



# SWORD AND SHIELD

A REFORMED MONTHLY MAGAZINE

*Happy art thou, O Israel: who is like unto thee,  
O people saved by the LORD, the shield of thy help,  
and who is the sword of thy excellency!  
and thine enemies shall be found liars unto thee;  
and thou shalt tread upon their high places.*

Deuteronomy 33:29

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# CONTENTS

---

3

## MEDITATION

Rev. Nathan J. Langerak

7

## EDITORIAL

CANONS 5.7:  
RENEWED TO REPENTANCE

Rev. Andrew W. Lanning

15

## FROM THE EDITOR

Rev. Andrew W. Lanning

15

## UNDERSTANDING THE TIMES

UNFORGIVEN (3):  
UNLESS ONE BECOMES AN ADULT...

Rev. Nathan J. Langerak

23

## CONTRIBUTION

THE NECESSARY REFORMATION  
IN SINGAPORE

Aaron Lim

27

## LETTER

Jacob Moore

28

## BOOK REVIEW

*IS ATHEISM DEAD?*

Rev. Andrew W. Lanning

32

## FINALLY, BRETHERN, FAREWELL!

Rev. Nathan J. Langerak



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*And they that passed by reviled him, wagging their heads, and saying,  
Thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest it in three days, save thyself.  
If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross. — Matthew 27:39–40*

All his life Jesus Christ was the object of the scorn of men. Even in the womb, there was no room for him in the inn. Men tried to snuff out his life many times. Many times they laid traps to catch him in his words, hoping to find some occasion against him that they might kill him. After he had performed some notable miracle, men met secretly to discuss how to destroy him. Even at the time of the passover, when he had come to Jerusalem, they were minded to assassinate him secretly.

But his hour was not yet.

And now it is that hour and the power of darkness, and Christ is delivered over to their hatred.

Isaiah saw him long before hanging on Calvary's cross, and Isaiah spoke of him: "He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not" (Isa. 53:3).

Many years before Isaiah, David had taught Israel to sing of his Seed in his anguish: "I am a worm, and no man; a reproach of men, and despised of the people. All they that see me laugh me to scorn: they shoot out the lip, they shake the head" (Ps. 22:6–7).

Now at Golgotha these words come true as the passersby revile the dying Christ.

With a terrible swiftness the events of his crucifixion unfold. That very swiftness is evidence of the hatred that lay smoldering deep within men's breasts against Christ. And when it becomes evident that he is in their power, their hatred breaks forth in a terrible fury motivated by the long-standing enmity of the powers of darkness. All the forces of the demonic kingdom, of the false church and the world, of hardened unbelief and visceral enmity, break out against Christ. They fall on him to tear him to pieces and to heap indignity and cruelty upon him and to pour out venom and malice against him.

The mob in the garden swiftly takes Jesus and binds him. There are no charges. His enemies will come up with some when the time comes. A sham trial is hastily organized. False witnesses are sought, but none can agree about what makes Jesus worthy of death. He is placed under oath, and when he confesses the truth, then with mock indignation the evil consistory condemns him. When Jesus stands before Pilate, then the leaders of the false church go among the people to move them to ask for Barabbas. With blood-curdling screams, over and over

again, they demand Jesus' crucifixion and call down his blood on their heads and on the heads of their children. Trying to escape his responsibility, Pontius Pilate delivers Jesus to Herod, and that reprobate passes Jesus off to Pilate's soldiers for a moment of levity. Having given sentence against Jesus, the legionaries of Pilate array Jesus in shabby purple, smite him with a reed scepter, crown him with thorns, and mockingly bow before the king. The morning now come, they lay Jesus' cross on his lacerated back and lead him out to be crucified. They strip him of his clothes, nail him to his cross, place the superscription "The King of the Jews" over his head, set his cross upright upon Golgotha, and sit down to play a game of dice for his vesture.

Now those passing by add to the misery of the dying Christ.

No doubt the devil is behind the words of these passersby. Chief among the princes of this world who crucify the Lord of glory is the devil himself. He and all his demons were opponents of Christ all his ministry long. They are now active in the high priest's chambers, at Gabbatha, at the palace of Herod, and at Golgotha. We can almost hear their cackling at the cross. They have crucified the Lord of glory! Having attempted to snuff out his life from the first mention of his name in the garden of Eden, when they heard the dreadful promise of the Seed of the woman and of the crushing of their own leader's head, now they have crucified him before the world.

And they are among the passersby. Who are the passersby? Residents of Jerusalem? Perhaps some are from Galilee. No doubt many are pilgrims from the Dispersion who have gathered to keep the passover. Maybe some are villagers from the surrounding countryside, hastening on some errand at this busy and financially profitable time of year. Others are gawkers gathered by the spreading news of the crucifixion of Jesus. For one reason or another, whether purposefully gathering at the cross or going about the errands of their day, they pass by the terrible scene at Golgotha.

But they pass by.

Where are they going? What are they doing this Friday morning? It does not matter. There at Golgotha they and their lives and their spiritual states are all summarized in the description that they pass by.

They go about their day, cast a hurried glance at the

dying Christ, take note of the commotion of the thieves and the smug shouts of the Jewish leaders. They quickly take in the superscription that has been nailed over his head; a smirk of comprehension comes across the faces of some, and a self-righteous surge of outrage arises in the breasts of others. They see the nails and the exhausted figure of Jesus Christ, lacerated, bloody, and bruised from his encounters with Caiaphas, Herod, and Pilate. Taking it all in, hurriedly they pass by.

To pass by such a scene is in itself the expression of the coldness of their superficial and carnal natures. What thinking person could pass by three of his countrymen, writhing in their agony and bleeding in their suffering, and not even stop? Jeremiah wept with this bitter lamentation: “Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by? behold, and see if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow, which is done unto me, wherewith the LORD hath afflicted me in the day of his fierce anger” (Lam. 1:12).

They pass on. It is nothing to them. The cares of the world and the thoughts of the day consume their carnal minds.

Thousands of them. Do they know him? Have they not just hailed him as the Son of David? Did they not hear his gracious words? Did they not see his mighty works? Did they not take note of the authority with which he spoke? It makes no difference. He has now been condemned by the church and before the world. Guilty of some crime, as described by their leaders and as confirmed by the court of Pilate.

Casually they go on with their lives and pass by the cross of the one who had taught them and who, as the testimony of his doctrine, had healed them, recovered sight to the blind, made lame men to walk, cleansed lepers, and raised dead men to life again.

So indifferent, so superficial, so carnal.

He has been condemned; that is all that matters. The church has said that he is guilty. Blind followers of blind leaders, they pass on with their day and with their lives.

But it is worse, for, not even stopping with their day to consider what is happening, they revile him: “Ha, ha, thou that destroyest the temple and buildest it, save yourself and come down from the cross!” Foul wisdom of man: “Come down from the cross!” “If thou be the Son of God”: foul blasphemy of the dying Christ by these superficial, carnal, unthinking, and uncritical passersby!

Still worse is their wicked perversion of his words. Christ had spoken similar words: “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” But they say, “Thou that destroyest the temple!”

There is a vicious sarcasm in these words.

There is a lie in these words. Jesus never said what they say that he said. Oh yes, he said that he would build the temple in three days, but for the rest they pervert his

words. With their perversion they with their leaders seek to justify their own unbelief and carnality.

He made his declaration about the temple after he had first cleansed the earthly temple. He had driven out all of the profane buyers and sellers, along with their bleating sheep, lowing cattle, and cooing doves. He had overturned tables and scattered the moneychangers, who had made God’s house of prayer a den of thieves. Incensed, the wicked leaders had demanded a sign of his authority to cleanse the temple. The Lord gave them the sign of his authority as the Son in God’s house: “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (John 2:19).

He accused them of being destroyers of God’s house. It was their appointed place. They were the destroyers. He was the builder. In their hatred of him, they perverted his words: “He said he would destroy the temple and build it in three days!”

Thus twisted, these words had been brought against Jesus by false witnesses at his trial. In that perverted form these words were passed around, repeated, and picked up by the crowd that gathered at his trial. Now that same lie is repeated by those who pass by, who throw these words in his face: “Ha, ha, thou that destroyest the temple and buildest it in three days.”

But they were the destroyers of the temple. The words of Christ that they had perverted to justify their crucifixion of him and to excuse their indifference and their blind following of their blind leaders were a prophecy, a divine word of God against them and a sure word of what God would do: “If you destroy this temple—and you certainly will destroy this temple—I will raise it up!”

A word against them, a word against man, a word against man all history long. Man is a destroyer in God’s temple. For the temple of God is simply the house that God builds to be the dwelling place of God and man. The temple is the covenant of God, a covenant of fellowship and friendship of God with man. In the temple one is with God. In the temple one is known of God and knows God, is loved by God and loves God. To be in the temple is to be a friend and servant of God; to be a priest unto God, consecrated to his glory; and to be a willing servant of the most high God. To be in the temple is to be blessed by Jehovah God in all things; to enter into the temple is to have communion with God, to dwell with him, to walk with him, and to talk with him.

That is what Adam destroyed in Eden. The garden had been his temple.

That temple God gave in a figure in the tabernacle. At Shiloh Israel destroyed it too.

That old temple of Solomon that stood in the holy city of David—Israel did almost nothing else than to destroy in that temple. The Israelites filled it with their loveless and formal worship of God, filled it with their

idols, and even filled it with the blood of martyred saints. By their wretched unbelief and hardened wickedness, they brought about the destruction of that temple by the Babylonians.

God's house was rebuilt, and that one too the Jews destroyed.

For forty-six years Herod had been building the temple that then stood in Jerusalem, and that one too the Jews would destroy by their wicked rebellion against their rulers.

But all of those houses were but figures and shadows of the real temple of God, his covenant.

This temple man always destroys because in Adam all men are by nature covenant-breakers, truce-breakers, enemies of God, who stand in implacable hatred of God, mind the things of sin and of death, and are alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them because of the blindness of their hearts. All men by nature willingly follow after the devil, the prince of darkness, the ultimate desecrator of God's house; and, following Satan, man is always destroying God's house, violating God's covenant, unwilling and unable to dwell with God.

And the Lord had accused the Jews of such. Destroy this house! That is what you always do and all that you can do. I will not destroy this house. You destroy this house. I will rebuild it!

They also lied against the truth because when Christ had said, "Destroy this house," he was not talking about the earthly temple. Every temple and tabernacle that had been before was not only a shadow of God's covenant but was also a shadow of Christ, Christ whom God gives as a covenant for the people. Those houses were but shadows of his body. That God—who came down to dwell in the temple and took up his abode in the temple and in that temple drew his people unto himself—would come down in the flesh of Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ is the real and abiding temple of God. In him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily. The essence of the temple, God with man, was realized in the wonder of grace in the incarnation. Jesus Christ is Immanuel, God with us, the Son of God come in the likeness of sinful flesh. He is God and man united forever inseparably, unchangeably, without mixture or confusion of the natures, two natures—God and man—united together in the one person of the Son of God.

And they sought to destroy him. And man, the sin of man, the guilt and sin, the hatred and enmity, the covenant-breaking and all the violating of the law of God that his people did—that was the cause of Jesus' destruction. It was not for his own sin that he was destroyed; it was not for his own guilt; it was for yours and for mine that he was destroyed.

And wonder of wonders, in their act of destroying the temple, God was laying the foundation for its everlasting existence. There on that accursed tree of the cross, God was laying the foundation stone of that temple, rejected indeed of men but elect and precious. They were destroying the temple of his flesh, and he was laying the foundation for a new and everlasting house of God. There at the cross he will lay such a foundation of righteousness—fulfill all obedience and pay for every sin—that he will have the right to perfect that temple, such that it can never be destroyed since his righteousness can never be destroyed.

Shortly, Christ will be raised from the dead; he will ascend up into heaven; he will receive of God his Father the promise of the Holy Spirit; he will return in that Spirit to fill his people, to form and to fashion them as living stones built upon him, the chief cornerstone; and he will continue to raise that temple all history long, until his church as the new Jerusalem will descend out of heaven as a bride adorned for her husband.

Yes, he will raise it up!

But to this all, the leaders, in whose ears these very things had been spoken, were blinded by their hatred of him. Their hearts had been hardened beyond description, and their ears were so fat and their eyes so blind that they could not see, hear, or understand any of this.

And they twisted his words to lie against the truth.

And the passersby accept this judgment of their rulers, and the passersby cast it in Jesus' teeth to explain away the scene from which they will shortly pass away. "Ha, thou that destroyest the temple and buildest it in three days! Save yourself. Come down from the cross."

Come down, if you are the Son of God! As they walk on, they dismiss him.

The devil is in those words too! He is the poison in their tongues.

I say that because the crowd repeats the devil's challenge to Jesus Christ when the devil tempted Jesus on the pinnacle of the temple at the very beginning of his ministry: "If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down: for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee: and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone" (Matt. 4:6).

Devilish challenge.

Those words were spoken by the tempter as he was fully conscious of who Jesus was. The words were a bold challenge for Jesus to reveal himself as the Son of God; to show his eternal power and his Godhead by choosing the way of disobedience to his Father, by sinfully tempting the Lord his God; a challenge to forsake the way of the cross and to choose the way of disobedience, even of personal glory.

And no doubt that venomous barb is thrown at Christ by Satan in the mouths of those who pass by to taunt

Christ, to tempt him to forsake the way of the cross, to leave that terrible way of suffering that is about to descend on him in the darkness, and to show his power before all. A devilish dagger thrust deep into the heart of the savior: "If thou be the Son of God! Come down!"

But you cannot say that that is the purpose of the passersby. Theirs is a dismissal of the dying Christ. When they say, "If thou be the Son of God," they mean that he is not the Son of God. The cross is their irrefutable proof that he is not the Son of God. He is not the Son of God, and he is not the builder of the temple, for he is on a cross, accursed of God and men!

The passersby do not challenge Jesus to reveal his power, but they declare that he has none at all. Their purpose is not to provoke Jesus to come down from the cross but to declare that he could not if he wanted to. He does not come down from the cross because he cannot. He cannot come down because he is not the Son of God.

Blind in their hatred and unbelief to the fact that they are destroying the temple and declaring Jesus to be the one who destroys the temple, being willingly ignorant of the fact that he is even now building the temple, they cannot conceive of another reason, a deeper wisdom, a divine logic for the Son of God to cling to the cross.

