

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

SEPTEMBER 2023 | VOLUME 4 | NUMBER 4

CONTENTS

3

MEDITATION

CHILDREN OF YOUTH
Rev. Nathan J. Langerak

8

FROM THE EDITOR

Rev. Nathan J. Langerak

9

EDITORIAL

REFORMED? NOT AT ALL! (1)
Rev. Nathan J. Langerak

16

UNDERSTANDING THE TIMES

A DISTORTED DOCTRINE
OF PRAYER (2)
Tyler D. Ophoff

23

OUR DOCTRINE

THE REFORMED DOCTRINE OF
JUSTIFICATION, FORGIVENESS,
AND REPENTANCE
Rev. Luke Bomers

31

RUNNING FOOTMEN

A WHALE OF A SCRUPLE
Eddie Ophoff

36

CONTRIBUTION

THE BEATITUDES (1):
BLESSED POOR
Garrett Varner

40

FINALLY, BRETHREN, FAREWELL

Rev. Nathan J. Langerak



Sword and Shield is a monthly periodical published by Reformed Believers Publishing.

Editor in chief

Rev. Nathan J. Langerak

All quotations from scripture are from the King James Version unless otherwise noted.

Quotations from the Reformed and ecumenical creeds, Church Order, and liturgical forms are taken from *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005), unless otherwise noted.

Every writer is solely responsible for the content of his own writing.

Signed letters and submissions of general interest may be sent to the editor in chief at natelangerak@att.net or to

Rev. Nathan J. Langerak
705 Pettibone St
Crown Point, IN 46307

Sword and Shield does not accept advertising.

Please send all business correspondence, subscription requests, and requests to join Reformed Believers Publishing to one of the following:

Reformed Believers Publishing
325 84th St SW, Suite 102
Byron Center, MI 49315
Website: reformedbelieverspub.org
Email: office@reformedbelieverspub.org

Reformed Believers Publishing maintains the privacy and trust of its subscribers by not sharing with any person, organization, or church any information regarding *Sword and Shield* subscribers.

CHILDREN OF YOUTH

Lo, children are an heritage of the LORD: and the fruit of the womb is his reward.

As arrows are in the hand of a mighty man; so are children of the youth.

*Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them: they shall not be ashamed,
but they shall speak with the enemies in the gate.* — Psalm 127:3–5

A lovely scene we have in these verses. This lovely scene is the covenant home. You can see the scene in your mind's eye. You are familiar with it. The mother who rises each morning and gives herself to the needs of her family. The father who sits down for dinner with his family, and they eat and drink together, they open the scriptures and read and discuss, and they bow their heads and pray. Can we enumerate all the labors that go into this covenant home? It is quite impossible. The covenant home is a wonder of grace in which a host of labors come together in the raising of children who fear the Lord and confront the enemies in the gate. Verse 2 of the psalm says simply that the laborers in this home “rise up early,” “sit up late,” and “eat the bread of sorrows.” For in this lovely scene, it is not all pleasantries, but the scene involves sorrows too. Parents, late at night, praying for their wayward children. The son who must be rebuked. The daughter who must be warned. The scene involves the anguish of parents who struggle to raise their children in the fear of the Lord in this sin-cursed and weary world.

The Lord loves children, for in himself he is Father and Son in the most blessed fellowship in the Spirit. His being is the perfect home for the fellowship of the covenant God. And God's dearest possession in all the world is his Son, Jesus Christ, the one by whom God made all things and for whom he made all things. And in his Son, God establishes a covenant with his elect. In that covenant God builds their homes and gives them a piece of his covenant to have and to enjoy in their homes.

Oh, indeed, it must be true that “except the LORD build the house, they labour in vain that build it.” Jehovah, Jehovah alone, builds covenant homes. He does that in and through the labors of covenant parents. The covenant home is one that Jehovah builds; and in that home that he builds, he gives believers a glorious work in his covenant. By extension this includes the good Christian school established by believers. Verse 1 explicitly mentions “the city,” which is a fellowship of various homes, so that the psalm views God's building the homes of believers as the way in which he also builds his city, the church, which is his kingdom.

The psalm declares the work in the home and on behalf of the home to be vanity except Jehovah builds, which means that labors apart from and outside Jehovah's building are not only fruitless but also condemnable and damnable. The home that Jehovah does not build is the home that he tears down and destroys. Yet for believers there can be the appearance of vanity and the thoughts that their work is vanity. With the truth that Jehovah builds the homes of believers, the psalm comforts them in their weariness and thoughts of vanity in their labors.

But “children are an heritage of the LORD”!

Wonderful confession about this home in the psalm!

The central work of this home and also the cause of much weariness in this home are children. May we say that this home in the psalm and all its labors surround the children? Yes! Jehovah builds homes of believers by giving children. It is also the children who are the main work of the home and who are the reason for many anxieties, fears, and concerns of believing parents. The psalm is concerned with the proper view of the children of the godly home. Verses 3–5 are Jehovah God's praise of his children to believers. He commends his children to believers and commends the lives of believers that are given to children. Over against the work of raising these children, Jehovah comforts believers with the truth of his sovereignty, especially in the lives of their children. And God promises his happiness to believers in their children.

Lo, children!

God speaks in the psalm of the children of believers. This ought to be obvious because the house that is built in the psalm by the gift of children is a house built by “the LORD.” Jehovah does not build every man's house. Jehovah blesses the house of the righteous and builds it. But “the curse of the LORD is in the house of the wicked” (Prov. 3:33): the house of the wicked and everything in it are under Jehovah's ban, and he tears down the house of the wicked in myriad ways. Jehovah builds the houses of believers, and he does that through their children.

Children of youth!

God ordained the youth of the man and his wife as the

time of having children. Not all men and women are like Abraham and Sarah, who had a child late in their lives. Youth is given to men and women to have children. The will of God for young men and women is that they marry and have children. This is the reason for the strength of youth. God gives strength in youth, and it is to be used in the interest of children.

