

Reformed Herald

GOD'S SOVEREIGN GRACE IN CHRIST

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Ready for Spring?

These beautiful almond tree blossoms were captured by RCUS member Melinda Henderson near Shafter, California

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Editorial – "I'm a Pretty Good Person"

Even if someone agrees with you that the God of the Bible exists, they may still not be interested in your attempts to evangelize them. When told they need to put faith in Jesus Christ, they will probably answer you, "No thanks. I don't need your religion and your strict, uptight morals to tell me what to do. I can live a free and happy life just fine, and I know God will let me into heaven. I am a pretty good person, after all."

How do we respond to such thinking? It is VERY common. It is found in our own families, quite often. It is even found within our own hearts. The basic human religion is that we can be good and God will like us. But is that what God says? Shouldn't we let God tell us what goodness is, and what it means for Him to like us? We must listen to the God Who does exist, not the god of our human imaginations. The God Who exists speaks plainly in Romans 3:12. *"There is none who does good, no not one!"* So, how do you answer the excuse, "No thanks, I'm a pretty good person"? Romans 3 suggests this answer. 1: NO you are Not! 2: You already know this. 3: Why are you willing to risk eternity? Don't you know where 'pretty good people' go?

NO, you are not a good person. Neither am I. This fact is one thing that all people have in common. You don't have to have met someone before to know this about them. They are already described in Romans 3:10–11, *"As it is written: 'There is none righteous, no, not one; 'There is none who understands; There is none who seeks after God.'*" I just heard someone offer a 'wise' but skeptical response to a man who said he was searching for God. The skeptic said, "I didn't know God was lost!" While he may get a quick laugh, the truth is this. God is not lost, but man is lost. We need to seek after God. But because of our sin, we are not going to find the true God unless He first shows Himself.

The deepest problem with a person who is an unbeliever is their self-deception and lies. They claim to be a pretty good person, so they do not really need the Christian religion. Yet the facts prove that they are NOT a good person, and they actually KNOW this. By saying, "I'm a pretty good person," they are also confessing they are partly bad! They know they don't measure up to God's standard. So, to soothe their guilty conscience, they have to compare themselves to axe murderers and terrorists. Those are the 'bad people.' But of course, the Bible says that any sin condemns us to eternal punishment of body and soul in hell. Every sinner is on death row. And it makes no difference what specific set of crimes got the criminal in the jail cell next to you in death row. We are all guilty before a Good and Holy God.

So, what is our hope? Stop pretending to be a good person, a better person than the next guy or girl. After all, don't you know where "pretty good people" go? Why are so many people in this world willing to risk eternity for this lame excuse? It does not matter if we are a little bit better than the terrorist in the eyes of the world. It does not matter if our legacy in this world is a bit more positive than the self-absorbed dictators of human history. What matters is how we look in God's sight.

How humans look in His sight is plainly revealed in Scripture. For example, Romans 3:19–20 declares that the Law of God reveals that all the world is *"... guilty before God."* *Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin."*

So the issue is plain. Each of us must acknowledge our sin, our condition as those who are NOT good. Each of us must acknowledge that we have believed the lies that we are good enough. Each of us must flee to Christ alone. That is the only way to be sure we get to heaven. You and I can't get there by our own good deeds! You can only get to Heaven by Another Person's good deeds, in your place. Because eternity isn't guaranteed for those who are 'pretty good.' Eternity is ONLY for those who are ABSOLUTELY GOOD. And there is none Who is good like that, except God.

Rev. Kyle A. Sorensen,
Manitowoc, Wisconsin

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2015 Report of the President Pro-tem of Covenant East Classis of the Reformed Church in the United States

Acts 2:42 says: *And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*

John Calvin comments on this verse: "Wheresoever the pure voice of the gospel doth sound, where men continue in the profession thereof, where they exercise themselves in hearing the same ordinarily that they may profit, without all doubt there is the Church." Our marching orders, given to us by Jesus Christ, are to shepherd the flock of God as we preach the whole counsel of God, faithfully administer the sacraments, and exercise church discipline (Belgic Confession, Article 29). I am thankful to God these "marks of the true church" continue to be present among the churches of the classis.

As President *Pro-Tem*, I am encouraged as I read the reports of the pastors of classis. God continues to fulfill his promise to build his church. Matthew 16:18 says: *And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.* We see this in the encouraging report of Rev. Ron Potter and the work the Lord is doing to build his church in Blue Bell, PA. We also see this in the reports we hear from Pastors James Sawtelle and Tim Marinelli in Golden Valley, MN, about the work at Redeemer and among the Chinese at the University of Minnesota. And we see this encouragement in Gettysburg, PA. Rev. Jay Fluck writes: "2015 has been a year of answered prayer. We became a member congregation of the RCUS! That meant that we had oversight and responsibility to a body beyond ourselves. The involvement with and oversight by a faithful denomination is a great comfort."

I am also encouraged as I read of the faithfulness of the pastors of classis in preaching and teaching the Word. God's sheep are being fed with the Word as each of you labors diligently and faithfully. Rev. Steve Altman writes: "I am very thankful to belong to a church and a denomination that places a premium on the Word of God as one of the means through which we come face to face with the wonderful grace of God each and every Lord's Day."

As I read the reports I was also reminded of the importance of prayer. Rev. Marinelli writes: "As I am charged not only to labor in the Word but also in prayer (Acts 6:1-4), I have continued in daily prayers for the needs of the church, of the families, and of the individual members of Redeemer. Rev. Sawtelle and I also come together for weekly meetings which



include a time of prayer for the needs of the church. Finally, I have been involved in Redeemer's monthly congregational prayer meetings, praying not only for the specific needs of this body but also for the RCUS, the church worldwide, and for various mission works." These words are an encouragement to us all to continue laboring in the Word and in prayer individually, in our families, and in the congregation. If the church

where you are serving does not have a regular prayer meeting, I want to encourage us all to think about beginning this important practice. From the very beginning, the monthly prayer meeting has been one of the most important aspects of the church where I

Continue laboring in the Word and in prayer individually, in our families, and in the congregation. If the church where you are serving does not have a regular prayer meeting, I want to encourage us all to think about beginning this important practice.

am serving (Emmaus Road Reformed Church). Let us continue to devote ourselves to praying for each of the pastors and churches of classis, including Northland Reformed of Kansas City, MO, as they pray for God's will in providing their next pastor. May we remember to pray for our brother, Rev. Randy Klynsma, as he has now begun to labor in Omaha. How thankful we are to the Lord for bringing Mr. Steve Carr to Grace Reformed in Northwest Arkansas for "such a time as this." Let's continue to pray for the students under care of classis. And let us also keep Rev. Harvey Opp and his wife in our prayers "for guidance regarding his sense of calling and desire to serve in the church, however the Lord leads." The importance of prayer is especially seen in light of what Rev. Sawtelle writes: "I think the greatest challenge in the church today is the general lack of commitment that plagues our entire culture. People seem to want a church home with all that entails. But participating in worship, Bible studies, prayer meetings, youth group meetings seems ever to take a back seat to whatever else they have going. Commitment to 'self' is the defining spirit of our times. We find this spirit even among many life-long Christians. The culture has influenced the church in this area. Meeting this pastoral and spiritual issue will be something that we will be seeking to address more thoroughly in the coming year. Pray for us in this."

I also want to remind us of what Rev. Potter wrote in his report; namely, the words of Ephesians 4:3 where Paul urges the church to be *eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*. One of the important results of the work of the gospel in the church is unity.

This unity is something we must pray for in each of the churches of classis. All of us have conflict in our various relationships because we are all sinners. Sadly, when conflict is not handled biblically people will sometimes abandon the relationship and leave the church. We all know examples of this kind of division. Handling conflict biblically is a way that we grow in holiness, and it is an important part of growing in our love for each other as we remember Paul's words that we are to *live in harmony with one another in accord with Christ Jesus* (Romans 15:5).

I am also thankful as I read your reports of the communion of the saints in the churches. It is important for us as pastors to set an example for the congregation as we shepherd the flock and show hospitality. What a blessing it is to spend time with the people of God in their homes, over a meal, or gathering together as families. Rev. Sorensen's words are important for all of us to remember as we pray that each congregation will grow in their love for each other: "Last year I spoke in this report of the doctrine of the communion of the saints being seen as the "friendship of the saints." As can be expected, there has been mixed progress in this regard. We all have room for growth. I have seen people excited and thriving because of the Christian friendship which is enjoyed in this congregation. I have seen others who see that same friendship in some places, but see a total lack of concern from other church members, and so they are turned off to any involvement with the congregation whatsoever. Let us recommit ourselves to love one another."

May God continue to bless the preaching, teaching, sacraments, shepherding, and fellowship that takes place in the churches of Covenant East Classis to the praise of his glorious grace (Ephesians 1:12).

