

Perspectives

in Covenant Education

Teenagers

Where the Ninth Grade?

Teens at Risk in a Sinful World

Hurt: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers

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"The entrance of thy word giveth light" Psalm 119:130

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Statement of Purpose

Perspectives in Covenant Education is a journal regulated and published quarterly, in November, February, May, and August by the Protestant Reformed Teachers' Institute. The purpose of this magazine, in most general terms, is to advance the cause of distinctively Christian education as it is conceived in the Protestant Reformed community. More specifically, the magazine is intended to serve as an encouragement and an inducement toward individual scholarship, and a medium for the development of distinctive principles and methods of teaching. The journal is meant to be a vehicle of communication, not only within the profession, but within the Protestant Reformed community and within the Christian community in general.

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“I encourage those who are over thirty and who hold any illusion that the high school they went to is similar to the one today’s students attend to visit the school, walk the halls, and listen to the students talk to one another at lunch or during breaks. Unless you have stayed in close touch with the changing adolescent culture, you will most certainly be struck by the fact that the world you inhabited and the experiences you had are but a distant, never-to-be-reclaimed memory.”

Chap Clark, *Hurt: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers*, p. 89.

Where the Ninth Grade?

by Tom Bergman

“Where the Ninth Grade” is the title of a pair of articles written for Perspectives in 1985. The question has been renewed for the Protestant Reformed schools in western Michigan in 2008. Should the ninth grade remain a part of the grade schools or should the ninth grade be moved to Covenant Christian High School?

The issue has been thoughtfully and carefully studied. Sensible answers in either direction have been delineated.

Many points are made in favor of moving ninth grade to the high school. Such a move would provide students with better continuity throughout the four years that count toward a high school diploma—without a major transition between the freshman and sophomore year. Other Christian high schools in the area who have moved ninth grade into the high school all recommend the move. High schools that include the ninth grade offer more options for mathematics and science courses. A four-year curriculum will help to move students through course sequences that are more appropriate to their individual needs. Currently, the mean grade point average of Covenant’s graduates is lower than

the mean for other students with the same ACT scores. It is also noted that placement of the ninth grade might not be unrelated to the fact that the percentage of Covenant’s graduates who continue their education is 25-30% lower than other Christian high schools in western Michigan. There is also research that indicates that “the worst time for a transition is between 9th and 10th grades” (9th Grade Forum Newsletter, January 2008). Other area Christian high schools report that freshmen adjust well to high school life and that it is good for them to familiarize themselves sooner with high school expectations.

Additionally, an augmented faculty at Covenant would promote specialization in subject areas, thus increasing Covenant’s ability to assign teachers to teach classes within their areas of endorsement, a requirement that may become a part of the state’s curriculum program someday. Students in the feeder schools are well known by their teachers, but having students in high school for four years would help the high school faculty become more familiar with them. On a related note, class size would be more consistent.

Athletics was “not one of the main considerations.” However, the point is made that moving the ninth grade to the high school would provide “equal or increased opportunities for participation” in athletics (Forum Newsletter). Only 35-40% of Covenant’s students play on at least one team while 65% or more of students at other participating schools in the same conference play on at least one team. And although moving the ninth grade would increase the burden on Covenant’s gym, it would also open up more gym time for teams at the feeder schools.

If the move were to take place, there would be significant costs involved. For one of the committees, that has been the primary concern, one which they have studied in depth. Although cost factors would have to be considered at Covenant, the committee reports that if the ninth grade is moved to Covenant and if “current tuition scales are maintained at the grade schools, in most cases the grade schools would experience an overall cost savings” (Forum Newsletter).

Many points are also made in favor of retaining ninth grade at the grade schools. Students are being well prepared to enter high school at tenth grade, academically and spiritually. Concern has been stated in the past over the increased financial strain and that moving the ninth grade would have a negative impact on the curriculum for seventh and eighth grades. If grade point

average is an area of concern, an easy way to increase students’ GPAs would be to have Covenant revise its current practice and begin to include ninth grade scores in art, music, and physical education. That being said, the fact remains that taking challenging courses is generally a more important factor than achieving high marks. Statistics show that Covenant’s students, having been taught thoroughly, score higher on the ACT than other students with similar GPAs. Apparently, Covenant’s students are as well prepared to pursue higher education as are students from other schools. Concerning a low interest in attending college, current ninth grade placement might not be to blame; we can all do a better job of persuading our students to seek additional education. If we desire to align with the state’s Michigan Merit Curriculum, the current ninth grade placement and current academic support structure will suffice. Besides, trimming the faculty at the grade schools would have an unwanted effect on the seventh and eighth grades which are currently taught by well-placed teachers on well-balanced staffs.

Regarding the transition to high school, our unique school system does not seem to support the research about a transition after ninth grade. Things are going well academically, socially, and spiritually among ninth graders in the grade schools and also once they get to tenth grade in the high school.

Also brought up are the differences between junior high school athletics and high school athletics. Junior high sports schedules are generally more limited and the playing time more shared. The high school sports schedules are generally busier and more time-consuming. In the interests of home and family, this is cited as a reason for keeping ninth grade where it is.

In addressing the costs of moving the ninth grade versus retaining the ninth grade, the point is made that if a grade school is in debt, then fewer families would be carrying the load of that debt. In light of the fact that recent financial drive goals have not been so easily met, this is something to consider.

If improvements must be made, moving the ninth grade to the high school is one way to try to make those improvements. Other sugges-

tions include: more rigor and higher expectations in the high school courses, more encouragement from parents, more practice ACT sessions, more ACT retakes, and an intensive curriculum coordination project across the schools.