Concerning the children of believers, the psalm takes a startling and remarkable view: these children are “an heritage of the LORD.” Children are a heritage as Jehovah gives them to believers. Children are a heritage in order that Jehovah builds their houses. Children are a heritage not by their parents’ upbringing or through their parents’ labors. But children are “an heritage of the LORD” as they come from the hand of God and are given to a covenant home.

Such a statement that children are “an heritage of the LORD” is remarkable over against the people of the world, who are worse than lions and bears and more like savages who butcher and brutalize their children. The text is not a general statement about the glory and goodness of all children, but in its statement about the children of believers, it rebukes the world, who views children as nuisances, drags upon resources, hindrances to selfish lifestyles, pawns in parents’ plans, instruments of parents’ pleasure to raise and spoil as they please, subjects of parental whims regarding whether the children live or die, means to parents’ selfish ends, and grist for military mills that grind up children by the thousands. How is it not true with respect to children that worldly parents are implacable, unmerciful, and cruel!

That children of youth are “an heritage of the LORD” is remarkable over against the corrupt missionary zeal of many who despise the growth of the church in her children. These zealots compass land and sea to make one disciple and then make him twofold more the child of the devil than themselves. In the interest of their supposed mission zeal, children are abandoned to missionary camps so that their parents can engage in a supposedly more glorious work of missions.

Such a view of children as “an heritage of the LORD” is remarkable over against a church world that has bought wholesale into the thinking of the world, which the world euphemistically calls “family planning,” but which is the calculated and deliberate minimization or destruction of children by all sorts of means.

Jehovah’s praise of his children is remarkable over against many men and women who are capable of having children of youth and who should desire children of youth but instead deliberately put off having children of youth. These men and women say about their youth, “Our youth is ours, and we do not want to waste our youth with children. Our youth is for building up our bank accounts, our portfolios, and our possessions. And

our youth is for having a good time vacationing without children, reposing in sunny locations with drinks in our hands.” Jehovah’s praise of his children rebukes many who are fully able to have children in the prime of their lives but who deliberately cease from having children by means of medical operations upon the male or the female or by the use of powerful, body-altering chemicals so that they will not have children of youth. Or if they must satisfy a selfish desire of the womb for a baby, they have only one or two. They deliberately make themselves old when God gave them youth for the purpose of having children.

Over against all of this carnality and unbelief, Jehovah declares about his children, “Lo, children are an heritage of the LORD.”

What a glorious commendation of children! Can anything more precious be said about children than that they are Jehovah’s heritage? He claims them as his own and as an inheritance, in which he dwells and which he distributes as a most precious possession.

Israel as a nation was Jehovah’s heritage, chosen and redeemed out of all nations of the earth and in whom and with whom God dwelt according to his gracious purpose in election. And as a symbol of that and as the Israelite’s share in that, God gave to each family of Israel a piece of Canaan. The heritage of the Israelite was Jehovah’s gift of a piece of the land of Canaan to every Israelite family. In Canaan God dwelt with his people. A little piece of heaven for them! Thus an inheritance is fundamentally a gracious gift because of Jehovah’s election and his redemption, and that inheritance is distributed according to his sovereign will. And so whatever else you might have to say about Jehovah’s *heritage*, it is a covenantal term. It is God’s gift to his people in the covenant of grace and for their blessing and salvation. The proper view of children is proper covenantal thinking, just as surely as the improper view of children is anti-covenantal thinking. That the covenant children are Jehovah’s heritage means that they are the objects of his grace and as such are also gracious gifts from Jehovah.

That the covenant children are the objects of Jehovah’s grace is the reason they are called Jehovah’s heritage. That is also why they are called not only “an heritage” but also the “fruit of the womb” and “his reward.” All this emphasizes that the children who are called Jehovah’s heritage are the objects of his grace and thus are also gracious gifts. They are not given to the parents in order that the parents may make the children members of God’s covenant; children are not given in order that by instruction the parents will lead the children to accept God’s covenant. Children are given as those who are in God’s covenant and thus are numbered among his chosen people.

To put the matter negatively: if a child of believers is not himself the object of Jehovah’s grace, he is not a gracious gift but is a grief of mind, soul, spirit, and heart. The

psalm is not extolling all the children of the world. The psalm is not speaking of all the children of believers. But Jehovah speaks of his elect children and thus those who are the objects of Jehovah's grace. They are his heritage, the fruit of the womb, and his reward. These children he chose in love out of all people before the beginning of the world and appointed to them his covenant and promised to be a God unto them. These precious children God also bought and redeemed by the lamb slain before the foundation of the world and who was thus crucified on Calvary as their head and savior. An inheritance is always secured at the death of the one who gives it. So the one who promised the inheritance also secured it by Christ's death. And these children as the heritage of Jehovah are given according to God's sovereign right of distribution: to this home this one and to that home these ones.

Thus God gives children as a gracious reward. The rewards of God are always gracious. The graciousness of the reward stands in contrast to all earning and merit. Jesus Christ earned his own gracious reward at Calvary. God rewards his people. He rewards them richly and bountifully. He daily heaps benefit after benefit upon them. And these children are Jehovah's reward. To demolish the human pretension that man builds his house or that man causes his children to be Jehovah's children and to teach believers that God builds their houses, he teaches that the children by which houses are built are God's gracious gifts.

And children who are Jehovah's heritage and his gracious reward are also the fruit of the womb. He gives these children by making the womb of the covenant mother fruitful. The womb of the daughter of Eve is naturally unfruitful; it is barren. It is barren in the sense that the womb cannot bring forth children of God. And still worse, the womb is a grave. The womb may bring forth many children, for the command to man is to be fruitful and to multiply. God surely gives to everyone their children. But the only children whom the womb by nature can bring forth are carnal children of the world. Man is a vicious stock that brings forth corrupt children. So we confess that by nature our children are conceived and born dead in trespasses and in sins, that they stand outside the kingdom of heaven, and that except they be born again, they cannot even see that kingdom. The womb is utterly barren as far as bringing forth children who are Jehovah's heritage and his reward. The power of God's grace operates in the womb of the covenant mother and upon her children in order to bring forth elect, redeemed, and regenerated children of his grace.