Terrible darkness of sin!

Terrible unbelief in those who pass by the bloody tree of the Son of God.

For if you confess the truth of the matter, their argument falls to pieces.

Confess that we are the destroyers of God's temple and that whosoever destroys in God's temple, him will God destroy.

Confess that we are destroyers of God's temple by our sins; by our depravity; by all our unfaithfulness; and by all our hatred, wickedness, and vile deeds.

Confess that we deserve to be destroyed.

Confess that when Christ was crucified in the church by false teachers, I passed by to continue on with my life, perhaps even adding my epithet to those already flung by others.

Confess that, and you will see why the Son of God clung to the bloody cross.

Confess that the temple of God could never be built except upon the foundation of the satisfaction of the justice of God against our sins.

Confess that the temple of God must have an unshakable foundation, a foundation that cannot be laid except by the satisfaction of the justice of God.

Confess that you and I cannot make such a sacrifice! You and I, the blood of the whole world, the sacrifices of the whole host of angels and of all the beasts of the world—if the whole world were consumed for a sacrifice,

it could not build God's temple, for it cannot satisfy his justice.

Still more, confess that by nature we are so wicked and perverse that we would never care to bring such a sacrifice to God. Let God perish, if only we can have our sins.

And still more, let us say that we were willing. Oh, to give something, anything, the most precious thing to God in vain attempts to satisfy his justice and to deliver our souls from everlasting destruction—then we would be swallowed up in the fire of the wrath of God that we would have to suffer forever and yet never make satisfaction for sin.

That is why Jesus stayed nailed to that cursed tree. That is why when they twisted his words and sarcastically cast them in his teeth; why when the devil and all the forces of darkness challenged Jesus to come down, come down, from the cross; why when all the multitudes of passersby charged Jesus to excuse themselves and dismissed him to justify their unbelief, then the Son of God clung, clung to the cross as the terrible storm of the wrath of God gathered to break out with such force as to bring him down into the very suffering of hell.

Because as the Son of God, God in the flesh, God and man in perfect union in one person, God was paying God what God was owed. None but the Son of God could bring a sacrifice so pleasing to God as to make satisfaction for sin. None but the Son of God could enter death, the very death of hell, and come out again. None but the Son of God has blood so precious that every drop of it and all the suffering associated with it touched the heart of God so that at the end of it, God said, "It is enough," and the Son of God said, "It is finished!"

There was another power, the power that conquers all, at work at the cross: the infinite, eternal, and unfathomable love of God for his people; the love of the savior for his Father; and the love of the savior for his people, who without his atoning death must perish in their misery as destroyers of God's temple.

Oh, hallelujah, Jesus did not come down!

And when you understand that...if you understand that...then you will stop at Calvary.

Men still pass him by. Wherever there is the preaching of the cross of Jesus and he is set forth and crucified before the eyes of men, there men pass him by. Perhaps they too twist his words and join in a sarcastic reviling of the Christ. Whenever he is crucified by unbelieving men in a doctrinal controversy, then men pass him by, not thinking him worthy of losing their own lives. Many pass into church—they pass in at baptisms and at confessions of faith—and they pass on unmoved and unrepentant. Many stay in the church and from Sunday to Sunday pass Jesus by with every Monday, hastening to get on with



their lives. Others pass him by and pass out of the church to join the false church or to run with the world.

When men pass Jesus by—when they pass on unmoved and unchanged, having seen the dying Christ crucified among them—it is because he as the decreeing God had passed them by with the grace of election and appointed them to their destruction as reprobates.

But if you stop when Calvary comes to you, Jesus did not pass you by! He chose you so that you would not pass him by but that you would stop: that you would stop and consider for what reason the Son of God did not come down from the cross; that you would stop and believe; and, believing, that you would fall down and worship. Unless he did not pass us by with the grace of election, we would pass him by too.

Having chosen you, then when the cross comes to you, he arrests you and changes your heart; and then you

fall down at the foot of Calvary, and you confess all your sins before him; and you pray ever so fervently,

Lord, thou Son of God, do not come down. Only thy blood can save me; only thy blood can atone for my sin; only thy blood is so precious that God will no more remember my sin; only thy blood is so valuable that for the sake of it I will pass on into heaven; only thy blood can accomplish perfect righteousness, because of which the temple is built; only thy blood can be the reason that I am made a living stone in that temple! O Lord, Son of God, do not come down. Save not thyself, but save me from all my sins.

And you will sing and shout and rejoice in this: that the Son of God did not come down.

—NJL

## EDITORIAL

# CANONS 5.7: RENEWED TO REPENTANCE

With this editorial I return to an explanation of some of the articles of the Canons of Dordt that have been used by the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) in their attack on the doctrine of the Reformed Protestant Churches (RPC) and in their defense of the doctrine of the PRC. The Protestant Reformed use of these articles shows how far these churches have departed from the actual doctrine of the Canons. My prayer is that God will use the explanations of these articles to establish the RPC upon the old paths of the Reformed faith.

In two past articles I considered Canons 3–4.17.<sup>1</sup> This time I turn to an explanation of Canons 5.7.

### *Translation*

Here is the English translation of Canons 5.7 that the Reformed Protestant Churches use:

For, in the first place, in these falls He preserves in them the incorruptible seed of regeneration from perishing, or being totally lost; and again,

by His Word and Spirit, certainly and effectually renews them to repentance, to a sincere and godly sorrow for their sins, that they may seek and obtain remission in the blood of the Mediator, may again experience the favor of a reconciled God, through faith adore His mercies, and henceforward more diligently work out their own salvation with fear and trembling. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 174)

The English translation of Canons 5.7 that the Reformed Protestant Churches use is not accurate. Our inaccurate translation introduces at least one gross error, teaching that God is reconciled to us: “the favor of a reconciled God.” The truth is that God did not need to be reconciled to his people. He was never alienated from his elect but has loved us from eternity to eternity the same with a love that can never break. He was not alienated from us, but we were alienated from him. He did not have to be reconciled to us, but we had to be reconciled to him. He is not a reconciled God, but we are a reconciled people.

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Lanning, “Canons 3–4.17: ‘Grace is Conferred by Means of Admonitions,’” *Sword and Shield* 3, no. 4 (September 2022): 8–18; “More on Canons 3–4.17: ‘Grace is Conferred by Means of Admonitions,’” *Sword and Shield* 3, no. 5 (October 2022): 8–16.

Our inaccurate translation also presents what is at best an ambiguous relationship among repentance, sorrow for sin, faith, forgiveness, and remission of sins.

Here is the accurate translation of the article, as given by Homer Hoeksema in *The Voice of Our Fathers*:

For in the first place, in these falls he preserves in them this his own immortal seed, out of which they are regenerated, lest it should perish or be cast out. And again, through his Word and Spirit he certainly and effectually renews them to repentance, in order that they should sincerely sorrow after God over the sins committed, that they should through faith, with a contrite heart, desire and obtain forgiveness in the blood of the mediator, that they should again feel God's favor, having been reconciled, that they should through faith adore his mercies, and that henceforth they should more diligently work out their own salvation with fear and trembling.<sup>2</sup>

This article, more than any other, convinces me that the Reformed Protestant Churches need a more accurate English translation of the Canons of Dordt and perhaps of all our Reformed confessions. The erroneous translation of Canons 5.7 has been used by the Protestant Reformed Churches to support their contention that repentance is a vital activity of man that precedes God's contingent activity of forgiving man's sins. An accurate translation of the article would expose the Protestant Reformed error as being contrary to the confessions. An accurate translation of the confessions would not only preserve sound doctrine in our midst, but it also would be a simple matter of honesty in our confessions. The members of the RPC all confess their agreement with the doctrine of the creeds, and the officebearers of the RPC all take a vow before the Lord that they "heartily believe and are persuaded that all the articles and points of doctrine contained in [the three forms of unity] do fully agree with the Word of God" (Formula of Subscription, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 326). An accurate translation of the confessions is vital in order for members and officebearers alike to know what they are vowing and to be honest in their confessions.

### *The Misrepresentation*

The popular misrepresentation of Canons 5.7 is that man's repentance is a prerequisite and condition for God's forgiveness of man's sin. The article is hijacked and made to

teach that God gives men repentance ("effectually renews them to repentance") in order that they may then seek and find forgiveness of their sins ("that they may seek and obtain remission in the blood of the Mediator").

This view of Canons 5.7 is taught by Professor Engelsma and the Protestant Reformed Churches. Professor Engelsma's doctrine is that man's activity of repenting precedes God's activity of forgiving man's sin, and God's activity of forgiving man's sin follows man's activity of repenting, so that God's forgiving waits upon man's repenting. Although Professor Engelsma has studiously avoided calling repentance a *prerequisite* or a *condition*, his doctrine is exactly that of prerequisite repentance for conditional forgiveness. Here is his doctrine of repentance in his own words from his public "family letters" over the past year:

The believer must hear God say, "I pardon your iniquity." Without forgiveness, daily, he cannot *live*. To know this saving word and act of God experientially, the believer must repent, and God calls for, and works, this necessary repentance.<sup>3</sup>

And in the same letter, referring to Psalm 51: "For the psalmist puts confession of sin and repentance 'before' forgiveness."

And: "The necessity of repentance in order to receive from God the forgiveness of sins." And: "The necessity of repentance for the reception of pardon." And: "The truth of the necessity of repentance for forgiveness." And: "The order of this saving work of God is repentance/remission." And: "The sinner's confession precedes God's forgiveness." And: "Repentance in this important respect precedes forgiveness." And: "God requires repentance of the sinner for forgiveness." And: "The necessity of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." And: "Faith neither knows Jesus as one's Savior nor trusts in Him for salvation unless one is burdened by the guilt of sin, which burden is that of repentance."<sup>4</sup>

Although Professor Engelsma has studiously avoided calling man's repentance a *prerequisite* or a *condition*, he has openly called man's repentance the *means* by which man is forgiven. This is a significant term because the only means of forgiveness that the Reformed faith knows is faith: justification by faith alone. Professor Engelsma's doctrine of forgiveness is not justification by faith alone but justification by repentance.

The PRC teach that repentance is the (God-given and God-worked) means unto the remission of

2 Homer C. Hoeksema, *The Voice of Our Fathers: An Exposition of the Canons of Dordrecht*, 2nd ed. (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2013), 442.

3 David J. Engelsma, "The Reformed Protestant Churches (RPC): Sin Freely!," June 21, 2022. The emphasis is Engelsma's.

4 David J. Engelsma, "The RP Church: Failing to Hold the Traditions," *Sword and Shield* 3, no. 1 (June 2022): 9–12.



sins. As means, repentance precedes remission of sins; as end, remission of sins follows repentance.<sup>5</sup>

Professor Engelsma has tried to distance his conditional theology from the appearance of conditional theology by asserting that God works the sinner's repentance. This does not rescue the professor's theology, for every conditional theologian in history has paid lip service to God's work, as Professor Engelsma knows full well. The theologians of Rome, Arminianism, and the federal vision all wear out their pens and their keyboards writing, "Grace, grace, grace." The issue is not whether God gives repentance to his people. The issue is whether God's gift of forgiveness must wait upon his people's repentance, regardless of where that repentance comes from. On that issue Professor Engelsma is very clear:

The PRC teach that repentance is the (God-given and God-worked) means unto the remission of sins. As means, repentance precedes remission of sins; as end, remission of sins follows repentance.

Here is the professor's doctrine: justification by means of repentance, not justification by means of faith alone.

Professor Engelsma wrongly appeals to Canons 5.7 to establish his position. I quote here a lengthy section from one of Professor Engelsma's public "family letters" that has not previously been published in *Sword and Shield*, although the July 2022 editorial did refer to portions of this letter.<sup>6</sup> His letter is entitled "Letter to My Family *in re* the RPC: the Heresy on the 'Right'" and is dated May 23, 2022. In the section quoted here, Professor Engelsma tries to ground his doctrine in Canons 5.7.

Forgiveness is what we ask for daily in the model prayer, "Forgive us our debts," etc.

By forgiveness is not meant eternal election, or the redemption of the cross. By forgiveness, I refer to the verdict of God, brought home to the penitent believer by means of faith, in His declaration of pardon in the consciousness of the believer, as is the reference of the model prayer and as is the reference of Canons, 5.7.

Canons, 5.7 clearly identifies forgiveness, its reality and its necessity: "by His Word and Spirit, [God]...renews them to repentance, to a sincere and godly sorrow for their sins, that they may seek and obtain remission in the blood of the Mediator, may again experience the favor of a reconciled God, through faith adore his mercies," etc. Repentance is the way in which God remits

sins. It precedes forgiveness. To use the deliberately misleading language of Andy Lanning, Canons, 5.7 teaches an activity of the believing sinner (repenting) that precedes a saving work of God (remitting sin). Without a sincere and godly sorrow for sins, there can be no experience of reconciliation with an offended God.

For confessing this truth of Canons, 5.7, the PRC are condemned by Andy Lanning and the "Wheat RPC" as the whore of Babylon, and as chaff for the burning. At the very least, the PRC are in good company: the Canons themselves and the host of Reformed Christians who have confessed Canons, 5.7 down the ages.

The semi-official doctrine of the RPC is now that our repenting does not precede our being forgiven, regardless of Luke 18 and regardless of Canons, 5.7. This is to deny repentance and its necessity altogether. This leads to the appalling admonition from the pulpit, "do not repent."

What!

Are we now to believe, as the soundest and most full development of the Reformed faith, that God forgives us before we repent, that is, whether we repent or refuse to repent? Do the RPC really oppose, not only the PRC, but also the Christian religion, that teaches that God's way of forgiving is His bringing His elect child to repentance? If so, why does a consistory work to bring an excommunicated sinner to repentance before it forgives him in the name of Christ and restores him to the fellowship of the congregation? If so, how do the RPC in good conscience subscribe to Article 7 of the 5<sup>th</sup> head of doctrine of the Canons of Dordt? And if this is the case, namely, that repentance is not necessary for forgiveness, parents in the RPC may no longer require repentance of an erring child before they forgive him and restore him to their fellowship.

The members of the RPC must wake up spiritually! God requires repentance before He forgives. And, therefore, He works it in us before He forgives. To oppose this truth is to reject all the creeds and much of the Bible, as I have demonstrated. There is no excuse for denying this. Every member has access to a good concordance. Under "forgiveness" and under "repentance" he or she can discover that God calls for repentance, which is then followed by forgiveness.