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In Christ's service,

Rev. Ryan Kron

Eden Prairie, MN

Report on the Annual Meeting of Covenant East Classis

“Bless the Lord, oh my soul. Oh my soul, worship His holy name.” With these words, the choir of St. Paul’s Evangelical Reformed Church (Hamburg, MN) lifted their voices to praise our Redeemer during the worship service on Tuesday evening, March 1, 2016. So stirring were the words of this song that, before he began his sermon, the *now*-licentiate, Mr. Steve Carr, took a moment to thank the choir for reminding him, and all who had gathered for Classis, of the ultimate purpose for this meeting: to serve the Lord with joy and gratitude and so glorify Him who, through giving His Son, has shed upon us blessings incomparable and innumerable—a purpose that can easily be forgotten in the business of the day, whether at a Classis meeting or doing the laundry at home.

Prior to the opening of Classis’ formal business, Rev. Jim Sawtelle led a pre-Classis meeting (on the evening of February 29th) which focused on managing the relationship between the pastor and the Consistory. This sparked a brainstorming of formal ways to improve communication among church officers in order that the work of the church may be faithfully accomplished and that the needs of her members (including the pastor and his family) may be sufficiently addressed. Not only was this session productive, it also fostered a tone for the Classis meeting—one of brotherly love and of a “*striving together for the faith of the gospel*” (Philippians 1:27).

On Tuesday, March 1st, President *Pro-Tem*, Rev. Ryan Kron, called the 31st Covenant East Classis Annual Spring Meeting to order, with ten ministers and ten elders in attendance. The tone of brotherly love set in the previous evening was further promoted by Rev. Kron’s convicting yet encouraging devotion on Ephesians 4:31-5:2 entitled, “Fighting Bitterness.” With this passage, he challenged us to imitate the loving-kindness of God by weeding-out all roots of bitterness in our hearts and walking together in love, even as Christ Himself loved us and gave Himself for us as a sacrifice to God to please Him.

Following the reading of the Standing Rules of Classis by Rev. Kron, the election of the officers of Classis resulted in Rev. Kyle Sorensen as President, Rev.

Dan Schnabel as Vice President, Rev. Ron Potter as Stated Clerk, and Elder Jim Drewes as Treasurer. This Classis welcomed a number of first-time elders including Mr. Dustin Rothwell of Emmaus Road RCUS in Eden Prairie, MN, Mr. Chris Campbell of Northland RCUS in Kansas City, MO, and Mr. Royce Gray of Peace RCUS in Garner, IA. Classis welcomed licensure candidate Mr. Steve Carr, who currently serves as Stated Supply for Grace RCUS in Rogers, AR. At a point later in the meeting, his wife (Crystal), his children, and his parents (Rev. Kevin and Mrs. Kathy Carr) attended and were welcomed. The members of Classis received and extended the right hand of fellowship to Rev. Tim Marinelli of Redeemer RCUS in Minneapolis, MN, for the first time. Classis also welcomed Mr. John Camp, a member of Emmaus Road RCUS, who is seeking to be taken as a Student Under Care of the Classis. Mr. Camp, along with Rev. Dylan Rowland (a congregationally ordained pastor of an independent congregation in Waverly, OH) would later be interviewed regarding their orthodoxy and intentions for potential ministry in the RCUS. Rev. Shane Lems of Hammond Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Hammond, WI, served as the fraternal delegate from the Midwest Presbytery of the OPC, bringing us greetings along with a brief report.

As the regular business of the meeting continued, the permanent committees read their various reports. Of note, the Executive Committee’s report expressed thanks to Rev. Randy Klynsma for his time of service on the Executive Committee. Rev. Klynsma has received a call and has begun his labors in Omaha, NE—a mission work in the South Central Classis. The Executive Committee also recommended that the Consistory of Northland RCUS provide the assistance of oversight as needed for Grace RCUS of Rogers, AR, and this recommendation was approved. The Church Camp Committee reported on the success of the camp of 2015 but expressed a need for additional funds from the churches of Classis to assist with camp expenses. Discussion also noted the need to call upon the churches of Covenant East Classis to encourage their youth to attend camp as

it is a wonderful opportunity not only for a time of fun fellowship, but also for the development of godly friendships and personal growth in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The President *Pro-Tem* Report on the State of the Church, delivered by Rev. Kron, was encouraging as he noted the clear and tangible ways in which our Lord Jesus Christ has shown Himself faithful, even in our Classis, to continue to build His church in this past year (as promised, Matthew 16:18). Rev. Kron also encouraged the ministers and elders to promote and ensure the faithful preaching of the whole counsel of the Word of God, the devotion to prayer for the work of the church, and the promotion of unity and hospitality within the local bodies represented.

Likewise, the parochial reports from the various ministers that followed were encouraging. I found myself giving thanks and being challenged by these men who are faithfully devoting themselves to feeding the flocks to which they have been called to serve. Their efforts in the weekly preaching of the Word, teaching various Bible studies, and reaching out to their surrounding communities through works of

evangelism are things for which we should praise and give thanks to the Lord. It was a blessing to hear of the advancement of the work in Blue Bell as well as in Gettysburg where Covenant RCUS became a RCUS congregation in the past year. It was a blessing to hear of the new faces in our churches, receptions of new communicant members, and births and baptisms of covenant children. It was a blessing to hear of the Lord's provision of new officers serving these bodies. It was a blessing to hear of the faithful work of catechizing our youth in the doctrines of grace. It was a blessing to hear of church budgets being met. It was a blessing to hear of church members coming together regularly for times of prayer. It was a blessing to hear of members bearing one another's burdens in times of loss, grief, and sorrow. Amidst these blessings we also heard the need to pray for the provision of officers for a few of our churches currently in need (including a minister for the vacancy at Northland RCUS), and that the Lord would do a work such that some of our ministers may become unburdened from worldly employments and financial needs, freed to devote themselves exclusively to the work of the church. As the ministers read their reports, the body paused to pray for each of the churches.

Following the constitutional questions to the elders of Classis, and a few other reports, the licensure examination for Mr. Steve Carr began and continued until Classis recessed at 5:20 p.m. As part of his licensure examination, Mr. Carr was to preach in front of Classis, and this was incorporated with the worship service at St. Paul's RCUS where her members joined in worship Tuesday night. Rev. Mark Larson of Peace Reformed Church (Garner, IA) conducted the service, and Mr. Carr preached his sermon, *Jars of Clay* (from 2 Corinthians 4:7-12). In his sermon he encouraged us in the truth of our union to Christ—a union that not only enables us to endure our sufferings as we live through them, but also enables Him to be glorified as He lives through us, with the all-sufficient grace and power of the risen and living Christ on full display in our frailties and weaknesses.

On Wednesday morning, the licensure examination with Mr. Carr "in the hot seat" continued. The morning devotions were led by Rev. Steve Altman who proclaimed a wonderful, convicting, and encouraging message (*Love Without Hypocrisy*) from Romans 12:9-10. In God's providence, this intensely practical message continued to emphasize the urgent need to show brotherly love with the self-abasement and self-sacrifice with which our Elder Brother, the Lord Jesus Christ, has loved us, displaying the love of the Father for us, as Christ laid down His life at the cross. Rev.



Mr. Steve Carr signs Licensure



Altman challenged us personally to display such love not only as a body of ministers and elders towards one another, but as husbands and fathers in our families and as brothers towards our fellow brothers and sisters in the household of God.

By the afternoon, Mr. Carr's examination ended. With the vote of Classis, Rev. Sorensen announced to Mr. Carr that he had successfully sustained the examination. After Mr. Carr read and signed the Form for Licensure and was presented with his Licensure Certificate, Classis extended the right hand of fellowship to him. It was then determined to postpone his ordination examination to a later date. *Licentiate* Carr did very well on his exam and made a good confession! We are grateful and rejoice to see the Lord of the Harvest preparing and sending laborers out into the fields. Along with Mr. Carr, we give thanks for Mr. Austin Reed (member of Northland RCUS) and Mr. Campbell (elder of Northland RCUS), both of whom are seminary students of Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary and Students Under Care of Classis. We give thanks for Rev. Rowland and Mr. Camp who also are looking towards potential service in Christ's kingdom within the RCUS.

Following Mr. Carr's examination, the work of Classis continued with the reports of the Standing Committees. Classis voted to provide for various requests for benevolence as well as to support particular ministers, churches, and mission efforts within the Classis.

Throughout the days of meeting, the cold of the outdoors was contrasted by the warm hospitality we received inside from the members of St. Paul's RCUS who sacrificially provided us with food and fellowship and enabled the work of the church to go on smoothly.

