

AGENDA MATERIALS

CLASSIS CENTRAL US – MARCH 15-16, AD 2021

Table of Contents

	Page
Agenda	2
Lodging Information	3
Credential	4
Interim Committee Report by Convening Consistory	5
Stated Clerk Report	6
Treasurer Report	8
Consistory Supervising Classis Website Report	9
Church Visitor Reports	
Beecher	10
Kansas City	11
Lansing	13
Sioux Falls	14
St. John	15
Waupun	17
Fraternal Observer/Delegate Reports	
Rev. Freswick to the Presbytery of the Midwest	19
Rev. De Rooy to Classis Minnkota	20
Consistory Supervising CPAC Report	21
CPAC Report	22
Report on Chicago Heights, IL	31
Report on Quito, Ecuador	38
Missions Committee Representative Report (no report)	
CERCU Representative Report	42
CECCA Representative Report (no report)	
WOC Representative Report	44
Appeals Committee Representative Report	46
Candidacy Materials for Mr. Nathan Vos	
Consistorial Recommendation	47
Medical Evaluation of Health	48
Diploma	49
Transcript of Seminary Grades	50
Statement of Testimony	51
Sermon Manuscripts & Exegetical Papers	
Lord's Day 45 Sermon	53
2 Kings 4:8-37 Exegesis Paper	59
2 Kings 4:8-37 Sermon	70
Luke 14:15-24 Exegesis Paper	77
Luke 14:15-24 Sermon	87
Classis Functionaries List	93

AGENDA

The 51st Meeting of Classis Central U.S. URCNA

Convening at **Faith United Reformed Church** in Beecher, IL

Convened by Hills United Reformed Church

Monday, **March 15, 2021**, at 6:30 p.m.

1. Opening Devotions – By Member of Convening Consistory serving as Chairman *Pro Tem*
2. Presentation of the Credentials and Roll Call of the Delegates
3. Reading of the *Form of Subscription* and the Delegates' Response of Agreement
4. Declaration that Classis is Duly Constituted.
5. Seating of Officers: Chairman from First URC, Oak Lawn and Vice-chairman from Redeemer URC, Orange City.
6. Adoption of Agenda, including the following Time Schedule: 15-minute breaks at 10:00 a.m., 3:00 p.m., and 8:00 p.m. One-hour breaks at 12:00 noon and 5:30 p.m. Evening session to end at 9:00 p.m. Morning session to begin at 8:30 a.m.
7. Appointment of Committee to Examine the Credentials of the Delegates
8. Classis Reports:
 - a. Interim Committee by Convening Consistory
 - b. Stated Clerk
 - c. Treasurer
 - d. Consistory Supervising Classis Website
 - e. Church visitors
 - f. Fraternal Observers and Delegates
 - g. Ecumenical Activities by the Churches
 - h. Consistory Supervising CPAC
 - i. CPAC
 - j. Consistories Concerning Church Plants and Chaplains
9. Federation Reports:
 - a. Missions Committee
 - b. Committee for Ecumenical Relations and Church Unity (CERCU)
 - c. Committee for Ecumenical Contact with Churches Abroad (CECCA)
 - d. Website Oversight Committee (WOC)
 - e. Appeals Committee
10. Fraternal Greetings
11. Candidacy Exam
 - a. Candidate Credentials: see attached – motion to accept
 - b. Sermon Evaluation: Lynwood URC – see attached report to be discussed in executive session
 - c. *Practica*: Rev. Nick Alons (60 minutes)
 - d. Bible Knowledge: Rev. Todd De Rooy (45 minutes)
 - e. Biblical Exegesis: Rev. Mark Vander Hart (45 minutes)
(Assigned Texts: 2 Kings 4:8-37; Luke 14:15-24)
 - f. Confessional Knowledge: Rev. Ed Marcusse (45 minutes)
 - g. Reformed Doctrine: Rev. Joel Worries (45 minutes)
 - h. Church History: Rev. Jacques Roets (60 minutes)
 - i. Ethics: Rev. Jon Bushnell (45 minutes)
 - j. Church Polity: Rev. Paul Freswick (45 minutes)
12. Elections & Appointments:
 - a. CPAC – Grant Diekevers' first term expires April 2021

13. Determination of Treasurer's Remuneration (Currently \$300/year – unchanged since initiated April 2013).
14. Credentials Committee Report
15. Next Meeting:
 - a. Date for next Meeting. (*Rules of Procedure* I.B., "Two meetings shall be held each year: in the second full week of April and in the second full week of September.") Monday and Tuesday, September 13-14, 2021.
 - b. Place – Kansas City is next in rotation to convene classis.
16. Closing Matters:
 - a. Thanks to Host Church
 - b. Concept Minutes
 - c. Prayer and Adjournment

DEVOTIONS SCHEDULE:

As listed below, please prepare to lead devotions during the upcoming Classis. This schedule goes beyond the anticipated length of classis, just in case.

- Opening of Classis Monday, 6:30 pm (*Scripture, Prayer, Song*)..... Chairman Pro Tem
- Closing of Session #1 Monday evening (*Scripture, Prayer, Song*) Doon
- Opening of Session #2 Tuesday morning (*Scripture, Prayer, Song*) Hills
- Closing of Session #2, prior to Noon Meal (*Prayer*) Kansas City
- Opening of Session #3, after Noon Meal (*Scripture, Prayer, Song*)..... Lansing
- Closing of Session #3, prior to the evening meal (*Prayer*) Lynwood
- Opening of Session #4 after the evening meal (*Scripture, Prayer, Song*) Oak Lawn
- Closing of Classis (*Scripture, Prayer, Doxology*) Chairman

Lodging Information Comfort Inn, Matteson, IL

Classis is being hosted by [Faith United Reformed Church](#), 130 West Corning Road, Beecher, Illinois, located one mile south of the village of Beecher, on Corning Road, just east of Route 1

Twenty-eight motel rooms have been reserved at the **Comfort Inn**, 5210 Southwick Drive, Matteson, IL 60443. Phone: 708.503.0999. Group room rates are best obtained by phoning the local motel rather than phoning the national chain's 800 number. The rooms are reserved under the name "Classis Central US". Every room will have two queen beds and is non-smoking. The cost is \$79 plus tax. The **cutoff date** to get this group rate is **February 19**. There is no complimentary breakfast because of COVID-19 restrictions.

Print this page separately, fill it out and bring the hard copy to classis.
Please e-mail the correct spelling of the delegates' and alternates' names to the clerk ASAP at
classisCentralUS@gmail.com

CLASSICAL CREDENTIAL

To Classis Central US of the United Reformed Churches in North America, to convene on _____ (date), at _____ (place).

The Consistory of _____, member congregation of the United Reformed Churches in North America, has appointed brothers _____ and _____ as delegates to represent said church at the meeting of the classis. The alternate delegates are: _____ and _____.

We hereby instruct and authorize them to take part in all the deliberations and transactions of the classis meeting regarding all matters legally coming before the meeting and transacted in agreement with the Word of God, as interpreted by the Three Forms of Unity, and applied in the Church Order.

By the order of the Consistory,

Done in Consistory on

_____ (date)

Chairman

_____, Clerk

Church Order Article 26 Questions

1. Are Consistory and diaconal meetings held regularly? _____
2. Is the Word of God faithfully preached? _____
3. Are the sacraments faithfully administered? _____
4. Is church discipline exercised? _____
5. Are the poor cared for? _____
6. Is God-centered schooling promoted? _____
7. Does the Consistory need the advice or help of the classis for the proper government of the church? _____ If yes, use the reverse side.

Done in Consistory on _____ (date)

_____, Chairman

_____, Clerk

**Hills United Reformed Church
410 S Central Ave
P.O. Box 485
Hills, MN 56138**

January 14, 2021

Brothers,

The consistory of the Hills United Reformed Church has served as the convening consistory for the Spring 2021 meeting of classis. It has been our privilege to serve in this capacity, and we look forward to seeing all of you at our upcoming meeting.

Below is a summary of the work that we've completed in preparation for the meeting:

1. We received and approved the request from Faith United Reformed Church of Beecher IL for a candidacy exam for Nathan Voss during our March classis meeting.
2. We also accepted Faith URC's gracious offer to host the Classis meeting in Beecher. We have been in touch periodically to check on progress in the arrangements for food and lodging offering our assistance to the extent that we're able.
3. We have contacted and secured examiners for each section of the candidacy exam as well as the time allotted to each.

We are grateful for the opportunity to serve the congregations of our classis, and especially our Lord Jesus Christ in this way.

Elder Todd Haak
Clerk of Consistory

CLASSIS CENTRAL U.S.

of the

UNITED REFORMED CHURCHES IN NORTH AMERICA

Rev. Ralph A. Pontier
Stated Clerk of Classis
641-230-3880

118 Holland Drive
Pella, IA 50219
ClassisCentralUS@gmail.com

REPORT OF THE STATED CLERK

February 1, AD 2021

Dear Brothers,

Since my last written report on September 11, 2020, I have attended to the following matters:

1. Follow Up on the Last Classis
 - a. I prepared the minutes and report of our last classis meeting which was held on September 14-15, 2020. They were distributed to the classis mailing list on September 16 and to the rest of the federation on September 17.
 - b. I updated both the classis and federation websites with the date, time, and place of our next meeting and set up a classis forum notice to go out weekly reminding recipients of the agenda deadline for this meeting.
 - c. At the request of the Community URC chairman, I removed Mr. Dan Zandstra from the Classis mailing list. I also approved Elder David Jacobs of the same church for forum announcements from the classis website.

2. I forwarded to the classis mailing list, on the date indicated, the following materials:
 - a. 9/23 The minutes and report of Classis Western Canada
 - b. 9/24 The Classis Central US mission newsletter and suggested bulletin announcement
 - c. 9/30 The minutes and report of Classis Southwest US
 - d. 9/30 The minutes and report of Classis Eastern US
 - e. 10/5 The minutes and report of Classis Southwestern Ontario.
 - f. 10/13 The minutes and four letters from Classis Minnkota
 - g. 10/14 Re-sent (at CPAC request) the classis mission newsletter and bulletin announcement
 - h. 10/24 The minutes of Classis Michigan (no report was supplied)
 - i. 1/26 The Classis Michigan Provisional Agenda for March 9, 2021
 - j. 1/26 The Classis Eastern US Provisional Agenda for March 5, 2021
 - k. 2/1 The agenda for Classis Minnkota scheduled for March 5

3. [Classis Website](#)
 - a. I asked others more talented than myself to add a list of the churches of classis to the home page of our classis website with a hyperlink to each church. Larry Van Den Berg completed that task on

January 13, 2021 using a HTML list supplied by R. Scott Clark after he sent me a note in late December that ours was the only classis page at URCNA.org without a list of its churches. Our page now has a list of churches in classis like all the other classis pages at URCNA.org.

- b. Our page at URCNA.org is still unique, however (in a good way, I think) in that it is the only page that links immediately with a classis website since we are the only classis with its own website.
- c. One of our ministers asked why the Rules of Procedure for classis are on the private side of our classis website while the URCNA Church Order is on the public side (as it also is public at URCNA.org). I had no explanation. If classis would like the rules public, I can accomplish that task easily.

4. Ecumenical Matters

- a. I received an invitation to send a fraternal delegate to the February 6 meeting of the Ohio Presbytery of the PCA meeting in Cleveland, OH.
- b. I received an invitation to send a fraternal delegate to the March 12-13 meeting of the Presbytery of Ohio of the OPC meeting in Columbus, OH.
- c. Since both are farther away than we normally send delegates, and since both were meeting before this body could respond, I sent them each brief notes of fraternal greeting.
- d. I encouraged the convening consistory to appoint one or two fraternal delegates to the March 5 meeting of Classis Minnkota, and solicited volunteers to contact them for such an appointment.

5. Guests

On December 31, I received a request from Rev. Zachary Wyse, URCNA church planter in Cincinnati, Ohio, requesting permission for himself or Mr. Collin Welch (scheduled to be examined for candidacy on March 5 at Classis Eastern US) to address classis on a proposed church plant for Madison, Ohio. I referred the request to the convening consistory with the reminder that our *Rules of Procedure* allow that “missionaries called by URC churches may be permitted to address classis.”

6. With the assistance of the convening consistory, the host consistory, and all of you who wrote reports, I compiled the agenda for this meeting.
7. It is a privilege to serve the churches of Classis Central US as clerk. Thank you for the opportunity to serve in this way.

Respectfully submitted, your servant,

Ralph A. Pontier

**Classis Central US
 United Reformed Churches in North America
 Harlan Harmelink, Treasurer
 Sioux Center URC, Supervising Consistory**

Beginning Balance - All Classical Funds (8/18/20) \$10,897.72

General Fund

Beginning Balance		\$2,621.28
Income:		
Classical Askings	\$7,637.00	
Interest	<u>\$ 13.44</u>	
Total Income	\$7,650.44	
Expenses		
Church Visitors/Delegates Expense	\$1,384.40	
CPAC	1,246.81	
Clerk---2020 Remuneration	1,200.00	
Treasurer---2020 Remuneration	<u>300.00</u>	
Total Expenses	(\$4,131.21)	
Net Change		<u>\$3,519.23</u>
Ending Balance		\$6,140.51

Classical Assistance Fund

Beginning Balance		\$8,276.44
Income	\$1,224.50	
Disbursements	\$0.00	
Net Change		<u>\$1,224.50</u>
Ending Balance		\$9,500.94

Current Balance – All Classical Funds (12/31/20) \$15,641.45

Please forward all Askings, bills, or questions to:

Harlan Harmelink
 1441 4th Ave SE
 Sioux Center, IA 51250
 (712) 441-0573 (cell)
Harlan.Harmelink@dordt.edu

January 17, 2020

Esteemed brothers,

The Consistory of the Grace United Reformed Church (Waupun, Wisconsin) presents this report to Classis Central US for our duties as the Oversight Consistory for the Classis Central US website listed at <http://www.ClassisCentralUS.info>

The only actions taken since the last Classis report were to pay for items related to the operation of the website and then to be reimbursed by the Classical treasurer. We also provided technical support to Rev. Pontier in how to edit the web site.

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to serve the Lord of the churches in this capacity.

Sincerely, in Christ,

Elder Larry Van Den Berg
Clerk
Grace United Reformed Church (Waupun, Wisconsin)

Classis Central US
United Reformed Churches in North America
Church Visitors' Report
Faith United Reformed Church Beecher, Illinois

On the evening of January 6, 2021, at the invitation of the Council of Faith URC (Beecher IL), Rev. Ed Marcusse of Oak Glen URC (Lansing IL) and I conducted a regular church visit per the provisions of Article 27 of the Church Order. The brothers warmly welcomed us.

The visit was opened with prayer and with Rev. Marcusse reading from Isaiah 55. Rev. Marcusse then led the visit using a series of questions designed to stimulate discussion with the brothers regarding whether they were faithfully performing their duties, adhering to sound doctrine, observing in all things the adopted order and properly promoting the edification of the congregation by word and deed. We had particular discussion with the office-bearers regarding their response to the unique challenges arising from the unprecedented situation we find ourselves in due to the COVID-19 pandemic and in Faith's particular situation of currently being vacant

We were pleased and encouraged by the responses of the Faith Council. Despite their vacancy they are working diligently to keep in regular contact with the congregation during the current situation; the Word and the Catechism are being faithfully preached; the Lord's Supper is administered six times per year; and the business of the church is regularly attended to through monthly meetings of the elders, deacons and Council. Sunday school, catechism and society/Bible studies are being conducted. Presently, the Council is awaiting the results of the candidacy examination of Mr. Nathan Voss to be conducted at the upcoming meeting of Classis, the Lord willing. If Mr. Voss sustains his examination the Council hopes to call him to be ordained as their Minister of the Word and Sacraments. Mr. Voss was present for our meeting and was asked several questions.

There appears to be an atmosphere of love, mutual respect and encouragement among the elders and deacons. The elders are faithful and diligent in overseeing the doctrine and life of the congregation in a spirit of love and encouragement. When necessary church discipline is purposeful and practiced in love. The elders also oversee the work of the deacons through regular monthly reports and meetings, and they oversee the church education activities through approval of material to be used and the teachers/leaders as well as serving as Catechism teachers. During their vacancy the elders have been diligent in obtaining pulpit supply and ensuring that the Word and the Catechism are faithfully and regularly preached or exhorted. Christian education is encouraged and supported.

The deacons are faithful and diligent in administering the resources provided by the congregation for the support of various mission and other Christian causes including addressing individual financial needs through benevolence. They are prudent and have developed good practices and procedures in the handling, counting and distribution of the monies donated. The deacons ensure that annual contributions are timely made to the federation and to classis.

The approved giving causes and the missionaries supported are annually reviewed. It is the policy of the deacons to limit the number of supported missionaries to encourage closer congregational involvement with their missionaries and their mission activities. Particular focus and emphasis is given to El Pacto de Gracia and Rev. Sernas. The elders provide oversight for Rev. Sernas as he labors in Chicago Heights. An elder attends each worship service and the Faith congregation is encouraged to interact with the El Pacto congregation. Rev. Sernas was present for our meeting and was involved in both the questions asked and the answers given. He regularly attends the Council/Consistory meetings of Faith Church.

The Council was encouraged to continue to make use of secure offsite storage for all of the records of the congregation including minutes of meetings, correspondence, membership information and the like to ensure the ability to recreate the records in the event of a situation in which the current storage arrangements are damaged or destroyed.

Overall the visit with the Council of Faith URC went very well. We commend the office-bearers for their diligence and faithfulness, and we encourage them to stay the course in the face of the difficulties and uncertainties of the current situation. It was a blessing to hear the reports of the brothers regarding the faithfulness of the elders and deacons in the execution of the tasks and responsibilities to which the Lord has called them. We rejoice with them as we received the report that the spiritual condition of the congregation is good and that there is positive growth in Christian love and faithfulness among the brothers and sisters in Christ worshipping at Faith. We pray that the Lord will continue to bless them and equip them to do His work to which we all have been called.

The visit was closed with Rev. Marcusse reading the charge from the form for the ordination of elders and deacons. A prayer and mutual encouragement was offered, and well wishes were given and received.

Respectfully submitted,

John Surowiec
Church Visitor East
Community United Reformed Church
Schererville, Indiana

Church Visitors' Report

Covenant Reformed Church, Kansas City

On November 16, 2020, Rev. Joel Vander Kooi and I traveled to the Kansas City area for a meeting with Covenant Reformed Church, at the request of its Consistory, on behalf of Classis Central US. This was a routinely scheduled church visit, with the congregation being notified properly. We were warmly welcomed by the brothers with a delicious supper, where all the council members were present.

Rev. Vander Kooi ably led the visit, using the requirements specified in Church Order Art. 27. All the synodical questions were asked and answered satisfactory, without discrepancy. The council updated us on their progress in their pastoral search. Minutes of the council and consistory meetings were reviewed and found to be in good order.

Specific areas of discussion centered on the requirement of office bearers to promote Christ-centered schooling, diaconal help for Christian education, masking mandates, and pastoral compensation. These questions, in addition to all the interactions, demonstrated that these brothers are engaging faithfully and fruitfully in their respective callings. Overall, having spent several hours with the faithful brothers in Kansas, we were encouraged by Christ's work through His office bearers in shepherding the flock at Covenant Reformed Church.

Your servant,
Rev. Spencer Aalsburg

July 7, 2020

United Reformed Churches in North America
Classis Central US

Dear Fathers and Brothers,

On the evening of November February 5, 2020, Rev. Jacques Roets of Redeemer United Reformed Church (St. John, IN) and I conducted a church visit with the council at Oak Glen United Reformed Church (Lansing, IL).

At 7:00pm the president of the council opened the meeting with a reading from Isaiah 40:18-31 and with prayer, followed by a brief review of the church order as is their custom (for this evening, arts. 25-27 were read and discussed).

At this point, the meeting was handed over to Rev. Roets who led the council through a series of questions designed to inquire whether the office-bearers were faithfully performing their duties, adhering to sound doctrine, observing in all things the adopted order, and properly promoting the edification of the congregation (per church order article 27). We found Oak Glen URC to be in full compliance with the church order. A relationship of mutual respect, love, and encouragement exists between the pastor, elders and deacons. They provide ably for their pastor, both financially (in line with CO article 10 and the recommendations of Synod Visalia).

A few items stood out about the way in which the consistory and council at Oak Glen URC is leading and serving the congregation. First, the consistory is active in seeking to grow theologically in their understanding of Reformed doctrine and praxis. Since art. 38 of the church order tasks the consistory with regulating the worship service, they have recently studied Bryan Chapell's book *Christ Centered Preaching* so as to have an informed, educated approach to their regulation of that aspect. They have also studied John Murray's *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*.

Second, the council has recently taken a new approach to the work of missions and evangelism in the church. Whereas formerly there was a combined "missions and evangelism" committee, these have been split into two separate committees with separate mandates. The missions committee carries on the more traditional work of identifying and supporting URCNA mission causes and publishing a monthly newsletter, *The Oak Leaves*, that features updates from missionaries. The evangelism committee, however, is now explicitly focused on making the church known to the Lansing community. They oversee and participate in a number of outreach events (e.g., the Christmas "cookie walk"; summer "burger bash"; yearly pancake breakfast) which seek to show the love of Christ tangibly to the church's neighbors and build relationships that can encourage the sharing of the gospel.

We commended the council of Oak Glen URC for their diligence and encouraged them to stay the course in their ministry.

Rev. Roets closed the meeting with a reminder of the charges given to officers in the URCNA's liturgical forms. The visit ended with a word of prayer at which point the council took some time to fellowship with the church visitors over cookies and coffee before reconvening for their ordinary meeting agenda.

Respectfully submitted,

Rev. R. Andrew Compton
Redeemer United Reformed Church (St. John, IN)

Classis Central U.S. - Official Church Visitor's Report

Church Visited: Christ Reformed Church, Sioux Falls, SD
Date Visited: November 12, 2020
Church Visitors: Rev. Joel Vander Kooi and Elder Korrie Van Maanen

This official visit was announced to the Sioux Falls Congregation two weeks prior to the visit. All the members of the Council were present - three Elders and one Deacon - as well as Rev. Spencer Aalsburg. The visit was conducted by Rev. Vander Kooi who read 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 and used the theme "Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing." as a guide in conducting the visit and the asking of questions.

The Council members testified to the faithfulness of God in the Sioux Falls Congregation as the members work together to encourage one another in their faith and strive to build one another up even during difficult times. Worship services are held twice on the Lord's Day and on special religious holidays. The Council expressed appreciation for the work of Rev. Aalsburg as he faithfully proclaims God's Word from week to week. All the office bearers have signed the Form of Subscription and the Elders meet monthly and faithfully rule in Christ's Name. They currently have only one Deacon as their second Deacon had recently moved out of the Sioux Falls area. The Church visitors encouraged the Council to fill this position as soon as possible due to the large responsibilities placed on just one Deacon.

The Sacraments are faithfully administered according to the Word of God and our Church Order. The Lord's Supper is celebrated monthly and visitors are asked to fill out a "Communion Request Form" which is approved by the Elders. Parents presenting children for baptism are instructed in the meaning of baptism.

The Sioux Falls congregation has approximately 50 children from 4 years old up to High School age that are involved in Sunday School and Catechism classes. There is also an Adult Sunday School that meets before their morning worship service.

The Council takes responsibility for the honorable support of their pastor and does its best to follow Synod's guidelines regarding retirement, disability insurance (which they are currently adding), life insurance and health insurance. The minutes of their meetings were examined and found to be in good order.