5 David J. Engelsma, "Post Hoc, Ergo Propter Hoc? Non!, or, 'Don't Kill the Rooster!,'" as quoted in Engelsma, "Ignorant, Lying, or Merely Mistaken," *Sword and Shield* 2, no. 16 (March 15, 2022): 12.

6 Andrew Lanning, "Professor Engelsma Goes Mad," *Sword and Shield* 3, no. 2 (July 2022): 6-16.

The false doctrine of the RPC concerning repentance/remission is evidence that these churches are already departing from the gospel and are on the way of denying, not only the Reformed faith of Canons 5.7, but also the gospel of the Christian religion: repent, in order to be forgiven. They make themselves guilty of the “heresy on the right.”

Professor Engelsma again wrote about Canons 5.7 in a public “family letter” on September 2, 2022. In the section quoted here, Professor Engelsma states the Reformed Protestant charge against him, then states his own doctrinal view, then attempts to ground his view in Canons 5.7.

Dear Family,

A charge by the men of the RPC against the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) is that we put an activity of man before the saving act of God. This charge is supposed to be the basis of their charge that the PRC, and I in particular, now make God dependent upon humans.

The charge is not only erroneous. It is utterly foolish, as I have pointed out before with the convincing example of the rooster and its crowing...

But because the men of the RPC continue to charge that the PRC put an activity of the sinner before the saving act of God (see the September 2022 issue of the “Sword & Shield”), I want to clarify this issue for you.

The charge against the PRC concerns our doctrine that the regenerated child of God repents of his sin, so that he may be forgiven. The activity of repenting precedes God’s act of forgiving. This doctrine, the RPC charge, puts men before God and thus makes God’s forgiveness conditional—it depends upon man’s repentance. This charge is probably the main doctrinal charge of the RPC against the PRC and, therefore, the main justification for their separate existence as a denomination. Therefore, I consider myself justified in wearying you—and myself!—once again with this defense of the PRC’s confession of true repentance and its relation to divine forgiveness.

My response to this false, ignorant, and evil charge is as follows.

First, it is the confession of the Reformed creeds that forgiveness (which is the word of the gospel in the soul of the penitent sinner) follows repentance. Canons 5.7 plainly teaches as the Reformed and Christian faith that “[God]

renews them [the elect sinners] to repentance, to a sincere and godly sorrow for their sins, that they may seek and obtain remission in the blood of the Mediator, may again experience the favor of a reconciled God,” etc. The article teaches that “a sincere and godly sorrow for...sins” [repentance] precedes remission. An activity of the sinner precedes a saving act of God. No clever doctrinal and textual wizardry can obfuscate this perfectly clear teaching of the creed. To charge that the teaching that repentance precedes forgiveness is heresy is to condemn the Canons as heretical. This is the charge of the theologians of the RPC. If they were honest men and women, they would frankly say, “our theology condemns Canons 5.7.” I (een brood gegetende profet) prophesy that, if the RPC last that long, the day is coming that they will revise Canons 5.7 to reflect their aberrant theology, that forgiveness of sins precedes repentance over these sins. They must!<sup>7</sup>

### *The True Interpretation of Canons 5.7*

Canons 5.7 does not need to be revised. It is a perfectly sound article. I personally believe and confess Canons 5.7, and I have made a vow before God and his people to that effect. But Canons 5.7 does need to be translated accurately. And before Professor Engelsma or anyone else objects that an appeal to translation is nothing but a sly revision after all, I remind Professor Engelsma that he too would insist on a proper translation of Canons 5.7. Professor Engelsma does not believe in a “reconciled God,” as his translation of Canons 5.7 currently reads, or at least he did not confess such a God when he taught me dogmatics in seminary. Professor Engelsma believes (or used to believe) in a reconciling God. Therefore, Professor Engelsma also would insist, I presume, on an accurate translation of Canons 5.7 that would not perpetuate the error of a “reconciled God.” For me to insist on an accurate translation of Canons 5.7 is not to revise the article but to be faithful to the article.

Again, an accurate translation of the article, according to Homer Hoeksema, is as follows:

For in the first place, in these falls he preserves in them this his own immortal seed, out of which they are regenerated, lest it should perish or be cast out. And again, through his Word and Spirit he certainly and effectually renews them to repentance, in order that they should sincerely sorrow after God over the sins committed, that

7 David J. Engelsma, “Letter to My Family concerning the Denial by the Reformed Protestant Churches (RPC) that Repentance Precedes Forgiveness,” September 2, 2022.

they should through faith, with a contrite heart, desire and obtain forgiveness in the blood of the mediator, that they should again feel God's favor, having been reconciled, that they should through faith adore his mercies, and that henceforth they should more diligently work out their own salvation with fear and trembling.<sup>8</sup>

With this proper translation the meaning of Canons 5.7 can be understood.

First, the purpose of Canons 5.7 is to explain how God preserves his people in their salvation even when they fall grievously into sin. God's people sin (5.1–3), even falling into “great and heinous sins” (5.4) and “enormous sins” (5.5, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 173–74). But even in the very midst of the worst, most lamentable falls of his people into sin, God preserves them as his people. Canons 5.1–5 show what man is capable of: sin. Canons 5.6 shows what God does: preserves. Man sins. But God preserves!

But God, who is rich in mercy, according to His unchangeable purpose of election, does not wholly withdraw the Holy Spirit from His own people, even in their melancholy falls; nor suffers them to proceed so far as to lose the grace of adoption and forfeit the state of justification, or to commit the sin unto death; nor does He permit them to be totally deserted, and to plunge themselves into everlasting destruction. (Canons 5.6, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 174)

Article 6 states the *what*: preservation. Article 7, connected to article 6 by the word “for,” explains the *how* of this preservation. God preserves his people in their salvation, even when they fall into sin, by two mighty works: he preserves the seed of regeneration in them, and he renews them to repentance.

Second, Canons 5.7 begins by explaining God's first mighty work in preserving his people. “For in the first place, in these falls he preserves in them this his own immortal seed, out of which they are regenerated, lest it should perish or be cast out.” In the very midst of their falls into sin—indeed, as God's people are actually committing their sin and walking in their sin and corrupting themselves in their sin—God preserves in his people the immortal, imperishable, indestructible, incorruptible seed of their regeneration. That seed of regeneration, which is the living Word of God implanted in God's people, cannot perish or be cast out. God's people cannot cast out that seed by their sin, their folly, their unbelief, or their rebellion. The seed, being the living Word of God, is indestructible. And God, by his almighty power, preserves that seed in his people.

This mighty work of God is a great comfort for the poor sinner. The sinner cannot preserve himself. He would undoubtedly perish in his backsliding! But God does what the sinner cannot do. God preserves his seed in the believer. The assurance of this preservation excites the believer to humility, filial reverence, true piety, patience in every tribulation, fervent prayers, constancy in suffering and in confessing the truth, and solid rejoicing in God (see Canons 5.12, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 175).

Third, Canons 5.7 explains God's second mighty work in preserving his people.

And again, through his Word and Spirit he certainly and effectually renews them to repentance, in order that they should sincerely sorrow after God over the sins committed, that they should through faith, with a contrite heart, desire and obtain forgiveness in the blood of the mediator, that they should again feel God's favor, having been reconciled, that they should through faith adore his mercies, and that henceforth they should more diligently work out their own salvation with fear and trembling.

The key to understanding this second mighty work of God is the meaning of the word “repentance” in the article. The translation that the Reformed Protestant Churches currently use makes it seem as though the article defines “repentance” as a sincere and godly sorrow for sin. “And again, by His Word and Spirit, certainly and effectually renews them to repentance, to a sincere and godly sorrow for their sins” (*Confessions and Church Order*, 174). This translation also makes it sound like this repentance—this godly sorrow for sin—is the means by which God's people obtain the forgiveness of their sins. That is, they do not obtain forgiveness by faith alone. In fact, it appears that they do not obtain forgiveness by faith at all, for faith is not even mentioned with the remission of sins in this translation. Rather, this translation states that God's people obtain God's forgiveness by their repenting. “And again, by His Word and Spirit, certainly and effectually renews them to repentance, to a sincere and godly sorrow for their sins, that they may seek and obtain remission in the blood of the Mediator.”

This explanation of the article—repentance as sorrow and repentance as the means of forgiveness—is how Professor Engelsma explains the article.

Repentance is the way in which God remits sins. It precedes forgiveness. To use the deliberately misleading language of Andy Lanning, Canons, 5.7 teaches an activity of the believing sinner

8 Hoeksema, *The Voice of Our Fathers*, 442.



(repenting) that precedes a saving work of God (remitting sin). Without a sincere and godly sorrow for sins, there can be no experience of reconciliation with an offended God.<sup>9</sup>

And again: “The article teaches that ‘a sincere and godly sorrow for...sins’ [repentance] precedes remission. An activity of the sinner precedes a saving act of God.”<sup>10</sup>

The proper translation of Canons 5.7 makes it clear that Professor Engelsma’s doctrine cannot be the explanation of the article.

First, Canons 5.7 does not use the word “repentance” in the narrow sense of a sincere and godly sorrow for sin. Even though that is a good and biblical way to use the word and even though we often use the word in that narrow sense, article 7 is not speaking of *repentance* in that narrow sense. Rather, Canons 5.7 uses the word “repentance” in the broader sense of the entire sanctified life and walk of the child of God. When God renews his people, the result is a spiritual life and walk in the midst of this world. In this sense the word “repentance” is a synonym for the believer’s life. It refers to the activity of the believer, whom God has delivered from the power of sin and who has been renewed by God’s Word and Spirit according to the image of Christ. This broader use of the word *repentance* was common in the Reformation. For example, it was the first of Martin Luther’s well-known Ninety-five Theses: “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent’ (Matthew 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”

One only has to look at Canons 5.7 to see that the article is using the word “repentance” in this broader sense. The article confesses that God “certainly and effectually renews them to repentance.” The language of *renewal* is the language of sanctification. It is language that encompasses the entire inner spiritual life of the child of God. It is the very same language used in Canons 3–4.12: “Whereupon the will thus renewed is not only actuated and influenced by God, but in consequence of this influence becomes itself active” (*Confessions and Church Order*, 169).

Furthermore, Canons 5.7 teaches this renewal as the source of all of the living, spiritual activity of the child of God. The article calls attention to five aspects of the renewed sinner’s spiritual activity by the words “in order that” and “that” and traces all of this spiritual activity back to the sinner’s renewal.

And again, through his Word and Spirit he certainly and effectually renews them to repentance, *in order that* they should sincerely sorrow after

God over the sins committed, *that* they should through faith, with a contrite heart, desire and obtain forgiveness in the blood of the mediator, *that* they should again feel God’s favor, having been reconciled, *that* they should through faith adore his mercies, and *that* henceforth they should more diligently work out their own salvation with fear and trembling. (emphasis added)

The article could never say this about repentance in the narrow sense. Only in the broader sense of repentance as the entire sanctified life of the child of God could it speak of all the spiritual activity listed in the article.

What is more, Canons 5.7 draws a distinction between repentance, on the one hand, and a sincere and godly sorrow for sin, on the other hand. A sincere and godly sorrow for sin is one of the spiritual activities that results from the elect sinner’s renewal by God’s Word and Spirit. The sinner is renewed unto repentance “in order that” he should sincerely sorrow after God over the sins committed.

All of this makes it clear that Canons 5.7 is not using the word “repentance” in the narrow sense of the word but in the broader sense of the sanctified life of a believer.

Second, the correct translation of the article teaches faith alone as the instrument by which the believer desires and obtains the remission of his sins. “That they should through faith, with a contrite heart, desire and obtain forgiveness in the blood of the mediator.” In the translation the RPC currently use, faith is not even mentioned as that which obtains the remission of sins. One who reads the current translation of the article is in danger of finding repentance, not faith, as the instrument by which he is forgiven. He can only find faith in the article at that point if he infers it, but even then he feels that he is introducing something foreign. “By His Word and Spirit, certainly and effectually renews them to repentance, to a sincere and godly sorrow for their sins, that they may seek and obtain remission in the blood of the Mediator.”

The danger of this present translation is illustrated by the fact that no less a mind and a theologian than Professor Engelsma has found justification by repentance in this article. Justification by repentance is not in the article, but the translation that we currently use certainly obscures justification by faith alone. Let us take warning that the corrupted translation of Canons 5.7 could produce false prophets among us, just as the formidable false prophets of the PRC have found a refuge in their bad translation of the article.

The correct translation of the article carries the true

9 David J. Engelsma, “Letter to My Family *in re* the RPC: the Heresy on the ‘Right,’” May 23, 2022.

10 David J. Engelsma, “Letter to My Family concerning the Denial by the Reformed Protestant Churches (RPC) that Repentance Precedes Forgiveness,” September 2, 2022. All punctuation is Engelsma’s, including brackets and ellipsis.

thought of the article. Faith in Christ—and faith alone—obtains the forgiveness of sins in the blood of the mediator. The “contrite heart” of the believer mentioned in the article is not an instrument alongside faith but is simply the mark of faith.

All of this demonstrates that the meaning of Canons 5.7 cannot be that the believer’s sincere sorrow of repentance is a prerequisite for the forgiveness of his sins. Rather, the meaning of Canons 5.7 is that God preserves his people in the midst of their sins by preserving the seed of regeneration and by renewing them unto all the spiritual life and activity of his children. The article has nothing to do with forgiveness by prerequisite repenting but teaches the Reformed gospel of preservation by the mighty operation of God.

### *The Reformed Protestant Doctrine of Repentance*

As for Professor Engelsma’s constant slanders against the Reformed Protestant doctrine of repentance, those have been answered again and again and again. I refer the interested reader to the editorials of June, July, and August 2022, just to name a few.<sup>11</sup> And I will conclude by asking the reader to indulge me as I quote from a previous editorial that summarizes our doctrine and answers Professor Engelsma.

The doctrine of the Reformed Protestant Churches, as it is the doctrine of the gospel and the doctrine of the Reformed faith, is that God’s forgiveness of the sinner is absolutely, sovereignly, and graciously free. There are no conditions that the sinner must fulfill in order to be forgiven. There are no prerequisites that the sinner must meet in order to be forgiven. There are no payments that the sinner must make in order to be forgiven. There is simply nothing that the sinner must do, nothing that the sinner must bring, and nothing that the sinner must be in order to be forgiven of his sins. God forgives the transgressions of his elect people without any regard to any activity that they have performed. God forgives the transgressions of his elect people strictly because it is God’s will to do so, strictly because it pleases him to do so. God forgives the transgressions of his elect people solely with an eye to what Christ has accomplished by his obedience and atonement and without any eye whatsoever on what they have done. God forgives, and that utterly freely.