As the Classis meeting concluded, Christ's kingdom continuing its advance, it was a blessing to see the Lord abiding with and remaining faithful to His church. As we labor on in this next year we by faith continue to look, with praise and thanksgiving, for incomparable and innumerable blessings from Him from whom all blessings flow.



Rev. Tim Marinelli

Minneapolis, MN

“Love Without Hypocrisy”

Devotion delivered at Covenant East Classis, March 2016

⁹Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good.

¹⁰Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another.

(Romans 12:9-10, NKJV)

Brothers, will you please turn with me in your Bibles to the Apostle Paul’s Epistle written to the Romans, the twelfth chapter, where I would like to look with you at verses 9-10. As many of you know, Monday night we talked together about the relationship that exists specifically between a pastor and a consistory. A very helpful discussion ensued where we spoke of our relationships to the church, to our spouses, and even the relationships of our spouses with the consistory, and in some respects the church. Though the discussion was not necessarily just about our relationships, I could not help but keep thinking of Paul’s words here. They apply to all of our relationships with one another. It is important to cultivate those relationships in the context of Biblical love as Paul describes it here and elsewhere in his letters to the churches.

I think that it is safe to say that if someone were to just observe the workings of our culture here in the United States, it would be very reasonable for them to walk away holding to the assumption that our culture is obsessed, or at least very concerned, with the whole idea of love. Our music groups and singers from every genre continually sing of it. I think just in my own lifetime I could easily rattle off a very lengthy list of examples. Foreigner wanted to know what love is. Tina Turner wanted to *know what love had to do, had to do with it*. Randy Travis boldly claimed that his love *was deeper than a holler, stronger than the rivers, higher than the pine trees growing tall up on the hill*. I could go on, and you would discover among other things my questionable taste in music. Our movies and our television programs continually portray a notion of love. Our literature speaks of love in very lofty terms. We even have a day, February 14th, Valentines Day, set aside to celebrate love.

Of course, in all of these examples we see pretty quickly that Paul is speaking of something else entirely here. All of these examples deal with a romantic concept

of love, but the Apostle Paul is telling us here about the love *that all Christians truly ought to be expressing towards one another*. It is a much loftier love. It is a love that is carried forward by the very Spirit of God working in us and through us. It is the highest form of love for fallen human beings like us to consider. The love that Paul is pointing us to here *is the love that is but a manifestation of our love to God Himself*. You remember Jesus, in Matthew 22, telling us the first and great commandment is to love the Lord our God with all of our heart, all of our soul, and all of our mind. The second commandment is like unto the first, *that we should love our neighbors as ourselves*. On these two commandments, Jesus said, hang all of the Law and the prophets. This is a summary of the Law! So, as Paul begins now in Romans 12 to speak about just some of the virtues that ought to be present in the Christian life, he starts where he usually does: *he starts with love*.

The wonderful thing here-is that he does not leave us guessing about love, does he? He tells us exactly what true love, that is, *what Christian love is, and what it is not*. His goal is to move us towards exactly this kind of love being present in our lives, to embrace this kind of love, and to keep us on our guard against settling for something significantly less. If you are looking at these two little verses and wondering to yourself how this could be a comprehensive picture of love, I would point out that everything that Paul has described in this twelfth chapter, *presupposes this very love!* That in and of itself tells us just how critical it truly is that we get this right in the context of the Church of Jesus Christ!

Look at how he begins here to further expound upon this in verse nine: *Let love be without hypocrisy*. This is truly a very short sentence that is loaded with meaning! In just five simple words, Paul tells us much about the nature of this love that ought to be flowing forth from Christians. Let’s consider it both positively and negatively here. Both what is being implied that love

does, and what love in fact does not do. *Love ought to be sincere.* It ought not be faked, or forced, or even coerced from us. It must not consist of empty words. It must be genuine. We are to understand that this love is that which flows from humility, which Paul has already stated. I'll come back to that in just a moment.

But first, look at that word hypocrisy. That word hypocrisy is a very familiar word to us. The word hypocrite literally means "play-actor." And of course, you know what a play-actor is. It means pretending to be someone or something that you are not, as an actor does upon the stage. He pretends to be somebody else. He is not that person, but simply pretending to be that person. He is knowingly playing a role. Though the meaning here is much bigger than just this, Paul is affirming that genuine love is not something that you pretend to have. Love is not putting on a mask. Do you know what that looks like? I can give you some examples.

Hypocritical love abounds in the world and the church alike! It can be witnessed in the many different and devastating forms of Gossip. We are familiar with Gossip. Someone opens up to you about some of the difficulties that they are having, some of the struggles that are weighing them down in this life, and you feign concern and compassion, nodding, smiling sympathetically, affirming your understanding of their particular trial. Yet inwardly you despise them for their weakness, and you simply cannot wait to tell someone else about what you have just heard- saying in the dark, and in secrecy, what you know should not be uttered in the light. You point out the sins of others to everyone except the person who is struggling under the weight of that sin. Gossip. It is wicked. It hurts the people of God. Paul says it is not a part of the kind of love that ought to work to restrain our wagging tongues. It manifests itself when we speak in lofty, very Christian sounding buzz words and terms about things like praying for one another, sympathizing with one another, crying with one another, knowing that we have no desire or any real plans to actually do so. Hypocritical love is seen even when we speak often of our deep and abiding love for God and His Church, while inwardly we refuse to let go of our petty differences and grudges with one another. It rears its ugly head every time two or more get together to discuss what so and so was wearing, saying, or just fill in the blank. Gossip, slander, angry outbursts, or even secret outbursts that we bury deep and think that we are able to hide from everyone else- all of them speak to this kind of hypocritical love.

Paul wants for the Church of Jesus Christ to know *that these things ought not be!* All of these sins, and more like them, are all antithetical to the kind of genuine love that Paul says, ought to be manifested in the true people of God! And brothers I think that we would do well to think and meditate on this truth. We are living in a day when the church of Jesus Christ all too often is content with superficial niceties. Flash a plastic smile, nod approvingly at things that really do not interest you at all, secretly cling to the differences between you and others and your right to be offended. Just fake it and know that deep down you are so much better off than most, so much more righteous than most. Paul wants you to know this morning that superficial niceness, putting on a smile and faking it while in your heart you

It always breaks my heart to see well-meaning Christians fall into biting and devouring one another. We so easily justify our irritation with one another. We cling to our right to be offended by anyone and everyone and everything.

remain indifferent, is not at all consistent with the kind of love that is found in the true Church of Jesus Christ. You and I are being called here to a real, tangible, active, and genuine love for one another! Do you love like this? Do you desire to be loved like this? *Without hypocrisy.*

It always breaks my heart to see the way in which well-meaning Christians can fall into biting and devouring one another. We so easily justify our irritation with one another. We stand up to fight anytime our puny "kingdoms of one" come into what we perceive to be danger. We cling to our right to be offended by anyone and everyone and everything. We actually foolishly think that by clinging to our grudges that we are being pious. But what we need to see this morning, is that all of those things are evil! Gossip, anger, hate, slander, keeping long records of wrongs committed against the most high majesty of myself! They are all sin, and they are not found in the Apostle Paul's description of the first great fruit of the Christian life!

Yet we do these things don't we? We recognize these sins in our own lives. Why? Well, once again beloved it's because we have bought the lie that the Christian life is

all about me and mine! We readily exchange those pronouns like “we” and “us,” for better sounding ones like “I” “me,” and “mine”! Paul is calling us on it here. He is calling us back to the understanding of the Gospel that changes our quest for self! Do you understand? Look, one of the wonderful things about the Gospel is that it does not pull punches when it describes us apart from the wonderful grace of God in Jesus Christ! It doesn’t avoid the discussion of what I am and what you are as fallen human beings. And we wince when we hear it. We are desperately wicked. We are sinners standing in the dire need of God’s grace! We are usurpers of God’s throne. We want nothing in this flesh as much as we want to rule our own little empires of dirt!

The Gospel does not avoid that fact. It places it on a billboard! It’s there upon the cross! It says to us that Jesus Christ had to come to this earth. He had to put on this flesh with all of its infirmities, sin excepted. He

As a Christian, you are not allowed to only love “in theory.”

had to live a lifetime of suffering, which culminated upon the cross where He actually at one point cried out in a tormented lament, *My God, My God why have You forsaken Me!* And the very reason that all of that transpired was because you and I have a sin problem that needed to be dealt with! A problem that we ourselves are incapable of dealing with. God’s justice demanded it! So Jesus Christ left the glory that was His with the Father and He came to suffer and to die in order to deal with it! That is the Gospel! Pain and suffering and desperation and painful laments happened because we have sinned, we do sin, and we still sin after being redeemed! We gossip, we hate, we are far too easily displeased with one another! We hold onto grudges because we think it is our right! And Paul says, “Please, brothers and sisters in Christ, consider the Gospel and love as those who have known the love of God! The Love of a God who does not hold grudges against our innumerable offenses if we have been covered in the perfect righteousness of the Son!”