The Council also shared God's Providence in 2020 as they had to leave the building they were sharing with another congregation and had to locate a different facility in which to worship. In June they were able to begin worshipping in their own building which was in a much more visible location and had the space necessary for all their needs. They would also like to express their appreciation to the churches in our Classis who helped them financially as they purchased this new facility.

The Church visitors commit the Sioux Falls Congregation to the Grace of God and His Blessing upon their faithful worship and ministry in the Sioux Falls area.

Humbly Submitted,

Rev. Joel Vander Kooi
Elder Korrie Van Maanen

Classis Central US
United Reformed Churches in North America
Church Visitors' Report
Redeemer URC Dyer IN

On the evening of September 8, 2020, at the invitation of the Council of Redeemer URC (Dyer IN), Rev. Ed Marcusse of Oak Glen URC (Lansing IL) and I conducted a regular church visit per the provisions of Article 27 of the Church Order. The brothers warmly welcomed us.

The visit was opened with prayer and with Rev. Marcusse reading from Acts 20:25-38. Rev. Marcusse then led the visit using a series of questions designed to stimulate discussion with the brothers regarding whether they were faithfully performing their duties, adhering to sound doctrine, observing in all things the adopted order and properly promoting the edification of the congregation by word and deed. We had particular discussion with the office-bearers regarding their response to the unique challenges arising from the unprecedented situation we find ourselves in due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

We were pleased and encouraged by the responses of the Redeemer URC Council. They are working diligently to keep in regular contact with the congregation during the current situation; the Word is being faithfully preached as is the Catechism; the Lord's Supper is regularly administered; and the business of the church is regularly attended to through monthly meetings of the elders, deacons and Council. The church education year (Sunday school and catechism) and society/Bible studies are scheduled to commence Sunday September 13, the Lord willing.

There appears to be an atmosphere of love, mutual respect and encouragement amongst the elders, deacons and minister. Mutual censure is conducted per the provisions of Church Order. The elders are faithful and diligent in overseeing the doctrine and life of the congregation in a spirit of love and encouragement. The elders also oversee the work of the deacons through regular monthly reports and meetings, and they oversee the church education activities through approval of material to be used and the teachers/leaders. The elders also provide oversight of the minister's work through regular communication and encouragement as well as having an elder meet with the minister every two months to review a worship service including the sermon. The elders strive to provide the minister with opportunities to be with his family and for personal growth through regular vacations and the provision of a six week long sabbatical every 3 years. The deacons meet annually with the minister regarding his financial needs.

The deacons are faithful and diligent in administering the resources provided by the congregation for the support of various mission and other Christian causes including addressing individual financial needs through benevolence. They are prudent and have developed good practices and procedures in the handling, counting and distribution of the monies donated. During the discussion of the process of collecting and accounting for the gifts of the people the deacons were encouraged to consider modifying their practice surrounding the deposit of the funds into the bank after they are counted and recorded to provide further checks and balances in that process. There also was encouragement to the Council to continue to seek secure offsite storage for all of the records of the congregation including minutes of meeting, correspondence,

membership information and the like to ensure the ability to recreate the records in the event of a situation in which the current storage arrangements are damaged or destroyed.

Overall the visit with the Council of Redeemer URC went very well. We commend the office-bearers for their diligence and faithfulness, and we encourage them to stay the course in the face of the difficulties and uncertainties of the current situation. It was a blessing to receive the reports of the brothers regarding the faithfulness of the elders, deacons and minister in the execution of the tasks and responsibilities to which the Lord has called them. We rejoice with them as we received the report that the spiritual condition of the congregation is good and that there is positive growth in Christian love and faithfulness amongst the brothers and sisters in Christ worshipping at Redeemer. We pray that the Lord will continue to bless them and equip them to do His work to which we all have been called.

The visit was closed with prayer and mutual encouragement and well wishes.

Respectfully submitted,

John Surowiec
Church Visitor East
Community United Reformed Church (Schererville IN)

The United Reformed Churches in North America

Classis Central United States

Church Visitors' Report

Grace United Reformed Church of Waupun, Wisconsin

The Consistory of the Grace United Reformed Church of Waupun, Wisconsin invited the church visitors for the Eastern half of Classis Central to come and preside over a C.O. Article 27 meeting. On the evening of November 17, 2020 Rev. Jacques Roets and myself, Rev. Ed Marcusse, met with the Council of Grace URC at their church building in Waupun. All the members of the Grace Council were present for this meeting, one being present by way of live video.

The minister of Grace, Rev. Paul Freswick, opened the meeting by reading Psalm 36 and having prayer. Shortly thereafter the meeting was turned over to Rev. Roets who first verified that the congregation had been made aware in advance of this meeting of the church visitors. They had, and no one from the congregation expressed any need to meet with the church visitors.

Next Rev. Roets asked if there were any particular questions that the Waupun Council had for the church visitors. The Council responded by asking about how the elders of Grace could best continue their practice of doing family visits in this age of the Covid virus. Both Rev. Roets and myself explained how our own elders were handling this same concern even while admitting that much grace and leeway needed to be granted by the elders for all involved because of the differing levels of concern held by the different families in our respective churches.

Then Rev. Roets went on to ask numerous questions concerning the Council's faithful performance of their duties, their adherence to sound doctrine, their observance of our adopted church order, and their promotion of the edification of the congregation by word and deed. Rev. Roets took particular care to ask about how the Council was doing all this in light of the Covid virus.

The responses of the deacons, elders, and minister to these questions brought blessing and encouragement to us as visitors. They gave every appearance to us that there was much love and fellowship between the members at Grace URC. While the virus has added a new concern and has brought out differences between members as to what the proper response should be by them to this threat, no one holds it against the other when they disagree. The council reported that there were several large and deep financial needs that had arisen within the congregation because of Covid; but they also reported that when those needs were made known to the congregation they were immediately and fully met. The men gave praise to God for the great love which the saints at Grace show to one another.

The deacons are faithful in handling the gifts that God people give and diligent in dispersing them properly. They meet at least annually with the minister to ensure that his and his growing family's earthly needs are being met. The questions from Synod Visalia in 2014 concerning the minister's retirement contributions, disability insurance, etc. were asked of the deacons by Rev.

Roets and were answered appropriately. The deacons also reported that the church financial records are audited every year and a bookkeeper has been added to help with this.

The elders ensure that faithful preaching is being brought forth every Sunday, and they also oversee the doctrine and life of the congregation by way of personal contact and visits. Holy Communion is held six times per year with mutual censure performed before each communion service. The elders also help the minister in leading the church education classes and training the covenant youth of the church.

The minister is faithful in bringing the Word of the Lord to God's people each week. The morning sermon follows a series working through a book of the Bible, while the evening worship service contains a Confessional sermon. Rev. Freswick has been at Grace now for two years, and he reports that while these years have not been without difficulties, they have been two years of great blessing.

We as church visitors left this meeting giving thanks to the Lord for this faithful piece of the Body of Christ meeting together there at Waupun. It appears to us that the office-bearers are doing diligent and faithful service on behalf of their Lord, and the congregation is being drawn closer to their Savior. We pray that God's blessing upon Grace United Reformed Church may continue.

In order to remind the office-bearers of the solemnity of the tasks given them by God, Rev. Roets read the "charge" portion for each church office from the Ordination form before he closed our meeting. Prayer was offered for the church and for the office-bearers, and we were given well wishes for a safe journey home.

Respectfully submitted,

Rev. Ed Marcusse

Church Visitor East

**Fraternal Delegate Report:
Visit to the Orthodox Presbyterian Churches Presbytery of the Midwest (PMW)**

On Friday, September 18th of 2020 I had the joy and privilege of attending the meeting of the PMW of the OPC as our fraternal delegate.

In addition to some routine matters and committee reports I was able to observe a discussion about how to receive a church, previously an Evangelical Free congregation, that was seeking to join the OPC. This church, in Kendell Wisconsin, has slowly come to appreciate and embrace Reformed and Presbyterian doctrine and church government. The Presbytery was glad to admit them, but due to their status as coming from a congregational background, there was some difficulty in knowing how best to receive them. Technicalities resolved; this congregation was officially received as a “mission work” of the OPC with an eye to being fully adopted once two prospective elders have finished their training. It was encouraging to see a congregation with nearly a 100-year history received into the fold of Reformed and Presbyterian churches.

One item not officially on the agenda that may be of interest is that there is much discussion of a possible split of PMW in the near future. The conversation has been along the lines of a possible North/South split; with the Wisconsin and Minnesota churches becoming their own presbytery. At the moment, PMW is the largest presbytery of the OPC, with 31 established churches and 7 mission works.

It was a joy to fellowship with the brothers there. I also had the privilege of delivering a 5-minute address where I was able to focus on the blessings of our unity as sister denominations. I did accidentally say “Mr. Chairman” instead of “Mr. Moderator,” but the short address was well received.

Respectfully submitted,

Paul Freswick

Classis Central US of the URCNA
March 15-16, 2021
Rev. Todd De Rooy
Fraternal Observer to Classis Minnkota of the CRC

Dear Brothers,

Classis Central US granted me the privilege of attending Classis Minnkota of the CRC as a fraternal observer, in our first official visit to that Classis. Our Classis had received an invitation to send an observer as Classis Minnkota was to take up our invitation to join with them in an ecumenical relationship.

Classis Minnkota convened on September 17, 2020, opening with prayer, a meditation on Psalm 51, and singing. The delegates of Classis Minnkota took up our invitation as their first order of business. There were a few questions from the floor pertaining to the nature of this ecumenical relationship and our invitation was received without dissent!

Classis Minnkota proceeded with some regular business before conducting a candidacy examination. The candidacy exam consisted of Practica, Sermon evaluation (Old Testament, New Testament, and Catechism), and Reformed Doctrine (which included the Confessions). The exam sections were very similar to our exam sections and many of the questions put to the examinee would be familiar in our own Classis. Of particular note were some resounding affirmations: Christ's righteousness as the only ground for our justification; and the infallibility and inerrancy of Scripture.

The afternoon was spent with a presentation and heavy discussion that arose from the credentials. One church of the Classis brought forward the recent issue of a CRC in Classis Grand Rapids East which had recently ordained and installed a woman deacon who is in a same-sex "marriage." The same church also brought up the issue of a CRC minister who has outrightly denied the penal substitutionary atonement of Christ in his preaching and in his ordination exam. Neither of these issues have been properly dealt with by the respective Classes nor has discipline been done. Classis Minnkota voted to send communications to the Council of Neland Ave. CRC, Classis Grand Rapids East, and the Council of Delegates (COD) of the CRCNA. These issues were also assigned to a standing committee for further review and presentation.

It was a joy to be at Classis Minnkota! I was warmly welcomed and enjoyed their brotherly hospitality. It is my continual hope that this ecumenical relationship between Classis Minnkota and Classis Central US would bear much God-glorifying fruit.

Your servant in Christ,

Rev. Todd De Rooy

**REPORT TO CLASSIS CENTRAL U.S.
FROM THE OVERSEEING CONSISTORY OF
THE CHURCH PLANTING ADVISORY COMMITTEE**

Dear Fathers & Brothers,

The consistory of Immanuel United Reformed Church, DeMotte is privileged to continue to serve classis as the overseeing consistory of the Church Planting Advisory Committee. CPAC has faithfully provided us with its meeting minutes which are reviewed at our consistory meetings. CPAC's Chairman and our consistory committee representative are responsive to our inquiries and guidance.

We approved the work of CPAC and continue to uphold them in our prayers as they seek to assist the churches in their work of missions and advancing the Kingdom of Christ in Classis Central.

Respectfully submitted,
Howard Ridder Jr.
Clerk, Immanuel United Reformed Church, DeMotte, Indiana

Consistory approved on January 26, 2021

The Church Plant Advisory Committee (CPAC) Report to Classis Central U.S. March 2021

Recent Work of the Committee

Since our last classis meeting, CPAC has continued monthly meetings by phone. Our in-person meeting in November familiarized newly-elected member Bruce Aardsma (Scherverville, IN) with the committee's work, much of which has been devoted throughout the last year to a proactive investigation of Sioux City as a potential field for a church plant.

At its spring 2020 meeting, Classis received an initial report that contained not only the committee's earliest findings on the Sioux City area but also our proposal for planting there. This last fall, members of the committee were able to make a two-day field visit, which allowed us to meet and interview a number of locals, mainly leaders of local churches and schools. In November, CPAC was invited to participate in an exploratory meeting of representatives from URC congregations in the area. Redeemer-Orange City and Sioux Center URC initiated this meeting, looking for the next steps in building on CPAC's work. There were about 30 attendees (some by way of Zoom).

A Review of the History and Function of CPAC

In speaking with various members of classis, the committee has come to realize that its role is unknown to many. We, therefore, take this opportunity to review the mandate and functions for this committee of classis. And CPAC is just that – a committee of classis which established CPAC with the following four-fold mandate:

1. Regularly gather and distribute information in one comprehensive report about church plant works in Classis Central U.S., including their financial needs.
2. Provide advice and recommendations to the churches on potential church plant locations in Classis Central US.
3. Develop "Classis Guidelines for Church Planting" covering the planning, commencement, funding, and oversight of church plants and submit the "Guidelines" for approval by the churches of Classis Central U.S.
4. Provide regular reports of its work to a consistory designated by Classis.

The grounds for such a committee were as follows:

1. Experienced men compiling, digesting, and disseminating information about church planting would testify to our unity in this vital missional calling of the churches.
2. A comprehensive and coordinated report to the churches would save consistories duplication of efforts in obtaining and assessing such information and help prevent inadvertent ignoring of church plants within our own classis with whom we are closest geographically and fraternally.

3. While consistories rightly supervise church plants, not all consistories have the same degree of experience or informational resources to assist in this mission task. This advisory committee could greatly assist in this Kingdom labor.
4. As church planting is the primary outworking of the Great Commission, we need to be intentional about planning church plants in a united fashion, as the name in our federation testifies.
5. A committee dedicated to church planting efforts would aid our Classis in being proactive in domestic missions, instead of reactive, isolated, or complacent in this labor.
6. The designation of a supervising consistory is consistent with our Reformed ecclesiology. This advisory committee does not possess its own inherent authority, but rather its work is prescribed by, and accountable to, the churches. This “supervising consistory” could be a particular consistory selected for a specific term or the churches of classis could assign this responsibility to the convening consistory of classis.

Since CPAC’s formation, our federation has also adopted a manual for church planting as “Pastoral Advice” (*How to Plant a Reformed a Church: The Church Planting Manual of the URCNA*). The manual includes the following statement (see p. 9) about consistories working with their respective classes:

It is of the utmost importance that a Consistory inform their classis of a potential church plant opportunity as soon as they are convinced it exists. Since we are not Congregationalists, URCNA Consistories should never operate independently of their classes in the work of church planting. A Consistory must seek the concurring advice of its classis as specified in CO Article 22: “When a congregation is organized within the federation, this shall take place under the supervision of a neighboring Consistory and with the concurring advice of the classis.” It would be foolish for a Consistory to follow this article in a perfunctory or superficial manner by waiting until the time of organizing the church to seek the advice of its classis. Advice should be sought as early as possible, since wisdom is found in a multitude of counselors (Prov. 11.14). Classis can review the Consistory’s proposal, and offer helpful feedback, as well as financial assistance when possible (cf. CO Art. 47). This is particularly important for Consistories with no experience in church planting.

For the last few years Classis Central has had church planting guidelines that are codified in our classical *Rules of Procedure* (RoP), Section VII – “Classis Guidelines for Church Planting.” These guidelines provide an approved framework that facilitates our working together as consistories of classis for greater effectiveness in planting efforts, along with better stewardship of resources. Classis has clearly spoken to its desire for such coordination and cooperation –

While any Consistory may seek to begin a mission work independently of the other churches, the churches of Classis Central U.S. are agreed that formally working together as early as possible in our church planting efforts, both foreign and domestic, would result in more orderly and effective communication, wiser use of our resources, more regular and specific prayer, and more consistent financial support. (*RoP*, Section VII)

In keeping with the principle outlined above, and in the interest of fulfilling the Great Commission, our churches have agreed to use the “Church Plant Proposal Form” in our *RoP* to present a potential church planting effort to classis (that form is reproduced at the end of this report). Alas, this form has not yet been used. As a matter of fact, classis has not begun a church plant in about thirteen years!

What would it look like to plant a church with the support of the whole classis, in a way that honors the Scriptures, our confessions, our church order, and our current agreed-upon procedure? Here are the current church planting guidelines for a plant to receive classical assistance, followed by a brief description of what our procedure would look like (from *RoP*, VII.A.3):

3. Procedure for Obtaining Classical Assistance

In order to encourage the churches of Classis to cooperate more effectively with one another in their mission efforts, the following steps shall be taken to receive classical assistance:

- a. The Consistory overseeing a church plant shall complete a “Church Plant Proposal Form” for review by CPAC forty-five days prior to the deadline for the Classis Agenda, and then submit the form to the clerk of classis for inclusion on the agenda.
- b. Having reviewed the completed “Church Plant Proposal Form” and received the advice of CPAC, Classis shall by majority vote decide whether or not to formally assist the church plant.

As part of this formal process, any Consistory wishing to have united involvement with the churches of classis in its planting effort would submit a “Church Plant Proposal Form.” As one can readily gather from reading the form, this procedure would not only help the overseeing Consistory in addressing fundamental questions for themselves but also allow classis to learn from that Consistory and raise important questions for that Consistory. And, since we have committed to working together, this procedure would also give classis opportunity to speak into the process through its advisory committee and through open discussion on the floor of classis.

Ultimately, classis votes whether or not to give formal assistance to a church plant. Classis has stated precisely what this assistance looks like (*RoP*, VII.A.2):

2. Classical Assistance Defined

Consistories may engage in the work of church planting apart from Classis; however, Consistories seeking assistance from the churches of Classis shall work in accordance with these guidelines. Classically assisted church plants shall be:

- a. included on the agenda for each Classis;
- b. included in the classical church planting newsletter;
- c. included on the websites of the Classis and the federation;
- d. deemed a priority for financial assistance by the churches of Classis.

Church plants that are not classically assisted shall ordinarily lack these benefits.

In short, the churches of classis have expressed their desire to work together in planting efforts by means of this procedure that extends certain benefits to the Consistory which, feeling the

weight of church planting, desires more meaningful and united assistance. It should be noted that this procedure in no way allows classis to “lord it over” a particular church by requiring it to work with classis. But the churches have recognized the obvious: Why would any particular church *not* want to involve sister churches in its region for mutual support, encouragement, accountability and assistance? Since we have not yet begun a church plant using the proposal form, we have not actually worked through this process (our two currently assisted mission works were grandfathered in when these guidelines were established). If a church would – for whatever reason – not want the four advantages listed above, and would not desire the accompanying accountability, they are in no way obligated to pursue those benefits. The churches of classis have already expressed that these benefits would ordinarily not be available to those who wish to work more independently in planting efforts.

To continue our working together by way of classical assistance, not only in the beginning but also throughout the process of church planting, classis has also adopted an “Annual Update” form for assisted mission works. Our *Rules of Procedure* state, “Church plants shall continue to receive classical assistance by presenting to Classis the ‘Church Plant Annual Update Form’ by means of the regular CPAC report.” Most delegates are probably familiar with this form, as our two current mission works submit an update to classis each year (the annual updates are appended to CPAC’s report for the spring meeting of classis – you can see the very basic questions in the annual updates that are appended to this report).

These reports inform the churches of many blessings and challenges of church planting, and provide the overseeing Consistory with feedback from a multitude of counselors. Moreover, once churches of classis extend formal assistance to a work, the overseeing Consistory can rest assured that we are formally committed to helping them – we just covenanted to do so! And, since all covenants have two parts, the churches of classis are assured that the overseeing Consistory will remain forthright with, and accountable to, supporting sister churches through the highs and lows of church planting (which is hard work, as illustrated by the lack of church planting commencement over the last thirteen years).

One of CPAC’s major advisory duties is to serve as an extension of classis in working with our church plants. Other duties are delineated under our “Functions and Tasks” (*RoP*, IV.B.4.c) –

The Church Planting Advisory Committee shall:

1. function under the oversight of a Consistory designated by Classis and shall give account of its work through regular reports of its meetings and activity;
2. make reports of its activity at every meeting of Classis;
3. regularly gather information in a comprehensive newsletter about Classically Assisted Church Plants. The newsletter shall be distributed via the Classical Clerk;
4. work with Consistories in completing “Church Plant Proposals” and “Annual Updates” of their church plants that are to be presented to Classis;
5. review “Church Plant Proposals” and “Annual Updates” that are presented by Consistories, and bring recommendations to Classis;
6. investigate potential mission fields, with a view to connecting a church plant with an overseeing Consistory;

7. respond to inquiries that are sent to the committee by the Classical Clerk and the URCNA Stated Clerk;
8. respond to invitations to visit church plants;
9. make recommendations to Classis about amending “Classis Guidelines for Church Planting;”
10. encourage churches of Classis in missions and evangelism, in conjunction with the federation's Missions Coordinator.

We hope that this review of CPAC’s founding and function is informative for the men currently serving on consistories of Classis Central. Please do not hesitate to ask committee members any questions you might have about its work.

Financial Question (#11) in the Annual Update Form

In the Annual Update Form, you will see that Question 11 deals with finances – “How has the last year been financially? Please include internal and external income, as well as current financial assets. What is your revised projected, estimated budget for the next three years?” At our spring classis meeting of 2020, our committee mentioned to the delegates how it does not appear that this question is functioning well for classis – we, therefore, sought some feedback and direction. Responses varied; some of the suggestions were diametrically opposed to each other. On one end of the spectrum, it was asserted that there is no reason for assisted church plants to provide financial information unless they have a special need; on the other end of the spectrum, it was asserted that such information is expected. The latter position appeared to be motivated by a genuine desire to understand financial situations in order to give more unified and effective help to mission efforts, which would be entirely in keeping with one of the basic reasons for classis’s establishment of the Church Planting Advisory Committee. Clear, thorough and transparent financial reporting will result in better care for a current mission work – it will also result in growing confidence among all our Consistories that, instead of bearing the burden of church planting alone, each would receive significant support from the whole classis. And that should obviously translate into more church planting among us.

Finances are significant part of what it means for us to work together and assist each other – we have agreed that formal classical assistance for a church plant means that it will be “deemed a priority for financial assistance by the churches of Classis” (*RoP*, VII.A.2.d). Reporting on a plant’s financial situation should not be viewed as giving any church opportunity to “lord it over” another – the reporting is done in the interest of helping the churches prioritize their giving according to their duty to “assist each other in the support of their missionaries” (C.O. Art. 47), which results in long-term sustainability and effectiveness in planting efforts. Such reporting will at times give our classis opportunity to celebrate God’s provision; at other times it will help us see how we might best serve a mission work together. The committee would appreciate an informed (and informative) discussion at this next classis meeting regarding this matter: Why would one of our churches not want to be clear and transparent in reporting basic financial information about a plant to which all the churches of classis have committed assistance? Perhaps there are good reasons, but at this point we are unaware of them.