Especially with regard to the elect sinner’s repenting, God’s forgiveness is absolutely free. God does not check to see if the sinner has repented before God forgives the sinner. God does not withhold his mercy until the sinner has acknowledged his sin and shown sufficient sorrow for his sin. God does not wait upon the sinner to repent before God forgives. God does not even wait upon God’s own work of bringing the sinner to repentance before God forgives. God forgives the sinner freely, without regard for the sinner’s repenting but only with regard for God’s own will and the righteousness of his Son.

There are many ways to describe this free forgiveness: justification by faith alone, salvation by grace, unconditional salvation, sovereign salvation, the Reformed faith, the gospel, and so on. At their heart all of these describe this reality: free forgiveness of sins.

We believe that our salvation consists in the remission of our sins for Jesus Christ’s sake, and that therein our righteousness before God is implied; as David and Paul teach us, declaring this to be the happiness of man, that God imputes righteousness to him without works. And the same apostle saith that we are justified freely by His grace, through the redemption which is in Jesus Christ. (Belgic Confession 23, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 51).

The truth of the gospel that forgiveness is truly free for the child of God without condition of repenting or any other work or activity of the sinner is truly liberating for the child of God. Without that gospel the child of God is not free but is in terrible bondage. He is in bondage to the law with all of its requirements. He is in bondage to all of the accusations of his conscience and all of the accusations of the devil that he has not obeyed perfectly. He is in bondage to fear and to self-love, which are the only motives that he can find to try to obey God’s law. In the doctrine that repentance is a prerequisite for forgiveness, the sinner will never know forgiveness. He will forever be bound by his own imperfect repenting.

But when he is set free by the gospel of free forgiveness, the child of God is free from every demand of the law for righteousness (Gal. 3:13).

11 Andrew Lanning, “Entrenched in Prerequisites,” *Sword and Shield* 3, no. 1 (June 2022): 14–24; “Professor Engelsma Goes Mad,” *Sword and Shield* 3, no. 2 (July 2022): 6–16; “The Reformed Protestant Churches (RPC): Free Forgiveness!,” *Sword and Shield* 3, no. 3 (August 2022): 7–13.

He is free from every accusation of his conscience that he has disobeyed the entire law of God (LD 23). He is free from every charge of the devil and the false church that he is condemned (Rom. 8:33–34). He is free to live his life before God’s face in faith and without terror (Ps. 130:3–4). He is free to obey God in gratitude, free from self-love and the fear of damnation (Belgic Confession 24). He is free to approach God in prayer without any terror or dread (Belgic Confession 23). He is free to decide boldly and to do boldly those things that God requires, even knowing that he will sin in doing them because of his old man, and knowing also that God does not impute to him those sins (Ps. 103:12). And he is free to sin boldly in doing those things (let the reader understand) without it ever becoming license for him to sin. This is some freedom!

The gospel of free forgiveness in Jesus Christ also frees the sinner to repent. Without the gospel of free forgiveness, the sinner would never repent. Without the gospel of free forgiveness, the sinner would only do what Adam did: flee from God and hide from God. If the sinner must repent before he hears that he is forgiven, then the sinner would never, never come to God. He would never come to God in prayer. He would never come to God with the petition “Forgive us our debts.” He would never come to God in sorrow for his sins. He would never come to God with a broken heart and with a contrite spirit. He would never come to God with his tears and his groanings over his sin. He would only run from God as fast as he could! Why? Because there is no mercy with God! Not as far as the sinner knows. The sinner has no knowledge that the righteousness of Christ is his. The sinner has no knowledge that God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and plenteous in mercy. The sinner only knows his sin. Professor Engelsma will not permit the sinner to know anything other than the sinner’s sin until the sinner first repents. Professor Engelsma will not permit the sinner to hear the blessed declaration of God in Christ, “I pardon your iniquity,” until the sinner completes his necessary, prerequisite repentance.

The believer must hear God say, “I pardon your iniquity.” Without forgiveness, daily, he cannot *live*. To know this saving word and act of God experientially, the believer

must repent, and God calls for, and works, this necessary repentance.

According to Professor Engelsma, until the sinner repents he has no knowledge of the pardon of his iniquity. Until he repents he never hears God say, “I pardon your iniquity.” In Professor Engelsma’s doctrine the sinner is not free!

But knowing his forgiveness in the blood of Christ according to the eternal and unchangeable good pleasure of God, the sinner is free to repent. Knowing his forgiveness in the blood of Christ, the sinner will certainly and inevitably repent. He will be sorry for his sins and abhor his iniquities. The forgiven sinner is a repentant sinner. Not because he must repent in order to be forgiven but because his whole life before God arises out of and stands upon God’s mercy in Christ. Knowing God’s mercy in Christ that justifies him independently of all of the sinner’s repenting and working and obeying and loving, the sinner will hate and mourn his sin as contrary to the God who has so mercifully received him. He will cry out to God and flee to God, who receives sinners for Jesus’ sake. God’s mercy in Christ has made the sinner free to do so. By God’s mercy in Christ, the sinner is free to approach unto God. He is free to beseech God, “Enter not into judgment with thy servant” (Ps. 143:2). Only knowing the mercy of God in Christ that forgives his sins—only *after* knowing the mercy of God in Christ that forgives his sins—is the sinner free to repent.

This [obedience of Christ crucified alone] is sufficient to cover all our iniquities, and to give us confidence in approaching to God; freeing the conscience of fear, terror, and dread, without following the example of our first father, Adam, who, trembling, attempted to cover himself with fig leaves. And, verily, if we should appear before God, relying on ourselves or on any other creature, though ever so little, we should, alas! be consumed. And therefore every one must pray with David: *O Lord, enter not into judgment with Thy servant: for in Thy sight shall no man living be justified.* (Belgic Confession 23, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 51–52)

Freedom from the guilt, shame, and curse of sin—in Christ! Freedom to repent—because of Christ! That is some freedom!<sup>12</sup>

—AL

12 Andrew Lanning, “The Reformed Protestant Churches (RPC): Free Forgiveness!,” *Sword and Shield* 3, no. 3 (August 2022): 10–11.



The April issue of *Sword and Shield* arrives just in time for spring break. Why not throw the magazine in your bag and take it to see some sunshine? And don't be afraid to get sand in its creases or to smudge it with greasy sunscreen fingers. I can assure you that the magazine has seen far worse!

In this issue Reverend Langerak continues his defense of the doctrine of forgiveness of sins over against Professor Gritters' doctrine of unforgiveness. Also be sure to take a look at the letter from Jacob Moore, which may well bring tears of joy to your eyes. Aaron Lim, elder in the Berean Reformed Protestant Church in Singapore,

contributes a superb article on the necessary reformation in Singapore. I found some of the things that he relates to be shocking. Thanks be to God for making a hole in the net for his people. The undersigned returns to an examination of some articles of the Canons and reviews a book.

If any of our readers have read something that they would like to review, book reviews are welcome. As are your letters, as always.

May the Lord speed the truths written herein to your heart and the next issue into your hands.

—AL

## UNDERSTANDING THE TIMES

*Men that had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do.—1 Chronicles 12:32*

# UNFORGIVEN (3): UNLESS ONE BECOMES AN ADULT...

## *No Pardon for the Living or the Dead*

I have been examining the speech on forgiveness that was given by Prof. B. Gritters a while back in Grace Protestant Reformed Church.<sup>1</sup> The speech is worth considering at length because it was a good summary of current Protestant Reformed doctrine about justification and the covenant of grace, and it was a good predictor of where the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) are headed with their doctrine. They are headed right back to Rome. Only God knows how long it will take them to get there, but at the rate they have been developing in their theology, it is not impossible that elements in the Protestant Reformed Churches very shortly will have good things to say about Rome. The Roman Catholic Church epitomizes the Man-centered theology that at present is ravaging the Protestant Reformed Churches.

The message of the speech was the same as Rome's message. The speech was a message that the believer is unforgiven unless... This is the message of Rome, according

to answer 80 of the Heidelberg Catechism: "The mass teaches that the living and dead have not the pardon of sins through the sufferings of Christ, unless..." (*Confessions and Church Order*, 116). Professor Gritters' teaching is the same: the living and the dead have not the pardon of sins unless... His condition is repentance. There was no forgiveness in eternity. There was no forgiveness at the cross. There is only forgiveness if and when man repents. God is willing to forgive. God made provision in the cross of Jesus Christ for that forgiveness. God does not forgive unless man repents first.

That this is true for the living and for the dead Professor Gritters made perfectly clear in his speech. He was asked, "We don't receive forgiveness of our sins until we *own* them. What about those sins we don't even know are sins, also sins of omission?" Professor Gritters responded,

Yeah, that gets at the heart of what I'm saying too. I'm thankful for this question because it seems to indicate that we're forgetting that forgiveness

<sup>1</sup> Barrett Gritters, "The Confusion about Forgiveness," speech given at Grace Protestant Reformed Church on November 3, 2022. The speech can be found at <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=11522113504354>.

is God *speaking* to me, “I don’t impute that sin to you. I am not going to hold you accountable for that sin,” *when* we say about that sin, “God, I’m sorry for that sin.” There are other sins that we never confess. Some of them we don’t even know we committed; some of them are sins of omission we never think about. Now, remember about those sins, God *decreed* not to hold them to our account. Jesus Christ died for them and paid for them. They are fully paid for. If we die not thinking about some of them, you might say that *you’re not forgiven of those sins*. That just means you didn’t hear about that sin God saying to you, “I forgive you.” They’re paid for though. You’re going to go to heaven.

According to Professor Gritters, the greatest blessing of salvation is to hear that God forgives your sins. And this is true. According to article 23 of the Belgic Confession, “We believe that our salvation consists in the remission of our sins for Jesus Christ’s sake” (*Confessions and Church Order*, 51). Yet in the above quote regarding forgiveness for the living, Professor Gritters downplayed it as though it is no great thing. In the sinner’s life there are sins that he never confesses, so he never hears God say to him that he is forgiven. He remains unforgiven. There are things that God decreed for the elect sinner and for which Christ died for the elect sinner that never come into the possession of the sinner.

This same thought Professor Gritters carried over to the dead man. In response to the same question, he gave another example of his theology of unforgiveness:

Let me give another example of this. I think this is pretty important. It’s possible that on the way home one of us gets in a wreck and dies and didn’t confess a certain sin that we’ve committed. We didn’t think about it; or maybe we did, and we were ready to confess it when we got home tonight, but we died before we confessed it. We die *unforgiven* of that sin, that is, not that Jesus didn’t die and pay for that sin, but that *I didn’t hear God say to me*, “I don’t hold it against you.” Forgiveness, again, is God’s *declaration* to us, “I forgive you.”

In light of this dreadful theology, a questioner asked, “If we have to repent from our sins, *then* we are forgiven; then do we have to repent from future sins, in case we die before that happens? Otherwise, we die in our sins unforgiven?”

Professor Gritters responded, “I think that is what I was just talking about too.” The answer to the questioner was, “Yes, you do die unforgiven.” It appeared as

though the professor also implied that we should start confessing future sins. He certainly did not reject that as wrong. The questioner also pointed out—either wittingly or unwittingly—the folly of Gritters’ theology when the questioner suggested that perhaps we should repent of future sins in case we die before we can repent. However, since we do not know what specific sins we are going to commit, we cannot repent of them.

It was all just lunacy. What will be next? Mass for the dead? That is what happens when one preaches man’s wisdom instead of the wisdom of God in Jesus Christ: that of God’s eternal good pleasure and by his amazing grace, Jesus Christ is made unto us wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption (1 Cor. 1:30–31). We are forgiven of all our sins, even those of omission and even the ones that we never confess. The Lord taught us to pray, “Forgive us our debts!” And God hears his people and lifts them up in the gospel of the full and free pardon of all their sins and gives to them the joy of their salvation.

### *A Little Whimsy*

In pressing his theology of unforgiveness, Professor Gritters waxed whimsical when it came to the unforgiven infant. In response to the same question in which he taught that we are unforgiven in life and unforgiven in death, he also wondered about a child who dies in infancy. He said,

There are other sins that we never confess. Some of them we don’t even know we committed; some of them are sins of omission we never think about. Now, remember about those sins, God *decreed* not to hold them to our account. Jesus Christ died for them and paid for them. They are fully paid for. If we die not thinking about some of them, you might say that *you’re not forgiven of those sins*. That just means you didn’t hear about that sin God saying to you, “I forgive you.” They’re paid for though. You’re going to go to heaven.

That’s why it’s possible for a baby who dies in infancy, who’s never committed one actual sin, to go to heaven. *He’s not been forgiven in the sense that he never heard consciously* God say to him, “I don’t hold that sin against you.” He’s an infant; he died in his mother’s womb maybe. But Christ died for his sins; God determined to take him to heaven, and he went to heaven though he didn’t *hear in his ear* and embrace with his believing heart that declaration of God.

But as I was thinking about that today, I thought, Hmmm. Maybe that needs to be clarified a little bit in this way. When that little infant,

who never spoke one word and never thought any thought, gets to heaven, he is able to speak. And this is what he is going to say: “God, forgive me of my sinful nature. Forgive me of my connection to Adam.” And then God is going to speak to him and declare, “I don’t hold that against you because I put that responsibility on my Son, and he’s forgiven”—if we may imagine that. That’s when he would *hear* God say it to him.

You cannot make this stuff up!

Now, I am being generous in supposing that Professor Gritters was talking about the infant child of *believers*. He did not actually say that. So let us just suppose that he was talking about the infant child of believers. He said, “I thought, Hmmm.” He was doing theology out of his own brain and not out of the word of God. In harmony with his own wisdom and not the wisdom of God, Professor Gritters supposed and asked his audience to imagine the little infant who dies. And what did the professor come up with out of his own brain? That infant goes to heaven and is given a voice. With his little voice that infant has to say, “God, forgive me...” And then and only then will that infant hear God say, “I do not hold that against you.”