Since children are "an heritage of the LORD," this destroys the false opinions of the Baptists who forbid the sacrament of baptism to a vast part of Jehovah's heritage and refuse to children membership in the church and covenant. God calls children his heritage so that his church

is made up of believers and their children. Children who were Jehovah's heritage in the Old Testament had to be circumcised. And since God calls the New Testament church the Israel of God, the church's children must be baptized. This is saying nothing different than what Christ stated as the ground for infant baptism when he said, "Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God" (Mark 10:14). Christ was teaching the New Testament church that she must view her children as members of his covenant, as the Old Testament did, because God includes children in his heritage as the objects of his grace. As a sign and seal of that work, God commanded circumcision in the Old Testament and baptism of children in the New Testament.

So also the psalm destroys the notion that all the children of the womb are Jehovah's heritage. No, the sovereign will of God determines his own heritage, so that in the Old Testament he loved Jacob and hated Esau. So also in the New Testament, the fruit of the womb, the reward of the Lord, and his heritage are his children according to the election of grace.

Besides, both the view of the Baptist and the view that all children are the heritage of Jehovah imply that the parents' upbringing of their children and a child's own choice as a consequence of that upbringing is decisive in the child's salvation. Rather, children come to parents as gifts of God, as saved, as his heritage, his reward, and his fruit bestowed by grace from the wombs of covenant mothers.

Arrows!

Such children are as arrows in the hand of a mighty man. Under that simile, God speaks of the highest purpose for the raising of covenant children. It is not as though the raising of these children is unimportant. But that raising must aim at the highest purpose, the very purpose of God in giving the children.

Children are as arrows in the hand of a mighty man! These children are not called simply arrows but arrows in the hand of a mighty man. A mighty man was a mighty man of valor, a man well trained in the art of war and whose skills were honed to a razor's edge. When such a mighty man fired his arrows, they all found their mark, and thus such a man was overwhelming in battle. To speak in our language, that comparison brings to mind the difference between handing a gun to a novice recruit and handing a gun to a member of some elite unit. The bullets of the latter generally will find their mark with unfailing accuracy, while the bullets of the former are fired with little accuracy and are often wide of their mark. So arrows in the hand of the mighty man are arrows that find their mark.

Further, for a Hebrew man the comparison between children and arrows would have been natural because as warriors are prone to name their guns, so the Bowman

called his arrows sons of the quiver. So children of youth are as the sons of the quiver of the expert archer.

Thus the bull's-eye, the mark, at which children are to be aimed is the same as the mark at which every believer is to aim, which is the glory of God. He calls children his heritage, and it is the highest purpose of the heritage of Jehovah God to worship, praise, honor, fear, and glorify him. The arrow must hit that mark of the glory of God.

And when God speaks of children as arrows in the hand of the mighty man, God is not comparing the parent to the mighty man who is able to direct his arrows to hit the mark, but God is explaining how Jehovah unfailingly directs those children to the mark of his glory. He gives the children, and he causes them to serve his purpose.

The gracious work of Jehovah in giving children and directing them to the purpose of his glory means their salvation. Their salvation does not depend on their decisions for Christ, on their ratifying the promised salvation, or on their good works but on Jehovah's gracious gift of salvation to them.

The outward evidence of that inward and invisible salvation is their own bold and unashamed confessions of the truth. This is what God means when he says, "They shall not be ashamed, but they shall speak with the enemies in the gate." This is stated in the language of God's covenant promise to Abraham that his "seed shall possess the gate of his enemies" (Gen. 22:17). To possess the gate of a city was to possess the city and to rule it. Furthermore, the gate was the place of public preaching and the judgments of the court of law. In the bold and unashamed confessions of Jehovah as their God by the children of believers and their opposition to the enemies of Jehovah, God is glorified, and the children's purpose is reached. The work of God in their hearts and his grace in their lives become evident in their boldness in confessing the truth. The work of God's grace in their hearts becomes evident in their opposition to all that is opposed to God, his covenant, and his kingdom. When they speak against the enemies in the gate, the power of that war is the Word of God. The nature of that warfare is spiritual, and the victory in that warfare is the Lord's.

That those enemies are in the gate teaches that this warfare of the children of believers is especially against those who call themselves church and those who are born in the sphere of the kingdom but who are not church and who do not belong to the kingdom of God. The opposition becomes fiercest and the boldness becomes most notable against those who are closest.

Further, when God speaks of the children's boldness in confronting enemies, he is teaching that by means of those children God extends his kingdom. God extends his kingdom and the holy gospel by his work of grace in the hearts of the children of believers for the salvation of

those children and the glory of his name. He builds his kingdom by building the homes of believers through the generations of their children. He confronts and destroys the kingdom of Satan by that means. God causes his glory to stand out in those confessions.

Thus the purpose of God controls the upbringing of these children. Believing parents are to enjoy their children as from the Lord. Believing parents are to receive their children as from the hand of Jehovah and to delight themselves in their children as gifts and rewards from God. Is that not part of the beautiful scene that lies behind the text? Covenant parents and their children fellowshiping in the truth and enjoying each other's company.

But above all, believing parents are to direct their children to Jehovah, whose children they are. This is implied not only by God's declaration that these children be directed to the purpose of his glory, but also by calling them Jehovah's heritage: a heritage was a gracious gift, and it determined a man's life. It was his piece of ground that he worked and in which and for which he labored before and unto the Lord. So these children are the parents' work. And also when God calls these children arrows in the hand of the mighty man, God places that quiver of children with the father and mother and says to them, "Now, so direct your children."

This work involves above all directing them to the glory of God: teaching them Jehovah's truth, at the heart of which is the glory of Jehovah as the sovereign God of all grace; bringing them up in the true doctrine of salvation; and teaching them to sing God's praise and to know, love, and trust him with all their hearts.