It would be helpful if our parents and teachers in Alberta, California, Colorado, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, Washington, and Wisconsin could weigh in on the discussion. It might prove very helpful. Please feel free to write to the Perspectives. As one of our principals stated, the question up for discussion is not “What do we do about the ninth grade problem?” It is “Where the ninth grade?” that is, “Where could we best serve the midadolescent youth of the church of Jesus Christ who are at the ninth grade level?”

P

Feature

Teens at Risk in a Sinful World

by Sue
Looyenga

As if it were not enough that his dysfunctional parents had been evicted from their dream home because of their own foolish decisions, and that his older brother was serving a life sentence for killing another brother—all this before he had even been born—the teen was well aware

that the weight of his parents’ hope and expectation had been upon his own slender shoulders from the time he first saw the light of day. He was the replacement—the one “appointed” in his much-loved dead brother’s place to carry on the family heritage—or so they told him. His

mother had said it the day he was born, and it was true. Didn't his very name, Seth, bring that to everyone's mind?

Certainly, Seth, third son of Adam and Eve, would be regarded in our day as an "at-risk" teen. His life was filled with the consequences of his parents' sin: unrelenting, back-breaking work in the soil; dealing daily with the frustration of herding animals bent on meandering in their own ways; returning each night to a home blanketed with sorrow over the loss of a beloved, God-fearing child to a violent death—and that at the hand of his own sibling; the bitter ache of a

banished son who was a murderer without remorse, living far away and nurturing the serpent's seed by now as well. And certainly Seth did not grow up unaware that his parents' hopes were resting upon him as the one through whom the Seed of the woman would come to save them from all of this pain.

In addition, word undoubtedly came to Seth throughout his life of the increasing wickedness of his relatives living in the land of Nod, of their polygamy and their remorseless violence, of course, but also of the creativity that brought into their service the gifts of metalworking and music to enhance life and serve their own ends. They lived luxurious, licentious, boastful lives, likely unaware and unconcerned about the devastation their father and grandfather Cain had wreaked upon his

family, while Seth was left with his grieving parents to pick up the pieces and go on in God's name and for His sake.

Who or what protected a young man born into such circumstances from abandoning his family in their miserable situation, throwing himself headlong into the pursuit of some happiness for himself, and embracing the culture of the world around him as an antidote for feelings of inadequacy he had as the son appointed to such a weighty calling as Abel's replacement? From a worldly perspective, Seth was a boy that didn't have a chance of making something of himself—not with a family like this in his background.

The answer can only lie in the fact that Seth knew who he was and Whose he was. He knew that his life, "in all its perfect plan/was ordered 'ere [his] days began." Seth was made aware—by God's revelation of Himself by His Spirit, and through the word that came to him by those who feared and loved Jehovah—that his life had purpose and hope, and that he had a source of never-failing strength on which to draw for its duration. Seth knew that he was a child of promise, and that the promise could not fail because it was sealed by the very Word of the One who made it—Jehovah, God of the covenant. Then, too, Seth was not alone; he was part of a community of believers, who would pray with him, who would pray for him. God's Spirit, we

know, was testifying with his spirit that he belonged to God, that he was elect and he was precious. And so, Seth grew to manhood, and he thrived spiritually, even though he lived in a wicked age among sinners, and even though he himself was a sinner.

We are told very little of Seth's life, simply that in time, he married and had a son, Enos, whose name meant "man." We are also told in Scripture that in his days, those who feared God began to join together to call upon His name. After that, we read Seth's name only one more time in the Bible, close to the end of the lineage of Jesus Christ that is traced back to the first Adam in Luke 3. In these few passages, though, we find without doubt that God was faithful to Seth—faithful in his lifetime, faithful in his generations.

There are many other examples of young men and young women in the Scriptures whose lives, like Seth's, would qualify them to be labeled "children at-risk" in today's society. Scripture includes children who were born to parents whose drunken debauchery was a shame to be spoken of; whose parents did not live together in the fellowship of God's love; whose families were blighted by adultery, fornication, incest, idol worship, murder, and every conceivable sin under heaven. But Scripture also shows that God was faithful.

Teenagers born into today's covenant homes are no less "at risk." Sin, we know, continues to

grow at a steady rate, and the devil constantly finds new inroads for its delivery into our homes. In our age, the term "at-risk" teen is becoming a psychological catch-word, used to describe those young men and women who have difficulty coping with the stresses of life, particularly the growing violence in schools, the deterioration of the family structure, substance abuse, alarming media images, and gang activity. It is easy for us to become unnerved by the world's concern for its youth and get caught up in the search for a solution with them. The truth of the matter is that all children have always been at risk, not only physically and psychologically, but spiritually as well in this fallen world. It should come as no surprise that there is an increased concern for our youth by parents, teachers, and authorities who see the deterioration of our culture, since sin proliferates as humankind foolishly wanders farther from God and His commandments as time progresses.

Likewise, the means by which today's teens, including those in Christian homes, are trying to cope with these stresses are not really so different from those available in the days of Seth. The temptation has always been around to use the good gifts God has given us to serve our own desires apart from God. The sons of Cain in Seth's day used music to serve their base desires, metal to shape inventions that they used to serve other gods, and society to flaunt their avarice, immoral-

ity, and violence. Even so today do the sons of Cain entice the sons of Adam to indulge in their godless media, promote their “medications” meant to anesthetize the pain of living without God, and encourage imitation of their public lives of avarice, immorality, and violence as “the good life.” For as long as sin has reared its venomous head in the world, covenant children have been “at-risk” children, children at risk of losing not only their safety or their sanity, but even more, of losing the knowledge of their salvation for a time as they seek other means for finding true happiness in a sinful, deceitful world.