I think one of the things that so easily leads us away from the love that ought to be our reality in light of the Gospel is that we think that as long as there are those who are worse than us that God will see that we are really not all that bad! That is antithetical to the Gospel! If you are not that bad, then Jesus Christ died in

vain! Too often in the Church we become those who are experts at seeing sin in everyone else and complete amateurs when it comes to seeing it in our own hearts. That always leads us away from love and headlong towards wickedness. But Paul says, this love (that is, un hypocritical love, genuine fruit-of-the-Spirit love) abhors evil and clings to the good! Paul has already very clearly said that for those who are having their minds renewed through the Word by the power of the Spirit, we know the good. We know the perfect will of God and, knowing it, we love. We love because He first loved us, at our most unlovable! Remember that the next time you hear gossip. Or the next time you are tempted to despise your brother or sister in Jesus Christ for whatever petty offense they have committed against you!

Abhor what is evil and cling to what is good. And he doesn’t stop there. He says *be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another.* You are not allowed to love in theory as a Christian. Paul is not here speaking of love as if it were a gift that only some possessed and exercised within the church. It is the fruit of the Gospel. Seeing God’s justice poured out on another for our sin changes us! It makes lovers of self into lovers of others: others who, just like them, do not deserve the

grace of God in Jesus Christ! We ought to be affectionate with one another-not in a superficial way, but really and truly concerned for one another. It ought to be our joy to help one another!

Love is active! Be kindly affectionate with one another! It really needs no exposition does it? We ought to care. We ought to delight in sharing one another’s burdens and joys. We ought not to be so concerned about our fences and the protection of our stuff. We ought not to be so protective of our privacy. We ought not to strive for our own honor, but rejoice when honor is given to those we love. We should know when to speak the truth in love and when to keep our mouths shut tight. As those who have tasted the wonder of God’s grace, we really should not have a problem getting over ourselves.

Can you imagine a church like that? Paul could. In fact he says, “Look, this is what the church should be. This is what the Gospel points us towards.” It always breaks my heart to see and speak with those who have found in the church more hurt than they even found in the world. They found people who were quick to speak of their disgust for the way that they dressed, for the company that they kept, for the behavior of their children, or even more disgusting, for the color

CONTINUED ON PAGE 22

2015 Report of the President of Western Classis of the Reformed Church in the United States

Esteemed Fathers and Brethren:

The purpose of the President's Report is to summarize "the state of the Church" (Article 81). This is done by evaluating the various reports presented to Classis.

However, I must admit to being rather nonplused by some activities of the pastors of the Western Classis. One, for example, mentioned that he had set himself on fire! Another reported that his congregation now has a 20-gauge shotgun in the office and armed guards in the back pews. And a third graded his own sermons. His average is a good B+, although at least one message achieved a commendable A+ and another rated a solid F.

I'm confident that the Bible did not have such things in mind when God's spokesmen declared that we are a *peculiar people* (Deuteronomy 14:2; Titus 2:14; 1 Peter 2:9), but advertisements of our eccentricities at least bring a little chuckle to those who read them, proving once again that our beloved RCUS does not lack for character (or characters!).

On a more serious note, your reports testify to the marvelous grace of God. They express a profound gratitude to God for his covenantal faithfulness to his people. The marks of the church are evident in our congregations. Committee reports demonstrate a love for and commitment to the Word of God as our ultimate authority. Even our "retired" ministers are anything but superannuated; as the Sabbath Psalm says, *They shall still bring forth fruit in old age* (Psalm 92:14).

The Preaching of the Gospel

I'm glad to report once again that the preaching of the Word of God is faithfully carried out in our congregations through Lord's Day sermons, Sunday school instruction, Bible studies, catechetical classes and membership classes. Without a doubt, our uncompromising commitment to the truth of God's Word and the doctrines it teaches is our greatest strength. I say

this with humility, knowing that none of us (least of all myself) has done anything to deserve our gracious Lord's merciful kindness.

To advance the kingdom of our Savior, the pastors of the Western Classis have been and continue to be involved in many different kinds of labors. Some serve on the faculty and/or boards of Heidelberg Seminary and/or City Seminary. Others labor with Westminster Biblical Missions. Pastor Doug Schlegel will miss the first day of this year's Classis meeting due to a trip to Eastern Europe (he was under the mistaken notion that our meeting was scheduled to take place next week). Pastor Hank Bowen has also contacted an organization called *Reformation2Germany*, which seeks to plant churches in Germany that are modeled after the sixteenth-century Palatinate church. The leaders of this organization were unaware that an emigrant version of the Palatinate church still exists. Here at home, Pastor Jimmy Hall expresses a desire to engage in a church planting effort in Reno, NV. And finally, several of you mentioned that you are writing books on various topics or, as is the case with Pastor Valentin Alpuche, translating Reformed literature into the Spanish language.

As I read your reports, I was also impressed with the number of churches that now use SermonAudio.com as a means of communicating the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Your sermons are available to anyone who has an internet connection, anywhere in the world, at any time. In fact, they're available instantly. Sermons preached in Sacramento, for example, are often online before we lock the doors to go home, thanks to the diligence of one of our deacons. The positive side of this is obvious. For very little money our ministries are much bigger than they used to be. In some cases, there may be more people listening online than attending our services. But there's also a negative side to SermonAudio.com, viz., it provides no way to contact listeners. We can't invite them to church because we have no idea who they are. Thus,

we cannot expect a superabundance of visitors from this service alone. Perhaps its efficacy can be improved somewhat by cross-linking it to our church websites and other social media.

I'm not suggesting that we give up using SermonAudio.com. Far from it! I can't tell you how many times members of the Sacramento church have expressed their appreciation for the fact they can hear their own pastors whenever they have to miss a service due to illness, travel or some other providential hindrance. But I am recommending that we make good use of methods that actually put us in contact with others.

Let me give you two examples of what I mean:

- To a large degree, SermonAudio.com has eclipsed radio ministries. This is no doubt due to its cheaper cost and easier access. But radio ministries, by offering free CDs and literature, have the advantage of obtaining contact information for those who call in. Pastor Alpuche reports great success with this. He writes, "The Lord has truly blessed our radio ministry. We are giving away Reformed booklets to our audience, and they call me every Sunday asking for them."
- On the other hand, there's no substitute for actually going out to where the people are. The Apostle Paul preached anywhere – in marketplaces and synagogues and along riverbanks. One of our

congregations has adopted this strategy and has invaded a local college. As a result, it now hosts six Bible studies, which give Pastor Michael Voytek "many opportunities to counsel and pray with" the students. "The increasing number of students who attend our Sunday services" also encourages him. The Lord has blessed this outreach. Pastor Voytek notes that the average number of visitors per Lord's Day is twelve.

These are not the only examples of outreach mentioned in your reports. Evangelism is a high priority for several of our congregations. Yet, what gives me overwhelming joy is that every mention of evangelism in your reports is coupled together with prayer. Our outreach efforts must always start at the throne of grace. That's how it must be, since we confess that God alone can transform a sinner into one of his dear children. It takes an act of sovereign mercy to bring even one person to Jesus Christ, let alone many.

We should also note that the Western Classis currently has two students preparing to proclaim the glorious gospel of grace: Mr. Colin Samul and Mr. Matthew Davis. At this meeting we will examine Mr. Samul for licensure. Mr. Yevgeni Kogay, a licentiate in the OPC who seeks to transfer to the RCUS, is hoping to complete his examination as well. Further, the elders of the Sacramento church are recommend-



ing that Classis add Mr. Paul Liberati, a member of the Sacramento congregation and a student at City Seminary, to our list of students under care.

The Sacraments

Your reports indicate, and the Clerk's statistics confirm, that the sacraments are properly and regularly administered in the churches of the Western Classis. The frequency of the Lord's Supper varies between four and twelve times per year. The frequency of baptism, of course, is determined by need, as the Lord brings new converts and covenant children into our fellowships.

Christian Discipline

Church discipline is critical for the health of the body of Christ. Every believer needs to learn self-discipline, as the Spirit of God conforms him or her to the discipline of the gospel. The mutual admonitions and exhortations of members one to another are part of this process.

Sometimes our faithfulness to Christ demands formal discipline. Your reports indicate that such discipline, though often painful, is nonetheless carried out. Our statistics show that fifteen individuals were "lost by erasure or discipline" (down from twenty-six the year before). We grieve for them at times, particularly for those who have been removed from the Lord's Table, but we never grieve for them without hope. Instead, we cast ourselves on the certain mercy of a God who is always faithful to his promises.