CPAC has been using the following financial table in connection with Question 11:

	Fiscal YTD: 2017 ¹ <i>Month/Year</i>	2018 <i>estimated</i>	2019 <i>estimated</i>	2020 <i>estimated</i>
Total Budget	\$102,379.00	\$105,000	\$110,000	\$115,000
<u>Income:</u>	97,047.26	105,000	110,000	115,000
<i>Internal Offerings</i>	58,904.39	65,000	70,000	80,000
<i>External Support</i>	38,142.87	40,000	40,000	35,000
<u>Expenditures</u>	<u>95,708.97</u>	<u>105,000</u>	<u>110,000</u>	<u>115,000</u>
Difference	1,338.29	0	0	0
Assets/Liabilities ²	25,173.00	25,000	25,000	25,000

¹ We understand churches use different fiscal years, so please specify for clarity.

² Please feel free to further explain any assets and/or liabilities.

In our spring 2018 report, we informed classis that we have included this financial table to help the Consistories summarize the financing of their plant, giving other churches a simple bird’s-eye view of how our plants are doing financially – again, in the interest of prioritizing giving for the assisted work according to our shared commitment. Our intention is that the table will allow classis to process a standardized set of data, thus avoiding misinterpretation of figures with each new update. In an Annual Update that we received from the Consistory of Sioux Falls URC (now Christ Reformed) this helpful summary was supplied in response to Q. 11:

We rejoice in how the Lord continues to provide for SFURC through generous supporting churches (cf. below: contributions). There’s an average yearly increase of 15% in internal giving (cf. below: collections), and Lord willing, that will continue as He gathers members together and prospers the work of our hands. Accordingly, our external need of financial assistance is projected to decrease significantly over the next 3-6 years. We currently have right at five months of reserve (\$46,168).

Sioux Falls United Reformed Church

Projected Finances

	2011 (Actual)	2012 (Actual)	% Increase over 2011	2013 (Actual)	% Increase over 2012	2014 (Actual)	% Increase over 2013	2015 (Actual)	% Increase over 2014	Average % Increase	Estimated % Increase	2016 Budget (Budget)	2017 (Estimated)	% Increase over 2016	2018 (Estimated)	% Increase over 2017	
Income																	
Collections	\$ 36,785.13	\$ 44,485.95	21%	\$ 48,323.57	9%	\$ 58,788.50	22%	\$ 64,701.60	10%	15%	15%	\$ 74,613.14	15%	\$ 86,043.02	15%	\$ 99,223.82	15%
Contributions	\$ 37,548.62	\$ 48,517.23	29%	\$ 66,126.90	36%	\$ 39,767.05	-40%	\$ 39,092.87	-2%	6%	6%	??	??	??	??	??	
Interest Inc	\$ 0.36	\$ 0.06		\$ -		\$ -		\$ 0.25									
Total Income	\$ 74,334.11	\$ 93,003.24		\$ 114,450.47		\$ 98,555.55		\$ 103,794.72				\$ 74,613.14	\$ 86,043.02		\$ 99,223.82		
Expenses																	
Total Expenses	\$ 80,317.36	\$ 82,685.78	3%	\$ 100,409.77	21%	\$ 95,896.60	-4%	\$ 105,489.45	10%	7%	6%	\$ 111,522.29	\$ 118,164.40	6%	\$ 125,255.33	6%	
Net Income	\$ (5,983.25)	\$ 10,317.46		\$ 14,040.70		\$ 2,658.95		\$ (1,694.73)				\$ (36,909.15)	\$ (32,121.39)		\$ (26,031.52)		

*Insurance was not needed in the past and was not budgeted for in 2016 but will be needed. Placeholder figure of \$600 was added into the 2016 Budget.

It seems that there continues to be a lack of clarity as to what classis wants to receive in answer to Q.11 and/or a lack of seriousness in the material that is supplied by overseeing Consistories. The committee often receives the Annual Update with Q.11 left unanswered or with information that is nearly impossible to decipher. Accordingly, we recommend replacing the current Question 11 with the following:

The churches of Classis Central are committed to prioritizing giving for classically assisted works. To better help us understand your financial situation, please let us know how have you been provided for this last year? Where are you still lacking? Using the table below, please provide your most recently completed fiscal year as well as your current budget, year-to-date. There are spaces to include your financial projections for the years to come. Please also include your most current budget, and feel free to specify or clarify as you deem appropriate (e.g., assets and/or liabilities).

Annual Update for Quito, Ecuador

We are thankful for the Lord's work that continues in Quito (see the Annual Update for Quito which is appended to this report). The update is rather clear, except for the material supplied in answer to Question 11. CPAC has operated under the assumption that if the information is unclear to us, it is likely to be unclear to classis. So we sought clarification from the sending Consistory once again. We asked the Pella Consistory if they would be interested in using the Annual Update (specifically, Q.11) to make it clear how much the churches of classis are contributing to this mission work in comparison with how much churches outside classis are contributing. Covenant-Pella declined. In connection with their financial table, we asked if they do not plan on their budget growing over the next few years; if they are not planning to receive more external support than is currently given; if they would like to give the churches of classis any sense as to how Covenant-Pella feels about its ongoing support of this work; or if they would like to receive more financial support from the churches of classis. While a deacon from their missions committee expressed their gratitude for all the support they have received, the Consistory declined to use Q.11 to clarify any of the issues outlined above.

CPAC believes that Covenant-Pella, Rev. Landazuri, and the kingdom work happening in Quito would all benefit from better reporting of their financial situation. It strikes us as a strange thing that they are not interested in sharing in a way that would help us all to help them. Notwithstanding this discrepancy, the committee would still recommend that classis continue assisting the work in Quito.

Annual Update for Chicago Heights, IL

Here, too, the committee found most of the material in the update very clear, with the exception of the answer to Q.11 (see the Annual Update for Chicago Heights which is appended to this report). In the financial template, it seems that assets and liabilities have inadvertently been elided; no explanation is provided, and the figures were received too late for meaningful interaction with the Consistory at Faith-Beecher. Also, while the annual budget naturally increases by a few thousand dollars each year, internal offerings and external support are expected to increase in step with the budget, but in such a manner that there is an assumed \$50K

shortfall each year! Do our dear brothers at Beecher imagine that this will not be of concern to the churches of classis that love them and want to see their church plant thrive?

Again, CPAC is concerned with the lack of interest that Consistories demonstrate in their reporting on Question 11 of the Annual Update. Nevertheless, the committee recommends that classis continue assisting this work in Chicago Heights, and we are hopeful that the brothers at Faith-Beecher can help the churches by way of clarification so that we may better support them.

We are thankful for these mission works and for the opportunity CPAC is given to work with them. The committee wants to see more unified support from classis in the support of these missionaries and their respective congregations. But it is unclear to us if the overseeing Consistories actually desire to work with the committee or see any benefit in receiving formal classical assistance.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. That we replace Question 11 on the Annual Update form to the following:

The churches of Classis Central are committed to prioritizing giving for classically assisted works. To better help us understand your financial situation, please let us know how have you been provided for this last year? Where are you still lacking? Using the table below, please provide your most recently completed fiscal year as well as your current budget, year-to-date. There are spaces to include your financial projections for the years to come. Please also include your most current budget, and feel free to specify or clarify as you deem appropriate (e.g., assets and/or liabilities).

2. That classical assistance continue for El Pacto de Gracia in Chicago Heights, IL.

3. That classical assistance continue for Luz de Vida in Quito, Ecuador.

Respectfully submitted,

Rev. Jody Lucero, *clerk*
 Rev. Spencer Aalsburg, *chairman*
 Elder Grant Diekevers
 Rev. Joel Worries
 Elder Bruce Aardsma

Church Plant Proposal Form for Classis Central U.S.

Classis Central Consistory Proposing:

Location of Church Plant Work:

Date of Report:

A. Background

1. Please provide a brief, general background of the core group. How and when did the core group originate? If they left another church, why?
2. What has been your involvement with the group? How often are you meeting with them?
3. How many people/families are genuinely interested in being part of this new work? How well does the group work together?
4. Does this group understand what submission to a Consistory means? How well do they work with your Consistory?
5. What are their reasons for seeking to begin a URC mission work?
 - a. How familiar is the group with the Reformed faith as summarized in the Three Forms of Unity?
 - b. What are they doing together to grow more familiar with the Reformed faith?
 - c. How are you assisting them in their study of the Three Forms of Unity?
6. How does the group demonstrate a desire to reach out to the surrounding community with the Gospel, and to see people brought to faith in Christ?
7. What efforts have been made to promote participation in this group?
 - a. How are the people spending time together to pray for the work and to encourage one another in their efforts?
 - b. Is the group mostly comprised of people from a particular community, or are they spread over a larger area?
8. Looking at the group as a whole, what are the perceived assets and liabilities, or strengths and weaknesses (e.g., former elders, numbers, finances, church planting experience, strong personalities, etc.)?
9. What stresses are visibly evident? How are people coping with these?
10. What are your current prayer requests for this specific church plant work?

B. Demographics

1. What are the basic demographics of this particular area? (Include information such as local population, regional growth or decline, proximity to population centers, etc.)
2. What is the “religious climate” like in this area?
3. What other NAPARC congregations are in the area? If so, has there been any communication with them about the establishment of another Reformed church in the area (per the NAPARC Golden Rule Comity Agreement)?
4. Why should you start a URC in this location?

C. Planning

1. What is your vision for this church plant? How has this been clearly communicated to the core group?
2. What are your plans for faithfully maintaining oversight of this church plant?

3. Are there any plans in place for calling a minister?
4. Are there any plans for training office bearers? Are there any men who are being considered potential elders or deacons?
5. What has the group done to reach the community with the Gospel? What are your future plans for encouraging evangelism?
6. Where does this group plan to meet for studies and worship? Please describe the facility.

D. Finances – What is your projected, estimated budget for the next three years, including internal and external income? This budget should include costs associated with the following:

1. saturating the field with information about the new church
2. the church planter's salary, work expenses, housing, insurance, disability, and retirement
3. renting a visible office with signage until the church has its own worship location
4. web page, internet, and phone
5. producing materials for distribution and/or use for Bible studies, discipleship, etc.
6. rent for worship facility
7. advertising in local papers, on the radio, or low-cost cable access, etc.

Annual Update for Assisted Mission Works of Classis Central U.S.

Consistory Updating: Faith URC of Beecher, IL

Location of Church Plant: Chicago Heights, IL (Rev. Ruben Sernas at El Pacto de Gracia)

Date: December 7, 2019

1. What is going on in the life of this church plant (studies, events, activities, worship services)? What has changed over the last year?

The Coronavirus pandemic has impacted all aspects of the life of our church plant. For our 5pm service each Sunday, El Pacto has met in different locations this year. From the beginning of the year into March, El Pacto met at the First Presbyterian Church in Chicago Heights (the facility we have occupied for the past several years); but we have not met there since early March because First Presbyterian decided to close its building to the public – their pastor has indicated that they will not reopen until well into 2021.

During the quarantine, El Pacto did not meet for corporate worship from March 15 to May 24, during which time Rev. Sernas recorded sermons which were then posted on SermonAudio.com, Facebook, and YouTube. After COVID struck, Rev. Sernas set up a YouTube Channel (“El Pacto de Gracia Chicago Heights”). We currently have 32 videos posted; Rev. Sernas also shares them on El Pacto’s Facebook page. By means of these online platforms, El Pacto is reaching its members and regular visitors, as well as family and friends who live in different parts of Latin America (mainly Mexico and Peru).

From May 31 to July 6, we met at Providence Christian Academy in Dyer, IN. Since churches were allowed to meet for corporate worship in Indiana sooner than Illinois, we looked for a location in Indiana. Many members of our overseeing church send their children to Providence Christian Academy, located close to the Illinois-Indiana border. We are grateful for the use of their facilities. From July 12 to the present, we have been meeting at the Union Street Gallery in downtown Chicago Heights where El Pacto has its offices. We have a smaller office and a larger room; the latter is of sufficient size for our worship services.

We have not had extended periods of fellowship after worship services since early March. Immediately after services, our members and visitors greet each other and enjoy some fellowship, but we do not shake hands, there are no refreshments, and the people wear masks. We have not had a hospitality event since March. Prior to COVID, we had potlucks in May and November. We have postponed fellowship events because of social distancing and the lack of space for tables.

2. How are your prayers being answered? What joys and growth (spiritual & numerical) are you experiencing? What struggles? What are your current prayer requests?

El Pacto hopes to return to the First Presbyterian Church in 2021. That building has plenty of room for our worship services, fellowship meals and joint services with our supporting churches. It is located in a safe neighborhood in Chicago Heights with plenty of parking space. The Presbyterians have been generous and accommodating to our needs and requests; but as they are convinced that corporate worship spreads the virus, they have closed the building in the interest of keeping their insurance. If their building remains closed for most of 2021, El Pacto may consider

looking for a new church building in Chicago Heights. Please pray that First Presbyterian Church will reopen soon. If it does not reopen, then pray that the Lord would give us wisdom concerning a move to another building/location for El Pacto.

Our biggest answer to prayer is being able to resume corporate worship since May 31. We are thankful that we can meet together every Lord's Day to hear God's Word, sing His praises, share prayer requests, and enjoy some fellowship. It was difficult not meeting last spring.

Pray for our elderly visitors who have not been in church since March. There are different reasons for their lack of attendance – some are fearful because they belong to the vulnerable category; some have respiratory problems plus other health issues; some are avoiding any gatherings in order avoid contact with the virus. Please pray for their health, but also that the Lord would grant them peace over all these concerns. We long to see them back in church. Although we are unable to see these saints in person, I am in regular contact with them in order to get personal updates and prayer requests; I also text them the announcements, congregational prayer requests, and a link to the YouTube video each week.

While we have taken precautions to prevent the spread of the Coronavirus, there are three individuals who have tested positive for COVID (two members and myself). Two members (a mother and daughter) tested positive within the past several weeks – the college-age daughter has recovered, but the mother is still sick. The mother is stable, but recovering slowly. The whole family is under quarantine at home.

I am currently recovering from COVID and pneumonia. I fell sick on October 26. My family and I had to quarantine at home. I am very grateful to recent MARS graduate Arnold Lavaire who led El Pacto's worship service during my absence. I resumed preaching on November 22.

3. How many people are involved with this work? How has composition changed?

I am grateful for our families. They have been patient and prayerful in a year filled with change. Please pray for them as they experience joys and sorrows throughout their Christian lives. May the Lord strengthen their faith and help them to grow in Christian maturity.

The Mosso family is composed of Margarito & Marta with their six children (Nicole, Jonathan, Ali, Yasmin, Samuel, and Mateo). In January of 2020, Marta gave birth to Mateo, whom I baptized on March 1 during a joint evening service with Faith URC of Beecher. It is great to have joint services with our overseeing church as well as with our supporting churches. Please pray for Margarito and Marta – that the Lord would grant them strength and good health as they raise their covenant children.

The Cruz family consists of David & Elda with their two children (Jazzy and Joshua). Please pray for the physical and economic well-being of this family. Most of the family have dealt with various health issues. David (the father) works as a Lyft and Uber driver. He has had fewer clients this year. Elda's father passed away earlier this year. In the midst of these trials, they faithfully seek the Lord's mercy.

Teo Garcia has been a faithful member of El Pacto since our beginning. Please pray that the Lord would comfort Teo who lost his mother and sister this year. Please pray for the salvation of Teo's brother and family who live in the area. We pray that they would worship with us.

Dave & Ivone Arsenault recently moved to Kenosha, WI. We will miss them, but so thankful for all the ways they served the church. Ivone retired as a teacher at Lansing Christian School. They are now living closer to their daughter and her family.

My wife Leah and I are busy homeschooling our five children (Evangeline, Sophia, David, Jonathan, and Carmen-Cristi). We are part of a homeschool community called Classical Conversations, and have been blessed by this homeschool community. Wyatt Snyder, a high school student at CC, has joined us for worship because he wants to learn Spanish.

We are grateful for our regular visitors as well. Samuel & Reyna Cuevas faithfully attend church every Sunday. Please pray for Reyna who is looking for work. Samuel's cousin Miguel Angel recently joined us for worship – in Mexico, Miguel was a member of a Presbyterian church close to Juan Calvino Seminary. We have older saints who stay at home on Sunday because they are in the vulnerable category (Hector & Sonia Martorell and Irene Tijerina). Some of our regular visitors have health issues and watch online (Ana Solano and Graciela Puente). Prior to COVID, both Ana and Graciela would bring their grandchildren to church. One of our regular older visitors, Goyita, passed away in May. I will always remember Goyita bringing buñuelos (a Mexican pastry) for everyone at El Pacto on Sunday.

4. What efforts are being made to promote participation in this group?

One of the highlights of the year are joint services with our mother church (Faith URC) and supporting churches (Community URC, Lynwood URC, Oak Glen URC and Redeemer URC). It is great for the saints of El Pacto and the saints of local URCs to worship together in a bilingual service. On March 1, we had a joint service with Faith URC for Mateo's Mosso baptism. We were scheduled to have a joint Easter evening service with Community URC on April 12, but it was postponed due to the pandemic. It has also been a blessing to have joint services with Lynwood URC, Oak Glen URC and Redeemer URC. I am very grateful for the opportunity to preach and give presentations at our sister churches.

Typically, we have volunteers from our supporting churches. From January to early March, we had volunteer pianists and Sunday School teachers. Since March, we have had to make several adjustments and do not have as many volunteers. For example, since late May, we have relied upon pre-recorded music to help us with congregational singing; and in our current location (Union Street Gallery) we do not have a piano.

At the Central Classis meeting in September 2020, I spoke with Rev. Ken Anema of Immanuel-DeMotte about the idea of a group from Immanuel visiting El Pacto on a Sunday. In our current location, we would not be able to accommodate them – we pray that someday soon the First Presbyterian Church will reopen, and the saints from Immanuel can join us for worship. We praise God for the support and encouragement of our sister churches.

In September, I was contacted by Crown Point Christian School (St. John, IN) which has a dual immersion Spanish program. We talked about the possibility of collaborating together in the future. Perhaps their students and their parents can worship with us at El Pacto. We would definitely need a larger space in order to have sufficient room for our guests. Praise God that covenant youth want to learn Spanish and worship in both languages.

5. How is the vision of this church plant being advanced or changing?

What I wrote last year regarding this question is still relevant to El Pacto's overall vision. We are a bilingual ministry. The adults are first generation immigrants from Spanish-speaking countries.

Our covenant children either attend Christian schools or are homeschooled. In both cases, they are taught in English. The parents prefer speaking in Spanish, and the children prefer speaking in English. For this reason, our service is bilingual (although the sermon is mainly in Spanish). Our adult Sunday School class is in Spanish, and our classes for children are in English.

Since El Pacto's covenant youth prefers English, we think about where they will worship after high school. More conversation is needed among our youth, their parents and the elders at Beecher. It would be great to have a multi-generational church in which we are all able to worship together. This also requires consultation with other Hispanic ministries that we might learn how they minister to their covenant youth who are now young adults.

6. What progress is being made in calling a minister?

Rev. Sernas has been pastor since June 2016.

7. What progress is being made in training office bearers?

There are many things involved in the training of office bearers. We look to nurture and pray for Christian maturity in the men of the church, that they would exhibit the qualifications that are found in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. As a pastor, I must observe how the men live over a long period of time. Church officers and potential officers need to grow in their knowledge of the Bible and Christian doctrine as well. This past year we finished teaching the Belgic Confession. We are thankful that we have gone through the Three Forms of Unity. We began our study on the URC Church Order. Arnold Lavaire, a former summer intern, translated the church order into Spanish. This is a great resource for learning about Reformed church polity. Church officers not only need to be knowledgeable about the Bible, confessions, and church government, but they also need to be prayerful men. Once a month, we meet for prayer meetings; I teach from the Heidelberg's material on the Lord's Prayer. We then pray about our ministry, the city of Chicago Heights, the salvation of loved ones, and our URC missionaries. Just to clarify, the prayer meeting is open to everyone, not just potential officers.

8. What challenges have you experienced in faithfully shepherding this church plant?

I answered this question in part in responses to Question #1 and Question #2 above. It has been difficult to minister to people through video, phone, and text messaging. Although I am using all means at my disposal to minister to people, it is not the same as, or equal to, visiting with someone face to face. Since I do not want to lose contact with anyone, my weekly updates are an important part of my ministry to those confined at home; but I miss visiting with those who are considered vulnerable to the virus. There are also big differences in terms of worship and fellowship. Those who can worship together are very blessed to be together. Those who are confined at home have an isolating experience. I cannot visit the sick and elderly as easily as before because I do not want to run the risk of getting them sick.

9. *What kind of community outreach is occurring? How comfortable has the congregation been in embracing new visitors?*

In recent years, our organized outreach has consisted of three things: English Class, Bible Study and community dinner.

English Class: I praise God for the partnership between El Pacto and the Chicago Heights Park District. I am very thankful for Wanda Rogers, the Program Director of the Park District. She has been very supportive and encouraging about the English class. When I first met Wanda, I only wanted to request a room for the English class. Since the Park District did not offer an English class, Wanda wanted me to offer the class as a Park District volunteer. I filled out paperwork to become a volunteer. The class was offered virtually this past summer. I would record English class videos in my office. The videos are available on the Park District YouTube channel “Chicago Heights Park District Aprende Inglés.” This Fall, we offered an in-person class. I posted flyers all over Chicago Heights and neighboring cities at supermarkets, laundromats, libraries, bakeries, restaurants, government offices, local schools and clinics. However, since there has been a spike in COVID cases, my class will once again become virtual. Please pray for Alma Barabosa who wants to learn English and interested in El Pacto.

Bible Study: Prior to the quarantine, we had a Bible Study on Friday morning at Hector and Sonia Martorell’s coffee shop located in a Hispanic neighborhood. We would have these studies twice each month. We typically had a group of about 10-15 people. We stopped meeting because of the quarantine. In the Fall, we briefly restarted the study. Recently, we needed to stop the study because of the spike in COVID cases. Illinois has placed restrictions on restaurants and eating places. We are unsure when we will resume. In my communication with the Martorell family, the Bible Study can resume once the restrictions are lifted. This study has offered me a great opportunity to share God’s Word with Hispanics. Usually, after the study, I visit with people to pray with them. I have built several relationships, and several participants have visited El Pacto. Please pray that the Bible Study will resume early next year.

Community Dinner: Last year we had two community dinners. This year we did not have one during the summer due to COVID restrictions. We rescheduled our fall community dinner because the weather is unpredictable. In addition, the Park District only allows 50 people at the local parks at this time. Although we reserved Jirtle Park for the fall, we were able to reschedule for a Saturday in July 2021. Please pray for our summer 2021 community dinner.

10. *How have the proposed plans changed? What change have you seen in the group’s assets and liabilities, strengths and weaknesses? How have you handled successes and failures?*

Throughout this report, I have highlighted how our proposed plans have changed because of the pandemic and the changing restrictions. When we have experienced success, we give God all the glory. When we have experienced failure, we ask God for wisdom in learning from our mistakes. In my conversations with people from other churches, I have discovered that we have all had our share of challenges in 2020. The Lord willing, our plans for 2021 will come to fruition. We pray for the advancement of God’s kingdom in Chicago Heights.

11. How has the last year been financially? Please include internal and external income, as well as current financial assets. What is your revised projected, estimated budget for the next three years?

	Last Fiscal Year* 2020 - 2021	2021 - 2022 <i>estimated</i>	2022 - 2023 <i>estimated</i>	2023-2024 <i>estimated</i>
Total Budget	\$143,560.33	\$146,600	\$150,000	\$155,000
<u>Income:</u>	\$137,792.93	\$96,100	\$100,000	\$105,000
<i>Internal Offerings</i>	\$8,268.31	\$10,000	\$10,000	\$12,500
<i>External Support</i>	\$129,524.62	\$86,100	\$90,000	\$92,500
<u>Expenditures:</u>	<u>\$143,560.33</u>	<u>\$145,600</u>	<u>\$150,000</u>	<u>\$155,000</u>
Difference	-\$5,767.40	-\$49,500	-\$50,000	-\$50,000

* “Last Fiscal Year” runs July through June; it shows all actual offerings. Budget forecasts only include “budgeted offerings.”