On that way these children will also find their mark in their parents. According to God's own doing, children are like arrows that find their mark in their parents too. The children cause parents to mortify themselves. God demands that for the purpose of teaching children and directing them that the mother devote her life to the home. Her hard work consists of the labors in the home and in the sphere of the home. The Bible everywhere extols that as the will of God. She gives her life, first, to bearing children and, second, to raising them. The children are arrows in that they mortify her flesh. That is God's work. Children cause the old man in the husband and father to be mortified. The father must instruct, discipline, and correct his children. He must give of his time and energy for them. Especially, this involves the Christian school because to direct children to the glory of God and as Jehovah's heritage, they cannot be educated with apostate Israelites, Philistines, Moabites, and Ammonites. So a good Christian school of like-minded parents and children must be formed at great expense. Children bring with them trials as well as joys, and so they bring their parents to watch themselves; to give themselves to prayer,

warnings, admonitions, and encouragements, for so often parents need the same admonitions, warnings, and encouragements as the children do. And God uses children for the spiritual profit of their parents as the children find their mark as arrows in the hand of a mighty man.

And how all this stands in contrast to the wicked man, who abuses or misuses his children by violence or for his own gratification and pleasure. He uses them as his personal slaves. He treats them as whipping boys. How such a spiritual upbringing contrasts with the man who only teaches his boys to be good businessmen or only teaches his children to save money or not to burp at the dinner table. Such men—whether the brute or the shallow worldling—waste their children and thus their youth when they direct their children to every end but God. The father who does not teach his children the truth abuses his children as surely as if he took them in violence and whipped them for no reason.

But above all, a man who will not direct his children who are God's children to the purpose of the glory of God fights God, for what that man does with his children he does with Jehovah's heritage. God stands opposed to that man in his purpose, and that man will be overcome either to his repentance or to his destruction. Just as surely, the man who directs his children to the purpose of the glory of God will be prospered in his purpose by God, and that man's labor will not be in vain in the Lord.

Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with such children. The Hebrew of the psalm is not *blessed is the man whose quiver is full* but *blessed is the man who fills his quiver with such children*. The psalm speaks of the happiness of the man who gives his life to raising such covenant children. And by extension and by obvious implication, the psalm speaks of the happiness of his wife who gives herself to raising such children.

When the psalm speaks of a man's filling his quiver with these arrows, the psalm is not speaking of mere numbers. The psalm is also not taking the view of many—also many today—that this or that number of children is enough. The psalm speaks of a goodly number of children as a good and blessed thing, provided those children are Jehovah's children. But a man cannot be like a polecat or a lion and simply have children. If he simply has children and never raises them and teaches them, then both his family and the church have sorrows as the whole house lives undisciplined and unregulated by any law but their own.

Certainly, the idea of the psalm with the words "quiver full" is not the carnal idea of the Quiverfull movement, which seeks to establish earthly dominion, to build an earthly kingdom, and to have an influence in politics on the earth by means of their prodigious number of children. That thinking makes the whole psalm carnal and earthly, while the psalm is very much spiritual and heavenly.

The psalm praises not merely the number of children, but also the kind of children. A man is happy whose quiver is full of children who are like arrows in the hand of the mighty man. The psalm is not being idealistic, for it obviously speaks of hard work, vanity in all labors apart from the truth that Jehovah builds godly homes and specifically that Jehovah does that through giving as his gracious gift children of youth who are Jehovah's heritage. He gives those children. He directs them to the purpose of his glory and to their salvation and even to the salvation of the parents. And the man is happy who fills his quiver with such children. He has children; he desires them; he delights in them as an expert warrior delights in acquiring good weapons. He is happy in his children.

His happiness consists in seeing his children's unashamed confessions of the truth and their speaking with the enemies in the gate. This is the fruit upon the labors. But that is a gift from Jehovah God who gave those children. He gives children; he directs them to the purpose of his glory; and they actually do that. Apart from this truth that everything depends on God, there is no happiness in having and raising children.

And those children are for our happiness. God gives us happiness in and through our children. The world and Satan and our own flesh present the vacation to the Bahamas, Mexico, or Hawaii without children as the way to fulfillment and happiness. I ask, "What would you rather see: the confessions of faith of your children, their bold confessions of the truth as held in the Reformed Protestant Churches, or their having good careers in the world and forsaking the truth?"

The believer answers, "I want my children to be bold and unashamed and to confront the enemies in the gate! That is my joy: I have no greater joy than to see my children walk in the truth, just as I have no greater grief than if my children were ashamed of the truth and took the side of the enemy." Even in this there is no vanity, for the Lord's will and purpose are done, and he is glorified.

Happiness is to the man who fills his quiver with children. And happy is the woman who gives herself to the home and to those children. God gives happiness to that man and woman, just as surely as he withholds it from those who seek happiness anywhere else.

And God teaches this to us, so that we have the right view of our children; that we receive them from the hand of God as such; that we bring them for baptism as such; that we teach them as such; that we have comfort in our weariness in raising them; that in this most important work in the world, we rest in this truth that children are the heritage of Jehovah; that all our labors are controlled by that truth; that all our weariness is relieved by that truth; and that we live happily with our children before Jehovah.

—N.J.L.

All-points bulletin!

A new rubric is in the works for *Sword and Shield*, and we need the help of our interested and eagle-eyed readers to help fill the rubric.

Sword and Shield is a believers' paper. It is not the paper of the board of Reformed Believers Publishing; it is not the paper of the editor; it is the paper of believers. The board is made up of those believers, and the men and women who write in the magazine are those believers. It is the fundamental task of the believer to witness to the truth before the world. This calling is in part carried out in *Sword and Shield*. The men who started Reformed Believers Publishing and those who support it now believe that this is important to emphasize. To reflect this reality, *Sword and Shield* started the rubric *Running Footmen*, which is staffed by a willing group of men and women supporters of *Sword and Shield*.

In this same vein supporters of *Sword and Shield* can help fill another new rubric called *Insights*. The concept of the rubric is for the readers and supporters of *Sword and Shield* to send in interesting—perhaps shocking, either good or bad—or edifying theological quotations from the reading that they have done or are doing. Some may find that they send in only a quotation. Others may find that they want

to explain briefly the importance of the quotation they submit. Another option is for a reader to set pen to paper—or fingers to keyboard—and write up a little blurb on important events of the day. You see that this rubric is wide-ranging. We are aiming for around a page for each submission. If the submissions are short, then perhaps we will publish a number of submissions together to make up one page.