Whenever discipline is necessary, we hope and pray for the offender's repentance. The apostle Paul delivered the incestuous man of Corinth to Satan *for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus* (1 Corinthians 5:5). Question 85 of our catechism also anticipates the possibility of restoration when it asks, "How is the Kingdom of Heaven shut and opened by Christian discipline?" Because we do not know to whom the Lord will grant repentance, we must steadfastly hold the gospel of salvation before each of them. With great joy, Pastor Tracy Gruggett testifies to God's restorative grace. He was privileged to oversee the restoration of two individuals last year — one was a member who had been suspended, and the other was a man who had been excommunicated several years earlier.

We can thank God for encouragements such as these. As pastors and elders, we always struggle with

What gives me overwhelming joy is that every mention of evangelism in your reports is coupled together with prayer. . . That's how it must be, since we confess that God alone can transform a sinner into one of His dear children.

the temptation to think that we should base our actions on anticipated outcomes — if we do certain things, we can make it work. But the results in Bakersfield remind us that the Lord doesn't call us to act based on our own prognostications, but to obey his commands and leave the results to him.

The Western Classis was also involved in disciplinary issues this past year. At a special fall meeting, the body heard three appeals, which resulted in each case in the reversal of actions taken by the original judicatory.

Membership and Finances

Membership statistics continue to be somewhat disconcerting. During the 2015 calendar year, the churches of the Western Classis lost a total of 21 communicant members. Only two congregations — San Diego and Yuba City — reported gains. These two churches added 1 communicant member each. This leaves us with a total communicant count at the end of the calendar year of 637, the lowest it's been since 1999. The total baptized membership is 854. The Western Classis hasn't seen a lower total membership since 1995, when we had about half the number of churches that we have today.

The financial statistics are a mixed bag of sorts. Overall, the giving of our members increased slightly (0.01%) in 2015, for which we give God thanks. However, only about half of the churches met their guidelines to Classis. Of particular concern is the Home Missions fund. But two churches also gave to specific needs within the Classis, thus helping to offset some of our concerns. The Treasurer, Mr. Chris Fellersen, will give a full report to this body.

With seven of our congregations having a communicant membership of 25 or less, finances continue to be a concern. It is particularly a concern for the Chico congregation, since Classical and Synodical funding

for this work has now ceased. Pastor Gary Mancilas, however, reports that the church's deacons continue to fulfill their duty by "making known... the needs of the church... [and cultivating] the spirit of liberal and cheerful giving." Likewise, due in part to the loss of seven communicant members, the Los Angeles congregation failed to meet its budgetary expectations and had to draw from its reserves. Brethren, let us keep the temporal concerns of all of our churches, especially the smaller ones, before God in prayer!

One of the overtures that the Western Classis will be asked to consider this year concerns the Article 81 questions to the elders. This overture seeks clarification as to when and under what circumstances a "yes" answer can be given to the question, "Is the temporal contract between minister and people adequate to meet his temporal needs?" That is, is a church fulfilling its financial obligation to its pastor if the pastor must rely on outside work, a wife's income, or a pension from a previous employer in order to survive? Are his needs being met if neither he nor the church can afford to make contributions to his retirement plan or if there are no provisions for his post-retirement housing? Since the Lord has *ordained that they which preach the gospel should live of the gospel* (1 Corinthians 9:14), this is a question that we must take seriously.

Special Committee Reports

The two special committees of the Western Classis will be reporting this year.

The committee studying Two Kingdom Theology is finding it increasingly more difficult to wade through the volumes of literature being published on this subject, but comes with a report that it believes addresses the basic issues. One of its recommendations is to send the final report to Synod for its consideration and action.

The committee on Child Safety is ready to present some of its findings, but asks for another year to complete its assignment.

Retired Ministers

Several retired RCUS pastors reside within the bounds of the Western Classis (*viz.*, Lloyd Gross, Vernon Pollema, Neale Riffert, Dennis Roe, Gene Sawtelle, Paul Treick and Jim West). Each of these men continue actively in the service of Christ, although in some cases their ability is limited by their health.

Five retired pastors remind us that our race – serving the Lord Jesus in this world – will soon come to an end. Pastor West wrote, "Nevertheless, I am acutely aware that life is much shorter than before, making the urge to be productive for Christ all the

more intense!" Pastor Treick faced the threat of the villainous "C-word" this past year, and thankfully reports that "no prostate cancer was found." The trials of Pastors Roe and Riffert were more severe, requiring extensive hospital care and the very real possibility of awaking in the sweet presence of our dear Savior. Using the words of a Southern Gospel hymn, Pastor Pollema calls us to cherish the days we have left while anticipating our glorious homecoming:

One day closer home; one less day 'til I see Jesus.
One more day to tell somebody God's the only
One to free us.

If I live to see tomorrow, when this day is past and
gone,

No, I don't feel any older, but I'm one day closer
home.

Brothers, we press on, not hopelessly chasing after a mythical fountain of youth to save us from the unrelenting forward march of age, but rather confident that our *labour is not in vain in the Lord* (1 Corinthians 15:58). When the Lord calls us home, he will doubtless raise up many others to pick up where we leave off.

Further Comments

Before closing, I would like to make a few comments about matters of concern to the Classis that do not fit neatly under any of the preceding headings.

In his report to this body Pastor Schlegel notes that times are changing, and the first change that I noted in his report is that his Scripture quotations come from the New King James Version of the Bible. The elders of the Sacramento church are also considering the possibility of recommending a change to the local Constitution that would allow the NKJV to be used in the church's public ministry. Over the next year, the elders will assess the needs and concerns of the congregation. Whether there's enough support to make this change remains to be seen.

Change also seems to be in store for the Grass Valley church and the Stockton mission work that it oversees. As you know, Pastor Roe retired from his pastoral position last summer. Shortly thereafter, Elder Chris Case resigned from his position on the Spiritual Council and left the congregation. This left Matthew Davis as the only local elder, although Pastor Jonathan Merica and Elder Greg Goehring continued to serve on the Consistory. At the Consistory's request, the Executive Committee met with the elders and recommended that it would be in the best interest of both works to separate, with the Stockton work coming under the oversight of the Modesto church, and the Grass Valley Consistory being augmented by the men of the Sacramento (or another) Consistory.

On February 14th of this year, the members of the Stockton work voted to transfer their membership and oversight per the Executive Committee's recommendation. The Modesto Consistory had already agreed to assume oversight. Lord willing, the members of the Stockton work will be dismissed to the care of the Modesto church in the near future.

The situation in Grass Valley is more complex. The Grass Valley Consistory decided to follow the Executive Committee's recommended course of action in regard to the Grass Valley congregation. The Consistory had also decided not to continue Pastor Mayville's services as pulpit supply. However, before the congregation had an opportunity to vote on the Consistory's recommendation, Pastor Mayville, "at the request of Pastor Emeritus Roe," submitted a letter to the members of the congregation offering his services as a temporary pulpit supply on a part-time, half-salary basis, with a view toward possibly making the relationship more permanent. At a congregational meeting held on February 21st, the congregation tabled the Consistory's recommendation and adopted a motion from the floor to convene again on March 6th to consider Pastor Mayville's offer.

I mention this because concerns were expressed about the oversight and direction of the Grass Valley Consistory at the fall meeting of the Western Classis. As you can see from the foregoing, this situation presents a number of pastoral concerns, anomalies and Constitutional questions. Elder Davis requests counsel on how to proceed.

The Western Classis currently has two churches with vacant pulpits. The Anderson church is looking forward to Mr. Samul passing his licensure examination with the hope of eventually calling him as its pastor. Mr. Samul believes that the church's resources will allow him to minister there for at least eighteen months – longer, of course, if the Lord mercifully grants growth. At present Mr. Davis is teaching Sunday school and filling the pulpit in Grass Valley, with RCUS pastors administering the Lord's Supper when requested.

Without a doubt, the day in which we live is one of powerful spiritual warfare. In your reports, several of you mentioned your particular battles. Pastor Sam Powell speaks of members of his congregation "struggling with intense chronic pain, [concerns for] elderly parents, and those whose bodies seem to be falling apart." Yet, he also reports that the congregation remains "joyful, even in tribulation; hopeful, even in pain; rejoicing, even through tears; and always growing in the Lord." Pastor Paul Henderson reminds us of the great theological warfare that rages all around and encourages us to be always "on the 'attack' with the glorious good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ...!"

All in all, the Western Classis is faithful to its task of proclaiming the glorious grace of Jesus Christ. May the sovereign King of nations see fit to crown our labors with his blessing!

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Christ's servant and yours,

Rev. Frank H. Walker

Sacramento, CA

The tenor of the Classis is one of heightened alert over dwindling manpower (membership) and resources (guideline giving). Of course, we are not to fear. For the Lord knows what we need. Praise God that the growing conviction is to put first things first by preaching the gospel to the lost and shepherding God's people.