Annual Update for Assisted Mission Works of Classis Central U.S.

Consistory Updating: Covenant Reformed, Pella

Location of Church Plant: Quito, Ecuador (Rev. Pablo Landazuri at Luz de Vida)

Date: December 2, 2019

1. What is going on in the life of this church plant (studies, events, activities, worship services)? What has changed over the last year?

The Covid pandemic changed the life of Luz de Vida in important ways. During February the Ecuadorian government placed the whole country in a quarantine that lasted seven months. This decision forced the congregation to have morning and evening online meetings on Sundays. Although we greatly missed getting together for worship, the Lord used our Facebook Sunday broadcasts as a means to reaching out. By the end of August, our Consistory decided to meet again for face-to-face worship, despite the government's lack of clarity on whether churches were allowed or not to meet. This decision was made after the government allowed other institutions and businesses to re-open. Following very strict restrictions, and by God's grace, we have not had any Covid case in Luz de Vida since we opened.

Studies:

Rev. Landázuri taught a midweek study on the book of Job during the lockdown and four basic and membership courses for the community in an online format.

Worship Services:

As mentioned Luz de Vida had online Sunday meetings from February to August; since then, in-person services for morning and evening.

Licensure Examination:

Mr. Steve Wuori successfully sustained his licensure examination early in the year. Steve is an American citizen who has lived in Ecuador for the last 14 years. After obtaining his M.Div., he served as a missionary in the jungle of Ecuador for 12 years. Two years ago he accepted a job as an administrative director at a Christian school in Quito. He and his family have been worshipping with us ever since. Steve is currently working on an D.Min. at New Geneva Seminary.

Pastoral Training Program:

Luz de Vida has been blessed with at least four men interested in serving in the Ministry of the Word and church planting. After prayerful consideration, Luz de Vida decided to start a Pastoral Training Program for these and other men interested in Reformed theology. Rev. Landázuri, Rev. Donoso and Mr. Steve Wuori from Luz de Vida serve as instructors. Also, Rev. Alpuche, former URCNA minister, and current RCUS minister, has agreed to serve as an instructor as well. So far two courses have been offered (Theological Foundations and Greek 1). What makes this program distinct from others available here is that it offers 4 terms per year, each term lasting 15 weeks, with 3 classroom hours per week for each course. Also, biblical languages as well as preaching courses are offered as part of the program.

2. *How are your prayers being answered? What joys and growth (spiritual & numerical) are you experiencing? What struggles? What are your current prayer requests?*

We are grateful and humbled before the Lord because of the growth He has given to Luz de Vida, numerically and spiritually. Due to the pandemic, some of our members have had financial struggles. The congregation and leadership have responded with much love, actively providing relief and finding ways to help brothers and sisters in need to find a job through a network of information among the membership. Also, due to the lack of in-person fellowship, people are having more interaction and showing concern for others even when communication must happen over the phone. The same reaction is evident among the leaders, who are actively in contact with members and visitors.

Membership Growth Statistics:

Year	Professing Members	By baptism
2017	33	10
2018	49	12
2019	62	22
2020	81	29
Increase	19 (30.64%)	7 (31.81%)

The leadership and congregation are particularly excited about the Pastoral Training Program and the potential this might create for future plans (planting more churches in Ecuador). Also, we expect Mr. Wuori to be examined for candidacy and eventually ordained as Luz de Vida's minister. This would allow Rev. Landázuri to start a new church plant in the south of Quito.

Normal pastoral issues appear from time to time, but currently there are no particular struggles except a discipline case that appears to be going in right direction.

Our current prayer requests are:

1. For the country's financial situation due to the pandemic; and for those that lost jobs.
2. For the Pastoral Training Program; for the instructors and students.
3. For our future church plant efforts in the country.
4. For the government to remove restrictions against in-person meetings.

3. *How many people are involved with this work? How has composition changed?*

At this time Luz de Vida has 110 members; the core group is basically the same. The congregation grows organically, fundamentally through the witness of members to friends and family.

Luz de Vida has a Consistory and a Council formed by Rev. Landázuri, Rev. Donoso (E), Mr. Fausto Mora as elder, Mr. Franklin Bayas as deacon (also a candidate to the office of elder); Mr. Francisco Campos and Mr. Esteban Grijalva are candidates to the office of deacon.

4. What efforts are being made to promote participation in this group?

We used to offer twice per month a course for future elders and deacons. Due to the pandemic, that course has been suspended. We hope to reassume it soon.

5. How is the vision of this church plant being advanced or changing?

Our vision has remained the same with no fundamental change. Our objective is to plant confessional Reformed churches in Ecuador.

6. What progress is being made in calling a minister?

Since Rev. Donoso retired, Rev. Landázuri has taken the pastoral responsibilities. Thankfully, the Lord has provided us Mr. Wuori, a licensed exhorter who is proclaiming the Word every other week for us. As stated before, we hope to examine him during the first semester of 2021.

Our original plan was to consider Mr. Cristian García for the ministry, but he informed the Consistory of Luz de Vida about his desire to have his membership transferred to a different church. Although this was in a way unexpected to the congregation, the Lord provided Luz de Vida with Mr. Wuori whose preaching has been very well received. At the same time this event motivated even more the plan we already had for starting our own training program.

7. What progress is being made in training office bearers?

The Pastoral Training Program is an answer to that need (more details in 1 & 4 above).

8. What challenges have you experienced in faithfully shepherding this church plant?

The main challenge this year has been the pandemic and related issues. Due to government restrictions, some activities are currently on hold, such as catechism class and Sunday school.

9. What kind of community outreach is occurring? How comfortable has the congregation been in embracing new visitors?

At this time our worship services are broadcasted on Facebook. This appears to have a strong impact in the community, especially with friends and relatives of our members. Luz de Vida is

very mission oriented; therefore, visitors are readily embraced. Nonetheless, we need to figure out a way of being more organized in getting contact information from those who visit.

10. How have the proposed plans changed? What change have you seen in the group's assets and liabilities, strengths and weaknesses? How have you handled successes and failures?

Essentially our vision and plan remains the same. Luz de Vida has a clear Reformed identity; it understands the foundational importance that the Word has in its life and missional calling; it seeks to be faithful in its testimony to the community. Lay leaders are very much needed. Luz de Vida definitely needs more elders and deacons.

There is a great need for a Reformed educational institution. The Pastoral Training Program is seeking to train future ministers, but also elementary, middle and high school education are areas for ministry that need to be considered in the future.

Successes and failures are in general taken with humility and maturity. Luz de Vida's Consistory has older men with much experience in church life and with a godly piety that have been key in supporting Rev. Landazuri's ministry.

11. How has the last year been financially? Please include internal and external income, as well as current financial assets. What is your revised projected, estimated budget for the next three years?

	Fiscal YTD: 2020 <i>Jan-Dec</i>	2021 <i>estimated</i>	2022 <i>estimated</i>	2023 <i>estimated</i>
Total Budget	\$79,500	\$79,500	\$79,500	\$79,500
<u>Income:</u>	\$80,307	\$80,000	\$80,000	\$80,000
<i>Internal Offerings</i>	\$54,500	\$50,000	\$50,000	\$50,000
<i>External Support</i>	\$25,807	\$30,000	\$30,000	\$30,000
<u>Expenditures:</u>	<u>\$79,500</u>	<u>\$80,000</u>	<u>\$79,500</u>	<u>\$79,500</u>
Difference	\$807	\$500	\$500	\$500
Assets (Liabilities)	\$807	\$1,307	\$1,807	\$2,307

Classis Central US of the URCNA
March 15-16, 2021
Rev. Todd De Rooy
Classis Representative to CERCU

Dear Brothers of Classis Central US,

Thank you for the privilege of serving the churches in the important work of ecumenicity. Restrictions due to COVID-19 resulted in most major assemblies of our sister churches being canceled or postponed. The 2020 annual meeting of NAPARC was also postponed until later this year. There is, therefore, not much to report with respect to most of our sister churches.

However, on November 10, 2020 the members of CERCU met via technology with the Canadian Reformed members of CCCNA (the Committee for Contact with Churches in North America). Here is a brief summary of that meeting:

After an introduction of all committee members, the chairmen of both committees offered summary statements of where our respective churches are regarding ecumenical relationship. A continued desire for ecumenicity was shared from both sides. It was acknowledged that fellowship was continuing to flourish locally ‘at a grassroots level.’ Pulpit exchanges, pastor’s conferences, college outreach, youth group ministries, joint use of the Canadian Reformed seminary, and even concurrent Classis meetings were all cited as growth in this direction. The question was raised how best to pursue fellowship beyond the local level, as we face geographical distances. Some potential proposals were given: seek for concurrent classis meetings across borders, try to set up pulpit exchanges with churches far away, and bring this discussion back to our respective committees. One committee member also recommended that the CanRC brothers seriously consider adapting the Trinity Psalter Hymnal to help ecumenical progress. It was a good discussion, and both committees said they would continue to discuss this topic when they next met individually.

CERCU has begun discussing moving forward in our relationship with the Heritage Reformed Congregations. At their last Synod in the fall of 2020, the HRC voted to move to their Phase 3 of ecumenical relationships with the URCNA. Their Phase 3 and our Phase 2 are very similar.

It is our practice to have a full face-to-face meeting of CERCU at NAPARC. We do not know at this point if NAPARC will meet this fall; CERCU may have to conduct most of our meetings via Zoom.

As a reminder, brothers, this is a summary of our current ecumenical relationships:

Churches in Phase One – *Corresponding Relations*

1. Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church (ARPC)
2. Free Reformed Churches (FRC)
3. Heritage Reformed Congregations (HRC)

4. Korean American Presbyterian Church (KAPC)
5. Korean Presbyterian Church in America – Kosin (KPCA)
6. Presbyterian Church in America (PCA)
7. Presbyterian Reformed Church (PresRC)

Churches in Phase Two – *Ecclesiastical Fellowship*

1. Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC)
2. Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC)
3. Reformed Church in the United States (RCUS)
4. Reformed Church of Quebec / L’Eglise reformee du Quebec (ERQ)
5. Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (RPCNA)

If any Consistories or delegates have any questions about CERCU’s work, or our ecumenical relationships with sister churches, please feel free to contact me personally or at Classis. I would also encourage Classis and convening Consistories to consider making arrangements for a concurrent Classis with neighboring NAPARC Classes and Presbyteries. I am willing to help with any such arrangements.

Respectfully submitted,

Rev. Todd De Rooy
pastorderooy@gmail.com
712.395.8933

Classis Central U.S. Website Oversight Committee Report

Submitted by: Mr. Micah Van Maanen (WOC delegate) on January 26, 2021

Brothers,

The purpose of the Website Oversight Committee (WOC) is to maintain the federation's website located at <https://www.urchna.org>. The current Webmaster, Mr. Gary Fisher, does the majority of the work and keeps the Classical delegates informed of any major issues or developments throughout the year. The following is a report from the Webmaster of developments that have taken place in 2020.

Webmaster's Classis Report

The deadline for church updates to be included in the annual Archive Directory has passed. Despite the Statistician's best efforts, some churches did not meet the deadline and so their information in the Directory will not reflect the past year's activity. It is impossible to gauge the significance of this as we cannot know what changed and should have been updated - this might include contact information, service times, mailing address, etc. - but because none of the statistics for these churches, such as baptisms, professions, etc., could be confirmed, many of their statistics will be reported as 0 rather than to keep last year's numbers in place. This will also reflect in the totals for those churches' classes and for the Federation as a whole.

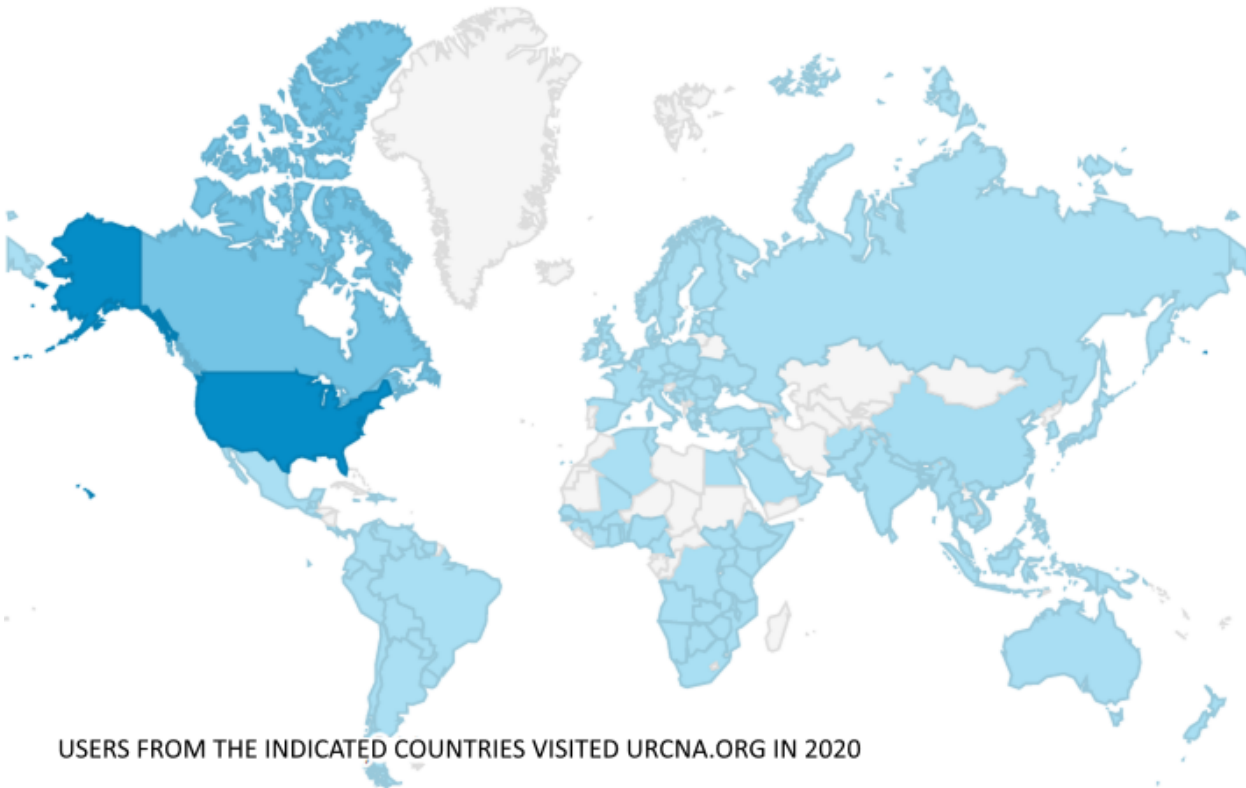
One issue which has appeared repeatedly over the past few weeks has been church clerks who were not able to log in, nor to make use of the self-recovery system ("Forgot Username" / "Forgot Password") because whoever had previously updated their church's Profile had changed the Church Email and Password Recovery address and either mis-entered it, lost access to it, or neglected to pass it on to the new clerk. We've also found a few instances where whoever controlled this address had marked URCNA emails as "SPAM," cutting themselves off from any and all URCNA-related communications. Because this is the email address which will be listed in the Directory, provided to other churches, and available to visitors who use the Find-A-Church feature, it is particularly important that the Church Email Address in the Profile is accurate, active, and regularly checked.

Although the end-of-year church updates are essential for the annual Archive Directory, which forms our lasting record, the churches are reminded that the Live Directory, available only to logged-in member churches, is continuously updated, and is used regularly both by sister churches and by the Standing Committees as well as the Stated Clerk and the Treasurers and should be kept up to date whenever changes occur. The Statistics file, which is available (only) to logged-in users and updated regularly, shows the current statistics for each church and classis as provided from day to day by the individual churches. Up-to-the-day statistics are available by request.

The massive work accomplished in late 2019 and early 2020 to add a full suite of Synod registration, reporting, and support functions to URCNA.org remains in place (though mostly out of sight) and ready to serve the next and all future URCNA Synods.

In November of 2020, URCNA.org served 30,158 visitors. In December that number climbed to 34,661. As of this writing in mid-January, the website has hosted 17,028 visitors. Although the bulk of our

visitors are in the US and Canada, the map below shows all of the countries where URCNA.org has been requested during the past year.



Visitors using desktop PCs are about equally divided between Apple and non-Apple devices; the same is true for phones and tablets but with what seemed like an interesting asterisk: the third most popular phone used to visit URCNA.org is a Huawei model sold only in China and southeast Asia.

Thank you for the opportunity to serve in this capacity.

In Christ,
Gary Fisher
Webmaster, URCNA.org

As the WOC delegate for our Classis, I also encourage you to bring any feedback, concerns, or possible improvements for the website to my attention so that I may in turn inform the Committee.

Respectfully submitted,
Mr. Micah Van Maanen

URCNA APPEALS COMMITTEE REPORT

Dear Fathers and Brothers,

As the representative appointed by Classis Central U.S. to serve on the URCNA Appeals Committee, I provide you the following report of our work:

As directed by Synod 2018, the representative from Classis Eastern U.S. was appointed as the convener of our first meeting. At that first video conference meeting, we reviewed our mandate and elected Rev. Cal Tuininga to serve as Chairman and Rev. William Godfrey as Clerk. At that time, there were no appeals pending for our committee review.

On December 20, 2019, the Committee held a second video conference meeting to review an appeal that had been submitted for adjudication at Synod 2020. Given that the appeal was submitted by the undersigned and Rev. Barnes, I recused myself from any substantive discussion on the appeal during the meeting. The Committee reviewed the appeal and found it in order.

On March 17, 2020, the Committee held another meeting to review an additional individual appeal and provided advice to the convening consistory concerning its inadmissibility. The Committee also reviewed a communication from Classis East that asked our committee to provide advice **directly to Synod** on Church Order issues related to a pending appeal. However, the Committee found that making such recommendations directly to Synod is beyond our Committee mandate to *“to make recommendations **to the relevant synodical advisory committee** concerning the proper and timely handling of particular appeals, without making recommendation concerning the disposition of the appeal”* (Acts of Synod 2018, Article 64, p. 44). Finally, the Committee also began formulating the advice that our Standing Committee will provide to the Synodical Advisory Committee on Appeals. Given that Synod 2020 was cancelled, the Committee did not finalize a Report to the Advisory Committee.

On March 26, 2020, the Committee held another meeting to review an appeal of Covenant Reformed, Pella, Iowa, which is related to Classis East’s handling of the Van Der Molen/Barnes appeal. The Committee found that the appeal was in order.

A Committee meeting date in 2021 has not yet been scheduled. The Report to the Synodical Advisory Committee will be finalized when the deadlines for appeals has passed (*date to be determined once it is decided when the next Synod will be held*) and the Committee has reviewed all appeals submitted by that deadline.

In His service,

Mark Van Der Molen, Immanuel URC, DeMotte

December 16, 2020

Faith United Reformed Church

130 W. Corning Road

P.O. Box 729 Beecher, Illinois

To: Classis Central U.S. (URCNA)

Re: Candidacy Exam Recommendation for Mr. Nathan Voss

Dear Brothers:

The Council of Faith United Reformed Church recommends Nathan Voss for a ministerial candidacy examination by Classis Central U. S. at its March 2021 meeting. Nathan and his wife, Lauren, became members of Faith URC (Beecher, Illinois) in September of 2020. Nathan graduated from Mid America Seminary in May of 2019. He has been seeking a calling in the ministry. Members of Faith URC became aware of Nathan's desire for ministry and seeking a call in the URC, by recommendation from a fellow student of Mid America and high recommendation by the faculty of Mid America Seminary. Nathan's love for the Lord and of His church is evident in his love for God's Word and God's people. Nathan seeks to know the members of the congregation to know their current circumstances and their needs. Nathan is very willing to help and to be of assistance to the consistory of the church. Nathan's preaching is Christ centered and scripture centered, and is very easily understood by all age groups. His love for the Lord and the preaching of his word have revealed and confirmed Nathan's desire and giftedness to serve the church of Christ pastorally. Nathan's doctrine and life have set a fine example of godliness. The Council of Faith URC heartily recommends Nathan for examination at the March 2021 meeting of Classis Central US.

In the service of Christ and His Church,

Warren Siebert, Clerk of Council

Faith United Reformed Church Beecher, Illinois

MEDICAL STATEMENT OF HEALTH

For

CLASSIS CENTRAL U.S.

UNITED REFORMED CHURCHES IN NORTH AMERICA

The *Guidelines for a Candidacy Exam* (Appendix 3, URCNA Church Order) call for each prospective candidate to submit "a medical evaluation of health" prior to being examined by the classis and named a candidate for the ministry of the Word and sacraments.

In fulfillment of this requirement, each examinee is expected to arrange for a medical evaluation by a licensed physician. After this medical evaluation has been performed, the examinee should ask his physician to complete this form, which then should be submitted to the clerk of classis by the examinee's consistory.

PHYSICIAN'S ATTESTATION OF HEALTH FOR MINISTERIAL CANDIDACY

I, Dr. JEFFREY A. MOZWECZ M.D., hereby attest that on this day, I examined Mr. NATHAN VOSS

with the intent of evaluating his capacity for serving as an ordained Christian minister in full-time service. Having done so, and being duly licensed in the state of ILLINOIS as a medical doctor, I declare that I have found no health condition which would impede him from this service.

(If there are any qualifications to this recommendation, please note those on the lines below.)

Attested on this day, December 15, 2020,

Signature: Jeffrey A. Mozwez M.D.

Please Print Name:

JEFFREY A. MOZWECZ M.D.

Thank you for your service!

Mid-America Reformed Seminary

The Board of Trustees
certifies that

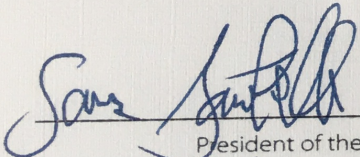
Nathan James Voss

has successfully completed the prescribed course of study,
along with all other stipulated requirements, and
upon recommendation of the Faculty
has conferred upon him
the degree of

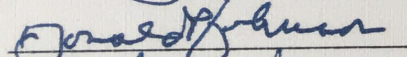
Master of Divinity

in witness whereof the undersigned have affixed
their signatures to this diploma,

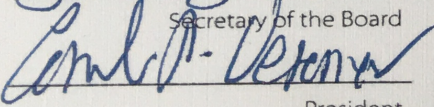
Given this 9th day of May in the year of our Lord 2019.