Recently, scientific researchers, moved to find solutions for the increasing despair and violence among teens have been able to identify a few of the things that seem to be the key to making a troubled teen more secure in a troubled society. First, they have found that teens need hope that the future holds possibilities for them; second, teens need hope that they can attain their goals; third, they need hope that there will be adults around them who will support them so that they can do these things. But, then, what if the world continues to become more unstable, and the economy spirals downward, and human help fails them? What assurance will these poor, troubled teens have then? There can be none, if there is no God in the picture.

As covenant parents, we cannot afford to minimize the dangers to

our children in a world that grows increasingly evil, but neither should we look to the world for coping strategies that turn them away from the God who is their strength in time of trouble. Our goal as covenant parents is not to spare our children the hardships that yield the fruit of the Spirit by overprotecting them. It is not to turn their eyes from trials by showering them with material goods and pleasures. It is not to bolster their shaky self-images by assuring them that they are beautiful, talented, intelligent, athletic, creative, or special in some way that the world deems valuable. Nor may it be our way to call sin by any other name than what it is in an attempt to soften the misery of a child that is breaking God’s commandments and experiencing the consequences.

Instead, we must point them to Seth, who lived not in Abel’s shadow, but in the shadow of the altar and the Lamb; who bore children in faith that God would indeed be true to His covenant promises; and who gathered with those who named the name of the Lord Jehovah and carried one another on wings of prayer to His throne. **P**

Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall: But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint. Isaiah 40:30, 31

Book Review—*Hurt: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers*

reviewed by
the editor

Hurt: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers by Chap Clark. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004. Softcover; 195 pp. + notes, bibliography, and index.

The author, Dr. Chap Clark, is associate professor of youth, family, and culture and Fuller Theological Seminary. His seminary work includes the chairmanship of the Practical Theology Division. Dr. Clark is the author of many books, including *Daughters and Dads* (co-authored with his wife, Dee), and *From Father to Son*. *Hurt: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers* was an Evangelical Christian Publishers Association (ECPA) finalist for book of the year in 2004.

Dr. Clark has done extensive work with youth and he cares deeply for them. For this book, he spent a great deal of time with adolescents at their own level, in their schools, and part of their conversations. He wanted to observe them closely and hear them, not as an adult interviewer, but as someone accepted within their own community.

One of his main arguments is that the time interval that we call “adolescence” has lengthened, and there is now a recognizable midadolescent period between early adolescence and late adolescence. Midadolescence would correlate roughly with young people of high-school age and late adolescence with post-high school young adults.

Another main point is that the structure of the adolescent world has also changed dramatically—he even calls it the “world beneath,” an entire social system set up and operating somewhat apart from our everyday adult world. One aspect of this is what he calls a change from “cliques” to “clusters.”

In the 1950s, a large pool of homogeneous adolescents jockeyed for a closer link to the inner circle of the popular students. Today, high schools are populated by smaller groupings of friends, or clusters, who navigate as a unit the complex network of social interdependence with a loyalty similar to that of a family...Midadolescents gather in like-minded groups to protect themselves from the forces they perceive as alien to them. This is the main reason why clusters have

replaced cliques in today's adolescent social economy: Adolescents believe they have no alternative (75).

Yet another main point that Clark asserts is that adults have abandoned the youth. He does not mean that adults push them away or hide from them. But the way our society operates is essentially no different than outright abandonment of the youth.

Organizations, structures, and institutions that were originally concerned with children's care, welfare, and development have become less interested in individual nurture and developmental concern and more interested in institutional perpetuation (or the competitive, even pathological, needs of the adults in charge). Today's adolescents have indeed been abandoned (49).

What is interesting is that many adults will highlight these and other activities as proof of their commitment to the young. "I drive my kid to all of these activities. I sacrificed my own life, work, avocation, and enjoyment in order to take the kids to soccer games, concerts, and competitions." This statement is in and of itself yet another subtle form of abandonment. We have evolved to the point where we believe driving is support, being active is love, and providing any and every opportunity is selfless nurture. We are a culture that has forgotten how to be together. We have lost the ability to spend unstructured down time. Rather than being with children in creative activities at home or setting them free to enjoy semi-supervised activities

such as "play," we as a culture have look to outside organizations and structured agendas to fill their time and dictate their lives. The problem is not simply organized activities or sports. It is the cumulative effect that children experience as they grow up in today's social structure. Sports, music, dance, drama, Scouts, and even faith-related programs are all guilty of ignoring the developmental needs of each individual young person in favor of the organization's goals... In general, the good of the unique individual has been supplanted by a commitment to the good of the _____ (fill in the blank: team, school, community, class, or organization)... (46, 47).

Clark is an accomplished writer who carefully chooses and presents his terms. When he speaks of "systemic abandonment," the reader might mistakenly assume some type of systematic, intentional, or methodical abandonment. But Clark rightly has in mind a general, system-wide, almost organic view of abandonment in which society operates as one.

Dr. Clark makes some very astute observations that we would do well to notice. He accurately correlates an increase in family problems to an increase in adolescent problems. "Adolescents have suffered the loss of safe relationships and intimate settings... The postmodern family is often so concerned about the needs, struggles, and issues of parents that the emotional and developmental needs of the children go largely unmet" (50). The solutions that

Clark offers at the end of his book then are inexplicably weak. He suggests: youth-workers ought to be trained better and work together more, youth-workers must understand youth and provide boundaries, parents need to understand better the changing adolescent, and communities must make mentors available. What about a call for more, clear preaching on what God says in his word about marriage and family? What about rebuilding sound, biblical foundations for the home? What good will any proposed solution do if the families are still in shambles?

