities arise, we are always ready to give an answer for the hope that is in us with meekness and fear (1 Peter 3:15). Our colleagues know without a doubt that we are not a law unto ourselves, that we do not seek to promote our own selfish ends and personal glory, but that we submit to and serve a heavenly Master, our Lord Jesus Christ.

***The second principle is that we work each day, conscious that we***

***ultimately serve God—not man.*** Not that we think any lesser of our bosses and supervisors, or that we need not bother about what they tell us, but it means that we are conscious as we work day to day, that in serving our bosses, colleagues and the company, we are in reality serving God and therefore accountable to Him (Colossians 3:23-24). As such, we give our *best* in everything we do, for God *deserves* nothing less than our best! (compare the Old Testament rituals where Israel was commanded to bring only animals without blemish to be sacrificed). Because we serve *God*, we dare not be lazy, do the minimum, cut corners or do slipshod work. Because we serve *God*, we do not cheat on our employers—report late, leave early, surf the Internet during work hours—or oppress our employees. We are faithful, diligent, reliable, conscientious, and responsible workers because we seek *God’s* approval, not man’s. We aim at *God’s* glory, not man’s. Because we serve *God*, our expectation of reward is also from Him. At the end of the day, our ‘reward’ is in knowing we have done an honest day’s work and our desire is to hear *God* (not man) say “*Well done thou good and faithful servant!*” In knowing that we serve *God* in our daily work, we find the motivation to do our best and understand that our work is charged with meaning and significance. For we know our work has a place and purpose in the overall plan of God to glorify Himself in the

consummation of all things in Jesus Christ.

### **Conclusion**

God has called us to work. He has prepared you and me from birth through all our life’s experiences and circumstances for the specific vocation He has planned for each of us—exactly where He wants us to be and in an area to serve Him so that His eternal purposes may be accomplished to His glory. Our work is meaningful and has inherent and eternal value. Knowing this, we work with our eye on our God and we give our best. Through our work, we express our gratitude to God for His free salvation in Jesus Christ. As we labour, we are reminded there is absolutely nothing we can do to earn our righteousness before God, but must only trust in the finished work of our Saviour on the Cross. We long for the day when the weariness of our work and our sins are finally over, and we hear our Lord say to us “*Well done, thou good and faithful servant:…enter thou into the joy of thy Lord!*” (Matthew 25:21)

\*I highly recommend that you read Prof. Robert Decker’s very helpful article at this link - <http://standardbearer.rfpa.org/articles/lord-what-wilt-thou-have-me-do>

## What is Reformed?



### Reformed Worship - Reformed In Listening (VIII)



>> Prof. Hanko



*Prof. Hanko* is a retired professor of the Protestant Reformed Seminary. His present work consists of preaching at Hope Protestant Reformed Church, writing for the *Salt Shakers* magazine, writing in a forum for the young people in Singapore, and writing new books. He has been to CERC many times and is dear to the people here.

In the last issue of *Salt Shakers* I introduced the whole subject of what Scripture demands of us when we listen properly to the preaching. I mentioned the fact that it is not easy for us to listen properly. In fact, it is so difficult that we seldom are able to listen as we should for an entire sermon.

There are two or three ideas that need mentioning first. One is that a certain obligation falls upon the minister to make listening as easy as possible. I do not mean that he must make a simple sermon that does not explain Scripture; nor do I mean that a minister must make a sermon that does not do justice to the text on which he is preaching. Such a minister sort of glides over the text, hoping that a few simple ideas will come out of it all.

In a way, it is sad that we have to talk about this. When knowledge was preserved through the spoken word because the printing press had not yet been invented, listening was necessary to learn anything and people were able to listen and retain the knowledge they heard.

When printing came along, listening was no longer as important as it once was, because it could all be written down and read and re-read. Then along came TV, with stuff so easily pushed on people that concentration was scarcely necessary. 90% of TV content has the approximate intelligence level of a five year old. It comes with appeal to the eye as well as to the ear. It dumbs down everything to an almost idiotic level. It comes at one in half-second images. It requires

almost no concentration. And so people find it difficult to “listen,” and concentrate on listening. The result is the need for a preacher to dumb down his sermons and use every trick in the trade to preserve concentration.

My brother tells a story that is worth repeating. He was up in northern Michigan and he and his family went to the best local church they could find. The minister began his sermon by telling the people that he had been away all week at conferences, and that he had had very little time to prepare a sermon. So, he said, “For a few minutes, I will splash around a little bit in the holy water of the text and hope that a few drops of heavenly dew fall on you.” He would have been better off staying off the pulpit.

A minister is obligated before God to spend a lot of time on his sermons during the week, to find all he can of the truth of God in a given text. He is like a diver who dives into the sea and strains to go as deep into the water as he can, and then fights his way back to the surface. So he dives into a text, goes as deep as he can, and fights his way back to the surface.