President of the Board

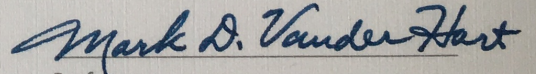


Secretary of the Board

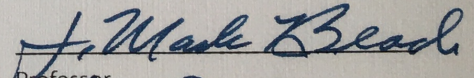


President

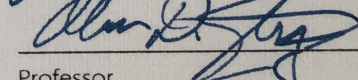




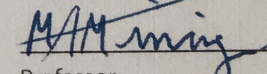
Professor



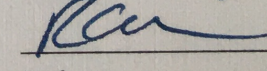
Professor



Professor



Professor



Professor

Mr. Nathan Voss
 Address 170 Timber Hill Dr
 Oak Brook, IL 60523-1426

Degree Program Master of Divinity
 Graduation Date 5/9/2019



Mid-America Reformed Seminary
 229 Seminary Drive
 Dyer, IN 46307
 (219) 864-2400

Official Transcript

2016 Summer

Course	Course	Hrs	Grade
CR 102	Intermediate Greek	3	A-
Current	Hrs	GPA	Cumulative
	3		

2016 Fall

Course	Course	Hrs	Grade
OT 113	Basic Hebrew	3	A-
DD 112	Theological Foundations	2	A-
PS 114	Preaching and Church Educat	4	A-
AS 112	Introduction to Apologetics	2	A
NT 113	Introduction to New Testament	3	A
GK 201	Greek	2	A-
CH 112	American Church History	2	A
Current	Hrs	GPA	Cumulative
	18	3.81	

2017 Interim

Course	Course	Hrs	Grade
OT 122	Advanced Hebrew	2	A
Current	Hrs	GPA	Cumulative
	2	4.00	

2017 Spring

Course	Course	Hrs	Grade
PS 133	Pastoral Care/Counseling	3	A-
PP 131	Applied Sermon	1	A-
BD 133	Biblical Interpretation	3	A
GK 202	Advanced Greek	2	A-
OT 133	Hebrew Reading, Text & Trin	3	A
DS 133	Theology	3	B+
PS 132	Public Worship	2	A-
Current	Hrs	GPA	Cumulative
	17	3.73	

2017 Fall

Course	Course	Hrs	Grade
NT 213	Interpretation of the Gospels an	3	B+
DS 213	Christology	3	A
DE 542	John Calvin's Institutes of the C	2	A-
MJO 211	Preaching from Revelation bef	1	A-
DS 212	Anthropology	2	A-
MN 211	Preaching from the Gospels an	1	B+
OT 214	Interpretation of Revelation bef	4	A-
Current	Hrs	GPA	Cumulative
	16	3.69	

2018 Interim

Course	Course	Hrs	Grade
DE 432	Christian Spirituality	2	A
Current	Hrs	GPA	Cumulative
	2	4.00	

2018 Spring

Course	Course	Hrs	Grade
OT 233	Interpretation of Revelation in 1	3	A-
DS 233	Pneumatology	3	B+
PS 332	Applied Pastoral Counseling	2	A-
MJO 231	Preaching from Revelation in 1	1	A-
NT 233	Interpretation of the Pauline Ep	3	B+
MN 231	Preaching from the Pauline Epi	1	A
CH 234	Medieval and Reformation Ch	4	A-
Current	Hrs	GPA	Cumulative
	17	3.57	

2018 Fall

Course	Course	Hrs	Grade
OT 313	Interpretation of Revelation in 1	3	A-
MJO 311	Preaching from Revelation in 1	1	A
DS 313	Ecclesiology	3	A-
AS 313	Applied Apologetics	3	A-

PS 313 Missions and Evangelism 3 A
ES 313 Christian Ethics 3 A

Course	Hrs	GPA	Cumulative	Hrs	GPA
	16	3.81		91	3.74

2019 Interim

Course	Course	Hrs	Grade
ES 552	Spirituality of the Church	2	A
Current	Hrs	GPA	Cumulative
	2	4.00	

2019 Spring

Course	Course	Hrs	Grade
NI 333	Interpretation of the General Ep	3	A-
DS 332	Eschatology	2	A-
PP 231	Catechism Sermon	1	A-
ED 333	Dem. History and Governme	3	A-
CH 334	Modern and American Church	4	A-
MN 331	Preaching from the General Ep	1	A-
BE 442	Messianic Message OT	2	A
Current	Hrs	GPA	Cumulative
	16	3.71	

TO BEST FOR AUTHENTICITY
 Official transcripts bear the signature of the registrar and are embossed with the seminary seal. This document cannot be released to a third party without the signature of the student. The face of this transcript is printed on grey copy safe paper. When photocopied the latent security statement contains the words 'UNAUTHORIZED COPY' over the face of the document.

Name and Title: Dr. Alan D. Strange, Registrar
 Date: 12/22/2020
 Signature:

Biography

My story is likely similar to many who grew up in the church and were raised by godly parents in a loving home. One might even describe my life and upbringing as ordinary. Yet, in my life, I see God's covenant faithfulness every step of the way. I see how God works in the lives of His people and can use even common circumstances to shape and sanctify their lives.

I am the youngest of five children with two brothers and two sisters and each one of them, along with my parents, were wonderful examples for me and shaped my life. God's word was always presented to me as the place to turn to in sadness, joy, pain, and trial. Some of the ways I grew most in my spiritual life were in the place of difficulty and fear. When I was younger, my family experienced a series of deaths in our extended family and close friends. This, coupled with general anxiety that I had always struggled with, was a very difficult time, but even at that young age, God was working in me as my parents continued to direct me to Him in the midst of anxiety and fear. I began to learn through that trial that God's word is truly powerful, prayer is efficacious, and God grows the faith in the midst of trial. I began the journey of learning that our only comfort truly is that we belong in all ways to our faithful Savior. I cannot say enough how influential this was in shaping and nourishing my faith.

I was homeschooled from first grade through high school. Homeschooling was perhaps the single greatest positive influence that God used in my life and in my siblings' lives. My parents sought to provide a Biblical education in every subject, and they were able to shape the whole curriculum around God's word and take the time to train and disciple us daily in our Christian walk. Though there were difficult aspects being homeschooled in an area and church where everyone else attended public or private schools, God greatly blessed it and used it to shape me in countless ways.

As I grew, I enjoyed listening to sermons and learning about theology. This desire was prompted by my own natural inquisitiveness and desire to understand, but it was especially prompted by my own need to seek God's Word for comfort, strength, wisdom, and an all-around deeper walk with God. While I was in high school, my parents suggested that I consider going into the ministry. This idea appealed to me, and I decided to pursue it and see where God directed it. With my parent's guidance, I decided to do my undergraduate studies online in two years. This then allowed me to attend Reformation Bible College in Sanford, Florida for two years and not prolong my time in college but gain a greater theological understanding as well as determine through my studies if I wanted to continue on to seminary.

Though at times questioning my call, I did decide to go to seminary, and I attended Mid-America Reformed Seminary. I am thankful for the time I spent there. I count the professors as my mentors, and I respected them for their training but most of all for their Christian hearts. My first year was difficult because I questioned if I was really called to the ministry. Much of the uncertainty I felt was tied into a fear of public speaking, which I had never attempted prior to seminary. However, God led me through my first year and into my first summer internship where He enabled me to do the work. My fear began to subside, and I began to question my calling less and less.

Shortly after seminary, God provided me with my wife, Lauren. I continue to see His faithful hand in not only His provision but also in those He continues to place in my life to help me look always to Him. In marriage, I see better the love of Christ for His people. I see the love I have for my wife and her love for me, and I cannot help but see Jesus' love for His people mirrored in the love of husband and wife. However, in marriage, I also see my inadequacies, which highlights the perfect love of Christ, with which I can only marvel. Lauren has been a tremendous comfort and help for me on this journey as she continues to direct me to the Lord and encourages me to trust in Him.

Throughout my time in seminary and for a year after I graduated, I pursued ordination within the CRC, the denomination in which I had been raised. My plan upon entering seminary was to seek membership within the URC as I agreed with its doctrine and polity in confessional commitment, church officers, doctrine of Scripture, etc. However, during my first year of seminary, I began to consider staying in the CRC to become a pastor for one of the many conservative churches remaining within the

denomination. I had found that there were many churches still operating according to Reformed principles that desired faithful preaching but did not have the shepherds to lead them. Through prayer and counsel from family, professors, and pastors, I decided to try and seek ordination within the CRC, and I became a candidate within it.

Several factors contributed to my decision to leave the CRC. First, recent developments in the CRC on a synodical level were concerning to me, and many of the individual churches' response to COVID, such as lack of in-person worship after ten months, made me question whether it was wise to seek ordination in a church where even the more faithful churches were content to neglect worship to such a degree. Second, all of the churches that had expressed interest in calling me as their candidate fell through for various reasons. Lastly, I noticed that many of the churches I saw as potential fits because of their Reformed principles were seemingly "dying" churches. I questioned whether it would be beneficial to begin ministry in such a way.

It was at this point of uncertainty, with no strong CRC prospects, when my wife advised me to consider going into the URC. After much thought, prayer, and counsel, I decided to further pursue prospects within the URC and see if the Lord blessed that decision. This led me to Faith URC in Beecher. They responded with enthusiasm to which my wife and I were encouraged. After continued prayerful consideration, we strongly felt the Lord leading us on in the process with Faith URC. Even in my short time as stated supply at Faith URC, I have grown to love the church, and I pray that it would be God's will for me to serve as their pastor.

However, my greatest desire is not actually to become a minister. Rather, my greatest desire, which I can only imperfectly strive for, is to be faithful to God, glorify Him, and please Him in whatever He has called me to do. I am pursuing ministry because I believe He has called me to it. I love Christ's church, and I am humbled at the prospect of being in a position I know I am not worthy to fill. My constant prayer is that God would continue to guide me and that He would never give me anything without also giving me the humility to receive it. I pray that the church would be blessed through me and myself through the church all through the Lord's ultimate provision.

Statement of Faith

I believe the good news of the gospel as it is revealed in infallible and inerrant Scripture. One God in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I believe the Bible is accurately summarized and interpreted in the creeds and confessions of the church, specifically the Apostle's, Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds and the Three Forms of Unity. I believe that I am a guilty sinner, guilty in the fall of Adam and guilty in my own life. I believe that I am utterly unable to save myself from this sin, and I look to Jesus as my only source of deliverance from the just wrath of God. Thus, my faith is not in my works, but in Christ whose righteousness and faithfulness, in both suffering for sin and keeping the law, has been imputed and credited to me. My response to God for this deliverance is to strive daily to glorify Him and enjoy Him forever. I truly believe that a hair cannot fall from my head without His will. He has been faithful to me through all my failings and has even taught me through those failures. I pray daily that I would yearn to mortify sin, humbly obey Him, and do everything for His glory. I see that He has worked in me most through the hardships faced daily in this world. For that reason, I pray that I would be thankful in all things even when called to go through trials and difficult times. I trust that He who began a good work in me will also carry it to completion, and thus, receive all praise and glory.

Nathan Voss

Catechism Sermon on Lord's Day 45

Title: "Is Prayer a Spare Tire?"

Texts: Luke 11:5-13; 18:1-14

Theme: *Prayer is the Means by which We Draw Near to God*

Martin Luther once said, "**To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing.**" He also said, "**Prayer is a strong wall and fortress of the church; it is a goodly Christian weapon.**" It seems that those God used greatly for His church were always those devoted to prayer, those who made prayer a priority. Sometimes we hear that and just take it for granted. Yeah, yeah, prayer's important, we all know that. But I wonder, do we really? Do we really understand prayer's importance?

Why do Christians need to pray? That's what the Catechism asks in this Lord's Day. This is a question that all Christians ask themselves at least once but probably multiple times in their lives. Why pray?

This question is actually a problem that everyone faces. For the Reformed the question is why would we pray to a Sovereign God who has already planned out the future? A future that will not change!

Some might say that we have this view of a sovereign God. In our Reformed understanding God is this all-powerful puppeteer who controls everything, and, in your scheme, it is pointless to pray." But you know what the problem is with that answer? If God weren't sovereign...then why would we pray to Him? If He's not all powerful, all knowing, everywhere present, then there would be no point to pray to a being that can't actually answer the prayer.

But the question still remains, since we are praying to an all-knowing, unchanging God, what's the purpose? Is there really any benefit to prayer? I heard one pastor answer this question by saying, "**We pray because it pleases God, because God likes it when we communicate with Him.**" Now that's certainly true, the Catechism itself expresses this, but this answer seems to be somewhat hollow or wooden. "Pray because God enjoys it," but do we actually receive any benefit from prayer? The Catechism deals with all these dilemmas about prayer and shows us that ultimately we pray because [Theme] **It is the means by which we draw near to God.** The Catechism does this by answering three questions. **Why do we Pray? How do we Pray? And What do we Pray?**

Why do Christians need to pray?

Now notice first the question the Catechism asks. It didn't say why *can* Christians pray or why *should* Christians pray. No, it said why do Christians *need* to pray. I think the sad reality is that we don't often feel the need to pray. And if we're honest with ourselves the prayers we do utter sound less like a need and more like a chore, something to get through before eating that meal. **Corrie Ten Boom once asked, "Is Prayer your steering wheel or your spare tire?** For many, it's just a spare tire.

You see people of God, prayer is something God commands us to do. 1 Thess. 5:17-18

says, **“Pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”** It’s not uncommon for us to go through a day without really having any prayer of substance. Sure, we may bow our heads and half-heartedly say some version of a prayer we always pray, but this is not true prayer. The real reason we pray is given in the answer.

There are two reasons the Catechism gives for praying: First, it’s to express thankfulness! It’s kind of ironic that the most important way of being thankful, is in the arena of prayer, but it is often in thanksgiving that we spend the least time. Have you ever prayed about something over and over? Something that was weighing on your mind or worrying you and as soon as God answers that prayer, you move on to something else and spend a fraction of the amount time you used for supplication in thanksgiving.

We are called to be full of thanksgiving! When we see God as He is, when we encounter Him in His word, we can’t be anything other than amazed which should well up in prayers of thanksgiving. Especially since we are the ones so much of it was directed to and those who have received the full bounty of God. People of God, don’t be like the lepers who were healed and only one came back to thank Jesus.

Why do we Pray? Because that is the best way to express our thanksgiving. Think about it. It’s direct communication to God. There is no more important way to express thanksgiving than to tell your Father directly.

Christians are supposed to be the most thankful of people...but are we? We have been given more than anyone else. We see that in what we’ve received in our salvation. The gifts of regeneration, faith, justification, adoption, sanctification, perseverance, and ultimately glorification.

These are sufficient gifts to make us thankful. But even more than that, because we understand God’s sovereignty and his providence, we now can and should be thankful for **everything** that happens in our lives. And you know ceaseless prayers of thanksgiving are one way in which we draw nearer to God! Because we begin to see and sense His hand, we begin to revel all the more in the union we have with Him, in essence our love grows!

So that’s the first reason to pray. But what’s the other reason the Catechism gives for prayer? **Because God gives His grace and Holy Spirit only to those who pray continually and groan inwardly asking God for these gifts and thanking Him for them.** This is what the passage from Luke 11 shows us. God will only respond in prayers to those who actually utilize prayer. **Verse 10 says, “For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.”** These are not meaningless words, even if we sometimes treat prayer like that. These words promise us answers to our prayers.

Luke shows us that if you continue to pester a friend at an inopportune time you will get your request just to get rid of you! How much more worthwhile will be continued prayer to our Father who loves us?!

Why pray, people of God? Because you receive grace through it! Because you receive the Holy Spirit through it! Meaning by that, the continued operation of the Holy Spirit in your life. Since God will not hesitate to give the Holy Spirit to those who ask, then it is the perfect means

of drawing nearer to God because He will continue to send us His Spirit in answer to our prayers (not that Christians can lose the Holy Spirit, but they can be ever more filled with the Spirit).

I wonder if we truly realize the confidence we have in prayer as well as the gifts we receive in prayer. It's probably easier to see prayer merely as an act of worship to God (which is wonderful) but forget that we receive abundant grace through it. We tend to look at prayers as obligations or habits, or fruitless, that they won't be answered. But look at what Luke says, **"If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him."**

You know what this means? It means you will always receive grace and the Holy Spirit through proper prayer, even if you don't receive the exact thing you were requesting because our greatest concern is not actually receiving our requests. One commentator said, **"Although to pray is to ask, prayer is not a means of *getting* what we want; it is a means of *becoming* what God wants us to be...Ultimately, prayer is not a search for things but for communion."** People of God, it's in that search for communion with God, as we bring thanksgivings, praises, and petitions, that God draws near to us through the Holy Spirit.

I think this is what we often miss in prayer. If you base whether prayer is worthwhile according to getting exactly what you asked, then you are missing prayer entirely! **The greatest joy of prayer isn't that you can ask a genie in the sky for a bunch of stuff! Rub the lamp and make your wish! The greatest joy of prayer is that you can commune with God Himself. Bask in His presence, praise His name, reflect upon His ways! Build a relationship with Him!**

We get so caught up in what we should ask in prayer that we forget, as Thessalonians says, to pray without ceasing because prayer is the vital instrument that enables us to commune with God. For a Christian to ask why we must pray is like asking a wife why she calls her husband on the phone. Spouses don't ask what's the benefit of talking to each other, what do I get out of it? **What you get out of it is a relationship!**

And oh, by the way, none of this denies the fact that prayer really does bless us! Why do we pray! We pray because that's how we can express thanksgiving and receive grace, and the Holy Spirit. We pray because God has made it the means by which we bring about what He has foreordained. This is why God's sovereignty is not a problem in prayer because your prayers are often the means by which He is answering and bringing about His will.

So we know why we pray but what about how to pray?

How Do We Pray?

The Catechism, in bringing all of God's word to bear, provides us with three points on proper prayer. One commentator helpfully summarizes these three conditions of prayer: First prayer must be *sincere*. Second prayer must be *humble*. And third, prayer must be offered in complete *trust*.

The first point is sincere, or as the Catechism says, **from the heart**. We can see this in

the passage we read from Luke 18, the prayer of the Pharisee was not sincere as he bellowed it out for all to hear. This was not a prayer from the heart. The Pharisee claimed to be giving a prayer of thanksgiving, but his prayer was not true heartfelt thanksgiving! It was a prayer to himself for how great he was! It is in the tax-collector that we see true sincere prayer. Jesus says, **“I tell you this man went down to his house justified rather than the other.”**

You know the sincerity of your prayer is not based upon its length or the impressive words you use! It’s based on whether or not your heart and mind are engaged praying with reverence, sincerity, and love. Psalm 145:18-20 says, **“The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. He fulfills the desire of those who fear him; he also hears their cry and saves them. The Lord preserves all who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy.”**

True prayer must be from the heart. But don’t take from this that it means you can only pray when you feel the need to or when your heart is in the right place! No, we seek to cultivate a prayer life and the way to do that is not in waiting to pray until you feel sincere. Instead, we pray all the more seeking through God’s grace to be sincere.

There is another condition for true prayer. The second condition is that it must be humble. This is also clearly seen in the tax collector. Listen to the description again. **“But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”**

The Bible repeatedly says that God will have grace on the humble, where God will exalt the humble, where God will draw near to the humble. When we come before God in humility, **meaning that we are seeking first God, His kingdom, and His glory, then we are praying sincerely, then we will receive grace, then we will receive the Holy Spirit.** God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.

There’s another aspect to this humility that the tax collector shows. **Knowledge of sin!** We must come before God with the recognition that not only are we sinners who need forgiveness and need to repent, but we are in a broken sin cursed world. It’s fallen, it’s not right. We don’t just come to “shoot the breeze” with God. We come as those still fighting against sin and we come in urgency because we need communion with God in light of the misery we find ourselves in.

The third condition for proper prayer is that it be offered in complete trust or confidence. Meaning we do not pray with utter skepticism, praying to God but doubting Him! It’s easy to do that isn’t it? To doubt whether God truly forgives when we confess. To doubt whether God will provide for us. To doubt that He will ever grant our petitions. We have those thoughts all the time **“What’s the point of praying about this because it won’t do any good!”**

The reason this is wrong, the reason we can’t do this, is because to doubt this isn’t only conceiving of God wrongly, it’s to utterly slap our Savior in the face. **When we approach God, we aren’t doing so on our worthiness or merit but on Christ’s. For God to fail to answer**

your plea (as long as it is proper) would be a failure to answer Christ. The reason God will listen to our prayer is because of our Great intercessor. All prayer is meaningless and useless apart from Jesus.

God's people are truly His people as long as they are united to the Son! The wings of prayer are clipped and never rise above the ground without Him. For what are we thankful in except in Christ. Why would we ever confess sins except that we find forgiveness in Christ. What request and petition could we have any confidence in were it not that our prayers go through Christ our intercessor. As Hebrews 4 says, **“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”** To pray to God, we come through our Savior. And this is what gives us the confidence to draw near to Him.

We do need to say something about this confidence though. There are many prosperity preachers/health and wealth gospels out there that believe God will bless you with anything you want or ask for, if you just do it right. These are pretty extreme cases, but there does seem to be some kind of issue here. **How can we not doubt God when we know that just because we might pray for something, doesn't mean God will grant it?** There are several answers to this.

First, we must be asking for the right reasons with the right motivations. James 4:3 says, **“You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.”** God will not grant these types of requests that seek worldly gain from sinful desires.

Second, in Ursinus's commentary on the Catechism (one of the authors of the Catechism), he makes a helpful distinction between the temporal blessings we ask for and the spiritual blessings we pray for. We cannot doubt the spiritual blessings. We cannot fail to be assured that our repentance, requests for grace, requests for the Holy Spirit, perseverance, and strengthening of faith will always be supplied by our Heavenly Father because He will never withhold from His true children.

However, for the temporal blessings we ask for in this life, we know that God may not grant exactly what we want. But even here Ursinus says we must not doubt. He says, **“We believe that we shall obtain from God the temporal blessings which we ask at his hand, if they contribute to our salvation, and [we] do not desire to be heard, if they would be injurious to us.”** In other words, we do not doubt that God will give to us everything we need, everything that would enable us to seek first His kingdom...our daily bread.

But let this also be a warning to us. We must be aware that we pray for those things that fall into proper prayer. We must pray with sincerity, humility, and confidence. But People of God, we must ask.

What do we Pray For?

Q&A 118 answers that for us. We are not going to go into this because it will be unpacked in the following Lord's Days but just as a point of encouragement to you and a reminder of the grace that God has given us, look at the words of this answer.

What should we pray for? **“Everything we need, spiritually and physically, as embraced in the prayer Christ our Lord Himself taught us.”** How wonderful! Philippians 4:6-7 shows us this glorious truth! **“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”**

People of God, do you see the power, the necessity, and the importance of prayer? Do you see how it is the means by which we draw near to God? Do you see why Martin Luther likened it to the Christian’s breathing?!

Now it would be easy to end here and say, “Go and do likewise”, which is true, but I want to end with some words from John Calvin. **“No one has ever carried this out with the uprightness that was due, but God tolerates ‘even our stammering’ and pardons our ignorance, allowing us to gain familiarity with Him in prayer, though it be in a babbling manner.”**

Take heart, people of God. Your prayers are precious in God’s sight like incense rising before Him. Take heart because your prayers rest upon a sure and unshakeable foundation, a foundation outside ourselves. The Catechism said as much, **“We must rest on this unshakable foundation; even though we do not deserve it, God will surely listen to our prayer because of Christ our Lord.”**

Amen. Let’s pray.