I will admit that I did expect a book written by a seminary professor to focus on biblical grounds and solutions, in spite of the book's title. In some sense, I suppose, Dr. Clark can be excused from such a focus. His work centers on kids who are in public schools and from secular homes. He speaks of society in general when he says, "As society allowed for the erosion of consistent and coherent rules, norms, rites, and rituals that nurtured the young from childhood to adulthood, midadolescents were forced (or believed they were forced) to create their own" (63). Although he might see problems in the family somewhat amplified in the homes of the students he spent time with, we all would do well to be aware that such moral relativism has not left the youth within the church untouched and unharmed. Even if it cannot be said that our teenagers are deeply entrenched in

the world of today's teenagers, at the very least that mixed-up world is easily accessible to them by the internet. Some aspects of the life of a teenager in our schools might be alarmingly similar to those outside. Couldn't you imagine hearing one of Clark's overheard conversations ("I love my blood-related family, but my friends are really more my family than my family") coming from one of our students?

The readers of the *Perspectives* may very well learn something valuable from Clark's *Hurt: Inside the World of Today's Teenager*. But beware the fact that his approach is essentially different than ours. He offers nothing specific about how to bring up the youth of the church as pilgrims and strangers in this world, as children of light. The outlook for his program is bleak if he plans to address the symptoms rather than the problem. The problem is deep and basic, the natural condition of man, which Clark seems to gloss over in his descriptions of adolescents: "I heard an overwhelming chorus of longing to be cared for and to be taken seriously...Beyond the perceived hostility that surrounds the midadolescent is a fragile soul hidden behind a sophisticated layer of defense and protection" (55).

The most unsettling premise of the book was that individuals are more important than the whole. This might have to be true in a dog-eat-dog secular world. But I don't think that Clark's assessment "The good

of the unique individual has been supplanted by a commitment to the good of the . . . school, community, class, or organization” should reflect negatively on our schools. The good of the individual is precisely in that commitment to the whole. We ought to teach them to view themselves, and importantly so, as members of a body. Individuals are nothing without the body. “The eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you (1 Cor. 12:21).

If Clark would correct that fundamental misdirection, he might come up with some better solutions for today’s teenagers.

Part of me wants to say that although Dr. Chap Clark will sell a great number of copies of this book in many bookstores, it doesn’t hold much for the Reformed parent or teacher. But a better part of me reminds me that our teenagers are not immune to the world or to living like it. It is best to stay informed. Read this book and profit from it. **P**

Contribution

Considering the North Star

by Brian Dykstra

*Thou through thy commandments
hast made me wiser than mine en-
emies: for they are ever with me.*

Psalm 119:98

Though only the forty-ninth brightest star in the night sky, the North Star is one of the most famous. Because it is so near to the sky’s north pole, it has been very useful for travelers on land and navigators at sea. Using the stars at the end of the Big Dipper’s bowl to find the North Star is one of the first things we teach our children about the heavens.

Just as a toy top will wobble on its axis while spinning, the earth also wobbles on its axis. As the

earth does so, the north pole traces a circle on the dome of the heavens. Scientists estimate it would take the earth’s pole 25,800 years to complete the circle. This means that what we know as the North Star was not always the Pole Star. Four thousand six hundred years ago when the pyramids were being built in Egypt, a different star was the Pole Star. However, Polaris is now so close to the celestial pole that it is a more accurate guide to true north than a compass because the earth’s magnetic pole is not located at earth’s north pole, and the magnetic pole also changes position.

The North Star’s nearly unmoving

position makes it a faithful guide. This feature of Polaris was celebrated by the poet and journalist William Cullen Bryant (1794-1878) in the last two stanzas of his poem “Hymn to the North Star.”

*On thy unfaltering blaze
The half-wrecked mariner, his compass lost,
Fixes his steady gaze,
And steers, undoubting, to the friendly coast;*

*And they who stray in perilous wastes, by night,
Are glad when thou dost shine to guide their footsteps right.
And, therefore, bards of old,
Sages, and hermits of the solemn wood,*

*Did in thy beams behold
A beauteous type of that unchanging good,
That bright eternal beacon, by whose ray
The voyager of time should shape his heedful way.*

Just as land travelers and mariners of days gone by, we and our children have a great need for guidance for we are pilgrims in a strange land and sail stormy spiritual seas. The world is a wicked place. I remember back in the 1960s when my great-grandmother said to my father that she thought how hard it would be to raise children in such godless times. The last four decades have not improved society’s spiritual landscape or made godly parents’ task any

easier. All one needs to do is read the reviews of movies and television programs in the newspaper to discern that the world of entertainment is no friend to godliness.

In Psalm 119 the psalmist writes that God’s commandments make him wiser than his enemies, whereby he attributes a certain wisdom to the foe. Satan has six thousand years of experience in temptation. He constantly circles and probes us and our children, searching for weaknesses which he can exploit for his advantage. If one class of temptation does not work, Satan will search for one which will.

God’s constant law makes us wiser than the enemy. With his law before us lighting our way, the snares of Satan are exposed. Spiritual discretion will remind us of the real end of those who satisfy sinful desires. Forays into the realms of sin will deprive us of the fellowship of God’s friendship. We will feel his displeasure in our hearts. God’s law, as Polaris, is a faithful guide directing us to a way which is safe.

Our spiritual struggle with the world is hard enough, but we must keep in mind that we always have our sinful flesh with us. It is in our hearts where we find the real front of our spiritual warfare. The great battle does not rage merely “out there somewhere,” but it rages within each of us. We might try to find places of refuge from the world’s godlessness, but we will never escape the fallen nature of our weak flesh while we

are on the earth. We have a ceaseless struggle on our hands. “Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry” (Col. 3:5). This is not easy. The old man of sin in us will not be driven from the battlefield easily. It is a life and death struggle involving desperate, brutal hand-to-hand combat.