(Matthew 6:33)

Report on the Annual Meeting of Western Classis

The Western Classis of the RCUS convened for its 31st Annual Session on March 1, 2016, in the stately two-story building of Grace Reformed Church in downtown Willows, California. Willows is slightly over a one-hour drive north from Sacramento and two and one-half hours from San Francisco. President Frank Walker called the meeting to order at 1:00 PM with seventeen ministers and thirteen elders present. Three pastors were absent, namely two of our retired pastors (Gene Sawtelle and Lloyd Gross) and one active minister (Tom Mayville, due to his employment). The remaining pastors made it, although burdened with varying degrees of poor health. Our brother Neil Riffert testified of the marvelous grace of God delivering him from death's throes in his present home state of Texas in order to be at this meeting. He hopes to relocate his family back to California in the near future.

The host minister Eric Bristley welcomed the delegates and led them in rousing praise to the Head of the Church with the hymn "Hallelujah, Praise Jehovah." Then he gave a devotion entitled "We Do Not Lose Heart" and opened the session with prayer. Rev. Frank Walker, Rev. Hank Bowen and Mr. Chris Fellersen were re-elected respectively as President, Stated Clerk, and Treasurer. Rev. Paul Henderson won over incumbent Rev. Tracy Gruggett by one vote in the second ballot for Vice President. There were no new churches nor ministers added to Classis. Rev. Gil Baloy introduced Mr. Gary Davenport as a first-time elder from Covenant RCUS, San Diego. We were grateful to see once again Elder John Heerema of Trinity RCUS, Modesto, who has been encumbered with sickness for several years. That evening, the Rev. Valentin Alpuche conducted the worship service. Rev. Jim West proclaimed a message of gospel hope entitled "The Greatness of God's Love for a Bad World," based on John 3:10-21.

The President's Report confidently affirmed once more our firm commitment to maintain the marks of the true church: the faithful preaching of God's Word, proper and regular administration of the sacraments, and necessary church discipline. Regarding the third mark, there were three appeals that were made to

Classis, which were finally adjudicated in a special fall Classis meeting. Presently, two churches have vacant pulpits. Elder Matthew Davis, a student-under-care, exhorts and teaches in one such congregation in Grass Valley. The Anderson church anticipates calling Mr. Colin Samul upon his passing his licensure examination. Treasurer Chris Fellersen presented a gloomy financial prognosis owing to decreasing guideline giving of several congregations. The tenor of the Classis is one of heightened alert over dwindling manpower (membership) and resources (guideline giving). Of course, we are not to fear. For the Lord knows what we need. Praise God that the growing conviction is to put first things first by preaching the gospel to the lost and shepherding God's people. (Matthew 6:33)

The parochial reports written by "watching and praying" pastors provide us an insightful look at the goings-on of our individual congregations. It is a vital vista to our knowing the work of the Holy Spirit in our churches. The President's Report is a helpful summary of them as well. How can we pray intelligently for one another's needs without such strategic knowledge? Though it takes more paper and costs more money, I appreciate that our Clerk goes the second mile to include the parochial reports in our Classis Abstract.

One change to the roll of Classis was the listing of Rev. Dennis Roe as Pastor Emeritus. We appreciate the Synod Clerk, Rev. David Fagrey, forwarding periodic health briefs on the progress of Rev. Richard Stetler's wife Heidi. Her surgery went well and she is at home resting and recovering. They thank the Lord for your prayers and support. How important are our wives to us in the ministry!

The brethren welcomed the two special reports, entitled the "Two Kingdom Theology" and "Child Safety in the Church." They are the fruit of long (in the first case two years long!), hard work by the respective study committees. May God give us clear and cogent understanding of these matters. Let us pray that the Holy Spirit grant humility and grace to receive the truth and apply their spiritual benefits to our churches accordingly.

Three fraternal delegates were welcomed and seated: Elder Michael Krabbendam representing the Classis Pacific East of the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC); Rev. Angelo Contreras of the Classis Pacific Northwest U.S. (URCNA); and Rev. Wayne Forkner of the Presbytery of Northern California and Nevada (OPC). Mr. Krabbendam from Chilliwack, British Columbia, is the second cousin of Rev. Henry Krabbendam (OPC), a friend to a number of us in the RCUS. According to Rev. Walker, he was instrumental in saving the life of one of his daughters many years ago! Mr. Angelo Contreras spoke on the joy of the mutual bond of Christian love that we share as fraternal bodies. Like Mr. Contreras, Mr. Wayne Forkner is no stranger to our Classis and greeted us warmly in behalf of his Presbytery.

The licensure examinations began on the second day of Classis. Mr. Samul started the day by giving a devotion entitled "The Power of Christ in Human Weakness," based on 2 Corinthians 12:7-10. Mr. Samul sustained all of his examinations, including the recitation of the Heidelberg Catechism. He was licensed and extended the right hand of fellowship by all the men followed with prayer by Rev. Tracy Gruggett. On the third and last day, for the morning devotion, Rev. Gil Baloy spoke on "Christian Contentment" from Philipians 4:10-20. Mr. Yevgeni Kogay, a licentiate of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, also was examined for the second time but was not passed. Mr. Paul Liberati, a recent member of Sacramento Covenant Reformed Church, and student at City Seminary, was interviewed on the floor and was brought under the oversight of Classis as a student-under-care.

"But the Word grew and multiplied." (Acts 12:24) How exciting it is to observe the work of missions in our backyard, as it were! The three mission congregations of Western Classis are Rehoboth Reformed Church in Cerritos, Valle de Gracia ("Valley of Grace") Reformed Bible Church in Shafter, and Calvary Reformed Chapel in Stockton. All of them are in California, of course. Each one of these continues to blossom in its own unique way. While Rehoboth Reformed Church experienced a decline in membership last year, fruit is beginning to be seen in an ongoing Bible study outreach (count six of them!) called "Living Well Bible Club" at Cerritos College Campus. Several students are now regularly attending the worship service. Three individuals are pursuing membership and one man recently became a member. Praise the Lord!

In Shafter, Rev. Valentin Alpuche leads a Sunday evening worship service with the piano accompaniment of his son. He holds Bible studies in his home. In addition our only RCUS Hispanic minister con-

tinues to teach English lessons three days each week. These classes have turned out to be marvelous opportunities for Bible teaching, counseling, and prayer. Rev. Alpuche proclaims God's Holy Word on an AM station, which is followed up with the mailing of free literature upon request. His ministry of the translation of Reformed works into Spanish extends well beyond Shafter. It reaches as far away as the Latin Fellowship of Reformed Churches in Costa Rica, South America. Amazing!

The Stockton congregation has a strong commitment to being a faithful witness to the Truth in their community. The financial giving is indicative of their heartfelt desire to see this work thrive. God may have provided the answer to the prayers for a new meeting place when a location was recently discovered that fits their financial and location needs. According to Rev. Jonathan Merica, the mission congregation comes under the new oversight of Modesto. Covenant Reformed Church of Grass Valley is to be commended for many years of faithful shepherding of God's people in Stockton. The three mission works will continue another year receiving classical and synodical support. The Bible warns us not to *"despise the day of small things."* (Zechariah 4:10). Therefore, let us lift up all of our precious mission churches in humble yet hopeful supplication to our ascended Lord who alone has been given all power in heaven and earth.

This report would not be complete without expressing in behalf of the brothers of Western Classis our hearty thanks to the congregation of Willows. All of our basic needs were marvelously met by the attentive and friendly care of those who served us with scrumptious meals each morning, noon, and evening that we were there. The concluding Thursday afternoon devotion was given by Elder Joe Gross entitled "Something You Say When You Have Already Said a Mouthful," from 1 Corinthians 16:13-14. He then closed in prayer. The final roll call was taken by the Stated Clerk with sixteen ministers and twelve elders. As is our practice, President Walker led the delegates in the recitation of the Apostles' Creed and the Lord's Prayer. After he pronounced the Benediction, all join together in the singing of the Doxology. The 31st Annual Western Classis was adjourned. In the will of God, the next Annual Session is scheduled to meet at First Reformed Church in Yuba City, California, on March 7, 2017, at 1:00 PM.



Rev. Gil Baloy

San Diego, CA

“The Power of Christ in Human Weakness”

Sermon delivered at Western Classis, March 2016

⁷And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure.

⁸For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me.

⁹And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

¹⁰Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.

(2 Corinthians 12:7–10, KJV)

Perhaps one of the most difficult aspects of living in this fallen world, is the reality of human weakness and human frailty. Apart from our sin, nothing makes us feel more exposed and more ashamed than the reality of our weakness—whether it be mental weakness, emotional weakness, or physical weakness. Weakness seems to tell us that we have failed, that we don't measure up, and even that we might be cursed. And of course, in the context of ministry (and service in the Church), these often appear on a podium for all to see. And worst of all, they tend to be unchanging. Isn't it true that those areas of your life that are weak tend to be systemic? They tend to be chronic in nature. They are not one time issues that you simply get over. So they often leave us questioning: “What is the purpose of my weaknesses, and most importantly, how can I live with them and bear with them (or even overcome them)?”