By Faith:
A Woman, a Prophet, and a Miracle

Nathan Voss

OT Biblical Exegesis Paper

January 18, 2021

2 Kings 4:8-37¹

4:8 And it happened one day Elisha passed by Shunem and there (was) a great² woman and she strongly urged him³ to eat bread⁴ and it happened enough he passed by (and would) turn aside there to eat bread. 9 And she said to her husband behold now I know that he is a holy man of God continually passing by⁵ us. 10 Please let us make a small upper room of walls and let us give him⁶ (a) bed and table and chair and lampstand and it will be there for him (when) he turns aside to us. 11 And it happened one day he came there and turned aside to the upper room and laid down there. 12 And he said to Gehazi his servant call this Shunammite and he called to her and she stood before his face. 13 And he said to him now say to her behold you (have been greatly concerned for us)⁷ what (can I do) for you? Would you have us speak⁸ for you to the king or to the commander of the army? And she answered in the midst of my people I dwell. 14 And he said what (can I) do for her? And Gehazi said she has no son⁹ and her husband is old. 15 And he said call to her and he called to her and she stood in the doorway. 16 And he said at this appointed time as the time you are living¹⁰ you (will) embrace a son and she said no my lord (O) man of God¹¹ do not lie to your maidservant. 17 And the woman conceived and bore a son at this appointed time as the time she was living that Elisha had spoken to her. 18 And the child grew and it happened one day he went out to his father to the reapers. 19 And he said to his father my head my head and he said to the servant carry him to his mother. 20 And he carried him and caused him to be brought to his mother and he sat upon her knees until noon and he died. 21 And she got up and caused him to lie down upon the bed of the man of God, and she shut him behind and she went out. 22 And she called to her husband saying now send to me one from the servants and one of the donkeys and let me run to the man of God and let me return. 23 And he said why

¹ The translation is quite “wooden” to better reflect the original Hebrew. For the same reason, there is little punctuation added.

² Probably signifying wealthy.

³ Lit. “caused to be strong in him.”

⁴ Or food.

⁵ Lit. upon, over, above.

⁶ Lit. “put to him there”

⁷ Lit. “feared toward us all this trembling.”

⁸ Lit. “what there is to speak.”

⁹ Lit. “but there is not to her a son.”

¹⁰ Difficult phrase to translate. See discussion below (p. 8).

¹¹ Gray says, “G^B omits ‘O man of God’ of MT.”

do you go to him the day is not new moon and it is not sabbath and she said peace. 24 And she bound the donkey and she said to her servant drive and walk do not slow for me to ride unless I tell you to. 25 And she went and she came to (the) man of God to mount Carmel and it happened as the man of God saw her (approach) he said to Gehazi his servant behold there (is) the Shunammite. 26 Now please run and meet her and say to her is all peace to you, peace to your husband, peace to your child? And she said peace. 27 And she came to the man of God to the mountain and she (firmly grasped at his feet)¹² and Gehazi approached to thrust her (away) and the man of God said leave her alone for her soul (is) bitter to her and the LORD caused it to be hidden from me and not caused it to be declared to me. 28 And she said did I ask (for) a son from my lord? Did I not say do not deceive me? 29 And he said to Gehazi gird up your loins and take my staff in your hand and go when you find a man do not bless him and when a man blesses you do not answer him and set my staff upon the face of the boy. 30 And the mother of the boy said as the LORD lives and as you live¹³ if I leave you. And he stood and went after her. 31 And Gehazi passed over before them and he put the staff upon the face of the boy and no voice and no response and he returned to meet him and told him saying the boy was not awakened. 32 And Elisha came into the house and¹⁴ behold the boy was dead and caused to lay upon his bed. 33 And he entered and shut the door behind the two of them and he prayed to the LORD. 34 And he went up and lay down upon the child and put his mouth upon his mouth and his eyes upon his eyes and his hands upon his hands and he stretched upon him and he warmed the flesh of the child. 35 And he returned and walked in the house back and forth¹⁵ and he went and stretched upon him and the boy sneezed seven times¹⁶ and the boy opened his eyes. 36 And he called to Gehazi and said call this Shunammite and he called her and she came to him and he said take your son. 37 And she came and fell upon his feet and bowed toward the ground and she picked up her son and went out.

Introduction

In 2 Kings 4:8-37 Elisha continues his prophetic work and proves that he truly is Elijah's successor and has received the same spirit that was on Elijah (2 Kings 2:9). One cannot read this text without seeing clear parallels to Elijah's own ministry. This gets further support in how the text highlights the miracles performed by Elisha in ways that point to Elijah's life. When Elijah had come on the scene his first words were to call a drought. One of Elisha's first recorded miracles is his healing the spring in 2 Kings 2:19-22, and also, there is a similar account where

¹² Lit. "and she caused to be strong at his feet."

¹³ Lit. "the life of Yahweh and the life of your soul."

¹⁴ Gray says, "S reads 'and he saw' in addition to MT at this point."

¹⁵ Lit. "one here and one here."

¹⁶ LXX omits the verb 'the boy sneezed.'

the armies of Israel, Judah, and Edom are faced with no water and through Elisha's words, they receive water.

Furthermore, in chapter 4, there are many close ties to 1 Kings 17 and Elijah's ministry. Elijah had dwelt with a widow and saved her and her son through the preservation of oil and flour. In 2 Kings 4:1-7 Elisha preserves the family of a widow through the multiplication of oil. Elijah had also raised the life of that widow's son in very similar way to how Elisha raises the son of the Shunammite woman in this text.

Clearly this section is trying to make a tie between Elijah and Elisha and what happens to him in 1 Kings 17. In that chapter Elijah's miracles show God's power over Baal, but they especially confirm the truth of God's word and the truth of God's prophet. Something similar occurs here. Notice the similarities between the women and the confessions they make about each prophet. In 1 Kings 17:24 the widow's confession about Elijah is, "Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is truth." In 2 Kings 4:8, the Shunammite woman confesses about Elisha, "Behold now, I know that this is a holy man of God who is continually passing our way."

The difference between the accounts is that Elijah was sent to a Gentile widow who needed to be shown Elijah's identity, while here we see a godly woman who recognizes the identity of Elisha. But why this connection? Well, it is to show that the spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha. It is to show them both to be the true prophet and mouthpiece of God and to illustrate the points of their ministries which is given in their very names. Elijah—My God is Yahweh and Elisha—My God saves.

If Elijah's name, broadly speaking, may be said to reveal that Elijah's ministry showed that the LORD is God. Perhaps, broadly speaking, it may be said that Elisha's ministry shows that it is the LORD that saves. This passage shows a godly woman, who through her faith, receives back her son from death and shows in a visible way the spiritual reality that the Lord is the God who saves, even from death itself.

The stories in this chapter certainly share themes. Verses 1-7 and 8-37 follow two women. "Thus, a poor woman and her sons want for food while a rich woman feeds Elisha and receives a son. Both women are asked in virtually identical terms, 'What may I do for you?' (vv. 2, 13). In both narratives, events occur in a hostile 'outside' (vv. 3, 18, 21, 37; cf. v. 39) that are remedied behind closed doors (vv. 4-5, 21, 33)."¹⁷ The themes of life and death are prominent, and, in both instances, Elisha is the mouthpiece of God that brings life in death.

Another prominent biblical theme that appears in this text is the birth of a son to a barren woman. Gray says, "The birth of a child to an elderly parent as a reward for hospitality is a theme of saga also in the patriarchal narratives (Gen. 18:1-15)."¹⁸ Though it may be too strong to

¹⁷ Lissa M. Wray Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 2014), 321.

¹⁸ John Gray, *1 & 2 Kings*, The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970), 492.

say, as Gray does, that the birth of a son as “a reward for hospitality” is a theme, in this text the child is certainly given to the woman as a way Elisha can thank her for all she has done for him.

This text displays the prophetic authority of Elisha as well as blessings to a faithful woman. It shows a woman, who wanted nothing, but through Elisha’s gift of a son is brought to profound loss. While establishing the authority of Elisha, this text reveals once again that the power of life resides only in the LORD, the God who saves!

Commentary

Verses 8-37 take place on three different days (vv. 8, 11, 18). Verses 8-10 provide the context, the relationship, and the blessing bestowed on the prophet through this woman. Verses 11-17 tell of Elisha’s desire to bless the woman and her gift of a son. Verses 18-37 tell of the loss of the son, the Shunammite’s commitment to bring it to Elisha, and the miracle of the child’s resuscitation/resurrection.

vv. 8-10 Shunem was apparently on the path Elisha frequently traveled from Gilgal to Mount Carmel. Shunem is “at the eastern border of the Jezreel Valley and 4 miles north of Jezreel.”¹⁹ The reader is introduced to this thoughtful woman. The ESV translates הַגְּדֹלָה as “wealthy.” Though this is probably true, a case can be made to understand this more in the sense of “great.”²⁰ The woman is shown to be upright and faithful in the attention she pays to Elisha because he is a man of God. She is apparently wealthy as she has the means to provide Elisha with a fully furnished upper room, but it seems the text emphasizes her desire to extend hospitality to one who works for God. This is a worthy pursuit and praised in Scripture (Cf. 3 John 5-8). She, unlike many in God’s word, recognizes the importance, holiness, and labor of Elisha without being informed of it by any other. “The woman’s reverence is also expressed in the vocabulary used to describe her hospitality (2 Kings 4:13); Elisha says she “trembled with fear” for him, expressing the care she has taken not to infringe on his sanctity as a man of God.”²¹ For the above reasons, the text could have “great” in mind instead of “wealthy.”

Some commentators question whether this woman had a self-seeking agenda to ingratiate herself with this man of God.²² However, Ryken says, “The woman’s hospitality was motivated by the holiness of Elisha’s calling. She wanted to support his ministry because he was a man of God.”²³ Ryken’s view seems most in keeping with the text as it goes through great lengths in the following verses to explain that this woman needed nothing and desired nothing in return for her support of Elisha. This woman provides all Christians an example of heartfelt support for Kingdom work.

¹⁹ Wray Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 323.

²⁰ Robert Cohn, *2 Kings*, Berit Olam (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2000), 28.

²¹ August Konkel, *1 & 2 Kings*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 415.

²² Wray Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 323; Gray, *1 & II Kings*, 495.

²³ Philip Graham Ryken, *2 Kings*, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2019), 71.

vv. 11-17 In these verses, Elisha wants to show appreciation but does not know what to do. The woman asks for nothing, even though there is an obvious request she could make since she has no children. It is Gehazi who reveals this. Finally, for a request she did not make, she responds telling Elisha, “do not lie to your servant” (4:16; ESV). It is interesting that she did not make this request. Her husband is poised to die without an heir and in that day and age there was most likely a certain amount of shame involved for barren women. Perhaps she did not believe it was possible for her to have a child, but from how the text portrays her, it would seem she was content in the life God had given her.

Elisha asked her if he could speak to the king or to the commander of the army (v. 13). Paul House says that this is another way of asking her if she needs any “political favors.”²⁴ This would indicate that Elisha has some “pull” with the leadership of society. Her response is to say that she dwells among her own people (v. 13). This means that she feels protected and secure in her community and they “got her back” as it were.²⁵

Another interesting aspect of the text is how Gehazi serves as an intermediary. Elisha is asking Gehazi to speak to the woman, who in turn sends her reply back through Gehazi. The text even describes her being outside the room, standing in the doorway, etc. All this seems to place a degree of separation between Elisha and the woman. It is possible that this was for propriety. The woman is actually not called old herself; it is her husband who is called old. Thus, it may simply be a way of describing both Elisha and the woman’s honor in how they conducted themselves. Another explanation for the degree of separation between the two is that she knew Elisha was a holy man and, like the widow with Elijah, thought that close proximity would be dangerous (1 Kings 17:18).

A reoccurring theme in God’s word is the barren woman bearing a child: Sarah in Genesis 18, Rebekah in Genesis 25, Rachel in Genesis 29, Samson’s mother in Judges 13, perhaps Ruth could be included (married 10 years without a child), Hannah in 1 Samuel 1, and Elizabeth in Luke 1. In this text the Shunamite woman receives the same care. God shows His care in what are considered impossible situations. Through promise, He brings covenant sons. It is a theme that continues to Mary, who conceives despite being unmarried and a virgin. She in that way was worse than barren because she did not have a husband to give her a son. God uses these events for great covenant purposes. Generally, it is to highlight the son that would be born and the great redemptive work he would accomplish. In this case, the son is not well known, but it allows God to show faithfulness to His faithful daughter and highlight the point that life comes by faith. In this case, the Shunammite woman’s faith.²⁶

²⁴ Paul House, *1, 2 Kings*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 1995), 267.

²⁵ Konkel, *1 & 2 Kings*, 414.

²⁶ Dr. D. Ralph Davis, “A Woman the Lord Made Needy” (sermon, First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, South Carolina, January 29, 2017), Accessed December 2019, <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=2117855132>

Elisha promises the birth of a son, however, “the time designation in Elisha’s promise is hard to translate. Perhaps it is simply “this time next year,” but it may be a reference to the period of her pregnancy. Literally it is ‘at the time of revival’ which implies spring (RSV, v. 17), but which also may hide a word play on the central event of this narrative.”²⁷ It seems that this text might intentionally remind the reader of Abraham and Sarah:

Both the cross-reference and the actual expression are striking. The expression, “when the year revives,” meaning the springtime, occurs in the Bible only here and in the announcement of Isaac’s birth in Genesis 18. The word *revives* invites hope, and so does the fact that Isaac was actually born against all natural possibility. The force of the allusion tempts me to adopt a line from one of Tennyson’s poems and have Elisha say, “About this time, in the boyhood of the year, you will embrace a son.” That would be too free, but the link with Abraham and Sarah is auspicious, for it reminds us of what God can do and has done, and it brings with it the further parallel that Sarah (nearly) lost that son, and then gained him back.²⁸

It is easy to see how a reader would naturally be reminded of Abraham and Sarah by this account. However, what is not so easy is to explain what that connection reveals. For this reason, it may be best to see the text alluding to this common covenant occurrence of a son to a barren woman and not “push it too far.”

Perhaps this is too speculative, but it is interesting that for many of the barren women, who are given sons, their sons face a threat to their life. Isaac was called to be a sacrifice that God spared at the last second. Jacob faced the threat of revenge from his brother, but God preserved him. Joseph just escapes murder at his brothers’ hands, is shipped off to Egypt and figuratively is returned to Jacob from the dead. Samson dies when he destroys the Philistines. John is killed by Herod. And, of course, Jesus is sacrificed on the cross. It appears common for the son of the barren/virgin woman to encounter death. These sons have close encounters with death, they die, they are figuratively raised from the dead (like what happened with Isaac), or they are actually raised from the dead. Apparently, Scripture is committed to show that death will not ultimately conquer the promised son.

vv. 18-37 In these verses the text shows that “unexpected life gives way to unforeseen death.”²⁹ What is most interesting is how the woman responds. In a frenzy of activity, no sooner has she set the boy down on Elisha’s bed than she is calling servants, saddling her mount, and going to the prophet. There is also a contrast between the repeated use of שָׁלוֹם (“peace”) and the obvious unrest of the situation. Shalom is used five times in verses 23-26. Her only answer to her

²⁷ Richard Nelson, *Firs and Second Kings*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1987), 173.

²⁸ Stanley Walters, “All Is Well,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 47, no. 2 (Nov 2011): 199.

²⁹ Iain Provan, *1 & 2 Kings*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 187.

husband and Gehazi is to give them that one-word response, “peace.”³⁰ However, it is Elisha who accurately describes her true situation in verse 27 as *כִּי־נַפְשָׁהּ מְרַה־לָּהּ* (Lit. for her soul/life is bitter to her). Finally, the woman declares what has happened and her true distress.

In verse 28 the woman says, “Did I ask my lord for a son? Did I not say, ‘Do not deceive me?’” (ESV) For the woman, her son’s death is tantamount to Elisha’s promise for a son never having been fulfilled. Provan says, “The sentiments seem similar to those of the widow of Zarephath (1 Kgs. 17:18). Those words were, however, only of accusation. Implicit in the Shunammite’s words is a confidence that Elisha will be willing and able to act—as her persistence in seeking his attendance at the scene reveals (v. 30).”³¹ Throughout this narrative, the Shunammite woman is presented as upright and godly. In the death of her son, she is presented as a woman of faith. She believes that Elisha is able to do something about this situation, and she will not rest until Elisha comes. She is not even satisfied with Elisha sending his staff with Gehazi. By resting all her hopes on the man of God, she is resting her hopes ultimately on God himself.

The woman is so insistent on Elijah’s promise that she swears “By the life of the LORD and by your life, I will not leave you.” This oath recalls the one that Elisha swore three times to Elijah when Elijah attempted to leave the younger prophet behind (2:2, 4, 6). This intertextual echo is all that is required to explain Elisha’s immediate reaction.³² After Gehazi’s failed attempt, Elisha goes up prays to the LORD and then lays on the child.

It is difficult to determine exactly what Elisha’s action means. It is possible that Elisha was figuratively transferring his energy to the dead boy.³³ It may have been an act of faith, willing to become ceremonially unclean and in effect saying, “Let his lifeless body be as my lively body.”³⁴ Whatever the exact meaning of this action, Elisha’s prayer is answered, the boy’s cold flesh becomes warm, and he sneezes seven times, which is “physical evidence that his soul or breath has returned.”³⁵

Conclusion

Having gone through this story, what is the point? There are many major themes in this text. As seen above, the theme of a barren woman having a son. Sinclair Ferguson says, “We see

³⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *1 & 2 Kings*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing Incorporated, 2000), 323.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 188.

³² Cohn, *2 Kings*, 32; Robert Hubbard, *First & Second Kings*, Everyman’s Bible Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 151.

³³ *Ibid.*, 33.

³⁴ Ryken, *2 Kings*, 80.

³⁵ Nelson, *First and Second Kings*, 174.

a pattern: A son promised to a barren woman. A son dying. A son rising. Dare I say you've heard that story before."³⁶ This gospel pattern is displayed in this chapter. But there is also more to it.

The miracle performed in the text cannot be missed. Just as with Elijah's miracle in chapter 17, this one shows "the Lord controls death, and the Lord cares for the needy and hurting. It also shows that prophets are not only preachers of sin and repentance; they also are agents of God's healing mercy and kind compassion."³⁷ Miracles are signs that verify the identity of the performer and show the truth of their words. Miracles are also often forward looking; they display kingdom power and kingdom truths such as the destruction of death and the resurrection of the dead.

This is clearly seen in Matthew 11:2-5, "Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?' And Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and *the dead are raised up*, and the poor have good news preached to them'" [Italics mine].

Elisha is performing these signs in the Old Testament, which not only continues to establish a firm prophetic tradition of which Jesus is the culmination, but these miracles are signs that ultimately reveal the Messiah. The son who would be born from a woman, who should not have been able to produce a child, is the one who would not only raise the dead through His power but be raised Himself from the grave to defeat death.

All these things are taking place in this chapter. However, one must not lose focus of the main characters in the text. The text highlights and follows primarily the Shunamite woman. She is not named by name, and the text is likely not seeking to glorify her per se but rather to highlight her faith.

Hebrews 11 presents the "hall of faith" and in 11:1 defines faith as "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." The chapter goes on to provide numerous examples of this faith in the lives of the Old Testament saints, and Hebrews 11:32-35 says, "And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. *Women received back their dead by resurrection*. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life." [Italics mine]

Hebrews 11 shows the reader that the Old Testament saints stood firm on faith, and through faith received back their dead by resurrection. Resurrection occurs through faith. The resurrections that occur in the Bible are all temporary things. All those raised to life were still sin-cursed people who would die again, that is, until the promise of true eternal life was achieved in Christ, through His faith and faithfulness.

³⁶ Sinclair Ferguson, "Dead Boy Lives" (sermon, First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, South Carolina, February 2, 2011), accessed December 2019, <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=7301213592310>

³⁷ House, *1, 2 Kings*, 268.

The Shunamite woman believed that God, through His prophet, could raise to life. She displayed faith. It is noteworthy that in many of Jesus' miracles the deciding factor for the miracle is faith. What can 2 Kings 4 mean but that it is faith in Elisha's God who saves from death itself, and that the power of life resides in Him.

Just as this Old Testament text reveals that it is faith in God, worked through His prophet, that overcomes death, the New Testament reveals that it is faith in Christ, the Son of God, that destroys death and brings life. It is faith in Jesus Christ that decides true life and true death. Elisha's name means "My God Saves." This story and God's revealed word show that God saves through faith.

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Nathan Vos

Sermon: Text: 2 Kings 4:8-37

Life Comes Through Faith in the God who Saves

Introduction

Katie Couric lost her husband, forty-two, to colon cancer in 1998. Her sister died about four years later. “I’m very interested in exploring a more spiritual side of me, and I’m in the process of doing that, both formally and informally,” said the anchor of the *CBS Evening News* in a recent interview. “I really envy those who have a steadfast, unwavering faith, because I think it’s probably so comforting and helpful during difficult times.”¹

People of God, what I find interesting about Katie Couric’s statement is that it is at the same time absolutely true yet also very simplistic. It is absolutely true that “faith is comforting and helpful during difficult times.” However, depending on how Couric’s statement is taken, it can sound simplistic. It almost sounds easy, as if having faith is like having some kind of immunity to difficult times. Believers must place tremendous effort and trust in God. It is in the moments of profound difficulty where often faith seems to have failed us. We know that’s not true, but when you talk to many going through difficulties, they will tell you both sides of Couric’s statement: yes, faith is the only thing getting them through, but it is *very* hard to exercise that faith.

Elisabeth Elliot said that “True faith goes into operation when there are no answers.”² Believers are called to cling to the promises of God, even when God’s promises are all He gives us. In this passage we see great loss and great pain, but we also see great faith. This passage shows us **[Theme] Life Comes Through Faith in the God who Saves.**

Countless times in God’s word we see spiritual realities visibly portrayed. And this text is no exception. What we see put on display here is the truth that God provides life through faith. In this text we see three main things: A Woman of Faith, A Test of Faith, and A Reward of Faith.

Context

In the beginning of 2 Kings, we see Elisha take up the prophetic office and display that he has been give the same spirit as Elijah. We see so many clear parallels between Elijah and Elisha. In 2 Kings 2:9 before Elijah is taken up Elisha says, “Please let there be a double portion of your spirit on me.” And when Elisha leaves that place 2 Kings 2:15 says, “**When the son of**

¹ Craig Larson and Phyllis Ten Elshof, editors, *1001 Illustrations that Connect: Compelling Stories, Stats, and News Items for Preaching, Teaching, and Writing* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 198, referencing — Cable Neuhaus, “Whatever Katie Wants,” *AARP* (November–December 2005)

² Craig Larson and Brian Lowery, editors, *1001 Quotations that Connect: Timeless Wisdom for Preaching, Teaching, and Writing* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 15-16.

the prophets who were at Jericho saw him opposite them, they said, ‘The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha.’”

The text is clearly making a point that Elisha is indeed Elijah’s successor and has received the same spirit. This gets further support in how the text highlights the miracles performed by Elisha in ways that make us think of Elijah’s life. When Elijah had come on the scene, the first thing he proclaims is a coming drought. One of Elisha’s first recorded miracles is when he heals the spring in 2 Kings 2:19-22 and also a similar account where the armies of Israel, Judah, and Edom are faced with no water and through Elisha’s words they receive water.

Furthermore, in our chapter, we see many close ties to 1 Kings 17 and Elijah’s ministry. Elijah had lived with a widow and saved her and her son through the preservation of oil and flour. In 2 Kings 4:1-7 Elisha preserves the family of a widow through the multiplication of oil. Elijah had also raised the life of that widow’s son in very similar way to how Elisha raises the son of the Shunammite woman in our text.

Clearly this section is trying to make a tie between Elijah and Elisha and what happens to him in 1 Kings 17. In that chapter the miracles show God’s power over Baal, but they especially confirm the truth of God’s word and the truth of God’s prophet. Something similar occurs here. Notice the similarities between both the women and the confessions they make about each prophet. In 1 Kings 17:24 the widow’s confession about Elijah is, “Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is truth.” In 2 Kings 4:8 the Shunamite woman confesses about Elisha, “Behold now, I know that this is a holy man of God who is continually passing our way.”