We must follow the psalmist’s example and have God’s law “ever with” us. The way to do that is to have the law written on our hearts. Psalm 119:11 says, “Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee.” This will not happen by accident. It will not happen without effort. It is not some birthright which is just handed to us. We must be diligent in our study of God’s Word.

If our Lord tarries, earth’s wobbling axis will cause the Pole Star to change and lose its honored position. Polaris would no longer be a faithful guide. God’s Word, however, never changes. His law will always be with us. May God use our diligent efforts in our schools so our children can sing in Psalter #333, “In its constant light I go, wise to conquer every foe.”

And, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.

Matthew 28:20b

Because the street my family’s house is on runs north and south, the

front of our garage can be used to find north. By standing on the service walk and lining myself up with the front edge of the garage’s roof, I can face due north. Also, the garage roof has a peak at the front, and the slope of the roof nearly points to the North Star. The roof line points just a little low. When I am preparing to retire for the night, I usually go outside for a few minutes. This gives me the opportunity to check out the stars, moon and planets if the sky’s not overcast, and get a few breaths of outdoor air. Before entering the garage service door, I often pause to check for the North Star. It is always there, as faithful as ever.

Polaris faithfully inhabits its nearly immovable position in the sky. If one looks at Polaris often enough, you grow accustomed to holding your head at a certain angle to find it. With enough practice, it can become nearly automatic. In fact, it is interesting to notice the change in the North Star’s elevation above the northern horizon when on a trip.

In Burnham’s *Celestial Handbook: An Observer’s Guide to the Universe Beyond the Solar System*, Robert Burnham, Jr. writes about the North Star, “In many lands and ages, the North Star has been seen as a symbol of constancy and faithfulness. Sir James Frazer in *The Golden Bough* describes an ancient Hindu rite in which a newly married couple honored the Pole Star as the symbol of fidelity, and vowed in its light to remain faithful to each other

for ‘a hundred autumns.’”

In an even greater and more important manner, Christ has promised to be always with his church. This promise is given just after the issuing of the “Great Commission.” Significantly, Christ also just notified his disciples, “All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.” What greater encouragement could the disciples have as they faced the hardships of fulfilling their commission and of observing to do all that their Lord commanded?

Consider God’s true church! Has there ever been a time when the church has not been troubled? The seven churches addressed in Revelation 2 and 3 had difficulties. The early church struggled with heresies and those who did not lead godly lives. Ephesus held the truth, but had lost her first love which resulted in Christ threatening to come quickly to remove her candlestick. Pergamos faced persecution, experienced martyrdom and held fast to Christ’s name, yet heresy could be found in her. Thyatira was known for her works, charity and patience, but had a dreadful false prophetess, Jezebel, causing trouble. When reading the epistles of Paul, we witness a great number of discouragements which God’s people had to face.

Why should we think our churches would be any different? We have faced many struggles in our history. We began by defending the truth of sovereign grace against the heresy of Common Grace. We faced internal

struggles in the 1950s. We have had to defend and explain the truth in the face of false accusations of others. While making this defense, the members of the congregations had to be nourished from God’s Word and discipline maintained. There will always be issues to face both internal and external. That’s just the way it is for God’s church on earth. What will we do?

Christ has promised to be with us through all of this. What a comfort to have the God of Truth with us! Since he possesses all power in heaven and on earth, who would be better to have with us? Our Lord reigns and will work all things for our good, though we may not understand how. His ways are mysterious. We must keep in mind that Christ is with us, though he yet remains unseen.

We can do more for our children than to point out the North Star or teach them how to find it. Christ’s faithful presence is pictured by the North Star. Is it cloudy at night? Is it daytime so the bright sky hides Polaris from view? It is still there! The faithful star still shines! Though there are times when Polaris is unseen, it is not the only unseen thing we seek. Are we troubled by what happens in the church today? Do we worry about the church’s future for our children? Take Christ at his word. He has promised to be with us, even unto the end of the world. **P**

Online Resources for an Election Year

by Marcia Zandstra

Because 2008 is an election year it is an opportune time to focus on websites dealing with our government and the election process. It is important that students are given information about their government, especially in the times we are living in. They must be guided to observe how God is at work in everything that happens in our country and politics. Hopefully the following sites will help teachers and parents with that task.

Electoral College

<http://www.archives.gov/federal-register/electoral-college/index.html>

Details on the electoral college, its policies, procedures and history (includes Frequently Asked Questions, 2008 Electors Vote, How Electors Vote, Historical Election Results, and Election Central)

Reading level: 7+

Electoral College

<http://ap.grolier.com/article?assetid=2008890-h&templatename=3D/article/article/html>

This site, The American Presidency, has a section called “The Presidency and Electoral Politics.”

Scroll down to Electoral College to find the reason for and the function of the American electoral college system.

Reading level: 3-6

Great Debate & Beyond: The History of Televised Presidential Debates

<http://www.museum.tv/debateweb/html/>

This site includes videos and pictures of presidential debates. There is also a section of curriculum resources.

The Democracy Project

<http://pbskids.org/democracy/>

This site has Be a President for a Day, Step inside the Voting Booth, and How Does Government Affect Me?

Zoom out the Vote

<http://pbskids.org/zoom/fromyou/elections/>

On the home page of this site is the section “Election 101” which includes Why Voting Matters, How the Process Works, and Resources. Also on election day, kids nationwide can cast their votes in Zoom’s online presidential election—one day, one vote per person. For the

2004 elections, students at Heritage Christian School had a mock voting booth and “voted.” They all enjoyed this activity.

CNN Politics Election Center: Primaries and Caucuses

<http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/>

Information is available here about the current presidential race. Topics include the issues, money, delegate counts, and more. The is also a section called “Path to the Presidency,” which explains the steps a candidate must take to win the White House.