Has Professor Gritters never read what the Reformed creeds say about the elect infants of believers? The infants are holy! So we read in Canons of Dordrecht 1.17:

Since we are to judge of the will of God from His Word, which testifies that the children of believers are holy, not by nature, but in virtue of the covenant of grace in which they, together with the parents, are comprehended, godly parents have no reason to doubt of the election and salvation of their children whom it pleaseth God to call out of this life in their infancy. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 159)

The elect infants of believers are holy. They are holy without a single work, word, deed, or action. They are holy because they are righteous. They are righteous without a single work, word, deed, or action. They are righteous because they are forgiven: forgiven by God at the cross of Jesus Christ, forgiven by God in eternity. And when they die, they are instantly in their heavenly home, surrounded by all the glories of the heavenly, with their resurrected souls given to them as the reward of the righteousness of Jesus Christ, and they enjoy living and reigning with Jesus Christ. It is just as in life. Elect infants are holy before they do one thing and by virtue of the covenant of grace into which they are freely and graciously incorporated by God their eternal Father.

Does Professor Gritters not know what answer 74 of the Heidelberg Catechism says about elect infants?

Since they, as well as the adult, are included in the covenant and church of God; and since redemption from sin by the blood of Christ, and the Holy Ghost, the author of faith, is promised to them no less than to the adult... (*Confessions and Church Order*, 111)

Elect infants have the promise. That promise certainly includes their forgiveness. By Professor Gritters’ logic the infant child who lives does not have forgiveness either, unless and until he repents. He has a conditional promise in the covenant: God will forgive you when you repent.

Does Professor Gritters not know what the Reformed baptism form, which he has read many times in his ministry, says regarding infants?

Holy baptism witnesseth and sealeth unto us the washing away of our sins through Jesus Christ... And when we are baptized in the name of the Son, the Son sealeth unto us that He doth wash us in His blood from all our sins, incorporating us into the fellowship of His death and resurrection, so that we are freed from all our sins and accounted righteous before God. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 258)

To be accounted righteous before God is to be forgiven. We have that as a free gift, even before we repent. Our elect infant children have that in the womb without one act of repentance. It is because the elect infant children of believers have that righteousness before God, and that without one act of repentance, that I also baptize those infants. The Reformed baptism form says that we baptize infants because “as they are without their knowledge partakers of the condemnation in Adam, so are they again received unto grace in Christ.” “Received unto grace in Christ” is the antithesis of “the condemnation in Adam.” You could say that as they received condemnation in Adam without a single act or work, so they are partakers without their knowledge, acts, or works of the forgiveness that is in Christ. Baptism, as the form reminds us, is “a seal of the covenant and of the righteousness of faith; and therefore Christ also embraced them, laid His hands upon them, and blessed them (Mark 10)” (*Confessions and Church Order*, 259).

The Heidelberg Catechism in answer 74 says that we baptize infants because they “are included in the covenant and church of God.” Ultimately, that inclusion is eternal and includes all the benefits of salvation in Christ, including the forgiveness of sins. The infant is not unforgiven until he repents, but he is forgiven apart



from his repentance by grace and the free mercy of God, which extends to believers and their seed in the covenant of grace.

Professor Gritters contradicts the Reformed creeds because he contradicts the Lord, who said, “Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18:3). Christ also said,

16. Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God.
17. Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child shall in no wise enter therein. (Luke 18:16–17)

Jesus told his disciples his doctrine of salvation. That doctrine does not change when one becomes an adult. Indeed, Jesus applied his doctrine of salvation to the adult. Except you—the adult—become as a little child...! That is the experience of salvation. The experience of salvation is that the elect sinner is saved as a little child who does nothing for that salvation. That is the experience of faith too. Faith does nothing for salvation but rests in Christ alone. A child does not experience that consciously. The adult does.

Only a big grown-up has to first repent before he is forgiven; but then, of course, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. Professor Gritters by his theology does not open the kingdom, but he closes the kingdom except you repent first. He is like the theologians that Christ excoriated: “Woe unto you, lawyers! for ye have taken away the key of knowledge: ye entered not in yourselves, and them that were entering in ye hindered” (Luke 11:52).

In his theological musings Professor Gritters taught that little children must become like adults and confess before they are forgiven. As such he also forbade the children to enter the kingdom. His theology is in essence no different than the conditional covenant theology that always suspends the promise to children on their acts of conversion, their repentance, or whatever else man has conceived to make a condition.

Perhaps this similarity in covenant doctrine is the reason that the Protestant Reformed Churches are increasingly cozy with the churches of the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC). There are a few differences in terminology, but in essence they all teach a conditional covenant promise to the infant children of believers; that is, they teach Arminianism in the sphere of the covenant. The Protestant Reformed Churches have made it their specialty to teach conditional covenant experience, but all are agreed that there is something man does first before God does his part. If I

cannot predict when the Protestant Reformed Churches will snuggle in bed with Rome, their union with the churches of NAPARC is already a practical reality. Protestant Reformed theologians speak at the conferences of the churches of NAPARC. Protestant Reformed elders wish those who depart the PRC the Lord’s blessing in their new church homes in apostate Reformed denominations. Protestant Reformed ministers comfortably move to preach in the pulpits of those other Reformed denominations and with hearty commendations from their abandoned churches.

The repentance of little children in the covenant is not the way that the children enter the kingdom, but repentance is the manifestation of the kingdom of God that they possess and in which they are included, even before they are born. This is what we also teach the children. We teach them that as children of the kingdom they have forgiveness in Christ and to sorrow for their sins. Their forgiveness is part and parcel of their holiness that they possess by virtue of the covenant of grace in which they and their parents are included. That little children cannot repent does not mean that they are unforgiven, but it means that they must come yet to the years of discretion in which they consciously experience the gospel of forgiveness and thus fall down before their God with increasing awareness of their sinfulness and in thanksgiving for forgiveness freely given them in the gospel of justification by faith alone without works. If they are taken from this world by God before they can repent, then we are not to imagine them as repenting in heaven before God forgives them, but we imagine them as living and reigning with Jesus Christ and that as the testimony of God to how we all receive the kingdom: without our works and by grace alone or, as Christ said, “As a little child”!

### *Rewriting the Bible*

This false theology about forgiveness Professor Gritters based on his abuse of scripture. Last time I looked at his abuses of the history of David’s sin with Bathsheba and of the record of the preaching of John the Baptist and the apostles. All these Professor Gritters made to serve the theology that a man is not forgiven unless he repents, that repentance is unto forgiveness, that repentance is so that a man may be forgiven, and all the other iterations of that kind of language that he used in the speech, all of which can be summarized this way: repentance is the prerequisite or condition to forgiveness. God is willing to forgive. God wants to forgive. God made provision for forgiveness. But God does not forgive and may not forgive unless and until man repents.

When Professor Gritters could not twist a scriptural

passage to support this wickedness, then he simply rewrote scripture. The gospel according to Professor Gritters he found in Genesis 3. Remember that his doctrine is that forgiveness comes after and only after repentance, that repentance is unto forgiveness, and that the fruit of that repentance is reconciliation. He said,

So go back all the way to the beginning of human history, when God had Adam and Eve in his bosom, as it were; and then they sinned, and he said, "Away from me." And he put them out, and he put that barrier in front of the garden's entrance of flaming swords and said, "Stay away." And then God went to pursue Adam and Eve; clothed them with the skin of an animal, whose blood was shed as a picture of substitutionary atonement; and then said, "Now that you're covered, come back to me."

The Holy Spirit, whose history it is, will be Professor Gritters' judge. Here is the account of Genesis 3 as written by the Holy Ghost:

7. And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons.
8. And they heard the voice of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day: and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God amongst the trees of the garden.
9. And the LORD God called unto Adam, and said unto him, Where art thou?
21. Unto Adam also and to his wife did the LORD God make coats of skins, and clothed them.
22. And the LORD God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever:
23. Therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken.
24. So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life.

Where is Professor Gritters' fable in the history of Genesis 3? When did God once push Adam and Eve away from him? God came and sought them out! Adam and Eve fell into the arms of Christ. They were always forgiven. The Genesis history is nearly the exact opposite of

Professor Gritters' account. Perhaps he could also rewrite Genesis 1 and 2: "In the beginning, millions and millions of years ago, God made a big bang..." And the whole audience would nod at his learned explanation of scripture, which is nothing more than deceit. Did anyone at the lecture actually open up Genesis 3 and read what it says? Did no one remember the order of events that they learned in their catechism classes? Professor Gritters evidently was counting on either the ignorance, the complacency, or the complicity of his audience. He simply rewrote scripture to find his theology of repentance and then forgiveness and then reconciliation, or rather, to find in scripture his theology of conditional forgiveness and a conditional covenant.

He did the same thing with the parable of the prodigal son. Professor Gritters said,

Forgiveness always aims at coming back. The father says to the prodigal son, "Welcome home, son." The prodigal son, who returned in repentance, heard the father say, "I forgive you," and saw the father's open arms, so that he could come back.

That is not what happened at all. The son was repentant, no doubt. But he did not say one thing before his father embraced him. Not one thing. I will let the Lord be Professor Gritters' judge. Here is the account in Luke 15:17-21:

17. And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger!
18. I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee,
19. And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants.
20. And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him.
21. And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son.

The point of the whole parable and even of the whole chapter is not that there is first repentance and then forgiveness and then reconciliation, as though the salvation of the sinner looks rather like assembling a piece of furniture from IKEA. The point of the parable is the joy at the repentance of the sinner as a miracle of the grace of God, who loves that sinner. That sinner he sought and found, and that sinner he drew back by cords of love.

## A Strange God

I have said before that the God of the Protestant Reformed Churches I do not know. This theology of repentance and then forgiveness, as all theology must, traces itself back to one's doctrine of God. In the speech Professor Gritters gave us his doctrine of God. I must quote a few sections from the speech. They will be unedifying to you, but they will be enlightening about the state of theology—or the doctrine of God—in the Protestant Reformed Churches.

The whole sacrificial system of the Old Testament pointed to that [forgiveness aims at reconciliation]. It ought to be very clear to us that forgiveness always aims at reconciliation. When the people of God came in the form of a priest, who went for them to where God lived, they had to go past the altar of burnt offering to see there on that altar substitutionary atonement, satisfaction for sin, that God provided a substitute for them. And then when they saw that and embraced that blessing with believing hearts, they didn't turn around and leave, but they went *in* to God's presence. They lived *with* him because God is symbolizing in that: "I want you to come back and be with me. But it will only be via the forgiveness of your sins. Come back, come back."

Now, you must understand that when God says, "I want you to come back and be with me," that is the wish and will of God. And when Professor Gritters said, "But it will only be via the forgiveness of your sins," then that was not merely a statement that God in his eternal will for us to come back then also gives the forgiveness of sins. But the professor made clear that when God says to the sinner, "Come back, come back," the will of God for the sinner's reconciliation with God and the way of coming back through the forgiveness of sins hinges on, or is conditioned on, the sinner's repentance and coming back. Remember that for Professor Gritters God does not forgive until and unless the sinner repents. Thus the full thought was that God says, "I want you to come back to me. Come back, come back in repentance. And then and only then will I forgive you." Not that God makes that sinner come back to him. God does not bring to pass his eternal will for the elect sinner's reconciliation. God is pleading, "Come back, come back." The sinner must do something first. Billy Graham could not have said it better. He certainly said nothing worse.

At the altar God provided the sacrifice and thus also the forgiveness through which his people are reconciled to him, and on that basis God brings them back to him. As God says,

18. And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation;
19. To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation.
20. Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God. (2 Cor. 5:18–20)

God's command to be reconciled is not hinged on the sinner's repentance but is based on what God actually did at the cross of Christ. God reconciled his people to himself. The ambassador of God is to declare that and to command in God's name that they be reconciled, which word God effectually uses to reconcile them to himself.

Concerning his doctrine of God, Professor Gritters said,

First, about God: All of God's works from eternity to eternity have their center in the cross. Everything that God determined was *aiming* at the cross, found its climax in the cross, and everything *after* the cross finds its significance *in* the cross. The cross is central. All of God's works are aiming at that. This is what's important to him: the *provision* for us guilty sinners that he puts away our sins. And that's why you can read, for example, in Psalm 86:5 (we are going to sing that, God willing, at the end) that God is always *ready* to forgive. Do you want to know what kind of disposition God has that stands behind that declaration to you? It's a readiness to forgive. And that's why Micah 7:18 can say, "He delights in mercy." It's almost as though you can say about God, "There's nothing he likes to do more than show you and me the mercy of saying to you, 'I put away your sins. They are gone.'"

Everything in this paragraph reeks of contingency. These statements about God's decree and God's provision and God's disposition must be understood in light of what Gritters taught throughout the speech: God does not forgive in eternity; God does not forgive at the cross; but God forgives only when the sinner first repents. That God is ready to forgive, then, means that he does not forgive unless and until you first repent.

But Professor Gritters should know that the word translated in Psalm 86:5 as "ready to forgive" means *forgiveness*. It is the adjective of the verbal root meaning *to forgive*. The noun form is used in Psalm 130:4. In the



intensive form, meaning *abundant forgiveness*, the word is found in Nehemiah 9:17 and in Daniel 9:9. In all of these cases and in Psalm 86:5, the word is a statement about the nature of God. It is not a statement so much of God's willingness to do something. It is not a statement of what God is prepared to do. It is a statement about the unchanging God. The word is parallel in Psalm 86:5 with God's goodness and mercy. God is not prepared to be good. God is not ready to be good. He *is* good. He *is* goodness itself. He is good in all that he decrees and in all that he does. God *is* mercy. He *is* mercy itself. So God *is* forgiving. As God is good and unchangeably good from eternity to eternity, so with God is forgiveness, unchangeably and perfectly from all eternity. Not merely an attitude that wants to forgive and not an impotent desire, but there *is* forgiveness with God from eternity to eternity. From eternity to eternity, as the good, unchangeably just, and unchangeably merciful God, God forgives. That is simply in his nature. This is part of his decree as well concerning the salvation of sinners. That with God is forgiveness explains the salvation of sinners. It is not something that he wants to do if man does his part, but it is who God is by nature, what he determined in his decree, and thus what he brings to pass and reveals in his people for the glory of his own name as the God of all grace and mercy.

What Professor Gritters meant when he said, "God is always *ready* to forgive," he made clearer when he compared us to God. We have to forgive like God forgives. I have no quibble with that. But Professor Gritters' explanation of our forgiveness is more telling for the light it sheds on the doctrine of God.