A caution!

If you send something in, and it does not immediately get published, do not worry or suppose that your submission is unwanted. The plan is that the rubric will be published occasionally on no fixed schedule. We would also like to build up a file of these items for use as needed. Please send all submissions to the editor. And please cite where the quotation is found.

For the rest, in this issue you will find the usual writers. We note that Garrett Varner is beginning a series on the beatitudes. Eddie Ophoff writes “A Whale of a Scruple” for *Running Footmen*. Rev. Luke Bomers is publishing in *Our Doctrine* a transcript of a speech that he recently gave for Berean Reformed Protestant Church in Singapore.

May the Lord bless this issue for the cause of his kingdom and as a witness to the truth.

—NJP

Announcement from Reformed Believers Publishing

As summer passes and the cool of fall arrives, it is time to make plans to attend the fourth annual meeting of Reformed Believers Publishing (RBP), the association that publishes *Sword and Shield*. The meeting will be held Friday, October 20, 2023, at 7:30 p.m. at the Wonderland Tire shop at 1 84th Street SW, Byron Center, MI 49315. The board encourages those who live outside the West Michigan area and parents with their children to attend this meeting. It is the highlight of the year for RBP and a time to enjoy fellowship with like-minded believers who are committed to the glorious privilege of publishing the truth of the sovereignty of God in salvation.

Rev. Luke Bomers, pastor of Zion Reformed Protestant Church of Yucaipa, California, will deliver the

keynote speech on the topic “The Office of Believer: 1953 and Today.” There will also be remarks by the chairman, secretary, and treasurer of the RBP board. If you are unable to attend the meeting in person, there are plans to livestream the meeting.

The annual meeting is also your opportunity to join Reformed Believers Publishing as an association member. Membership is open to all Reformed believers wherever they live. If you are interested in becoming a member, submit your request for membership to the board by using the website (reformedbelieverspub.org) or the other information on the masthead of *Sword and Shield*. New members will be received by vote of the current RBP members at the annual meeting in October, so submit your requests soon.

REFORMED? NOT AT ALL! (1)

Playing the Nice Guy

A year ago Prof. R. Cammenga started a series in the *Standard Bearer* entitled “Antinomian? Without a Doubt.” This series has been going on now for seven articles and is aimed at the theology of the Reformed Protestant Churches (RPC). Professor Cammenga writes,

In a few articles, I hope to demonstrate this distortion of the gospel of grace that has been embraced and is being aggressively promoted by the RPC. It is also my intention to demonstrate that, contrary to the charge of the RPC, the PRC remain faithful to the gospel of God’s sovereign, particular grace as set forth in Scripture and defended in the Reformed creeds. From their founding nearly one hundred years ago, the PRC by God’s grace have remained faithful to the truth, rejecting error both on the left and on the right. The leaders of the RPC have departed from the old paths and have laid another foundation than that which was laid in 1924 when the PRC were birthed.¹

I was inclined to wait until the professor finished writing his series, but it seems that the series will be interminable. He started with the supposed first error of the RPC on repentance and forgiveness. He has been beating that like a dead horse now, especially by mangling the creeds and cherry-picking quotations from John Calvin. And Professor Cammenga still has to cover what the Protestant Reformed theologians say about this supposed error. Then he has to get to an as yet unnamed second error of the Reformed Protestant Churches, which I assume he will cover in the same belabored and self-serving way. Besides, Professor Cammenga has already written enough to show that on the subject of repentance and forgiveness he is not Reformed at all. And if he is not Reformed at all on these subjects, he is simply not Reformed at all.

Professor Cammenga begins his attack on the RPC with the same refuge of false teachers throughout the ages: he plays the nice guy. So he writes,

At the outset, I want to be clear that I am not interested in character assassination. I do not in any way want to assault persons. I am interested in the truth—biblical and confessional truth. In my defense of the truth, I consider it to be my duty to expose error as did our Lord and His apostles. I will strive to speak the truth in love, as is the calling of every Christian according to Ephesians 4:15. It is not enough that we speak the truth; we are called to speak the truth *in love*. My aim is especially to help our readers in assessing the teaching of the leaders of the RPC. I am also interested in convincing those who have been led astray. I fervently desire the return of those who have left the PRC. I also pray for the repentance of the leaders of the RPC. May God use these articles to these ends. (98, 18:419)

This is pandering to a Protestant Reformed audience and a broader Reformed church-world that does the work of the Lord lackadaisically, has no stomach for battle, and believes that the cardinal sin of a preacher or writer is to be mean. But as Martin Luther said, “Their writings accomplish nothing because they refrain from chiding, biting, and giving offense.” Speaking the truth in love is not speaking the truth without attacking persons or speaking the truth while appearing to be cordial. Professor Cammenga seems to think that because one speaks the truth in a nice way that this will appeal more to people, and they can be convinced more easily of the truth. But that false notion of speaking the truth in love is nothing more than speaking with man’s wisdom. Look at the prophets. Look at our Lord. Look at the apostle Paul and the apostle Peter. Look at Luther and Calvin. Did they not attack persons?

So I want to tell Professor Cammenga that he should stop pandering to weak and shallow people who are offended by the business of defending the truth and to get busy attacking us. If we are antinomians, then we are wicked, plain and simple. The scripture damns those who turn the grace of God into lasciviousness as antinomians

¹ Ronald Cammenga, “Antinomian? Without a Doubt,” *Standard Bearer* 98, no. 18 (July 2022): 418–19. Subsequent references to quotations from this series of articles will be given in text.

do. If we are schismatics, as he charges, then we are likewise wicked, even grossly so, because we destroy in the temple of God, and he who destroys in God's temple him will God destroy.

I also can assure Professor Cammenga over against his prayer for our repentance that I remain impenitent in my schism and in my antinomianism. I welcome his charges and wear them as badges of honor given by Jesus Christ, whom Professor Cammenga's spiritual forefathers likewise name-called a glutton and winebibber and a friend of publicans and sinners and whom they branded and dismissed as a Nazarene.