Kids Voting USA

<http://www.kidsvotingusa.org/>

This site provides instructional materials for K-12 teachers to be used throughout the school year, every year. Classroom activities include voting and elections as well as the right to vote, democracy, and citizenship. You can also sign up for an authentic voting experience.

C-Span Classroom: Free Resources for Teaching Civics and U. S. Government

<http://www.c-spanclassroom.org/>

As the presidential race progresses, C-Span Classroom features weekly video clips from the campaign trail.

Ben’s Guide to U. S. Government for Kids

<http://bensguide.gpo.gov/>

Find descriptions of the federal government here for grades K-12, divided by grade level: K-2, 3-5, 6-8, and 9-12.

eThemes Elections for Elementary Students

<http://www.emints.org/ethemes/resources/S00001234.shtml>

This web page lists many sites for younger students. They explain how primaries, caucuses, and general elections work. Find out the reasons why people vote and learn how a single vote can make a difference. There are links to eThemes Resources about the executive branch, U. S. presidents, and citizenship.

Heritage Christian School

<http://www.heritageprschool.com/>

Go to Heritage’s website, click on Subject Links, and scroll down to Government. There you will find sites about the government such as Contacting the Senate, FedStats, FirstGov for Kids, U. S. House of Representatives, and the Supreme Court.



Literature designed for the much younger child offers some limited connections to our themes of “Teens,” though some of the books reviewed may only remotely relate. Enjoy the older and newer Newbery choices as well, especially as you as a parent or teacher seek to guide your children’s literary selections using biblical discretionary guidelines.

Proverbs 2:10-12 guides us again to encourage discernment: “When wisdom entereth into thine heart, and knowledge is pleasant unto thy soul...Discretion shall preserve thee, understanding shall keep thee.”

Elisabeth and Martine Agassi have created a very contemporary series (2002-2007) prominent at the local Barnes and Noble as well as in the board books section of local libraries. Titles include:

Hands Are Not for Hitting
Teeth Are Not for Biting
Feet Are Not for Kicking
Germes Are Not for Sharing
Words Are Not for Hurting
Tails Are Not for Pulling

Written to encourage not performing specific actions, these books promote behavioral and

moralistic teaching and offer aides for a parent or caretaker. The authors offer psychological basis and further words of advice for parents at the conclusion of these simple, brightly illustrated, picture books. Discernment exercise is necessary as these secular authors certainly do not view the child as a depraved sinner in need of self-control, much less needing forgiveness through the cross of the Savior. The books remain great tools to teach etiquette and morals to toddlers, especially as a parent can “add” a few words as necessary to teach about how God commands us to act in His Word.

Waking Beauty by Leah Wilcox, an easy reading picture book recently penned as well (2008), received an honor from Barnes and Noble for best read-aloud in their children’s picture-book section. Written in poetic form using bouncy rhymes with tantalizing word-plays and brightly colored illustrations on a twist to familiar, favorite story, this modern “Sleeping Beauty” book tells a vivid tale.

Certainly it makes an exciting read-aloud as the prince ignorantly and stubbornly refuses to listen to three fairies nearly screaming at him to “Kiss!” the princess who

lay loudly snoring for one hundred years. Funny perhaps to the adult reader, imposition of parental guidance and discernment ought to be shown. The princess' responsive kiss labeled "not bad," her ensuing punch in response to his kiss, the fairies' bold, sassy language to the prince, and more subtle "contemporary" talk ought to cause any Christian parent to take a second, closer look at this modern book.

God's Wisdom for Little Girls, by Elizabeth George, shares in poetic prose the Proverbs 31 story of just what it means to apply God's Word and this specific passage to a young girl's life. Beautifully painted and illustrated by Judy Luenebrink, this hardcover book extols each virtue Solomon shares, explaining each in an understandable, poetic style for little girls. The Proverbs texts are printed on the bottom, each with a matching poem.

This book offers quality application of this special Proverbs passage for young girls of ages 6 to 12 approximately. This book offers an excellent opportunity for the godly parent to discuss such virtues necessary to being a growing, godly girl. I would strongly recommend this book simply for its opportunity to discuss with children their walk as a child of the King.

God's Wisdom for Little Boys, by Elizabeth George and her husband

Jim George, is written along the same format, encouraging through poetic prose the character-building traits directly taken from Proverbs. Again, this book's painted pictures by Luenebrink make the shared virtues spring to life. God's little boy is shown to be giving, wise, friendly, thrifty, self-controlled, and has many more characteristics too. Such opportunities to discuss such traits don't always come along often in such a planned format—great bed-time share poems!

These two books by the Georges contain Biblical quotations not always written in KJV, though some are. Also, the authors' poems include the personal form of reference to God as they use "You" and "Your" almost exclusively.

2003 Newbery Award Winner

Crispin, The Cross of Lead by Avi, 262 pages.

The story of Crispin is a journey of a teen's identity struggle, but especially poignant as it's shared during a time period of much turmoil and unrest. Crispin is a thirteen-year-old in the 1300s, Middle Ages serfdom. Crispin is always thought to be the son of poor, unlearned woman, but he must find the truth of his identity as he is really the wealthy Lord Furnival's son, owner of many serfs and much land. His journeys include following the priest's advice to desperately run as the Lord's steward John Ayliffe seeks Crispin's life. Crispin meets

Bear, a seemingly cruel juggler, along the way. More importantly, a mysterious cross of lead belonging to Crispin's mother, Asta, is the key to discovering his wealthy, powerful identity.

The reader follows Crispin along his exciting identity journey. Will Crispin ever discover that he is an heir? Where is that cross of lead? Is Bear his friend, or is he a secret agent of Ayliffe? Will he kill, or be killed by John Ayliffe?