Well the Apostle Paul answers these basic questions here in 2 Corinthians 12 through the example of his life. And he does so with the basic idea that our weaknesses are given to us by Christ, for our good, therefore we can (and must) bear them in faith. In other words, our weaknesses are to be dealt with in the exact same way as our sin; by looking outside of ourselves to the all-sufficient grace of our Savior (as Paul recounts in verse 9). And so as we examine this text, we are going to do so by looking at why Christ gives us weaknesses. First, we will examine how they are given to humble our pride (which we find in verses 7 and 8). Second, we will examine how they are given to magnify His power (as Paul goes on to teach in verses 9 and 10).

As we will see, then, both of these truths require us to bear our weaknesses in faith.

How our weaknesses are given to humble our pride (verses 7-8)

So first, let's examine the relationship of weaknesses to pride. Verse 7 reads,

“And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure.”

Paul here describes this weakness of his as a thorn in the flesh, as a messenger of Satan. What's this mean? There have basically been three different understandings in Church history as to the identity of this thorn or messenger. Some understand this to be a reference to mere physical ailments. There are those who speculate that Paul may have been partially blind, or may even have had epilepsy, and they point to various passages in the book of Acts as evidence for this. So, if true, those would have rightly been considered weaknesses in his flesh. However, others (such as Calvin and Luther) understand this to be a reference to his spiritual ailments; in other words, his besetting temptations and discouragements in the Christian walk. This certainly fits with Paul's use of language. Paul usually speaks of the flesh as a reference to our sinful nature. Likewise, our sinful nature is what is subject to the temptations of Satan and his angels. So supposedly his spiritual or moral weakness is what is in view here. That's the second interpretation. Others understand this to be a

reference to the persistent opposition that he faced in his ministry, which discouraged him and therefore functioned as a constant “thorn in his flesh.” Think about how often Paul was overrun by those who opposed him so that he could not complete his work in a given town. This exposed his weakness and frailty as a human being. In fact, he mentions just that in verse 10, as he refers to reproaches, persecutions, and distress from those who oppose him. This is also very similar to what God said to the Israelites back in Numbers 23:55. He warned them: “*But if ye will not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you; then it shall come to pass, that those which ye let remain of them shall be pricks in your eyes, and thorns in your sides, and shall vex you in the land wherein ye dwell.*” Even in the Old Testament, spiritual opposition was referred to as a thorn in the side. This is the most likely interpretation of what Paul was referring to.

However, the reason that Paul speaks in the form of a metaphor, and doesn’t just come out and say what it was, is so that we might apply what he says here to all manner of weaknesses (see how he lists them in verse 10). The “thorn in the flesh” can come to us in the form of physical ailments (as they did, for example, in the book of Job), it can come in the form of temptations and discouragements, and it can also come in the form of opposition and abuse. All of these things tend to get in the way of how we would like to function and live comfortably as Christians and as servants of God. And so they beg the question, “Why are they there, and why do we have them?” Well, Paul answers that twice in verse 7.

“And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure.”

With Paul, the temptation would have been to become exalted in his ministry. As we observe in the context, Paul here has been defending his ministry against the charge of the so-called “super-Apostles,” (the false Apostles that he mentions throughout the book). He lists off his many qualifications, from his faithfulness to the Gospel to the suffering that he’s endured for the Gospel’s sake. No sooner does he mention all of those qualifications than he also mentions that, just like anyone else, he would have been prone to pride because of them. It would have been very easy for Paul to think of himself as the source of truth, or as the cornerstone of the Church, because of

all that God did through him. Yet there is only one source of truth and one cornerstone of the Church. So God graciously gave him difficulties to humble him and keep that in view. We even see him acknowledge this fact when he says, “a thorn in the flesh was given to me.” He confesses that his trials and weaknesses were not simply accidental. They didn’t just happen. They were given to him. And he recognizes that they were given to him for his good that he might not fall under the influence of pride, which he associates in 1 Timothy 3 with the condemnation of the devil. This was the purpose of this “messenger of Satan,” this “thorn in the flesh;” to overcome him, and any trust he may have had in himself, that he might not be overcome by pride.

As Augustine said when commenting on this verse, “On the words of the Apostle, the poison of pride, cannot be cured except by poison.” This was true in the life of Paul. Notice that he never says he was actually ever given over to pride; but that in retrospect, he rec-

Our weaknesses are to be dealt with in the exact same way as our sin; by looking outside of ourselves to the all-sufficient grace of our Savior.

ognized that his weaknesses were given to keep him from being like these false Apostles. The very thing that seemed to be a curse on his ministry in comparison to them, was actually the greatest blessing; in order to keep him low, and the glory of God high.

And the same goes with us. One of the purposes of our weaknesses and our trials, is to remind us that we are simply creatures. If pride says, “I will ascend to the heights of heaven, I will be like the most High God,” our weaknesses yank us right back down to earth and remind us of our place. Just as we are placing our trust in our own abilities and experiences, the difficulties of life (whether it be in the form of sickness, depression, or opposition) are meant to force us on our knees that we might keep our trust in God. You see, weakness and difficulty is ultimately for our good since it uproots the very foundation of our sin (our pride). Our weaknesses are given to humble our pride, so therefore we learn to bear them with patience.

We observe that with the example of Paul here. He interprets his situation through the lens of faith. As he describes it in verse 8, he bore it with patience and prayer. He writes, *“For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me.”*

Now, the word “besought,” there, might come across to some as a bit old-fashioned in our current use of English. But what the word means in Greek, is “to ask earnestly” or “to plead.” Whatever the nature of this “thorn in the flesh” was, Paul clearly found it to be intense and disturbing. It wasn’t pleasant. He wanted it gone. It is a perfectly natural and fitting response to suffering to want it to end. Yet notice that his response wasn’t to lash out or to complain. That is what we so often do in our pride and entitlement. Rather, Paul brought it straight to God. His suffering drives him to God. This is exactly what the “thorn in the flesh” was meant to do. Paul says he asked the Lord three times to take it away. He didn’t just ask and then turn away when he didn’t get immediate results. He continued to ask and continued to rely upon God. This shows us great perseverance and patience on Paul’s part, and prayer was the focal point of that. Prayer functioned as the hinge upon which his potential pride was converted into patience and humility. His trials were the force that turned the hinge, and shut the door on his pride, by forcing him into prayer. It’s not hard to see how this works in us as God’s people. Pride demands to be in control. Our weaknesses prove that we are not in control. Therefore, we pray to the One Who is in control, resulting in patience and peace. That is the evidence that we have let go of control and have thus let go of our pride. This is the fruit of weaknesses in our life, when we bear them in faith. As Paul writes in Romans 5:3, *“And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience.”* As we have seen, we get to patience through prayer. This is why when we face weaknesses and difficulties we must train ourselves to respond first by clasping our hands together in prayer. For if we respond in any other way, we are missing the point. Prayer is how we find refuge in the One that our trial has actually been about all along. Now let’s look at God’s answer to Paul’s prayer, in verse 9.

“And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness.”

How our weaknesses are given to magnify His power (verses 9-10)

My second main point is that our weaknesses are given to magnify the power of Christ. Therefore we are to embrace Him in confidence. That much can be discerned from the very text here in verse 9. How



Mr. Colin Samul, Licentiate

then is Christ’s strength magnified in human weakness? Well, just consider who Christ is and what He came to do. He is the Lamb, slain from before the foundation of the world! Those are images and words that emphasize weakness; a lamb is a vulnerable and weak creature that needs to be guided and protected. Likewise, someone who has been slain is someone who has been overpowered and overcome. Through His humiliation, Christ partook in human weakness and was subjected to the curse, temptation, and death. And this wasn’t just to render satisfaction for our sins, but so that he could also sympathize with us in our weakness, as Hebrews 4:15 says. In fact, Hebrews 2:10 says, *“For it became him, for whom are all things, and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings.”*

You see, Christ was made perfect through his suffering and humiliation, and then he was raised above it. When He was raised from death, to be given all glory, power, and strength. The very Captain of our salvation exhibits in Himself God’s power in human weakness. Therefore, He is the champion of all those who labor under the curse and long for release. The mere fact of who Christ is, and what He has done, ought to encourage all those who believe in Him and yet face suffering and human frailty (which includes all of us in one way or another). In Christ, suffering and weakness is not the end of the story.