And at the same time, I condemn Professor Cammenga as a false teacher like those who have always troubled the churches with their lies, and I do so speaking the truth in love. This means to speak the truth in love for that truth and then in hatred for the lie and those who teach it. Perhaps he will hear this harsh condemnation and repent of his false doctrine; and if not, perhaps some of God's people will hear and get away from his tent.

The reformation leading to the formation of the Reformed Protestant Churches has been vicious. That is how spiritual warfare is and how it must be as part of the history-long antithesis between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman. I do not say that out of a mean spirit. That is the nature of spiritual warfare. For too long in the PRC, there has been none of the spirit of contending earnestly for the faith. And now they contend, but they contend against the truth, which they damn and reprobate as antinomianism, and treat with the utmost disdain the ministers of truth, all the while professing not to want to assassinate persons and characters. You cannot attack the truth without attacking those who teach it. Christ said that: "If they reject you, they reject me and reject him who sent me." Likewise, you cannot contend against a lie without naming and attacking those who teach it. But the characters of men are not the most important. The most important things are the honor and character of God and Jesus Christ, who are assassinated in attacks on the truth. And whoever loves Christ cannot help but be vehement in his defense. So at the very least, if Professor Cammenga has the truth, his pandering to the unspiritual and squeamish in his audience by his caveat is the revelation that he does not love the truth that he claims to have.

In this vein I would encourage him if he attacks us and the truth again to use our names when he quotes us. It is not very scholarly to make unnamed quotations, and besides, it is weird. Are we the unmentionables? When someone uses quotes from our writings, he is supposed to give not only the source of the quotation but also the author of the quotation. I think perhaps Professor's Cammenga's tender audience might be able to handle that

without thinking—gasp!—that he is attacking persons. I will claim quotations if they are my words and defend them unless he can convince me by the creeds or scripture that my words are wrong.

Get Your History Straight

In my reply to Professor Cammenga, I make a historical observation. He and many others in the PRC are habitual liars in their continual crafting of a false narrative of events in the PRC from 2015 onward that led to the formation of the Reformed Protestant Churches. Professor Cammenga writes,

Three ministers, Nathan Langerak, Andrew Lanning, and Martin VanderWal, have led the schismatics out of the PRC. They have organized themselves as the Reformed Protestant Churches (RPC). At the time that they left the PRC, these ministers were guilty of public schism. One had been deposed for this sin.

Besides the sin of public schism, there is also a critical theological issue involved in the breech [*sic*] between the RPC and the PRC. Since they have left, in their writings in the magazine they founded, *Sword and Shield*, in the public speeches they have given, and in the sermons they have preached, the leaders of the RPC have developed in this error. Their error is the error of antinomianism. Although it is true that the ministers were never formally charged with antinomianism when they were in the PRC, there were indications already then of antinomian tendencies. Since then there has been doctrinal development (declension). (98, 18:418)

Let us get our history straight.

Besides, it is always good to review our history. It makes those who want to forget it or craft their own narrative uncomfortable, while also being beneficial to those who went through the history. The history could fill a book, but I will give the highlights. Rev. David Overway of Hope Protestant Reformed Church preached a number of atrocious sermons that were charged with false doctrine. By his denial of justification by faith alone in the believer's experience (!), he also denied the unconditional nature of the covenant in the believer's experience (!). The most egregious of these sermons was on the text John 14:6. In the sermon he taught that Jesus Christ and man through man's Spirit-wrought works are the way to the Father. Many in the PRC leadership and clergy believed that, and the sermons could not be condemned.

When Neil Meyer, an elder from Hope church, protested the sermon on John 14:6, he was falsely charged with being an antinomian. This is relevant because the

charge of antinomianism in this controversy was false from the beginning. It was the invention of men like Rev. K. Koole, the elders at Hope church and Grandville Protestant Reformed Church, and Professor Cammenga—among others—in order to distract the churches from the false doctrine promoted by Reverend Overway and defended vigorously by the Protestant Reformed ministers, professors, and elders. It also was revelatory of their own hatred of the gospel of grace, which they instinctively smeared as antinomianism. Indeed, if you believed Reverend Overway’s doctrine, then you must necessarily call the gospel of grace antinomianism because it declares that Jesus Christ alone is the way to the Father, wholly apart from any consideration of your works but by faith alone. The issue in the controversy was not the gospel versus antinomianism, but the issue was Romish legalism versus the Reformation gospel of justification by faith alone.

I have called that charge of antinomianism a red herring, and others in the PRC, including Professor Engelsma, have also called the charge of antinomianism a red herring, and so it was.

Professor Cammenga went on and on about antinomianism in that controversy and even went on to make a fool of himself publicly by promoting in a protest to the Protestant Reformed Synod of 2017 a book against antinomianism by the rank false teacher of the conditional covenant, Mark Jones.² That protest by Professor Cammenga showed that he was not Reformed.³ Mark Jones hates the truth of the unconditional covenant that is the heritage of the PRC. Jones characterizes the unconditional covenant as antinomian; and along the way of his critique, he also reveals that he does not believe in justification by faith alone.⁴

The counsel of Professor Cammenga’s colleagues to those who were troubled by his protest and writings was to ignore him. I did not ignore him, but I wrote against Mark Jones. I admit that in my writings against Mark Jones, I should have attacked Professor Cammenga, but remember that such polemics were strongly cautioned against by many of my colleagues, who preferred that Professor Cammenga be allowed to rant while everyone pretended to pay attention and at a convenient time would dismiss him. Many did dismiss him, but being incapable of self-awareness or of knowing how others see him, he continued to make a buffoon of himself with

his silly charge of antinomianism stolen from the playbook of Mark Jones and other enemies of the truth of the unconditional covenant. I note that Professor Cammenga has not yet quoted Mark Jones against us in his series “Antinomian? Without a Doubt.”