Now, do you see what stands behind that declaration [our forgiving others]? That's forgiveness—a declaration. What stands behind that declaration is a disposition to forgive. Don't be angry; don't be bitter; don't be evil speaking; be kindhearted and tenderhearted to each other. And then comes the act of forgiveness. I, like God, want to be ready to forgive.

God might not be able to forgive yet because man did not repent, but God is ready! Some God. All men will perish in their sins.

### *Confess Specific Sins or Remain Unforgiven*

Professor Gritters' ignorance of who God is as the God of forgiveness not only explains why the professor so forcefully and repeatedly taught that sinners are unforgiven, but it also explains his insistence that forgiveness comes only after the confession of specific sins. That we do not confess specific sins is why a man can be unforgiven in

this life, why he can be unforgiven in his death, and why the infant is unforgiven until the infant repents of a specific sin. The sinner must make the specific confession of a specific sin, or he remains unforgiven for that sin.

God is the God of forgiveness—abundant forgiveness—who forgives all my sins and not only the ones that I confess. I wish I could confess all my sins, but my confession about myself is like that of the psalmist: "For innumerable evils have compassed me about: mine iniquities have taken hold upon me, so that I am not able to look up; they are more than the hairs of mine head: therefore my heart faileth me" (Ps. 40:12).

Oh, Professor Gritters does not hear Christ in those lines! And so he will not let a believer say that and be forgiven either!

My iniquities are more than the hairs of my head. *More than the hairs of my head*, like the phrases *the stars of heaven* and *the sand on the seashore*, is a description of that which is innumerable. I have so many sins that I cannot count them all. So the one who is conscious of the multitude of his sins and the depth of his sinfulness, as the publican in the temple, simply becomes the sinner and the ungodly, the embodiment and epitome of sin, before God. He lowers his head and cries out, "God be merciful to me a sinner" (Luke 18:13). In the publican Jesus gave to us the example of the man who went home justified. God said to that poor man, "Forgiven. No condemnation. There never was condemnation, and there never will be condemnation." The publican did not confess one specific sin. He simply became the sinner, the ungodly, whom God loves to justify because with God there is forgiveness. The publican did not even become the repentant person. He became the ungodly. And it is the ungodly whom God justifies.

To such a one the gospel of Professor Gritters is that he is unforgiven until he numbers up in order to God all his specific sins so that he may hear from God that he is forgiven for those specific sins. Until then he remains unforgiven. Perhaps, as the fictional infant in Professor Gritters' story, he would have the chance in heaven to confess his sins to God so that he may hear that he is forgiven. But, then again, perhaps not? And relying on his confession of specific sins, his poor conscience is continually vexed; and all his life long and in his death, he is without assurance that he is in fact forgiven.

### *Merit Theology*

Professor Gritters' doctrine of repentance and then forgiveness is merit theology. That is how he explained it. When he was justifying his doctrine that there must first be repentance before God forgives, he said that this does "justice to justice."

Now, at this point it's important, before we go on to the third element of God's forgiveness of us, to ask about that relationship. *Why* first repentance, then forgiveness? And the answer includes at least two elements. The first, if I may say it that way, to do justice to justice. To do justice to God's attribute of righteousness. To do justice to justice. You see, because forgiveness comes after confession, *not* because confession and repentance *earn* God's forgiveness—Christ and his cross *earned* forgiveness. But forgiveness is for those who recognize that sin ought to be punished. And that opens up to an entirely new subject that ought to be developed in a series of sermons or lectures, and that is the righteous demands of God with regard to sin. God is a righteous God. Psalter 85:2 says, "All the doings of the Lord in justice have their birth." That is, the womb from which all of the doings of God come forth is justice. Justice. And that means, then, in connection with God's forgiveness of us, the sinner must recognize what God calls sin, sin; he must recognize that he ought to be held responsible; that what he did deserved punishment; and that he asks to be freed from that responsibility. And then God says, "*Now* you're thinking aright. You deserve to be punished, but I put my punishment on my Son; and when you embrace him by faith, confessing that you ought to be punished, now I declare to you, 'I have put away your sin on Jesus Christ.'" To do justice to justice; or, to use the language of the Heidelberg Catechism that most of us are familiar with, "God's justice must be satisfied," and everyone needs to live in the consciousness of that reality. To do anything different, people of God, is to do greatest *injustice* to this central reality of God's doings in the cross. Why the cross? You have to ask yourself that question. Why the cross? And the answer is, because your sins deserve what he got. And you're going to get his blessing only when you acknowledge what he got should have come to you. *You're not going to hear God speak unless you acknowledge that.*

Note that Professor Gritters' doctrine of repentance first and then forgiveness does "justice to justice." Note that he was not explaining merely that our salvation has its foundation on God's justice and that we cannot be saved apart from the satisfaction of the justice of God. But he was explaining why man must do something first.

It is to satisfy the justice of God. God is unjust if he forgives before we repent. God is only just if we repent first and then and only then can he forgive. All the rest of what Professor Gritters said was just camouflage.

But the justice of our salvation was secure at the cross. It was there that God did justice to justice. Stating that repentance is necessary for forgiveness on the ground that it does "justice to justice" is a denial of the cross of Christ. Christ suffered, the just for the unjust. Even if repentance were unto forgiveness, there is nothing just in that at all because no one's repentance is perfect. That God forgives the ungodly is the wisdom and grace of the God who did justice to justice at the cross of Christ. The glory of God's justice is not that he demands that sinners first repent. The glory of God's justice and the wonder of his grace are that he satisfied his own justice at the cross for those who are unjust, in order that he might be just and the justifier of the one who believes in Jesus. If repenting for forgiveness does justice to justice, then repenting is the thing that merits forgiveness. Professor Gritters can deny it all he wants, but in his scenario repenting for forgiveness does justice to justice. It is just, then, that God demands repentance before forgiveness, and it would be unjust if God gave forgiveness before repentance.

Where is the outcry? Where is the offense? This is just appalling theology. This is merit theology. This is doing theology. This is man-first theology. There is no gospel or grace in the business. God does not demand that the sinner repents to be forgiven in order to do justice to justice. Where is that in scripture and the creeds? Repentance is the gracious gift of God to an unworthy sinner, who is still unworthy even if he does repent and whose repentance when examined in the light of God's justice is a shabby thing. Repentance, in fact, never does justice to justice. If repentance has to do justice to justice, then we are all doomed.

The theology of the speech was abominable, bankrupt, crass, and damning. There was no joy in it. There was no hope in it. There was no comfort in it. There was no assurance in it. Remember for Professor Gritters you can die unforgiven. He tried to cover that up with a few worthless assurances. But the people got the message. So one listener asked, "Then do we have to repent from future sins, in case we die before that happens? Otherwise, we die in our sins unforgiven?"

Professor Gritters replied, "I think that is what I was just talking about too."

The message of the speech was *unforgiven!*

—NJL

# THE NECESSARY REFORMATION IN SINGAPORE

*Throughout the history of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, heretics have been present to trouble the church, to attempt to lead her astray, and to fight to destroy the church by robbing her of her dearest treasure and most important reason for existence. — Prof. Herman Hanko<sup>1</sup>*

## Introduction

In December 2021 God wrought a mighty reformation in Singapore. Covenant Evangelical Reformed Church (CERC) in Singapore was once a faithful witness to the truth of God’s sovereign grace and unconditional covenant of grace. Not twenty years ago, the Lord sent Prof. Herman Hanko to CERC to preach the beautiful gospel of Jesus Christ and to teach her the glorious doctrines of God’s sovereign grace and his unconditional covenant of grace.

But CERC soon became corrupt. When her sister churches, the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC), were ravaged by a controversy in which the gospel truths of justification by faith alone and God’s unconditional covenant of grace were corrupted, CERC stood by with deafening silence. When Christ’s perfect work on the cross was displaced by heretical sermons in the PRC, CERC offered no admonition nor rebuke to her sister for corrupting the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Within CERC the faithless watchmen exerted themselves in keeping the congregation ignorant of and indifferent to the raging controversy in the PRC. The watchmen foolishly thought that keeping silent in the face of false doctrines and heresies was the way to secure peace in CERC. They gave no instruction in the gospel that was under assault in the PRC until a tiny group of believers banded together to study and speak the truth—for which they were wickedly disciplined and cast out of Christ’s kingdom. Now CERC has peace—a carnal peace in ignorance and indifference to the lie. But she does not have God’s peace.

For CERC’s lack of love for the truth and lack of hatred against the lie, God gave her over to a delusion, so that she now believes the lie. God placed on her pulpit

Rev. Josiah Tan—a product of Protestant Reformed seminary training and theology—and placed in his mouth a lying spirit, so that he now feeds the lie to CERC. By means of his preaching, teaching, and writing, Reverend Tan corrupts the gospel truth of justification by faith alone in Christ alone.

## Doctrinal Corruption

Doctrinally, CERC has become thoroughly corrupt. The gospel of Jesus Christ means nothing to CERC. The gospel is not the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. The goal of the gospel is not the glory of God in the salvation of his church. Rather, the climax of the gospel, according to Reverend Tan’s bold declaration, is “in the way of our obedience.”<sup>2</sup> Man’s obedience—not the glory of the almighty God—is the climax of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Man’s obedience is the goal, the aim, the climax of the gospel!

In her theology CERC has replaced the absolute sovereignty of God with the sovereignty of man. Man has become sovereign and decisive in his salvation. Man’s willing and doing are decisive for his salvation. Reverend Tan boldly teaches that God’s activity of saving, justifying, and forgiving sins follows man’s prior activity of believing and repenting. God’s activities are not absolutely sovereign; they wait upon, are dependent on, and are conditioned on man’s prior activities performed by grace.

Jesus Here is teaching, that for salvation/justification/forgiveness of sins to follow, something must happen prior, that is a man believing in Jesus. That is a man, abasing himself and casting himself completely on Jesus. Without this, salvation will not follow. (5)

<sup>1</sup> Herman Hanko, *Contending for the Faith* (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2010), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Rev. Josiah Tan taught a series of classes on the recent controversy in the PRC. Before his fourth class, the session of CERC sent notes to the congregation, which Reverend Tan then used for his presentation in that class. The quotations are taken from those notes, which can be found at <https://bereanrpsg.files.wordpress.com/2022/04/cercs-4th-class-notes.pdf>. This quotation is from page 1. Page numbers for subsequent quotations from these class notes are given in text.



In yesteryear Professor Hanko taught that salvation is entirely God's work, and nothing is left to man. Professor Hanko condemned any notion that something is left for man to do to complete the work of salvation.

All of salvation is God's work, from beginning to end. Nothing at all is left to man. The salvation of the church, rooted in sovereign election and accomplished in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, is performed in the hearts of the people of God by the Holy Spirit, who works irresistibly to bring God's chosen and Christ's redeemed to the final glory of heaven.<sup>3</sup>

God's absolute sovereignty in salvation means that the whole work of salvation, from beginning to end, is so completely God's work that no room at all is left for man's work. Sovereignty excludes the freedom of man's will to choose for God. Sovereignty includes all the good works of God's people which are eternally prepared that the elect should perform them (Eph. 2:10). Sovereignty means that even the willing and the doing of good works is God's work, done according to His good pleasure (Phil. 2:12, 13). God's glory in the salvation of the church means absolute sovereignty in the work of salvation.<sup>4</sup>

From God's point of view, He works all things sovereignly so that all salvation is given graciously as a gift. Nothing is left to us which makes His salvation dependent upon what we do. We can do nothing, for we are sinners, dead in trespasses and sins.<sup>5</sup>

If man must do something at any stage of the work, then flesh in distinction from the Spirit does it. Nothing but flesh—impotent, wicked, depraved flesh—in the final analysis is responsible to complete salvation.

Are you so foolish?<sup>6</sup>

Witnessing CERC's replacement of God with Man on the throne, God gave Reverend Tan to rob CERC of one of her most precious treasures: God's forgiveness of her sins. In a sermon preached on Lord's Day 21, Reverend Tan robbed CERC of the forgiveness of her sins by teaching that the forgiveness of sins is forfeitable—losable. God's activity of forgiving sins is forfeitable by

man's activity of not forgiving his brother. "When you don't forgive your brother, you're forfeiting the forgiveness of God."<sup>7</sup>

The members of CERC must have gone home comfortless that Lord's day. Their minister robbed them of the assurance of God's forgiveness of their sins. In a class on the PRC's controversy, Reverend Tan again robbed CERC of the forgiveness of sins by teaching that "without repentance there is no forgiveness of sins. While we remain in the sin of an unforgiving spirit against others, there is no forgiveness for us" (12).

The fundamental blessing of salvation—justification, or the forgiveness of sins—is forfeitable, according to the prophet of CERC! Even more astounding was the response of CERC's members when their minister robbed them of their most precious treasure. They were not the least bothered. They might have been more bothered if their minister told them that their bank accounts, their careers, their vacations, or their houses would be forfeited; but they yawned when their minister robbed them of their most precious treasure.

In yesteryear Professor Hanko taught that the gift of justification is one of the most precious truths to the child of God.

The doctrine of justification is a fundamental doctrine of Scripture and is a delight to the child of God. It includes the most precious truth there is for the believer: the forgiveness of his sins in the blood of the cross. If the believer knows his sins are forgiven, he has everything. If he does not know that his sins are forgiven, he has nothing—though he possesses houses and lands, riches and fame. It all is a pile of ashes without the assurance of the forgiveness of sins.<sup>8</sup>

### *Faith as a Condition*

Corrupting the absolute sovereignty of God and forfeiting his forgiveness of sins, CERC corrupts the precious Reformed doctrine of faith. Faith is mixed with man's works, specifically man's work of repentance. According to Reverend Tan, "Repentance is part of faith...you can't have faith that lays hold of Christ without repentance" (14).

In yesteryear Professor Hanko explained the concept of faith in altogether different terms.

Faith is, in its essential nature, the bond that unites the believer to Christ...

3 Herman Hanko, *For Thy Truth's Sake* (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2000), 408.

4 Hanko, *For Thy Truth's Sake*, 227.

5 Herman Hanko, *God's Everlasting Covenant of Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1988), 194.

6 Herman Hanko, *Justified unto Liberty* (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2011), 182.

7 Josiah Tan, "The Holy Spirit and the Forgiveness of Sins," sermon preached on April 17, 2022, <https://youtu.be/Nt-1481P2Qga> (56:45).