But his work is not finished when he has done this. He must then make a sermon which is very clear and able to be understood even by the children. He must work on formulating the sermon in a logical and easy-to-understand way so that his use of language itself makes listening easy. A well-prepared sermon is one that is carefully crafted and formulated so that each word counts.

There are writers, as you know, whose writing, while very worthwhile, is so

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In our hearts the Spirit works so that a sort of miracle takes place: we hear, through the words of the minister, Christ speaking.

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attractive and well-written that one enjoys the writing for its own sake. Sometimes, when I feel my writing getting stale and colourless, I spend a few hours reading some excellent writer, just to get again the “feel” of good prose. I like especially Winston Churchill’s *History of the English Speaking People*. A minister has the obligation to make his sermons as easy to understand and as interesting as he possible can, while still being faithful to Scripture.

Rev. Hoeksema’s great gift as a preacher was—and I heard him preach many times—to take the most profound subject in Scripture and make it so clear that everyone knew what he meant. Many did not agree with his theology and said so, but no one, so far as I know, ever said that they did not understand what he was saying.

But we may not push the blame for not listening on to the minister—if he preaches the whole counsel of God!

I am writing about listening.

We believe that preaching is Christ speaking to His people.

Christ even talks about the fact that where two or three are gathered in His name, He is there. And in John 10 he says that His sheep even hear

His voice and follow Him. They can recognise His voice in distinction from the voices of thieves and robbers who try to make people believe that they are true shepherds.

In other words, Christ speaks, but He speaks through the minister. The minister must remember that when He preaches; and the people must hear—in what the minister says—Christ himself speaking.

How is that possible? When Christ Himself is in heaven and we are on earth?

The answer to this question is that our hearing of Christ is a spiritual hearing that is in our hearts. And that spiritual way of hearing is possible because Christ gives us His Holy Spirit who works in our hearts as the minister is preaching.

It all begins when we listen to what the minister has to say. We take our places in the pew saying to ourselves, “Christ has something He wants to say to me this morning (afternoon). I want to hear what Christ has to say to me because He is my Saviour, who is speaking to me important words that mean my salvation.”

In our hearts the Spirit works so that a sort of miracle takes place: we hear, through the words of the minister, Christ speaking. If we listen so that we are listening to Christ, then we will “hang on His every word.” I find it hard to explain what I am trying to say. Let me use an illustration. I had a professor in Seminary, Rev. Ophoff by name, who from time to time would forget the material we were studying and give us an impromptu lecture on some subject. I do not know what prompted him to do this. I do know that the subject had nothing to do with the lesson. I know, too, that he had not prepared it.

Although he was the most absent-minded man I have ever met, and

although he was naïve to the point of despair, he possessed a more profound understanding of human nature in its unfallen state, its fallen state, and its redeemed state, than any man I have ever met. And on some aspect of this general subject he would speak—in a sort of informal way.

Those lectures held me spell-bound. I was so completely captivated by them that I was totally oblivious to anything else. I even forgot to take notes—to my later despair. I can still recite, verbatim, whole sections of those speeches, although all this happened 60 years ago. I literally hung on every word.

This total absorption in a sermon does take place in our lives as well. Not all the time. Probably not even most of the time. But sometimes such complete and all-consuming listening does happen. I can’t explain otherwise how I can remember sermons I heard as a child.

I presume such listening is a combination of the excellency of the sermon, the delivery of the sermon, my own spiritual state and the absence of distractions. But such listening is wonderful. It is so all-consuming that when the minister says, Amen, we can’t believe he is finished.

This kind of listening happens rarely, I suppose; but the trouble is that we have so many things on our minds – work, vacations, making money, studying, exams, troublesome bosses, pleasures of all sorts, problems in life, that we get lost in thinking about all these things and are totally unaware that we are turning a deaf ear to Christ.

But what Christ has to say to us is so important that to listen to Him makes the difference between whether we go to heaven or to hell!

Listening is difficult, chiefly because we are spiritually not very strong and our sins intrude in our listening.



# THE OFFICE OF ELDER

>> Prof. Hanko



*Prof Hanko* is a retired professor of the Protestant Reformed Theological School. His present work consists of preaching at Hope Protestant Reformed Church, writing for the Salt Shakers magazine, writing in a forum for the young people in Singapore, and writing new books.

## The Importance of the Office of Elder

There is no church of Christ where the divinely ordained offices are not present. This may sound like an exaggerated statement, but it is true. Let me explain. Christ is present in His church through His Word and Spirit (Lord's Day 21/54, 18/47-48, 19/51). Christ's Word comes to us through the offices of elder, minister and deacon. If a congregation does not have God-ordained offices, Christ's Word is not in that church. And Christ's Spirit never, never works apart from Christ's Word.