I can remember, back when I was a sales manager, we would make a positive example out of all of those who struggled with their job but then later figured it out and rose to the top of the sales ranker. It was to make them a champion, or an encouragement for all those who struggled likewise. Their failure doesn't have to be the end of the story. You would find that those who struggled and actually cared about their job, would then embrace these "champions" and seek them out for advice and for encouragement. It often worked! In a similar way, Christ, our sympathetic High Priest, is to be embraced by those who are overcome by their weakness, guilt, and sin. We can do that in a much truer sense with Christ, because He has first embraced us with His gracious and powerful Spirit. We are united to Him by His Spirit! Look at His promise given at the beginning of verse 9. "And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee."

Now when Christ promises Paul His grace, this is a reference to the power of the Holy Spirit, the same power that he mentions at the end of verse 9. The Lord reminds Paul that the same power which had originally embraced him; which had regenerated him, and converted him, and sanctified him, was still right there with him in his weaknesses. It was sufficient for him.

Jesus reinforced this fact by reminding Paul that it's His grace and His Spirit. He says "My grace, is sufficient for thee." The same Holy Spirit who dwells within Christ and was properly His Spirit, also dwelled within Paul. Therefore the same *power* that sustained Christ through his weakness and suffering, and which finally raised Him from the dead, was also dwelling within Paul. Christ had already embraced Paul in the most intimate way possible.

As Question 76 of our catechism says, in Christ "we live and are governed by one Spirit, as members of the same body are governed by one soul." The power of the same Spirit, who strengthened Christ, also strengthens us. This is why His power is said to be perfect, or fulfilled. Just as a computer is perfect for computing, just as an automobile is perfect for driving; so Christ's Spirit is perfect for strengthening our weak human nature and seeing us through to completion. It is what His power is meant to do. This is what the Holy Spirit did for Jesus while completing His saving work, and so the Holy Spirit is also sufficient for us in all our weaknesses.

This means that when we are feeling weak and insufficient we are actually right where we are supposed to be. This is the perfect situation for Christ to magnify His power. For "God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty." (1 Corinthians 1:27). Our weaknesses are given us to magnify the power of Christ (our crucified and risen Messiah). Therefore, we must embrace Him with all confidence in our weaknesses. That's precisely what Paul does when

he hears this. He grabs hold of this truth and embraces Christ (by faith). At the end of the verse, he says, "Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me."

We see Paul owns this truth and appropriates it for himself. Likewise, at the end of verse 10, he repeats the promise in his own words, and claims it as his own; "for when I am weak, then I am strong." Paul embraces Christ by embracing His promise. This is the essence of the Christian life. As Charles Hodge comments on this verse: "Christianity is not merely the religion which Christ taught; but it is, subjectively considered, the religion of which Christ is the source and the object."

Paul was encouraged to embrace Christ all the more in his weakness. This gave him confidence that Christ's resurrection power was at work in him. We see the effects of that in verses 9 and 10. He says he will "most gladly boast" in his infirmities, and that he even found pleasure in them. This isn't because he found enjoyment in the infirmities themselves, but because he knew that a greater acquaintance with Christ's grace and power were occasioned through them. He says he did so "for Christ's sake", that "the power of Christ might rest upon me." The very thing that humbled him also exalted Christ, and so he would much rather boast in them, rather than in himself.

For all those who are in Christ, we can (and must!) embrace our weaknesses. I'm not referring to those things about us that can change and that we should change, but those providential difficulties that God has laid upon us. We need to do so, not only because they have the effect of humbling us (as we saw previously), but more importantly because they cause us to be intimately acquainted with the Grace of God and give us a greater appreciation of it. The Gospel assures us, and the person and work of Christ make it clear, that God is at work in broken vessels, such as you and me. His power is actually made known to this world through such brokenness and weakness. Think of the work of 12 disciples. They were relatively insignificant, mostly illiterate, and greatly rejected men. Or think about men like David Livingstone, who only had one convert, and yet he is known as Africa's greatest missionary because of what was begun through him. God's grace is made perfect in human weakness, and it is sufficient for us. It is all we need. By grabbing hold of the crucified and risen Christ, we can boast and take pleasure in our weaknesses and difficulties, knowing that they are the resting place of His power.



Mr. Colin Samul, Licentiate

Anderson, CA

Mission Work Updates:

Christ Reformed Church of Casper, WY



The work in Casper by God's grace is being blessed richly. The people that God has brought to be part of the work are steadily growing in grace and knowledge of the Reformed faith, and in love for one another. Different trials in the lives of different families were met with faith. They produced in God's people a greater patience, wisdom, and trust, which is always a joy for a pastor to witness.

Our attendance has slowly increased from year to year. At the end of the year our average attendance on Sunday morning was about 33, though this has taken a bit of a jump forward since then with the addition of new families who intend to join in membership. We currently have 27 baptized members and that number looks to increase by 14 in the next six months or so as things stand now.

Two very specific answers to prayer are that God has provided us with a deacon, the first new leadership in the church since it was planted, and God has also sent us a piano player.

The people of the congregation are getting to know the practice of Reformed church government and the benefits and obligations of membership in a denomination; many of them come from congregationalist or independent backgrounds. Greater structure and order is one great benefit and attraction of the Reformed faith to people in a time when there is a great deal of disorderliness and chaos in churches in America.

We thank God for the prayers and financial support of the RCUS for the work here in Casper.

Pastor Matthew Powell

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 10

of their skin. They came to the church looking for relief but they found more hurt. They found more hypocritical love than genuine love. Shame on us if that is what we really think that the church of Jesus Christ is really all about.

I can say that nothing encourages me more as a pastor then when I go to visit someone who is sick or struggling or lonely and find that I was not the first one there! I am always touched to see signs of others visits and cards of encouragement. Signs that there are those for whom loving comes easy. I loved that at a recent funeral in our congregation I saw many who were very busy that day drop what they were doing to hug the grieving. To grieve with the grieving. To comfort those whose reality in that moment was sadness. You see, beloved, that is what points to a church that I want to be a part of. That is what points to a church that brings glory to God. Because, quite frankly, that is what points to a church that is being inhabited by Christians.

I want to challenge all of us this morning to think on this. What is more important for us as Christians than one another? It is not this building. It is not our history. It is not your current pastor or a pastor sometime in

the glorious past. It's not our programs. It's certainly not our traditions. None of those things will last forever. The body of Jesus Christ, the people sitting around you this morning who are clinging to Jesus Christ with all that they have by faith, that is eternal! That is God's gift to you in this life! It is the people and their love for one another being legitimately present in our body. Not superficially, not forced, not fake. But really and truly present. You see, beloved, that is what points to our actually having a thorough understanding of the Gospel. It means far more to me than the books that you have read. Far more than the time that you have put in. Far more than the legacy that you feel that you have left. Will you love without hypocrisy? Your answer to that will tell you far more about your understanding of the glorious Gospel of Jesus Christ than anything else. What fruit are you content to have define the church? If it's less than this love, then according to Paul it is not enough! Amen? Let's pray!

Rev. Steve Altman

Napoleon, OH

Church News

Baptism

MaryAnne Elaine Mosley, daughter of Rev. J.P. and Francesca Mosley, was baptized on 1/24/16.



Confirmation

Kylie Ann Sorensen, daughter of Rev. Kyle and Donielle Sorensen, was confirmed in the Christian faith on 3/20/16.



Ordination and Installation of Officers



Elder Brian Davis was ordained and installed at Hope Reformed in Pierre, SD, on 1/24/16.



Rev. Randall Klynsmas (2nd from Right) installed on 3/20/16 as Mission Pastor for Omaha Reformed Church mission work in Omaha, NE.

Other Special Events

February 13th Sweetheart Banquet at Ebenezer RCUS in Shafter, CA. The younger folk sponsored the event and had fun serving, entertaining, and feeding the members. It was called "A Slice or Noodle of Italy."



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ChurchNews continued

Conference Invitation

COVENANT REFORMED CHURCH, GETTYSBURG, PENNSYLVANIA

ANNOUNCING: 2016 FAMILY CONFERENCE

WHEN: June 21–25, 2016

WHERE: Elder Bob Foster's Farm, 149 Centennial Road, Gettysburg, PA

WHAT'S HAPPENING:

Preaching at 10 AM and 7:00 PM

Fellowship meal at 5:30 PM on site each day

Sports (volleyball and soccer) for those so inclined

Fun activities for the younger folk

Camp out on the farm, stay in local motels or with a Church family

Tour civil war battlefields and museums if you so desire

PREACHERS INCLUDE:

Dr. Robert Grossmann; Rev. Ron Potter and Rev. Jay Fluck

REGISTRATION FEE:

\$15 per person to partially cover the cost of meals

CONTACT:

Don Buysse at: 717-528-8043 or dbuys@comcast.net or Pastor Fluck at jefluck@msn.com