The difference is that Elijah was sent to a Gentile widow who needed to be shown Elijah’s identity, while here we see a godly woman who recognizes the identity of Elisha. But why this connection? Well, it’s to show as we’ve already seen that the spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha. It’s to show them both to be the true prophet and mouthpiece of God to illustrate in many ways the points of their ministries which is given in their very names. Elijah—My God is Yahweh and Elisha—My God saves.

What we see in this passage is a godly woman, who through her faith, receives back her son from death, and shows in a visible way the spiritual reality that the Lord is the God who saves, even from death itself.

A Woman of Faith

In verses 8-17 we read about this Shunammite woman. This woman was truly a woman of character, and the text presents her as such. She notices Elisha and his travel habits. She sees a need, and she plans a way to take this need away from the prophet. More than that, she is the one who perceives that Elisha is a holy man of God without having any stated reason. She extends hospitality to him, which began with food and grows to the point where she makes provision of a room for Elisha and even furnishes it in a lavish way for that day and age. This shows her character and her concern to promote the ministry of Elisha.

It is worthy work that she is doing. Later in God's word we read in 3 John 5-8, "**Beloved, it is a faithful thing you do in all your efforts for these brothers, strangers as they are, who testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on their journey in a manner worthy of God. For they have gone out for the sake of the name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles. Therefore, we ought to support people like these, that we may be fellow workers for the truth.**" John is writing far later than this woman, but we see on here who's desire is to support God's word. That shows a noble heart.

Elisha is very grateful for the care she has shown him and so he tells his servant to call her up. Through his servant he asks, "**Would you have a word spoken on your behalf to the king or to the commander of the army?**" Most likely, Elisha is asking her is there some kind of political favor I can do for you. Do you have a need the king could address, or perhaps is there some security you need that the army could provide? She answers, "**I dwell among my own people.**" This answer most likely means that she was secure among the community and had no need of a political favor. She and her home were apparently protected.

So, you see in her answer that she isn't in it for her own gain. She is content, and she makes no request. But Elisha presses the matter, and we learn she has no son, and her husband is old. Finding some way to express his gratitude, Elisha tells her, "**At this season, about this time next year, you shall embrace a son.**" The Hebrew words we translate "**At this season, about this time next year**" is only used in one other place in the Bible in Genesis 18:10,14 where God promises Abraham that Sarah will bear a son.

A reoccurring theme in God's word is the barren woman bearing a child. Sarah in Genesis 18. Rebekah in Genesis 25. Rachel in Genesis 29:30. Samson's mother in Judges 13. Perhaps we can include Ruth (married 10 years without a child). Hannah in 1 Samuel 1. Elizabeth in Luke 1. And here we see that this Shunamite woman receives the same care. God shows His care in what are considered impossible situations. Through promise, He brings covenant sons. It's a theme that continues right to Mary, who was an unmarried virgin. She in that way was worse than barren because she didn't even have a husband to give her a son.

When Elisha tells the Shunamite woman that she will have a son, she gives an interesting response, "**No, my lord, O man of God; do not lie to your servant.**" She couldn't imagine that she would have a son, and she was content with her bareness. She didn't want to be toyed with.

Simply as an observation, God often calls many of the sons born to barren women to face a threat to their life:

- >Isaac was called to be a sacrifice that God spared at the last second.
- >Jacob faced the threat of revenge from his brother, but God preserved him.
- >Joseph barley escapes murder at his brothers' hand, is shipped off to Egypt, barley escapes death in prison, and figuratively is returned to Jacob from the dead.
- >Samson dies when he destroys the Philistines.
- >John is killed by Herod
- >And of course, Jesus is sacrificed on the cross.

It is common to see the son of the barren woman face death or to have a close encounter with death. Here we see the same where the barren woman loses her son.

A Test of Faith

Some time passes and the child has grown. He goes out with his father and experiences some ailment. We don't know what it was, but the child is brought to his mother and dies in her lap. However, she doesn't waste any time and places the child on Elisha's bed, which already clues us in on something. **She sees the child and his wellbeing as Elisha's responsibility.** She already begins to exercise faith in the journey she makes to the prophet.

She immediately goes to meet Elisha telling her husband only one Hebrew word, *Shalom*, which can be translated, "Peace," or as the text does here, "all is well." It's a quick response as she wastes no time to bring this concern and the responsibility to deal with it to Elisha. Her husband's response, **"Why will you go to him today? It is neither new moon nor Sabbath."** This most likely indicates that it was her custom and the custom of the day to go and hear the prophet on the Sabbath and new moons. This is somewhat like, "Why are you going to church? It isn't Sunday?" But she sets out quickly and goes to Elisha.

When Elisha sees her, he sends Gehazi to go make sure everything is ok, and she gives the exact same response to him as well, "peace." She will only deal with Elisha as she not only believes that the child is his responsibility, but she believes that he is the only one who can do anything about it. I think it's safe to say that we see a display of faith in her response. She believes Elisha can do something about it because he is a man of God, which means she believes God can do something about it.

Acting in what would have been a culturally unacceptable way, she seizes Elisha's feet. Elisha sees her distress. His answer is to send Gehazi with his staff, the staff symbolizing the extension of the person, to the child and to bring him back that way, but the woman is still insistent, and we see the reason for that in verse 28. Listen to what she tells Elisha: **"Did I ask my lord for a son? Did I not say, do not deceive me?"**

Do you see both sides to how we began this message with Couric's statement? This woman is acting in faith but that doesn't mean it's easy. She is in profound grief. The Hebrew here is literally that her "soul is bitter to her." This woman had no need and was content before Elisha gave her a son and gave her a cause for concern. She had told him not to lie about giving her a child, and she sees the death of her son as the very deception and lie she asked Elisha not to do.

It's as if the Lord blessed her just to give her greater cause for pain. I think we all can relate to that. It seems cruel what she is going through, doesn't it? A supernatural birth just to have a cruel death. We find ourselves in these situations at times. At a loss for what God is doing. How often is our faith tested when we feel like God has given us no answer? Even the text reveals that Elisha himself is at a loss. He had said, **"Leave her alone, for she is in bitter distress, and the LORD has hidden it from me and has not told me."**

The woman is not content to only have Gehazi come back with the staff. She tells Elisha, **“As the LORD lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.”** The woman believes it is only God’s prophet that can dispense God’s word. It is only the power of God’s word that can resurrect. God is testing her faith. God has provided yet now it seems He has taken away.

Why does God do these things? We can’t always answer that. In this case, we see that God is showing that He is able to save His people from death and has power over death. This miracle that Elisha performs is a foretaste of the resurrection power of Christ. But we don’t get all the answers we want. Sometimes we feel just like this woman, lied to and deceived, but this account should show us that God always has a reason. That our God is able to save, and He does so through faith.

A Reward of Faith

Finally, Elisha arrives and, in a scene similar to what we see Elijah do in 1 Kings 17, we read, **“When Elisha came into the house, he saw the child lying dead on his bed. So he went in and shut the door behind the two of them and prayed to the LORD. Then he went up and lay on the child, putting his mouth on his mouth, his eyes on his eyes, and his hands on his hands. And as he stretched himself upon him, the flesh of the child became warm. Then he got up again and walked once back and forth in the house, and went up and stretched himself upon him. The child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes. Then he summoned Gehazi and said, ‘Call this Shunammite.’ So he called her. And when she came to him, he said, ‘Pick up your son.’”**

Elisha does this strange thing. What does it mean? I’m not sure we can say with certainty what each action meant. Obviously, it was prayer to the Lord that was most important but as far as the other actions we can only speculate. It could be showing that Elisha is figuratively transferring his own life force to the boy. It could be that Elisha was presenting himself as a self-sacrificial intercession for the boy. Perhaps he was showing that he was willing to be considered unclean by touching a corpse. Elisha may have been illustrating that his life could be taken on behalf of the boy. But we don’t know.

The seven sneezes by the child signify that his soul or breath has returned to him, and he has completely recovered. Whereas before there was no sign of life, now his breath has returned. The child is well and returned to his mother.

[Conclusion] So What?

Having gone through this story we have to ask: what’s the point? There are many major themes in this text. We’ve already looked at the barren woman having a son. Sinclair Ferguson says, **“We see a pattern: A son promised to a barren woman. A son dying. A son rising. Dare I say you’ve heard that story before.”** We see this gospel pattern in this chapter. But there’s also more to it. We can’t miss the fact that a major miracle is performed here. Miracles are signs that verify the identity of the performer and show the truth of their words. Miracles are

also often forward looking; they display kingdom power and kingdom truths such as the destruction of death and the resurrection of the dead.

We can see this in Matthew 11:2-5, “**Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?’ And Jesus answered them, ‘Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them.’**”

Elisha is performing these signs in the Old Testament, which not only continues to establish a firm prophetic tradition, of which Jesus is the culmination, but these miracles are signs that ultimately reveal the Messiah. The son who would be born from a woman who shouldn’t have been able to produce a child. He would be the one who not only raised the dead through his power but raised himself from the grave to defeat death.

All these things are taking place in this chapter. But I also don’t want to lose focus of the main characters in the text. The text highlights and follows primarily the Shunamite woman. She isn’t named by name, and I don’t believe the text is trying to glorify her, per se, but rather highlight and display her faith. What proof do we have of that?

In Hebrews 11 we read of the hall of faith. Hebrews 11:1 defines faith as “**the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.**” And the chapter goes on to provide numerous examples of this faith in the lives of the Old Testament saints, and Hebrews 11:32-35 says, “And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. *Women received back their dead by resurrection.* Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life.” [Italics mine].

Hebrews 11 shows us that the Old Testament saints stood firm on faith and through faith, received back their dead by resurrection. **Resurrection occurs through faith!** The resurrections that occur in the Bible are all temporary things. All those raised to life were still sin-cursed people who would die again, that is, until the promise of true eternal life was achieved in Christ, through his faith and faithfulness.

The Shunamite woman believed that God, through his prophet, could raise to life. She displayed faith. You’ll notice in the New Testament that even in many of Jesus miracles the deciding factor for the miracle is faith. What can 2 Kings 4 mean but that it is faith in Elisha’s God who saves where the power of life itself resides?

Earlier I mentioned how at times we feel cheated by God. We feel like He deceives us, just as the Shunamite woman, but like her, we know that at the end of the day, it is our faith in Christ that makes everything well. I understand that at this time on earth those words can seem empty but remember how Hebrews defined faith. “**The assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.**”

In the difficulty, pain, and loss we face on this earth we must remember that it is faith in Jesus Christ that decides true life and true death. Elisha's name means "My God Saves." This story, and God's revealed word, show that He saves through faith. Amen.

**A Grand Dinner:
Who Will be Blessed in the Kingdom?**

Nathan Voss

NT Biblical Exegesis Paper

January 18, 2021

Luke 14:15-24¹

Translation

15 But after hearing these things², one who was reclining said to him, “Blessed (will be) whoever will eat bread in the kingdom of God.” 16 But he said to him, “A certain man was making³ a great dinner and he called many. 17 And he sent his slave at the hour of the dinner to say to those who had been called,⁴ ‘come, because now it is ready.’⁵ 18 And as one⁶ (they) all began to refuse. The first said to him, ‘I bought a field and I have a need (to) go (and) to see it. I ask you have me excused.’ 19 And another said, ‘I bought five yoke of oxen and I go to test them. I ask you have me excused.’ 20 Another said, ‘I married a woman and on account of this I am not able to come. 21 And coming the slave reported to his lord these things. Then, becoming angry, the master of the house said to his slave, ‘Go out quickly to the squares and streets of the city, and bring in here the poor and crippled and blind and lame. 22 And the slave said, ‘Lord, what you commanded has happened and still there is room. 23 And the lord said to the slave, ‘Go out to the roads⁷ and fences and compel (them) to enter, in order that my house might be filled. 24 For I say to you⁸ that none of those men who were called will taste my dinner.

Introduction⁹

Luke 14 provides several interactions at a single dinner between Jesus and the religious leaders of the day. In this chapter Jesus provides a call for His audience to look to others instead of themselves, to produce fruit showing true faith and love for God and neighbor, and to understand that the one who will be blessed in the kingdom are those humble and poor who know they bring nothing and have earned nothing by which they can attain kingdom blessings.

¹ The translation is somewhat “wooden” to better reflect the Greek text.

² ταυτα. Accusative direct object of Ακουσας.

³ εποιει. Imperfect.

⁴ τοις κεκλημενοις. Dative indirect object of ειπειν.

⁵ Some mss have an alternate reading of εισιν, but most witnesses support εστιν and need not be changed. Others have an alternate reading of παντα ετοιμα. Metzger notes that the Matthean parallel in Matt. 22:4 includes παντα and can explain why it may have been added here. Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament 2nd Ed.* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibel Gesellschaft, 1994), 139.

⁶ Lit. “from one.” It probably means “unanimously;” Martin Culy, Mikeal Parsons, and Joshua Stigall, *Luke: A Handbook on the Greek Text* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2010), 485.

⁷ Most likely the idea of highways.

⁸ This is plural.

⁹ Many commentaries include a section on source material and related accounts to this text. There is an account in Matthew 22:1-14 with many similarities, as well as an account in the Gospel of Thomas. However, I believe there are enough differences between this account in Luke, and the similar but yet different account in Matthew, as to treat them separately. As for the Gospel of Thomas, I do not believe it factored into Luke’s account.

Ultimately, Luke 14:15-24 is a kingdom parable that warns the listeners not to *presume* on the kingdom, and thus miss the dinner, but rather to be humble and come to the feast.

Depending on how Luke 14 is divided, verses 15-24 form the third or fourth unit that occurs around a Sabbath dinner at the house of a ruler of the Pharisees (14:1). The dinner itself is undergirded by the those present “watching him carefully” (14:1). One wonders if this is simply a careful watching to gain information and learning or, more likely, a sinister “watching” hoping to find something to use against Jesus.

Bock describes verses 15-24 as concluding “a section that has been loaded with confrontation and warning to the leadership: the Sabbath healing of the man with dropsy (14:1-6) and the parable about taking the lowest seat (14:7-14).”¹⁰ Jesus is confronting the Pharisees and how they have chosen to lead, even as they are trying to find material that they can use against Him. In verses 15-24, Jesus warns them that rejection of the “dinner offer” will mean that they will not receive the blessing of eating bread in the kingdom as one of their number declared in verse 15. In an ironic display, Jesus, with this parable, shows that those who should have had reserved seats of honor will not actually have a place at all.

Bock lists four primary themes of this passage. First, this is the leadership’s last opportunity and indeed the last time Jesus dines with the Pharisees in Luke. Second, the seats they vacate will be occupied by others. Third, Jesus is not excluding them, but they are excluding themselves. Fourth, the celebration will occur without delay whether or not they choose to attend.¹¹

Fitzmyer calls this text a “kingdom-parable,” and this seems to be an accurate description.¹² It is fitting in the context of a dinner party to discuss the kingdom using as a parable a dinner party itself. It also fits well in the context. Jesus had just advised the one who had invited Him to the dinner to hold a dinner for the poor, crippled, lame, and blind, declaring that blessing would flow from such an act (Luke 14:12-14). Jesus then tells a parable where the master of the house invites those very people to a dinner, while the “rich neighbors” as it were, receive no blessing.

Of crucial importance in interpreting this parable is the identity of the people groups. Who is Jesus representing by those who refuse the invitation to come to the dinner and who are the poor, crippled, and lame who actually attend the feast? Is this a contrast between Jews and Gentiles? Are those who spurn the rejection the religious leaders of the day? After explaining several possible explanations, Marshal gives a helpful answer. He says,

From our discussion it emerges that difficulty is caused by attempting to take all the details of the story in too literal a sense in order to construct a coherent allegory, whether

¹⁰ Darrell Bock, *Luke: 9:51-24:53*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 1268.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1268-1269.

¹² Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible Commentary (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 1049.

at the level of Jesus' original intention or at the level of subsequent interpretation. It is best to see in the story Jesus' comment on the 'pious' in Israel who neither entered the kingdom themselves nor allowed others to enter (11:52); they are warned that they will be excluded from the kingdom, and the way will be opened up (as it was by Jesus) to the needy and the outsiders...It is possible that Jesus intended a conscious allusion to the gentile mission.¹³

It makes sense not to press the parable too far and ascribe a specific identity to the characters of the parable. It is certainly a warning to the Pharisees and religious leaders; however, those who attend the banquet is a general description that include all those falling under the category of poor/humble being all believing Jews and Gentiles.

The key to interpreting this parable is the statement which elicited it. "When one of those who reclined at table with him heard these things, he said to him, 'Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!'" (Luke 14:15) Jesus responds to this statement with a parable illustrating that not all will be able to eat bread in the kingdom for some will decline the invitation, and it will be those least likely to receive an invitation who will be the ones who are blessed. It seems that Jesus is not specifically saying that it will be the Gentiles but rather describing the spiritual condition, such as humble and meek, of those who will attend the dinner, whether Jew or Gentile.

As stated above, it seems that there is a critique, reprimand, and warning leveled against the religious leaders of the day. The parable itself is illustrating that those who should have been at the dinner declined to come. The parable of a dinner is itself given *at* a dinner where Jesus called those present not to place themselves in positions of honor "for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (14:11). Also, Jesus exhorted the one who invited him to not seek greater earthly advantage in who he invites to his dinners but rather to invite those who have no standing, "for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just" (14:14).¹⁴

There seems to be a corrective measure from Jesus towards his audience. However, the degree of this corrective measure is harder to determine. Is Jesus providing a scathing rebuke and indicating that they *will not* enter into the kingdom, or is he warning them that *to enter* the kingdom they must adopt the meek and humble spiritual standing that is mirrored by the social standing of the crippled, poor, and blind? Calvin, commenting on this parable, says, "Christ pronounces the Jews to have been so entirely devoted to the world and to earthly things, that no man found leisure to approach to God; for the cares of this world, when we become entangled by them, are so many

¹³ I. Howard Marshall, *Commentary on Luke*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 586-587.

¹⁴ For a discussion of the context see, C. D. Agan III, *The Imitation of Christ in the Gospel of Luke: Growing in Christlike Love for God and Neighbor* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2014), 96.

impediments in our way to keep us back from the kingdom of God.”¹⁵ I believe this provides a good summary of this parable’s meaning. In seeking after their own pleasures those invited to the dinner were rejected. This is the very mistake Jesus is warning his own audience to avoid.

Outline:

Introduction

- a. The remark prompting the parable (14:15). *Blessed are those who eat in the kingdom.*

Body

- b. A Scorned Invitation by “Likely” Guests (14:16-20)
- c. A Blessed Dinner for Unlikely Guests (14:21-23)

Conclusion

- d. A Kingdom Warning (14:24)

Commentary

14:15 As seen in the introduction, this verse provides the statement that Jesus’ parable is addressing. Garland believes the man’s statement serves two purposes. (1) to “make a theological link between the invitations to a banquet (14:7-14) and the banquet celebrating God’s reign.” (2) It addresses the confidence of some guests who take for granted their place at the banquet.¹⁶ Fitzmyer provides a similar explanation. He says that Jesus’ answer to this man was in effect, “You are right; but if invited, will you be among those to decline?”¹⁷ It seems by the way Jesus responds that “the underlying assumption of this remark is that the Pharisees will be the blessed at that table.”¹⁸ Jesus gives a parable to the religious leaders that would certainly call into question their assumed security at the kingdom dinner.

14:16 “A great dinner” According to Marshall, the “great dinner/supper” is a standard figure of salvation.¹⁹ Thus, being at the dinner is the same as being saved. This is clearly in keeping with the setting of the parable; blessing to those who eat in the kingdom (v.15).

14:17 Many commentators say that it was custom in the upper classes at that time to send servants to let the guests know when the dinner was ready. This would have been especially important in a time without effective means of keeping food hot and unspoiled. In that day, when a meal was ready it had to be eaten the same day. For the purpose of the parable this explains why the master could not simply change the date.²⁰

¹⁵ John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke Vol. I*, Calvin’s Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993), 171.

¹⁶ David Garland, *Luke, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 585.

¹⁷ Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV*, 1054.

¹⁸ Bock, *Luke*, 1272.

¹⁹ Marshall, *Commentary on Luke*, 587.

²⁰ Garland, *Luke*, 586.

14:18-20 There are several ways to understand the Greek phrase *ἀπό μιας* (from one). The ESV somewhat ignores it and translates the verse, “But they all began to make excuses.” Bock explains that this expression can mean “with one consent,” “with one mind,” “all at once,” or even “unanimously.” Because of financial or familial concerns, all those invited reject the summons to eat the dinner.²¹

It is easy to try and judge the “worthiness” of each excuse given, but the point of the parable is that to each of those invited, they had something they found more important than attending the dinner. It is a common theme for Jesus to declare that nothing can come before following Him, and it seems that the same point is being made here. It is obvious that there will be no blessing of eating in the kingdom if the invitation is rejected in favor of other matters.

Some argue that these excuses did not imply a full rejection of the invitation but rather a late arrival to the dinner. It is claimed that there were allowances made for late comers during that day and age.²² However, a delayed arrival doesn’t seem to be the idea here as the individuals asked to be excused and the invitation to the poor came to fill the house so it would not be empty.²³ Others try to see a relationship to this parable and the acceptable excuses to withdraw from military service (Deut. 20:5-8; 24:5). But this is also a stretch as the context here is a dinner not military service.

Garland says that the excuses given by each party “escalate in bad manners, though the value of the grounds for the excuses also increases: field, animals, and wife.” Garland explains that “the first says, I am compelled to go to see the field. I ask you (pray), have me excused” the second says simply, “I am on my way” and mentions no necessity. The third is not going anywhere; he is going to stay home and does not ask to be excused.”²⁴ Garland’s theory may have some merit, but the fact that the first two, who asked to be excused, give the same word for word request to be excused seems to take away from the theory that the excuses escalate in bad manners. Perhaps this could be said of the last excuse, which is a flat refusal, or the text may be highlighting the bad manners of each invitee who are with one mind refusing the call and not showing an escalation in bad manners.

14:21 The unanimous refusal and empty dinner party is shocking, especially in that day and age. This is given more weight in light of 14:12-14 where the cultural context is revealed; there were significant advantages to hosting and attending dinners of the rich and important of society. Therefore, for the master of the house to be refused by all guests is a shocking outcome. The parable then shows how the poor and lame find themselves elevated to this great honor.

Bock says that, the dinner being ready and open for visitors represents Jesus’ “current kingdom offer...Jesus does not postpone the banquet or withdraw the meal; he gets a new

²¹ Bock, *Luke*, 1273.

²² Linnemann, *Parables of Jesus*, 89.

²³ Garland, *Luke*, 586.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 589.

audience. The time of blessing is now and continues into the future.”²⁵ The invitation can be rejected, but it will not stop the dinner.

Those who inhabited the city streets and lanes were the “poor and unfortunate in the town.” The poor and lame “constitute the outcasts or subclasses of the town’s society.”²⁶ This grouping of individuals is not new to Luke and is a reoccurring theme. It “recalls 14:13 and is similar to 1:51-53; 6:20-23; and 7:22. The OT background is Isaiah 61:1-2; 35:5-6; and 29:18-19.”²⁷ If this is a common theme, then what should be understood of the poor?