Christ is present in His church through the office of Elder. It is an extremely important office in the church. The Biblical church government that all Presbyterian and Reformed churches hold to is called "Presbyterian." The word "Presbyterian" comes from the Greek word *presbuteros*. That word means "elder". These churches have recognised the importance of the office of elder.

A minister is also an elder (1 Timothy 5:17). He is an elder who primarily preaches. The rest of the elders rule in the name of and on behalf of Christ.

It is the responsibility of every member of the church to see to it that there are qualified elders in the congregation.

## The Old Testament Origin of the Office of Elder

Because the church in the old dispensation and in the new dispensation is one church, we must expect that both dispensations

had office bearers in the church. In keeping with the typical character of the Old Testament (OT) church, the offices were prophet, priest, and king. Ministers, deacons, and elders are the New Testament (NT) carry-on of the OT offices.

Ministers speak the Word of God—as did the prophets. Deacons show the mercies of Christ as the priests did in the OT. (See the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-27) to see how the priests in Jesus' day failed in their calling.). Elders rule over the congregation—as kings did in the OT. Elders are God's kings in the church in this dispensation.

It seems as if there may also have been another body of elders in the OT (Exodus 18:14-26, Numbers 11:24-25). Elders are often mentioned in Scripture as those appointed to be judges in matters of dispute and in dealing with certain sins. This body of elders became the Sanhedrin of Jesus' day. It was replaced by the body of elders Paul ordained in the churches (Acts 14:23).

## The Duties and Qualifications for Elders

The unique obligation of elders is to rule in the congregation. To rule in the congregation, they must assume responsibility for all that belongs to the life of the congregation as a whole, as well as for the upright walk of every member.

The elders rule with the authority of Christ and Christ rules His church through the elders.

“ Every male member who loves the church must ask himself whether God wants him to serve in an office. Paul himself lays down the principle: “If a man desireth the office of a bishop [elder], he desireth a good work”.

The elders rule over all the members, but they rule also over the minister. A minister must do what his elders tell him to do. He is not his own boss and may not rule over the elders, as many ministers try to do. But the elders rule over themselves too—each elder being responsible for the conduct of the other elders (Church Order: Articles 16, 23, 64, 81).

The rule of the elders must be the exercise of Christ's rule over the church. It must be firm, but merciful—as Christ is. The elders must insist on holiness and punish evil-doers. They must be compassionate with the weak and patient with God's recalcitrant sheep (1 Peter 5:1-3). Ezekiel warns the elders that they are responsible for the spiritual safety of the people of God (Ezekiel 33:1-9). So responsible are they that they must warn the people against all the evils that threaten the church.

The qualifications for elders are found in 1 Timothy 3:2-7. Not highly educated men; not men successful in business; not men with charisma; not men with organisational skills—men are not qualified for such reasons. Spiritual qualifications are necessary.

I give thanks to God that I had good elders in my early years in the ministry. I would not have succeeded in the ministry without them. But they had nothing about them that the world considers important qualifications. At least two of them never finished grade

school. But they were wise men who had a great love for the church.

### Our Calling Towards the Office

It seems to me that all the calling we have with respect to the office of elder can be summed up in the words, “The zeal of thine house hath eaten me up” (Psalm 69:9). You will recall how the disciples of Jesus remembered these words at the time when Jesus cleansed the temple (John 2:13-22). Jesus had a zeal for God's house that devoured Him, and that actually did devour Him when He died for His “house” or church to cleanse God's house from sin.

The zeal that Jesus had is a zeal that all of us ought to have. The church of Christ is the most important institution in the whole world. It is so important that everything that happens in all of history is only for the sake of the church and the salvation of God's elect people.

God has, in wonderful grace, given us a place in that church. We manifest in the world our place in the church by being members of a local congregation. While the whole Church of Christ is our joy, the local congregation, of which we are members, is to us most important. It is the one institution around which our whole life revolves. We need it for our salvation and for the salvation of our children and grandchildren. We love that church and our zeal for it eats us up.

### Our Calling With Respect to the Office of Elder

Our elders have a difficult task. They must rule the congregation so that the souls of God's people are cared for (Hebrews 13:17). It is a task they cannot do in their own strength. We must pray for them and teach our families to pray for them. Criticism of their work is a sin.

Every male member who loves the church must ask himself whether God wants him to serve in an office. Paul himself lays down the principle: “If a man desireth the office of a bishop (elder), he desireth a good work” (1 Timothy 3:1). He must do this self-examination by honestly, before the face of God, seeing whether he has the gifts mentioned in 1 Timothy 3. He must do this, not in the proud way in which a Pharisee does this, but in a desire to serve in the church.