Response:

This newer Newbery definitely is an interesting, historical tale by Avi. The literary elements clearly meet Newbery criterion of clear theme (personal identification and struggle), organized information in tale, realistic and well-planned characters, and literary stylistic components. I find Crispin a character who is very easy to identify with and to understand. Though his struggles on the forefront are very physical, the author shares Crispin's personal emotions as well. A child or young adult of the twenty-first century will likely enjoy this well-written novel.

As a Christian reader, the element of violence poses a question in consideration of this book's viability as an excellent piece of literature. An older or even more mature reader (early teens perhaps), however, will be able to appreciate the literary excellence as the plot is very active and exciting with excellent, descriptive characters. An additional ques-

tion is the validity of the serfdom era in the Catholic tradition. Though the cross of lead was a prized possession of Crispin's dear mother, as an element of Catholic faith, it isn't dealt with on an on-going basis as such throughout the novel. Clear, however, is the journey in the plot that Crispin must discover his true identity. Avi's writing is unique and very enjoyable.

1929 Newbery Award Winner

The Trumpeter of Krakow, by Eric P. Kelly, 240 pages

Set in the Middle Ages as well, this much older Newbery also offers a lively tale. During the 1400s in Europe, this mystical tale is of magic and intrigue as the Charnetski family battles to guard the Great Tarnov Crystal. The fifteen-year-old Joseph, a normal boy who loves his dog acquired from a ruthless juvenile, seeks to understand people and life as his family flees from the Ukraine to the prosperous Polish city of Krakow. Here he meets Elzbietka, a quickly gained close friend, and her chemist uncle Kreutz. Joseph's father makes a living by playing trumpet, especially the Heynal (tune of Mary) upon each hour, guarding the city at the highest tower of the church of Mary in the city of Krakow. This Heynal song remains incomplete on a broken noted ending, a tradition started when ruffian Tartan invaders killed the then-trumpeter.

Joseph and his family, along with Elzbietka and scholar friend Jan Kanty, must guard the treasure of Poland, its great crystal, as Turkish ruffian Peter and his band seek to steal it. Mr. Charnetski, his father, eagerly and anxiously seeks to get it to Poland's King.

As the story unfolds, it is very mysterious as the reader must discover answers to many questions. Is Elzbietka's uncle a man of integrity or an evil chemist, seeking to steal or even destroy the crystal? A German scholar named Tring eagerly meets the Charnetskis. How can he help them save the crystal? Or will bold Tring even help them? Will the main character, Joseph, turn to greed, or will he assist his father's mission? More importantly, will Joseph and his father continue to guard Poland's honor as the trumpet sounds the Heynal? Just what will happen to the great crystal?

Response

This older Newbery winner will excite any good reader and easily succeeds in completion of New-

bery criterion. The exciting, almost scary plot, along with varying, descriptive characters, and a clear discovery theme offers an action-packed, well-written tale. Joseph is a character of old with whom older children or teens of today will relate as he embarks on the mission of discovery and identity.

Important issues remain, however, for the discerning reader as the tale is saturated with Middle Ages magic, charms, and even mysticism. The detailed story shares a journey of a family who guards a magical stone. Child readers, especially younger children, need to understand first and foremost that God is their Savior and source of all power; magic has no place in His strength and glory. Certainly this discussion ought to be sought as a student or child reader reads this well-written, older piece of children's literature. Readers ought to be perhaps age twelve or older because of these specific issues. **P**

101 Hymn Stories
101 More Hymn Stories
Hallelujah: What a Savior!
Kenneth W. Osbeck
Kregel Publications

These three books contain some real-life stories about hymns, their authors, and how they came to be composed. Anyone who loves to sing and who learned many hymns in his youth will find these brief stories fascinating. Most, if not all, are stories about hymns that are in the songbooks that have been in our homes from our youth. As you read about the various composers and the circumstances under which they wrote, you may find yourself singing these songs with a new measure of understanding and applying them to your own pathway of life. Perhaps the same thing could be done with the Psalter. For example, in my Bible the heading of Psalm 3 reads: “A psalm of David, when he fled from Absalom his son.” I do not know if it is possible to ascertain the circumstances under which each psalm was written and put it together with words and music from the Psalter, but if so, that would be similar to what Ken Osbeck has done with hymns—except that such

a book would be richer, because the Psalms (but not the Psalter) are inspired.

The first two books listed above contain hymns on a variety of subjects; the last one has twenty-five hymns celebrating Christ as redeemer. In general this last book is more devotional; it suggests the reader revisit the events of Passion Week as recorded in all four gospels until our souls “vibrate with gratitude and joyous anticipation.”

Kenneth Osbeck (M.A., University of Michigan) knows his subject well. He has studied, taught, directed, and written about music all of his adult life.

Osbeck has a certain bias against singing the Psalms, referring to the words as crude and unpoetic. An example he cites is Psalm 1:

*The man is blest who hath not lent
To wicked men his ear,
Nor led his life as sinners do,
Nor sat in scorner's chair.*

That isn't so much different from our own “That man is blest” and I don't think of that as crude and unpoetic. I think, however, that the people long ago were limited in their means of learning to sing. A leader had to sing the songs line

by line, while the congregation followed. That made the singing rather tedious.

Isaac Watts was one of the first to try to remedy the poor quality of the singing by writing his own hymns; he wrote the well-known “When I Survey” as well as new arrangements of the Psalms. One such arrangement was “O God Our Help in Ages Past.” His hymns, of course, were based on his own experiences and his own interpretation of Scripture.

I do not know how many of these stories are authentic. Osbeck himself states that “it is not possible to determine the authorship of all of the material of these books.” It so happens that I heard on the car radio one day a story about how George Beverly Shea came to write “I’d Rather Have Jesus.” When I came home I checked the story in 101 More Hymn Stories and found a slightly different version.