In 2018 Rev. David Overway was offered up as a sacrificial lamb and condemned, however weakly. The Protestant Reformed Churches found it within themselves to say that he compromised the unconditional covenant and justification by faith alone. But the errors of Reverend Overway never went away. Too many had made clear that they believed the errors and were going to defend them and drive out those who opposed the errors.

The ink on the 2018 synodical decision had not yet dried, and Reverend Koole renewed the false doctrine with his article in the *Standard Bearer* concerning the calling of the Philippian jailor in Acts 16:30–31. In this article Koole taught that there is that which a man must do to be saved.⁵ In so doing he also called the exegesis of Herman Hoeksema of that same passage, “Nonsense!” (with an exclamation mark), and the charge of antinomianism was revived against those who opposed him.

In opposing this renewed threat, eventually it became evident that no one could write in the *Standard Bearer* against it, so a new magazine, *Sword and Shield*, was published. The publication of that magazine more than anything else galvanized the foes of the truth in the PRC, and they were determined—as one of their own said—to lance the boil.” Yet we were not charged on our doctrine. As Professor Cammenga admits, there were no doctrinal charges against us. Indeed, after the beginning of *Sword and Shield*, the enemies of the truth studiously avoided the issue of doctrine in the controversy. At the trial of Rev. A. Lanning at the January 2021 meeting of Classis East, it was said repeatedly and with some force that nothing was alleged against his doctrine. Professor Cammenga knows this. In my own suspension and in the suspension of Rev. M. VanderWal, nothing was alleged against our doctrine. It was all a matter of improper behavior. I speak for myself that there was not so much as a hint to me from my consistory that I was an antinomian. Many members of the consistory rolled their eyes at Professor Cammenga and wished he would just go away. Many spoke of the time when the younger men would take over in the PRC, and things would change. Shortly before my suspension,

2 Mark Jones, *Antinomianism: Reformed Theology’s Unwelcome Guest?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013).

3 “Protest of Prof. Ronald Cammenga,” in *Acts of Synod and Yearbook of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America 2017*, 268–77. By means of an appeal to the definitions of *antinomianism* by avowed enemies of the gospel of grace and the unconditional covenant, such as Mark Jones, Professor Cammenga made a concerted effort to prove that some of Neil Meyer’s statements were antinomian.

4 For the theology of Mark Jones, see my nine-part series, “The Charge of Antinomianism.” Although searching on the website of the Reformed Free Publishing Association is very difficult—deliberate?—the first article can be found at <https://rfpa.org/blogs/news/the-charge-of-antinomianism-1-a-false-charge>.

5 Kenneth Koole, “What Must I Do...?,” *Standard Bearer* 95, no. 1 (October 1, 2018): 6–9.

I wrote the document regarding the doctrinal issues in the controversy that the consistory of Crete Protestant Reformed Church adopted and published. And in that document, I made evaluations about the place of antinomianism in the controversy. I said that the charge of antinomianism was a red herring and a distraction, and the consistory agreed.

What Professor Cammenga is now doing with his narrative is to give legitimacy to his engagement in a long diatribe against the Reformed Protestants about antinomianism as though this has always been the issue in the controversy. His narrative and articles are also a self-congratulatory, “I told you so.” But antinomianism has not been the issue. Antinomianism has been, and it will remain, a distraction from the main issue: the gospel of the unconditional covenant and justification by faith alone.

Professor Cammenga goes on and on about antinomianism because he does not understand the gospel-truths of the unconditional covenant and justification by faith alone. He is offended by them.

The Protestant Reformed Churches have given up their heritage of these two truths. *Unconditional covenant* and *justification by faith alone* are empty words in the PRC, used as window dressing for what is the gospel of these churches: *a theology of man's works and actions empowered by grace as decisive in the sinner's reception and experience of salvation*. To put it bluntly their theology is that *in a certain, vital sense man is first in the matter of repentance and forgiveness and thus in the matter of the experience of salvation*.

To put that in historical context, the theology of Rev. Hubert De Wolf that conversion is a prerequisite to entrance into the kingdom of heaven, which was preached from the pulpit of First Protestant Reformed Church and defended in the consistory room during his examination as teaching merely that in a certain sense man is first, has won out in the PRC. The theology went underground. It changed its clothes. But it is the same old error.

Before Professor Cammenga continues his series on antinomianism, he should answer the charge of the writers of *Sword and Shield* that the man-first theology of the present-day PRC and the man-first theology of Rev. Hubert De Wolf are the same and use virtually the same language. This is the official dogma of the PRC: there are activities of man that precede the blessings of God (all by grace, of course).⁶ This was De Wolf's doctrine too. Perhaps in Professor Cammenga's examination of that, he will realize that he is far from the theology of Herman Hoeksema as that was distilled in the 1953 controversy in the PRC.

There was a doctrine at the heart of the recent controversy in the PRC, but it was not antinomianism. The

doctrine at the heart of the controversy was conditionalism in the experience of salvation inside the covenant of grace: once a man is in the covenant, he is empowered and enabled by God to do many things that are necessary for his salvation, so that the doing of those things precedes God's blessings upon those things; and without doing those things, he does not receive the blessings of God. Repentance for the forgiveness of sins is simply one example of that. Doing good works to have more and more of God's blessings or fellowship is another example.

A Wrong Approach

Next, I take issue with Professor Cammenga's definitions of *legalism* and *antinomianism*. He writes,

My approach in these articles will be to contrast legalism with antinomianism—the antinomianism of the RPC—on specific doctrinal issues, after which I will set forth the historic Reformed faith. (98, 18:419)

He chooses this approach because part of the Protestant Reformed narrative is that there are two ditches on each side of the gospel. Thus the PRC with its doctrine has managed to maneuver in such a way that it avoids both ditches. The gospel for the PRC is somewhere between these two ditches. I suppose, depending on whom one would ask, the gospel is nearer to one ditch than to the other. The two-ditch mantra is an old and tired one. The gospel stands not between two errors, but the gospel stands over against the one error of man as God.