If he concludes that God has given him these gifts, he must await God's call with the prayer that God will give him the privilege of serving Christ in the office of elder. To do less is to be like Moses who tried every way possible to get out of going to Egypt to deliver Israel. Moses' hesitation and even refusal was not humility; it was blatant sin and God was angry with him (Exodus 4:1-14). God is angry with you if you do not desire and prepare yourself for the office of elder.



# News from the Churches

## SINGAPORE

On 1<sup>st</sup> February 2015, Pastor Lanning, on behalf of the session, held an informational meeting to inform the congregation of session's recent developments with regards to the possibility of entering into a sister church relationship with Covenant Protestant Reformed Church (CPRC), Ballymena, Northern Ireland. During this meeting, Pastor Lanning went through the letter that would be sent to CPRCNI. The letter was divided into 2 sections: Background and Moving Forward.

The "Background" section comprised, among other matters, of Pastor Angus Stewart meeting with the session of CERC on 5<sup>th</sup> May 2014 with regards to the possibility of entering into a sister Church relationship with CPRCNI. Both parties concluded that there were no obstacles in establishing a sister church relationship. Also, Pastor Lanning has been granted the privilege of speaking at the 2016 British Reformed Fellowship (BRF) conference.

The "Moving Forward" Section stated that the unity of the Churches can only be found in the unity of God's word (Amos 3:3, Eph 4:1-4). After much discussion, it was noted that CERC and CPRCNI are united in significant doctrine directives, such as the truth of sovereign and particular grace, over and against the well-meant offer of the Gospel.

In the letter, a proposal was also made to use the PRCA constitution for sister church relations as a guide for the constitution for the sister church relationship between CPRC and CERC—since both churches have previously relied on that for their sister church relationships with the PRCA. CERC's sister church relationship with the PRCA implies that we give PRCA the opportunity to respond before entering into an ecumenical relationship with another church.

## PHILIPPINES

On 25<sup>th</sup> February, Berean PRC hosted the Classis meeting of the Federation of Protestant Reformed Churches in the Philippines. On 15<sup>th</sup> March, Pastor Smit and his family moved to western Michigan, USA, earlier than 1<sup>st</sup> July—the original date which the Smit family were supposed to move. This change has become necessary because God, by His gracious providence, has blessed the Smit family with the expected birth of their 9<sup>th</sup> child (Psalm 127:3). Medical insurance policies regarding the expected birth along with the significant time delay involved in having the baby born in Manila made it better for the Smits to move earlier. Lord willing, the baby is expected to be born around 8<sup>th</sup> June.

## INDIA

The India Mission Outreach involves the Georgetown Protestant Reformed Church (GPRC) of Hudsonville, MI and Pastor Paulraj of Vellore, India. A few years ago, Pastor Paulraj, through donations, was able to purchase a 2+ acre parcel of land in Vellore, which was aptly named "Eden". This land will be used for the building of Grace Foster Home, which will consist of two buildings, one for the boys and the other for the girls. By God's providence, the boys' building has since been completed, with the full electrical hook up recently installed. Twenty-eight boys, as well as Paulraj and his family, will move into the boys' building.

In mid-February, Paulraj and others met with architects to discuss further plans for the girls' building. Lord willing, the construction for the girls' building begins early March. Once completed, twenty-two girls will move into this building.





The congregation of the Protestant Reformed Fellowship of Pittsburgh, PA



Commemorating CK's 15th anniversary and CKS' 7th anniversary



Church CNY Visitation - a time of fellowship with exhortation, singing and lunch



Arrival of Bernice, Paul Ong, Noelene, and Samantha were greeted by a large group of youth upon their arrival in America

Join us at CERC Church Camp 2015; all are welcome!

Date: 16-19 June 2015 (Tue-Fri)

Theme: Ready to Meet Christ?

Speaker: Prof. Barry Gritters

Venue: Harmoni One (Batam, Indonesia)

Email [cercbatam2015@gmail.com](mailto:cercbatam2015@gmail.com) for enquiries!

We are planning to include a new rubric into future SS issues! Readers will have the opportunity to write in their questions on doctrine and Christian living which may be answered in this rubric. We would like to invite SS readers to note down such questions and email them to [cksaltshakers@gmail.com](mailto:cksaltshakers@gmail.com). Thank you!

### Covenant Evangelical Reformed Church

We are a Reformed Church that holds to the doctrines of the Reformation as they are expressed in the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism and the Canons of Dordt.

Place of Worship  
11, Jalan Mesin #04-00  
Standard Industrial Building  
Singapore 368813

Time of Worship  
Morning Service:  
9:30am to 11:00am  
Afternoon Service:  
2:00pm to 3:00pm

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