One might see how easy it would be to use this parable as a means to trumpet the social gospel. Luke is certainly making a point that Jesus’ message is going to the social outcasts. Luke uses this imagery to summarize Jesus’ ministry. This is clearly seen in Luke 4:14-30. In that passage Luke provides the paradigm of Jesus’ ministry and preaching. There, quoting from Isaiah 61, we read that Jesus came to “to proclaim good news to the poor,” but who are the poor? Some understand this as referring only to the spiritually poor, yet others take it only as the economically poor. Green thinks both extremes fail to adequately answer this question. He says, “It is thus evident that Jesus’ mission is directed to the poor—defined not merely in subjective, spiritual or personal, economic terms, but in the holistic sense of those who are for any of a number of socio-religious reasons relegated to positions outside the boundaries of God’s people.”²⁸ Johnson sees the “poor” as “not only the economically impoverished but all those who are marginal or excluded from human fellowship, the outcast.”²⁹

This way of understanding the “poor” is probably correct. From the full witness of scripture, it would be incorrect to understand the “poor” as simply the economically poor. However, simply defining them as spiritually poor does not fully recognize the fact that those who are economically poor, or socially outcast, often were more open to Jesus’ message and even targeted by Him. Furthermore, Luke is making the point that the kingdom of God does come and change the status of the poor. They are not made physically rich but are taken from a sin cursed state and position to a place of blessing. This interpretation would also fit well with the rest of Luke 4:20-30, where Jesus is rejected by His home and reminds them of the days of Elijah and Elisha, who both brought blessings to outsiders (Gentiles) rather than the people of Israel. Just as they ministered to the “poor,” Jesus will also minister to the poor.

14:22-23 In these verses there are two things that stand out. First, there is abundant room at the feast. By inviting in all those who would never turn down an invitation, the room has not

²⁵ Bock, *Luke*, 1275.

²⁶ Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV*, 1057.

²⁷ Bock, *Luke*, 1275.

²⁸ Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 211.

²⁹ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, Sacra Pagina Series (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 79; Bock, *Luke*, 410; Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 184.

been exhausted. Second, the invitation goes beyond the outcasts in the city to those outside the city. “The areas outside the city would have been inhabited by outcast groups (ethnic groups, tanners, traders, beggars, prostitutes), who required access to the city but were not permitted to live within it.”³⁰ It is likely that this aspect of the parable points to the gospel call going out to the Gentiles.³¹ This should not be so neatly divided. Bock gives a helpful explanation: “One should avoid the idea that the first new invitations (the second batch overall) go only to Jews and the second new invitations (the third overall) only to Gentiles. The picture is of reaching out to people in all directions, Diaspora Jews and Gentiles alike. Jews and Gentiles are both in view.”³²

“Compel people to come in” Many commentators believe this “compelling” should not be taken to mean “by force” but rather “an urgent appeal.”³³ However, Calvin disagrees and says, “This expression means, that the master of the house would give orders to make use, as it were, of violence for compelling the attendance of the poor...By these words Christ declares that he would rake together all the offscourings of the world, rather than he would ever admit such ungrateful persons to his table.”³⁴ Calvin is right to highlight the strength with which the master urges the poor to attend, however, it goes too far to understand “compel” as the use of any physical force. The idea here is of an urgent/insistent call.

14:24 To properly interpret this verse one must determine who is speaking and being spoken to. It does not seem likely that the master is speaking to the servant because the “you” is plural. It is possible that this verse is still the parable and the master is telling his audience at the dinner that the first invitees will never experience it. However, it seems to make the most sense that Jesus is directing this at the audience of the dinner he is currently attending.

Some believe that the pronouncement that “none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet” (ESV), refers to a practice of sending leftovers of the feast to those unable to attend (Ne. 8:10-12).³⁵ It is difficult to determine whether that is what is happening here, but it also does not change the meaning of the parable. There will be no kingdom blessings to those who refuse the dinner invitation.

Conclusion

This parable serves as a warning to those who believed their position in the kingdom was secure. In explanation of this parable Ridderbos says,

³⁰ Garland, *Luke*, 591, referencing Rohrbaugh, “The Pre-Industrial City,” 144-45.

³¹ Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: P&R, 1962), 378-379.

³² Bock, *Luke*, 1277.

³³ Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV*, 1057; Bock, *Luke*, 1277; Garland, *Luke*, 591; Marshall, *Commentary on Luke*, 590.

³⁴ Calvin, *Luke*, 173.

³⁵ See Marshall, *Commentary on Luke*, 591.

Special significance must be also be ascribed to the parables of the wedding-feast (Matt. 22:2-10), and of the great supper (Luke 14:16-24). These parables are rightly cited for the universal (embracing the heathen also) significance of the kingdom of heaven. But the thought of the covenant is also maintained in them. Those who were invited in the first place (the Jewish nation) did not listen to the invitation. They stayed away under all kinds of pretexts. But the host nevertheless carries out his plans of the wedding-feast in spite of their unwillingness.³⁶

The feast clearly indicates eschatological salvation. In this parable it is not the lord/master of the feast who keeps the invitees from coming, they make that decision themselves. “The allusion is to the leadership who refused to respond to Jesus’ invitation...But the kingdom’s bounty is not lost because of their rejection, for many others will be invited and will attend...In fact, many who attend will be among those who were least expected to attend.”³⁷ The Pharisees and religious leaders are not guaranteed a place.

This parable shows that those who had already been invited to the dinner were not willing to attend when the time came. Jesus’ own people, especially the leaders, were not willing to accept the invitation and their place is given to others (Cf. Romans 11:11). However, this cannot be pressed too far. Though many of the Jews and Jewish leadership are clearly implied, this parable goes beyond that to the kingdom declaration that anyone who rejects the summons will not be attending the eschatological dinner. The important question raised by this parable is “Have I really accepted the invitation to enter this house of feasting? Does *my life* show that I have accepted it and am on the way to this blessed experience, enjoying a foretaste of it even now?”³⁸

This parable is not assuming a wholesale rejection by Jews and Jewish leaders. There were those from every part of Jewish society who did accept the summons. To Jesus’ audience there was an understanding that they were bound for that eschatological kingdom dinner. They assumed that they would taste this blessing. Yet these individuals were also those who seemed to show little regard for those who needed “blessing” most (Luke 14:12-14). They were those who expected to be placed at the positions of honor (Luke 14:7-11). They were those who were more concerned with keeping their own Sabbath laws, unless it dealt directly with their own welfare, than they were to help others on the Sabbath. Kingdom blessing does not come to those who assume their place at the dinner but refuse the summons. Kingdom blessing comes to those who need it most and are led into the Master’s feast.

³⁶ Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, 199.

³⁷ Bock, *Luke*, 1278.

³⁸ William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Luke*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), 731.

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Nathan Voss

Sermon on Luke 14:15-24

Who Is Blessed in the Kingdom?

Introduction

“*So, who’s going?*” That was my typical question for parties while growing up. Who’s going to be there? That’s generally what’s asked by the one invited when they’re trying to gauge whether or not they want to attend. Perhaps the most frustrating thing is when you were counting on some specific people to be there and you show up only to learn that they aren’t coming. As a guest that’s hard enough, but that’s even worse for a host.

Most of us sitting here have had to decline an invitation. Sometimes we have to decline when a prior commitment gets in the way, and we are bummed that we can’t attend. Sometimes things arise that might get us out of an invitation. Perhaps it was something that we didn’t really want to do, and we were searching for a perfect excuse to get out of it. These types of situations arise all the time. A situation that is a little rarer, and more in line with this parable, is when you decline something that you already agreed to attend. This is when we especially see rude behavior. A host is counting on someone’s presence. Planning and expense is laid out. Food is prepared as well as a place set aside for you.

I’m sure many of us can relate this most to weddings. Inevitably at the weddings we host there are some who do not attend even though they said they were coming. We all expect that, in fact, wedding caterers plan for those who said they were coming and don’t, and those who were never invited but came anyway.

However, Jesus’ parable presents a situation where all the guests refuse. Imagine the weddings you have held and planned and imagine on that day when the guests are supposed to arrive, no one does. And you begin to call, and someone says, “*Yeah, I am buying a house,*” or “*a car*”, or perhaps even, “*I know I said I was going to attend, but I’m actually going to stay in with my wife.*” What does that tell the host? In the context of the Kingdom what does this parable mean?

We can capture the thrust of this passage with this one question serving as our theme.
[Theme: **Who Is Blessed in the Kingdom?**]

Context

We read the context, and we see on a Sabbath, Jesus is at the house of a ruler of the Pharisees and the religious elite of the day. They are watching him closely, trying to see if he messes up. **In the first 6 verses of chapter 14, Jesus shows how they have more concern for their own animals than they do for the hurt and sick. Then in verses 7-11 Jesus says that they should not seek to be the honored guests but should humble themselves, and, in so doing, be exalted.**

Immediately preceding our text, in verses 12-14, Jesus tells the guests that they should not be concerned about the riches of this life but that they should display a kingdom focus and

seek not their own interests but the interests of others. Verse 14 is key as it ends with Jesus making this point, **“For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.”**

Our text immediately follows, **“When one of those who reclined at table with him heard these things, he said to him, ‘Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God.’”** The context seems to indicate this man is making a presumptuous statement. Jesus declares that those who humble themselves and seek first the kingdom, in this case by providing for the lowly, will be blessed. However, this man assumes that he and those present will be the ones who are blessed in God’s kingdom.

Therefore, Jesus tells this kingdom parable. It answers this question: **Who are the ones blessed in the kingdom?** Is this man correct in assuming his kingdom blessing? In response, Jesus begins his parable.

A Scorned Invitation by “Likely” Guests

Jesus’ parable concerns a great dinner or feast that is being held by undoubtedly a great, wealthy, and powerful man. We can also gather that those who were first invited were wealthy men in their own right, being able to buy land or five yoke of oxen.

Though not explicitly stated, we assume these individuals had already responded that they would attend this great feast. **You see, in those days, it was the common practice to send out two invitations**, an early invitation to see who would come, and then, a second message when the feast was ready.

However, Jesus, as is his practice, presents a shocking twist. When the feast is set, and all is prepared, the servant goes out and informs the guests, but none will come. In verse 18 we read, **“But they all alike began to make excuses.”** This phrase might have the meaning **“unanimously.” All the guests decline!** They all asked to be excused. We might wonder if the excuses are legitimate. Each excuse reflects a greater concern for one’s own family, or financial wellbeing than they are concerned about attending the dinner. I don’t believe it is a coincidence that these were the same topics and critiques that Jesus was leveling against his audience in the surrounding context.

But in reality, the legitimacy of the excuses doesn’t matter. The context here is discerning who will be blessed in the kingdom, but there is no excuse worthy of missing *that* dinner. The dinner in the parable clearly represents the blessings of the kingdom of God. This means salvation and every blessing that accompanies it. This parable is illustrating that those who decline the invitation are not declining a simple feast, but the kingdom of God itself. ***Who are the ones blessed in the kingdom?*** Not those who reject the invitation! Not those who are too concerned with self-seeking matters!

You see, those who were supposed to attend do not. Those who should have responded neglected the call. Even Israel and many of the religious leaders would themselves ignore the call. They have no place because the kingdom dinner is actually populated by the outcasts. The in-group becomes the outcasts, and the outcasts become the in-group. Or as the text had already said in verse 11, **“For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles**

himself will be exalted.” And verse 14, “you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.”

Is this the mindset that we see displayed in ourselves? **Do we humble ourselves?** Are we more concerned about this earth than we are about heavenly blessings? And this doesn't mean you could care less about church. Jesus is talking to the people who supposedly cared the most about religion and what we see is that they were ultimately not concerned about Christ's kingdom but their own. **You see often religion itself is simply a means to achieve what we want on this earth. Status, honor, comfort.**

Religion can be the primary means at our disposal to feel superior to others. And, people of God, we are always in danger of this. This parable of the kingdom removes any possibility of us using our covenant position as a stepstool to climb above others. **Those who attend the dinner are those who bring nothing to the table.**

It is easy for us to become focused on our clique and not to express any concern for those we might see as beneath us and in the process, we start to form this idea in our minds that we have the kingdom cornered. *After all, don't we belong there?* **Don't miss this warning, those who in pride think they belong there, don't belong there at all.** This isn't saying we can't have assurance of our place at the table, it's saying the proud are so consumed with self, that they not only don't belong at the dinner, but *by their own pride* will decline the invitation. These individuals become the dinner's outcasts by their own decision.

Remember what Jesus says in Luke 18:14. The prayer that is heard by God comes from the tax collector who is too ashamed to look up but pleads for mercy. **“For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”**

A Blessed Dinner for Unlikely Guests

In His typical fashion, Jesus' parables go from one shocking thing to another. So, after the rude dismissal of the invitation, the master of the feast sends his servants to welcome in the outcasts of society. Verse 21, **“Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city and bring in the poor and crippled and blind and lame.”** The shocking discovery here is that those who do come to the dinner are those who were looked down as those least likely to attend. In a full reversal of what the man intended by his statement, Jesus' parable confirms, **“Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God.”** However, the “everyone” who will eat that bread are those very outcasts that the Pharisees would never invite to one of their own simple dinners.

-The Poor

Just what is meant by the poor, crippled, blind, and lame? Some might try to take this and use it for a kind of social gospel proof text. Even though that is not the right answer, there is a part of it that's true. **We might want to reduce it to two options, either the socially poor or the spiritually poor.** However, the poor here should not be understood exclusively in either way. The message that Jesus brings is for the poor spiritually, socially, and economically. The

reason is because Jesus has not come to change just the spiritual or just the physical realm, but rather, both together.

Jesus' miracles show that even the physical and societal realms experience new creation with the coming of God's kingdom. Now, of course, the full physical blessings of God's kingdom will come when Jesus returns, but we need to see here that the good news Jesus brings is all encompassing. What He began in His coming we probably most clearly see in the spiritual realm, but even so *all* is redeemed and made new in Christ, including our physical condition.

We see the spiritual reality of Jesus' message. We cannot accurately understand this parable unless we understand that the poor, crippled, and lame obviously doesn't mean only those who have this actual *physical* condition will be in the Kingdom. However, it is also true that the gospel message often finds reception from those who are downtrodden and without worldly comforts. This is, of course, due to God's election as he often mirrors the spiritual reality with their actual physical reality.

Thus, those who believe are the poor in many different ways, but all of them must be those poor in spirit! For even those not destitute but who respond to the call can accurately be described as poor. Is there any more impoverished state than fallen, outside God's kingdom, being under the penalty and judgment of God, without peace, without comfort? Those who see themselves within this fallen state, may properly be called the poor.

This parable provides another aspect of the kingdom dinner as well. Verse 22 says **“and the servant said, ‘Sir, what you commanded has been done, and still there is room.’”** Notice how much *real-estate is available*. By bringing in all the poor the dinner is still not even full. The kingdom is wide open, and there is room enough. The feast is bountiful. It's not like what we have at our weddings when we are deciding who to leave off the invitation. Instead, this feast is wide enough to accommodate all commers.

So, we read verse 23, **“And the master said to the servant, ‘Go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled.’”** Though we might not want to create a sharp divide between the poor and lame from the previous verse and what we see here, this verse seems to demonstrate a clear reference to what we might call the Gentile mission. Commentators say that often the people out among the highways and hedges were ethnic outcasts or even unclean sinners. The call goes beyond the poor of the city to those out along the way as the gospel will even go to Gentiles.

And notice what the master says, **“Compel people to come in.”** This doesn't have to mean a physical coercion, but the master is telling his servants to urgently insist on them coming in. Is that not an apt description of the Gospel call to attend?

Now don't miss this, what the prior group rejected, and what the poor are being compelled to partake of is a *feast*. As one pastor points out, the imagery of this parable is that the kingdom is like a dinner. And who does not want to come to a magnificent dinner? This parable shows that God is more generous than we are. He embraces those we would not. He does the very thing Jesus told them to do. **Invite those who have nothing to give.**¹

¹ Cornelis Venema, in a sermon on the same text.

Evangelism is a call to invite all to the dinner. Sometimes we can focus too much on “Come join the narrow way.” “Come bear your cross.” “Come suffer for Christ sake.” All that is true, but we miss the fact that we are invited to a blessed dinner. We miss that the call extended to unbelievers is a call of unmatched blessing, glory, and bounty. We live as if we are headed to the butcher’s block instead of all the blessings God is preparing to shower upon us. Shouldn’t the truth of our destiny produce present and unending joy?

Just imagine if you had tickets to the best sports game, the hottest show on earth, the place everyone wanted to be, would we approach that with timidity? Would we slink up to someone and kind of mumble, “Do you want to attend this free feast, with the best foods, the best entertainments, the best drinks, the best company?” We offer the greatest news!

A Kingdom Warning

Verse 24 ends the parable. We see Jesus address his audience directly. **“For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet.”** This verse is a warning. A warning to respond to the dinner invitation. A warning that no excuse is worthy to be absent. A warning for those who in pride assume they are the blessed of the kingdom.

Look at the description of those who attend. Do we see ourselves aptly described there? Those who attend are those who don’t have any business being there. In Luke 4:16-29 we see a paradigm for Jesus’ ministry, a description of what he came to do. **Jesus came to bring good news to the poor, sight to the blind, and freedom for prisoners.** To some who reside even in the visible church, who were invited long ago, they respond with indifference. They evidence greater concern for their property, their toys and tools, or their families more than they care to attend the kingdom banquet. This is one of those places where we must take stock and ask which group we more closely resemble? **Proud, indifferent, presumptuous elites or thankful beggars?**

Young people, will you be those who grow up and walk away when you have been invited to the dinner? Will the riches of the world pull you away? Or will the wisdom of the world make you mock the invitation? Will a potential spouse lead you away? Look at how many examples there are in God’s word where marrying incorrectly turned people away from their God. Look at the many warnings not to love money as it will destroy you. Look at the repeated call for humility.

Do we display presumption that we will be at the dinner, assuming that we have a place reserved for us? Christians have *assurance of faith* based on Christ and what he has done, Christians do not have *presumption* based on self-worth. That is why we see Jesus calling them to show their true faith by giving away the riches of the world and love God through loving their neighbor.

Jesus was speaking to Pharisees and lawyers, those who knew God’s law and believed they practiced it, yet he warned them that they were in danger of ignoring the invitation. Before you think that can’t be any of us, remember, **these were the people you would least expect to turn down the summons of the master**, but they were so unconcerned about it that when it

came, they showed what really was their desire. The last verse is the warning, **“None of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet.”**

In Luke 3:7 we see John the Baptist say something that might help us understand what Jesus is saying. **John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”**

Right before our passage Jesus had called his listeners to invite the poor, crippled, lame, and blind rather than those who could repay for hospitality. Jesus is calling the guests at the dinner he is attending to bear fruits in keeping with repentance. He is telling them that their presumption as children of Abraham won't save them. And if they continue as they are, being more concerned with the worldly blessings of the day, they will not receive the heavenly blessings of the kingdom. People of God, Luke 14 serves as a call for us to do the same. To display the fruits of true faith and seek to love God and our neighbor without repayment. Not so we can *earn* our place at the table but because that is what those who belong to Christ, and thus, in the kingdom, do. Remember, those who attend the banquet are those who know they deserve it least.

Who is blessed in the Kingdom? Those who are washed in Christ's blood. These are the guests that can be described as the poorest, for they are the humble who look to stand only on the merit of their Savior. Amen.

CHURCHES OF CLASSIS CENTRAL US

UPDATED JANUARY 25, AD 2021

Total of 21 Churches & Church Plants (19 organized, 2 unorganized)

Churches (organized) alphabetical listing for rotation of hosting and chairing:

1. Beecher, IL | Faith URC, vacant
2. De Motte, IN | Immanuel URC, Rev. Roberto Rossi
3. Des Moines, IA | Providence Reformed Church, Rev. Jody Lucero
4. Doon, IA | Doon URC, Rev. John Vermeer
5. Hills, MN | Hills URC, Rev. Alan Camarigg
6. Kansas City, MO | Covenant Reformed Church, vacant
7. Lansing, IL | Oak Glen URC, Rev. Ed Marcusse
8. Lynwood, IL | Lynwood URC, Rev. Nick Alons
9. Oak Lawn, IL | First URC of Oak Lawn, Rev. Harold Miller
10. Orange City, IA | Redeemer URC, Rev. Todd De Rooy
11. Pella, IA | Covenant Reformed Church, vacant
12. Rock Valley, IA | Rock Valley URC, Rev. Joel Vander Kooi
13. Sanborn, IA | Cornerstone URC, Rev. Dan Donovan
14. Schererville, IN | Community URC, vacant
15. Sioux Center, IA | Sioux Center URC, Rev. Jon Bushnell
16. Sioux Falls, SD | Christ Reformed Church, Rev. Spencer Aalsburg
17. St. John, IN | Redeemer URC, Rev. Jacques Roets
18. Waupun, WI | Grace URC, Rev. Paul Freswick
19. Wellsburg, IA | URC of Wellsburg, Rev. Joel Worries

Church Plants (unorganized)

1. Chicago Heights | El Pacto de Gracia, Rev. Ruben Sernas
2. Quito, Ecuador | Iglesia Reformada Luz de Vida, Rev. Pablo Landázuri

Contact Stated Clerk

CLASSIS FUNCTIONARIES:

Stated Clerk (2 term limit):

Rev. Ralph Pontier
641-230-3880 classiscentralus@gmail.com

Second term ends September 2023

Alternate Stated Clerk

Rev. Harold Miller

First term ends April 2023

Treasurer

Supervising Consistory: Sioux Center URC (appointed Mar. 2014)
Treasurer: Mr. Harlan Harmelink
1441 4th Ave SE
Sioux Center, IA 51250
(712) 441-0573 (cell)
Harlan.harmelink@dordt.edu

Church Visitors East

Rev. Ed Marcusse
Mr. John Surowiec (Schererville, IN)

Term ends April 2022
Term ends September 2021

Alternate: Rev. Andrew Compton
Alternate: Rev. Jacques Roets.

Term ends September 2021
Term ends April 2022

Church Visitors West

Rev. Spencer Aalsburg
Rev. Joel Vander Kooi
Alternate: Mr. Korrie Van Maanen (Rock Valley)

Term ends September 2023
Term ends April 2023
Term ends November 2023

CPAC Membership

Immanuel URC (De Motte, IN)
Chairman: Rev. Spencer Aalsburg
Clerk: Rev. Jody Lucero
Mr. Grant Diekevers (Sanborn, IA)
Mr. Bruce Aardsma (Schereville, IN)
Rev. Joel Worries
Alternate: Rev. Jacques Roets
Alternate: Mr. Korrie Van Maanen (Rock Valeey)

Supervising Consistory
Third term ends September 2021
Third term ends September 2021
First term ends April 2021
First term ends September 2023
First term ends September 2021
Second term ends April 2022
First term ends September 2023

CECCA Delegate

Mr. Gerald Swets (Schererville, IN)
Alternate: Rev. John Vermeer

Second term ends April 2023
Second term ends September 2022

CERCU Delegate

Rev. Todd De Rooy
Alternate: Rev. Joel Vander Kooi

Second term ends September 2022
Second term ends September 2022

Missions Committee Delegates

Rev. Jody Lucero
Mr. Harold Meinders (Pella, IA)
Alternate: Rev. Spencer Aalsburg

Third term ends March 2023
First term ends September 2021
Third term ends September 2021

Web Oversight Committee

Mr. Micah Van Maanen (Orange City, IA)
Alternate: Rev. Joel Worries

First term ends September 2022
First term ends April 2022

Standing Committee on Appeals

Mr. Mark Van Der Molen (De Motte, IN)
Alternate: Rev. Ralph Pontier

First term ends September 2021
First term ends September 2021

NOTE: Synodical committee delegates & alternates serve three-year terms. As per Synod Wyoming 2016's (Article 77) modifying Synodical Regulations 5.3.2.c, each classis determines how many three-year terms their delegates may serve.