Some of these hymn writers were surprising to me. Francis of Assisi wrote “All Creatures of Our God and King.” It is a hymn of praise and I always enjoyed singing it, but the second verse begins, “Dear Mother Earth...” Fannie Crosby, who wrote “Nearer My God to Thee,” was a Unitarian. She was also active on the stage. Augustus Toplady, a strong Calvinist who wrote “Rock of Ages,” engaged in bitter controversy with the Wesleys. Out of this came the second verse:

“Thou must save and Thou alone.”

In the Christian school, we sang out of the Christian Hymnal. One of the songs we often sang was “I gave my life for thee; what hast thou done for me?” Commenting from the pulpit on the concept of doing something for Jesus, my father used to say, “Shall we take our little tin cups and empty them into the overflowing fountain?” If we are to “sing His praises with understanding,” we ought to choose the words we sing with care.

Having read these books, I am inclined to say, “And now you know the rest of the story.” Be that as it may, I hope that you may be encouraged to do more of that old-fashioned singing around the piano, singing His praises with understanding.

Asylum for the Insane: A History of the Kalamazoo State Hospital by William A. Decker, MD. Traverse City, MI: Arbutus Press.

During the nineteenth century, mental illness was referred to as insanity, and those who were affected with it were known as insane, regardless of their specific conditions. As the causes of mental illness began to be recognized, the terminology and treatment changed. Previously they had been lumped together into one category and were variously referred to as imbeciles, morons, demon-possessed, and sun-

dry other derogatory names.

The way they were treated was in harmony with their designation, which was part of our heritage from Europe. No doubt you are familiar with the way patients were regarded and treated at the infamous Bethlehem institution in London, which came to be known as “Bedlam.” It was regarded as a zoo, and people could come to visit it as such.

It was due in part to the influence of Dorothea Dix that the treatment of the mentally ill in our country began to change.

The first land purchase for the Kalamazoo State Hospital was in 1853. The hospital is still in existence today, but it is much smaller than the original one.

Decker’s book takes the reader through the changes in attitude and treatment over more than a century. It contains many illustrations. One interesting chapter is about what were considered to be possible causes of mental illness. These ranged from demon possession to certain occupations, particularly farming. Atmospheric conditions were thought to be a factor in epilepsy, which was also considered insanity.

Over the years several of the buildings were sold to Western Michigan University and subsequently demolished for student parking. Today the hospital is known as the Kalamazoo Regional Hospital.

You don’t have to read this book page by page in order to enjoy it and learn from it. There are a lot of statistics, tables, and such, but just to see how everything has changed in a hundred years—and then to realize how much we don’t know about the human mind that God created, is worth pondering. “Marvelous are thy works; and that my soul knoweth right well” (Ps. 139:14).

Fire by Night by Lynn Austin.
Bethany House, 2003.

Lynn Austin is a fairly prolific author who, although new to me, has written several series of novels, some of which have won Christy awards. Her books are available at the Reformed Book Outlet [in Hudsonville, Michigan]. I read one of each series. *Fire by Night*, from the Civil War series, is not the first one in that series, but you don’t have to read them in order.

The Civil War brought much suffering, as war always does, but there was little to alleviate the physical suffering. This book opens with an account of the Battle of Bull Run at the beginning of the war. No doubt you recall the story: many from Washington turned out in their carriages, with their picnic baskets, to see the show, expecting to see the Union army defeat the Confederates and end the war in one fell swoop. Julia Hoffman, a young society girl from Philadelphia, was one of those

who came. She was accompanied by her uncle, a congressman, and a young preacher, Nathaniel Greene, whom she wanted to impress.

The battle turned into a rout of the Union army, and the wounded and dying were falling right alongside the carriage. Greene wanted to stay and help, but panic-stricken Julia insisted on fleeing. For this she earned the contempt of Greene.

Nothing Julia did after that could win his favor: no amount of charitable works, no fund-raising for the causes Greene espoused, nothing that was open to a woman in the mid-1800s. Julia decided to become an army nurse, something that for a young unmarried woman in the mid-1800s was frowned upon, especially by her own family. After much cajoling, she obtained permission from her father to see Miss Dorothea Dix, who was actively engaged in helping various women's causes. Miss Dix assured her that she would not qualify as a nurse, being too young and unmarried, but she dropped a hint about a doctor who might train her.

The doctor indeed accepted her, but to work in the laundry of his small hospital, not to train her, and only because she lied about being unmarried. She outwitted him, however, hired someone off the street to do the laundry, and in a weak moment, persuaded the doctor to teach her nursing skills.

Her many interesting and some-

times gruesome experiences are woven into the history with which we are familiar.

There is another unusual thread which is woven into the story, that of a girl who disguises herself as a boy, enlists in the army, and gets away with it until she is wounded. It could have been a separate novel.

All in all, Austin tells a good tale, and the story has a Christian thread in it. I have rarely found a Christian novelist who gives full honor to the sovereignty of God, even over our wills.

There is yet another thought that runs through this book. It is that Julia's work as a nurse was more important, more worthy of esteem, than had she chosen to be a wife and mother. In a sense this was true of Julia, because she was a society girl and mainly a decoration. She did not even dress herself or brush her own hair.

However, this theme recurs in another series, one about the home front during the second world war, when many women went to work in defense factories, like "Rosie the Riveter." That book has a wife and mother that secretly worked in a shipbuilding plant, where she was much more appreciated.

The third series I sampled was woven around the era of kings Ahaz and Hezekiah and the prophet Isaiah. Personally I do not care about novels based on the Bible, because they tend to take liberties with the

Bible stories, particularly when you approach it as we do, from the point of view of the covenant.

With these reservations, I think you can enjoy Lynn Austin as a novelist.



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