8 Hanko, *Justified unto Liberty*, 126–27.

Faith is not, first of all, believing. But it is, first of all, the living “connection” between Christ and His people.<sup>9</sup>

Faith as the bond that unites the elect to Christ is the essential and fundamental idea of faith. No aspect of faith as knowledge, confidence, trust, receiving Christ as one’s own, or believing him is anything else than *the activity of the bond that unites one to Christ*.<sup>10</sup>

The crucial idea is that faith is the living bond between the elect, regenerated Christian and Christ, by means of which all the blessings Christ merited for him become his.<sup>11</sup>

Since faith is partly man’s work of repentance, according to CERC, faith becomes a condition that man fulfills to be saved. Rejecting Professor Hanko’s doctrine, CERC openly teaches that faith is a condition. Unlike his dishonest Protestant Reformed colleagues, Reverend Tan is honest in admitting that his theology is conditional and that faith is a condition. “Is faith a condition for justification or forgiveness?... Is faith a condition? Yes, it is necessary.”<sup>12</sup>

In yesteryear Professor Hanko repudiated the teaching that faith is a condition. Professor Hanko explained that

when faith is made a condition, the meaning is that salvation will not be granted to anyone unless he fulfills the condition of faith. Man must first believe for salvation to be given to him.<sup>13</sup>

To teach that faith is a condition, instructed Professor Hanko,

makes faith the work of man and salvation dependent upon man’s believing...

Faith is described in Scripture as *a part of salvation* (Eph. 2:8). If it is a part of salvation, it cannot be *a condition to salvation*.<sup>14</sup>

When so many teach that justification is by faith *and works*, what they mean is that faith and works are the *ground* of our justification; we are justified *because* we believe and *because* we do good works, namely the works of faith and obedience.<sup>15</sup>

CERC was once a bulwark against conditions and conditional theology. Now she freely embraces conditions. Her consistory deceitfully assures CERC that “there is no

condition in which man fulfills on his own power, therefore it is ALL OF GRACE” (5). It is all of grace that man performs these conditions for his salvation. Man, in the end, is sovereign.

### *Corruption of the Sacraments*

That CERC has also become the false church is manifested in her corruption of the sacraments. The Lord’s supper is consistently and openly profaned by members of the church, with the approval of her consistory. Members who do not attend the worship services regularly—many for months and years—are still in good standing and approved by the consistory to partake of the Lord’s supper. By their persistent absence from the worship services, these members show their wicked despising of the Lord’s table. The elders continue to refuse to discipline them. These members remain in good standing.

The sign and seal of God’s covenant—infant baptism—is another sacrament openly profaned by CERC. Covenant parents who do not bring their covenant children for baptism remain in good standing in the church. Despite all their pious noise about church orderliness, CERC’s consistory has no regard for the doctrine of infant baptism. The baptism of the covenant seed is commanded by God because infants

are included in the covenant and church of God...they must therefore by baptism, as a sign of the covenant, be also admitted into the Christian church, and be distinguished from the children of unbelievers as was done in the old covenant or testament by circumcision. (Lord’s Day 27, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 111)

In CERC infant baptism is an option. Members who baptize or do not baptize their infants all remain in good standing.

### *Corruption of Church Discipline*

Church discipline is not exercised against the wicked in CERC. Many members of CERC regularly break the fourth commandment by their long absences from church. The consistory allows them to break the fourth commandment with impunity. No church discipline has been exercised against them. The elders tolerate their sin for months and years. The elders may visit them every

9 Hanko, *For Thy Truth’s Sake*, 410–11.

10 Herman Hanko, *Faith Made Perfect* (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2015), 117; emphasis added.

11 Hanko, *Justified unto Liberty*, 141.

12 Recording of CERC’s fourth class, [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1DQiscSljI811vQ9CZpM3CsLqc5L\\_M7QT/view?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1DQiscSljI811vQ9CZpM3CsLqc5L_M7QT/view?usp=sharing) (11:07, 14:50).

13 Herman Hoeksema and Herman Hanko, *Ready to Give an Answer* (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1997), 189.

14 Hoeksema and Hanko, *Ready to Give an Answer*, 183. The emphasis is Hanko’s.

15 Hanko, *Justified unto Liberty*, 140. The emphasis is Hanko’s.

once in a while to cajole them back to church, but no discipline is exercised.

Neither is church discipline exercised against those who break the fifth commandment by not obeying their God-appointed leaders in the church. Despite these God-ordained leaders' calling members of the church to worship twice on the Sabbath, many members of CERC disobey their leaders' calls. Many have hardly ever been to the second worship service. Some have never been. CERC's God-appointed leaders may cajole, scream, or threaten, but no discipline will ever be exercised against those who reject the calls to worship. They are free to break the fifth commandment with impunity.

Church discipline is, however, exercised against those who study and speak the truth of God's word in the midst of a controversy that has corrupted the gospel of Jesus Christ and justification by faith alone. Within a week of meeting to study and speak the truth of God's word, six souls were disciplined and cast out of CERC. At the final judgment the Lord of heaven will open the books and give his judgment on CERC's consistory.

## Reformation

Out of the fierce fires of false doctrines and deceitful lies, the Lord rescued six souls and their children. These six souls gave their ecclesiastical lives and names for the sake of the gospel. Although Professor Hanko's judgment of these six souls today is that they are rebels and schismatics,<sup>16</sup> we ask: Have we departed from what he taught us, or have CERC and the PRC departed from his teachings?

Professor Hanko used to warn us to be intolerant of false doctrine and to hold the truth above all. He taught us that a church once strong may depart on key doctrines of the truth and that our calling is to follow the truth wherever it is.

The church world today is obsessed with toleration. Within the same denomination and between denominations mutually, people express a great tolerance for the most vicious and spiritually destructive heresies. A church once strong may depart on key doctrines of the truth, but these deviations may be tolerated for the sake of

love. The very teaching that Paul condemns in this epistle [Galatians] as another doctrine that brings with it God's curse is being widely taught in once-conservative churches, but it is tolerated on the grounds of love.<sup>17</sup>

From the end of the apostolic era until the present, the church has never been free from the threat of false doctrine. Fighting false doctrine is so crucial a part of the church's existence in the world that to ignore it is to run the risk of not understanding church history at all. One cannot learn anything significant about a man from whose biography has been omitted the most important events in his life. One cannot understand the history of the church militant without understanding her battles against false doctrine.<sup>18</sup>

The enmity aroused by the believer's confession of the truth of the gospel and the suffering that results from such enmity the believer is willing to bear, for Christ his Lord bore the same hatred of men. Believers rejoice in the privilege of suffering for Christ's sake.<sup>19</sup>

We are committed to warfare on behalf of the truth, as scripture, the Reformed confessions, and Professor Hanko have always taught us. "Deep commitment to the truth of Scripture leads to warfare, for there are not many who love the faith with fire and passion."<sup>20</sup> Let Professor Hanko and the church world judge whether our doctrine is true or whether the PRC's and CERC's doctrine is true.

The Lord will reveal at the end of time whether we are rebellious schismatics or faithful children of the reformation. As Professor Hanko was thankful for the controversy of 1953 in the PRC, so are we thankful for our present controversy.

Ought we, therefore, to be thankful for this controversy?

All glory belongs to God, who preserves His cause in the midst of the world and makes His truth to triumph.<sup>21</sup>

—Aaron Lim

16 Professor Hanko wrote many articles for an email forum that included members of Covenant Evangelical Reformed Church in Singapore and the Protestant Reformed Churches in the Philippines (PRCP). The emails to that forum in which he attached his articles included personal notes. In his email dated June 4, 2022, he wrote, "We love you all dearly and pray that you may stand fast for the truth and resist those who try everything possible to bring schism into your unity and fellowship." In an email dated January 14, 2023, Professor Hanko wrote, "We are thankful for the 2 ministers in Singapore whom God used to defeat the efforts of the RPs to bring schism [*sic*] in the CERC." On December 31, 2021, he sent an article entitled "The Authority of Elders," in which he made clear that the sin of "some members [who] have left the denomination [CERC, the PRCP, and the PRC] to form groups or churches of their own" was "lack of obedience and submission to the elders in a local congregation."

17 Hanko, *Justified unto Liberty*, 300–301.

18 Hanko, *Contending for the Faith*, xvii–xviii.

19 Hanko, *Justified unto Liberty*, 308.

20 Herman Hanko, *Portraits of Faithful Saints* (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1999), 417.

21 Hoeksema and Hanko, *Ready to Give an Answer*, 200.



Dear Editors,

I write this apology in response to my letter that was published in the November 15, 2022, issue of the *Sword & Shield*. I am thankful to Reverend Langerak for explaining to me where I erred in his thorough response to my letter. I am also sorry for the spirit of pride that was evident in my letter.

I also want to make it clear that I do not believe that we are justified by repentance. I believe that we have forgiveness without repentance because God saved us in eternity before we were born or had shed one tear of repentance. Also, if salvation depended on the believer's repentance, salvation would be impossible. Man would rather perish in hell than repent of his sins.

Thus, rather than being justified by faith and repentance, we are justified by faith alone. As we read in Ephesians 2:8-9, "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast." We are justified without works, including the good work of repentance. John Calvin, in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, also makes clear the distinction between faith and repentance:

Paul says in the Acts, as to his "testifying both to the Jews and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ," (Acts 20:21). Here he mentions faith and repentance as two different things. What then? Can true repentance exist without faith? By no means. But although they cannot be separated, they ought to be distinguished. As there is no faith without hope, and yet faith and hope are different, so repentance and faith, though constantly linked together, are only to be united, not confounded.

Later in the *Institutes*, Calvin states "That repentance not only always follows faith, but is produced by it, ought

to be without controversy." Though repentance is closely connected to faith, repentance is only a fruit of faith. Repentance is a gift that God has given to his people out of love and that he alone accomplishes in the believer's heart. Since repentance is only a fruit of faith, it does not save us.

I also believe that God always has favor for his people. This love is eternal and determined his unconditional election of his church. As we read in Malachi 3:6, "For I am the LORD, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed." If God were to hate us for one moment, God's justice would require that he condemn us.

I also understand that salvation is not dependent on my forgiving of the neighbor. God chose me from all eternity before I had done one thing, whether good or evil. As we read in 1 John 4:10-11, "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another." Thus, it is only because God has first loved me in forgiving my sins that I can forgive my neighbor.

I am sorry especially for the statement that Christ's death on the cross was an "abstract reality." In doing so, I denied that salvation was already fully accomplished by Christ's death and resurrection 2,000 years ago.

I love the gospel, and I do not seek to lead God's people astray by teaching false doctrine. I realize that there is much I must still learn about the truth. I pray that the Lord will give me the wisdom and understanding to grow in the knowledge of this precious truth.

I ask that you might honor my request that my letter in the November 15, 2022, issue of the *Sword & Shield* be retracted.

Humbly in Christ,  
Jacob Moore

## RESPONSE

Jacob, your letter is a breath of fresh air. I thank God for it. Not only do you display a humble spirit that is willing to be taught by the word of God, but also you very powerfully and beautifully confess the sound doctrine of the glorious gospel of salvation. We gladly print this letter at your request, and it will stand as the last word on the things that you wrote previously. May God give all of us such contrite hearts.

And therefore we always hold fast this foundation, ascribing all the glory to God, humbling ourselves before Him, and acknowledging ourselves to be such as we really are, without presuming to trust in any thing in ourselves, or in any merit of ours, relying and resting upon the obedience of Christ crucified alone, which becomes ours when we

believe in Him. This is sufficient to cover all our iniquities, and to give us confidence in approaching to God; freeing the conscience of fear, terror, and dread, without following the example of our first father, Adam, who, trembling, attempted to cover himself with fig leaves. And, verily, if we should appear before God, relying on ourselves or on any other creature, though ever so little, we should, alas! be consumed. And therefore every one must pray with David: *O Lord, enter not into judgment with Thy servant: for in Thy sight shall no man living be justified.* (Belgic Confession 23, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 51–52)

—AL

# IS ATHEISM DEAD?

*Reviewed by Rev. Andrew W. Lanning*

*Is Atheism Dead?* Eric Metaxas. Washington, D.C.: Salem Books, 2021.  
432 pages, hardcover, \$19.29.

## Overview

The title of Metaxas' book—*Is Atheism Dead?*—is a play on the title of a famous 1966 *Time* magazine cover, which blared the question in enormous font, *Is God Dead?* The magazine paraded the supposed scientific evidence that the universe did not need a God to create it and sustain it. Metaxas' response, after roughly half a century of mounting evidence, is that it is actually atheism that has died, not God. In fact, the title of Metaxas' book is not so much a play on the *Time* magazine cover as it is a ridiculing of that cover and a celebratory dance on that cover's grave. Metaxas argues that science, archaeology, and a critical analysis of atheism all point unmistakably to the fact that God does, indeed, exist. For Metaxas, a careful review of the evidence does not lead to the conclusion that belief in God is untenable but to the conclusion that atheism is untenable. The evidence does not raise the question *Is God Dead?* but raises the question *Is Atheism Dead?*

Metaxas' thesis is that atheism is not an intellectually valid system because the evidence from science and archaeology irresistibly points to God's existence.

We are living in unprecedentedly exciting times. But most of us don't know it yet. That's essentially the point of this book, to share the news that what many people have dreamt of—and others have believed could never happen—has happened, or at any rate is happening this very minute and has been happening for some time. By this I mean the emergence of inescapably compelling evidence for God's existence. (3)

Metaxas divides his book into three main parts, each consisting of roughly ten chapters. Part one is a survey of scientific discoveries, all of which demonstrate that our world could not have happened by accident or by merely natural causes. In this section Metaxas treats the fact that the universe has a beginning, the fact that the universe is unimaginably fine-tuned, and the scientific mystery of the origin of biological life.

Part two is a survey of archaeological discoveries, all

of which corroborate the biblical record. In this section Metaxas reviews such developments as the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls and other manuscripts, the discovery of Jesus' childhood home in Nazareth, and the discovery of Sodom.

Part three is a critical review of several prominent atheists. In this section Metaxas demonstrates problems with atheistic philosophy. Metaxas especially criticizes the claim that science and discovery are only compatible with atheism and not with belief in God.

Metaxas concludes where he began.

So by 1966—and by default ever since then—the cognoscenti determined without saying it openly that God really was dead, or actually never had existed...

What are we to do about it?

Well, for one thing we can reject it with every atom of our being. Have we not seen that there is enough evidence to do so? Because there is much more evidence than merely enough. There is enough evidence to leap toward the God who created the universe and who created us...

As it happens, God—back then [in Jesus' day] and again now—has revealed things to us that we did not know before, that we could not have known before, that we couldn't have even imagined. And based on these new things, then and again now, we can say something deeply and heartbreakingly beautiful and true: God is not dead. He is alive.

*Rejoice.* (392, 403; emphasis is Metaxas')

## Analysis

I thought I would like this book. I *wanted* to like this book.

First, because the author, Eric Metaxas, has forever endeared himself to everyone who loves Martin Luther. Metaxas' biography of Luther is outstanding. When it arrived in my mailbox in 2018, I dropped almost everything for a few days to read it and savor it. In fact, in the middle of writing that last sentence, I got up and pulled

the Luther biography down from my shelf to reread the table of contents. Metaxas' chapter on Luther before the Diet of Worms is still a favorite. One could argue that Luther's stand before the emperor at the Diet of Worms in 1521 was more important for the Reformation than were Luther's Ninety-five Theses on the church door in Wittenberg in 1517. Metaxas brings Luther and the Diet to life. Those of us who could not be present in person at the Diet that day have the next best thing in Metaxas' retelling of it. And I still get a lump in my throat upon reading the title of chapter 22, which title is the final words that Luther ever penned, just before his death: "We Are Beggars. This Is True." After Luther's biography, whatever Metaxas writes I really want to like.

Second, I wanted to like *Is Atheism Dead?* because it is just plain interesting. It is jam-packed with facts and figures and discoveries and tidbits and observations that stagger the mind. A sample from the section on scientific discoveries:

Have you ever considered the stunning flora and fauna on our planet? The panoply of terrestrial life is almost too vast to imagine. There are 900,000 different species of insects alone. There are 400,000 species of plants, including mimosa plants that immediately fold up their leaves when touched, and carnivorous plants that eat flesh, and monstrous eight-foot-tall plants that bloom once every 40 years and have a fragrance that mimics the stench of rotting corpses. There is a plant existing only in the harsh desert of Namibia that can live 1,500 years, and in California there is a tree called the General Sherman that sprouted from the forest floor when Aristotle was a boy. It now stands 275 feet tall, with a trunk whose circumference is 113 feet. (83)

Another sample from the section on the fine-tuning argument. By *fine-tuning* Metaxas means that

there are certain things about our universe—and about our planet—that seem to be so extremely perfectly calibrated that they can hardly be coincidental. If these things were even slightly different, life would not even be possible...When we see how many things must be just *so*—and then just *happen* to be just so—we cannot help but wonder if perhaps mere coincidence isn't enough to account for it. (36–37; emphasis is Metaxas')

Metaxas gives the following example of fine-tuning:

We venture into the sublime madness of water in a subsequent chapter, and if ever there were

something we took for granted, that would be it. But before that, let's simply acknowledge the uncontroversial fact that water is inescapably central to life on Earth. But because of this, several things must also be very precisely just so. For example, if we were even slightly closer to the sun, most of our water would have evaporated, and life couldn't exist. By the same token, if we were slightly farther away, all water would have frozen, also making life untenable. (43)

Another sample from the section on archaeological discoveries, under a full-page, full-color photograph:

In 2020 archaeologists published findings about this first-century home in Nazareth. To mark and preserve this holiest of sites as the very place where Jesus, Mary, and Joseph lived, two magnificent churches had been built over it during the Crusader and Byzantine eras. The most recent of these was demolished by the Caliph Yazid II in 721 AD, and all traces of this site were lost for twelve centuries. (photo insert between 224–25)

The third reason that I wanted to like the book is because Metaxas skewers atheists, and he skewers them good. By the end of the book, he has a spit of all the leading atheists shish kebabled like so many plump morsels ready to lay on the grill. Sample quote:

Those who are militant in their atheism...not only cannot see that science has limits, but preposterously claim that science is our only way of "knowing" anything, and further claim that the material world to which science has access is all that exists. That's like saying that because our eyes cannot smell or taste, there is no such thing as aroma or food. It is of course perfectly circular and silly. They say that science can only access the material world, and yet declare with the impossibility of evidence that the material world is all that has ever existed—or can or will exist.

[Christopher] Hitchens was among the loudest of these and often maintained that the scientific method and "evidence" were the only way to know anything...

In the end it seems that the so-called New Atheists and angry and militant atheists have less in common with honest agnostics than with less intellectually respectable groups such as Satanists, who are obviously more animated by a hatred of the God they suspect exists—and the people who



claim to follow him—than they are of anything more intellectually robust. (369–70)

In spite of my fascination with Metaxas' book, I have the strongest possible objection to *Is Atheism Dead?* I agree with Metaxas that atheism is bankrupt. But I strongly disagree with Metaxas on the *reason* that atheism is bankrupt. Metaxas treats atheism as if it were merely a problem of evidence. That is, Metaxas believes that the mounting evidence from scientific inquiry and archaeological discovery will convince people that God exists. In fact, he writes his entire book in order to broadcast the "emergence of inescapably compelling evidence for God's existence" (3). Furthermore, Metaxas believes that the testimony of the telescope and the spade will be sufficient to make men believe in God. As one of the conclusions of his book, he claims that science, archaeology, and a critical evaluation of atheism have provided us with "enough evidence to leap toward the God who created the universe and who created us" (392). Believing that evidence from the heavens and earth will convince people that God exists, Metaxas views his mission in this book as a kind of scientific evangelism. He is out to proclaim the good news of the scientific and civilizational record that there is a God. Standing only upon what the microscopes and the obelisks have revealed, Metaxas declares as his last word on the matter,

Based on these new things, then and again now,  
we can say something deeply and heartbreakingly  
beautiful and true: God is not dead. He is alive.

*Rejoice.* (403; emphasis is Metaxas')

Metaxas' error is that atheism is not now and never has been a problem of evidence. God has always shown himself to every single human being, head for head (see Rom. 1:18–23; 2:14–15). God has manifested himself in stark clarity and in great depth. He has revealed his invisible things to all men: the fact that he exists, the fact that he is God, and the fact that he has eternal power. He has revealed the difference between right and wrong, and he has revealed that men must do the right and must not do the wrong. He has revealed his wrath against all who do not worship him, who hold the truth in unrighteousness, who do not like to retain him in their knowledge, who do not glorify him as God, and who change his glory into an image. God has revealed all of this about himself to every single human being in such a way that everyone has clearly seen God and clearly understood him. There has never been a time in the history of the world when men have not had enough evidence for the existence of God.

God has revealed all these things about himself to men in the creation. "That which may be known of God is

manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them" (Rom. 1:19). The invisible things of God are known "from the creation of the world." They are clearly seen and understood "by the things that are made" (v. 20). The work of the law is "written in their hearts" (2:15). One thing that no man can ever escape is the testimony of the creation. That man, no matter how limited by age or capacity, lives his life in the midst of God's creation. That man himself is a creature of the Creator. Every man clearly knows that there is a God and that he must be worshiped.

Man's problem is not evidence but unbelief. Atheism is not an intellectual problem but a spiritual one. A man does not become an atheist (or an idolater) because he could not find enough evidence for God. A man becomes an atheist or an idolater because he hates God, refuses to believe in God, suppresses the truth in unrighteousness, glorifies God not as God, is not thankful, becomes vain in his imaginations, has a foolish and darkened heart, and changes the glory of God into a creature (see Rom. 1:18–23). The atheist's problem is not evidence but unbelief. "The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God" (Ps. 53:1).

Man's problem is actually deeper than unbelief. Man's problem is God. God has revealed himself so clearly and unmistakably in the creation in order to leave man without excuse for his unbelief, atheism, and idolatry. No man will be able to say to God, "But I never knew! I never knew that I was to worship thee. I never knew that thou didst create me. I never knew!" God's reply will be, "But you did know! You knew clearly my invisible things from the visible things that I made." God reveals himself to men exactly so that all of his enemies are without excuse. "For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse" (Rom. 1:20).

Therefore, the power to turn an atheist from his atheism is not a breathtaking tour of the latest science and archaeology. As gripping as that tour might be, it only leaves men without excuse. Rather, the power to turn an atheist from his atheism is the gospel of Jesus Christ by the operation of the Holy Spirit. An atheist does not need a book about fine-tuning. An atheist does not need a book about the Ziggurat of Ur. An atheist needs a sermon. An atheist needs the Bible. He needs to hear the God who is the Father of Jesus Christ. He needs to hear the call to repent and believe and the promise that all who believe in Christ are saved. Only the gospel—by the power of the Holy Spirit and according to God's election—will turn an atheist from his atheism.

"Through faith we understand that the worlds were

framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear” (Heb. 11:3).

“So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Rom. 10:17).

All of this means that Metaxas’ project in *Is Atheism Dead?* is a failure from the start. The science may be interesting, and the archaeology may be astounding, but no one will believe in God because water behaves the way it does, because the mass of the universe is what it is, or because the Hittites lived where the Bible said they did. God’s word alone is the evidence that creates faith.

Metaxas’ project in *Is Atheism Dead?* is also dangerous to the mind of faith. It teaches that the trustworthiness of the Bible rests in something external to the Bible. It trains people to place their faith in the beaker and the bones instead of in the Bible. Metaxas’ book does not teach people to say, “Let God be true, but every man a liar” (Rom. 3:4). It teaches people to say, “Yea, hath God said?” (Gen. 3:1). It enforces the thinking that we may only believe the Bible if men confirm the Bible through their scientific and archaeological projects.

It is ominous that so many hundreds of thousands—and perhaps by now millions—of people have latched onto Metaxas’ project as if it were finally the answer to the problem of atheism. Metaxas himself expresses surprise at the enthusiastic reception some of his early articles on the subject attracted. Men everywhere are thirsty for scientific proof of God. They can’t wait to find Noah’s ark. They can’t wait for proof that the Bible is true. As if the truth of the Bible hangs in the balance! When a man’s faith rests in science and in all of the proofs that science can provide, then it is not faith in God or in his word.

Metaxas’ faith in science, and therefore his unbelief in the Bible, comes out throughout *Is Atheism Dead?* For one thing, Metaxas’ project to provide evidence for the existence of God is really only a halfway project. Metaxas often argues that the evidence all points to the fact that *something* or *someone* planned and made the world. But the God who is revealed in the creation is not merely a something or a someone. He is God. He is the Creator. He is the triune God. He is the Father of our Lord Jesus

Christ. He can be identified and named, definitely and specifically. Metaxas’ arguments often sound like those of the old intelligent design authors, whose project was merely to prove that creation pointed to some great intelligence that designed all things. Such projects are no better than paganism. If some great intelligence created all this, why not have it be Moloch or Baal or Allah? The truth is that creation does not merely point to *a creator*; it points to *the Creator*. It does not merely point to *an intelligence*; it points to Jehovah.

But Metaxas’ faith in science comes out especially in his acceptance of evolution. Metaxas believes that the universe is billions of years old, that it originated in a big bang, and that biological life evolved and evolved and evolved. Metaxas allows that a god was in control of it all. He would even call that god the God of the Bible. But the God of the Bible has nothing to do with billions of years and evolution. The God of the Bible has nothing to do with the big bang. The God of the Bible created in six days and rested the seventh. The God of the Bible created all creatures after their kinds, without evolution from one kind to the next. And the God of the Bible did all of that a few thousand years ago. The god of the big bang is not the God of the Bible. The god of evolution is not the God of creation. When one makes science his evidence, then he must inevitably deny the Bible and thus deny the God of the Bible.

It is dangerous for the church to found her faith on anything other than the word of God. Many brilliant men with compelling arguments and winsome presentations will interpret the exact same observational data in support of atheism. The faith of the church will then depend upon men and their interpretation of the data. Men are no foundation for faith! The only foundation for faith is God and his revelation. Rather, the church must say, “It does not matter to me if all of the data in the world testifies that there is no God.” (I speak foolishly.) “I know that there is a God, and I know who he is, because the Bible says so.” The cry of faith is always “Let God be true, but every man a liar.”

—AL





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## FINALLY, BRETHREN, FAREWELL

*Finally, brethren, farewell. Be perfect, be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you.—2 Corinthians 13:11*

*Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might. — Ephesians 6:10*

**N**eeded exhortation!

For we wrestle not against flesh and blood but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. Terrible and mighty forces of evil are arrayed against the church, as the nations with malignant intentions came against Israel of old. Cruel foes surround the church, as the nations allied against Israel to blot out her memory from the earth. So also do the devils and the evil spirits, as murderers and depraved enemies of God and the church, to the utmost of their power watch daily to destroy the church and every member of her. And with these enemies and hostile forces are their allies of sin and the ungodly world and the apostate church world. They never cease to assault us.

Be strong! Urgent exhortation!

And we are so weak in ourselves that we cannot stand a moment. Our very flesh is an ally with the hostile forces arrayed against and surrounding the church of Christ in the world. And we are but flesh and blood! And in the contest between flesh and blood and principalities and powers, the end must be the overthrow of flesh and blood.

Be strong! A hopeless exhortation? How can we possibly stand in this warfare?

In the Lord!

Those who are exhorted are those who are in the Lord. Called of God, they are called into communion with Jesus Christ. And in him they are armed with an invincible power whereby without any doubt they stand in the evil day. They stand, and standing they overcome by constant and strenuous resistance their evil foes.

In the Lord they cannot be overcome because the Lord with whom they have communion is the Lord who has already overcome their foes. He entered into the house of the strongman and spoiled all his goods. The Lord spoiled principalities and powers; he made a show of them openly, triumphing over them.

By the cross!

Principalities and powers had a legal right to hold sway over all men, for all men came under their power by the just judgment of God. And Christ by his cross overcame them by making satisfaction to the justice of God. And God raised Christ from the dead, and he sits now Lord of all—also Lord of all the principalities and powers that vainly oppose him and his church. In him neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, nor all the ineffectual opposition of hell shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might. He has come unto us in his Spirit; and by the power of his Spirit, we stand and cannot be overcome. Yes, clothe yourselves in his invincible armor that you have in him: the girdle of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit. Clothed with his armor, we cannot possibly be overcome of our foes, but we overcome them till at last we have the final victory.

—NJL