Both legalism and antinomianism declare man as God. Legalism teaches that man's activities are decisive in salvation, so that man becomes his own savior. Antinomianism teaches that man may do as he pleases in his life without attention to the law of God, so that man becomes a law unto himself. Both legalism and antinomianism overthrow the sovereignty of God. The sovereignty of God is what is always at stake in every doctrinal controversy. That issue may be reduced into this simple formula that has held true since the garden of Eden: Is God God, or is man God?

So Professor Cammenga's approach is wrong because he views the gospel as a kind of balancing act between going off into the ditch of antinomianism or veering off into the ditch of legalism. I suppose it is something like this: the legalist declares too much that there is something that man must do to be saved, and the antinomian declares too much that there is nothing that man must do for salvation. So the theologian has to balance these two.

However, the task of the theologian is wholly different: it is not a balancing act between two false doctrines, but

⁶ *Acts of Synod and Yearbook of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America* 2020, 75–78.

his task is to declare God as God and to place man, man's salvation, and man's life in their proper places within that truth. God is God, and so man is not God. God is God, so man's salvation is all of God and none of man. God is God, and so man's whole life is to be worship of that God according as God tells man how he will be worshiped.

Because Professor Cammenga starts wrong, he cannot help but go wrong in his evaluation of the teaching of the Reformed Protestant Churches.

Sounds Like Rome

Then Professor Cammenga continues and defines legalism: "It is the teaching of legalism that repentance *earns* forgiveness" (98, 18:419).

He should know that not even Rome was that crass. Here is what the official dogma of the Roman Catholic Church is on contrition or repentance:

Contrition, which holds the first place amongst the aforesaid acts of the penitent, is a sorrow of mind, and a detestation for sin committed, with the purpose of not sinning for the future. This movement of contrition was at all times necessary for obtaining the pardon of sins; and, in one who has fallen after baptism, it then at length prepares for the remission of sins, when it is united with confidence in the divine mercy, and with the desire of performing the other things which are required for rightly receiving this sacrament.⁷

Rome's doctrine is that repentance is necessary before God forgives. Repentance is "necessary for obtaining the pardon of sins."

Professor Cammenga's definition is a self-serving one that allows him to place his doctrine in between Rome's, which teaches that repentance merits, and the antinomian's, who teaches that repentance is not necessary. But Professor Cammenga's doctrine bears a closer resemblance to Rome's. The quotation above from the decrees of the Council of Trent would fit very well in any article written by about any Protestant Reformed minister and especially an article written by Professor Cammenga. The Roman Catholic theologians at Trent would have hailed Professor Cammenga as a great theologian, who had great insights into the necessity of repentance, over against those nasty Protestants, who denigrated repentance by their detestable faith alone. After all, did they not know that faith is always accompanied by repentance and that repentance is necessary? The fact is that Rome did not need to use the word *earn* or *merit*. Instead, Trent used the words "necessary for obtaining the pardon of sins."

Professor Cammenga's doctrine is no different. In his atrocious and ham-fisted handling of question and answer 76 of the Heidelberg Catechism, he tells us that repentance obtains the forgiveness of sins. He writes,

The Heidelberg Catechism has a similar Q&A regarding the Lord's Supper. After asking in Q. 76 what it is to eat the crucified body and drink Christ's blood, the Catechism answers that it is "to embrace with a believing heart all the sufferings and death of Christ," and in that way "to obtain the pardon of sin and life eternal." Faith in Christ, which is always accompanied by repentance, clearly precedes "obtain[ing] the pardon of sin and life eternal." (98, 20:470)

Wow! If this does not tell us that Professor Cammenga is a Roman Catholic, I do not know what will convince anyone. His quotation is a rewrite of the Heidelberg Catechism. Cardinal Bellarmine could have signed Cammenga's rewrite of the Catechism. The Catechism does not say, "and in that way 'to obtain the pardon of sin and life eternal.'" The Catechism says this:

Q. 76. What is it then to eat the crucified body and drink the shed blood of Christ?

A. It is not only to embrace with a believing heart all the sufferings and death of Christ, and thereby to obtain the pardon of sin and life eternal... (*Confessions and Church Order*, 112–13)

The Catechism uses the word "thereby." The German word is *dadurch*. I suppose that you could translate *dadurch* as *way*, but the English translation "thereby" captures the sense here. The Catechism is talking about the instrument of our reception of "the pardon of sin and life eternal." Or to rephrase it, the Catechism is asking how it is that we come into the possession of Christ and all the glorious and saving righteousness, holiness, and satisfaction of Christ. Or you could say that the Catechism is talking about our justification and its benefit of eternal life. We receive that—as every good Protestant knows, and as a professor of theology in the Protestant Reformed Churches, of all places, should know—by faith alone. Alone! Leave repentance out of it. Alone! Leave good works out of it. Alone! Justification is through faith alone, or justification is by means of faith alone. The instrument of justification is faith. It alone justifies because it alone is united to Jesus Christ, and through faith we are covered by his righteousness imputed to us. This is all theology 101.

But what is curious is that in his haste to proof text from the creeds against the Reformed Protestant Churches,

⁷ The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, fourteenth session, "On Contrition," in Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes*, 6th ed., 3 vols. (New York: Harper and Row, 1931; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 2:144–45.

Professor Cammenga exposes himself as a false teacher, like those in Galatia who denied the Lord. For Cammenga writes, “Faith in Christ, which is always accompanied by repentance, clearly precedes ‘obtain[ing] the pardon of sin and life eternal’” (98, 20:470). This might be just sheer stupidity on his part or the writing of a logical and theological amateur. I would say that his whole framing of this controversy as a matter of before or after—whether repentance is before or repentance is after forgiveness—is the amateur fixation of a shallow man. I would also say that it is another red herring. The PRC are good at throwing out red herrings in order to distract from the main issue: whether there are activities of man that precede the blessings of God. So he argues: when the creeds teach that faith precedes forgiveness, this means that repentance precedes forgiveness because repentance and faith are always together.

What do you do with this kind of logic? As though the creed here is even talking about what precedes what. What an arid view of the creeds.

However, I do not believe that Professor Cammenga is as silly as his statement makes him seem. What he does there is to put repentance with faith as the way of obtaining forgiveness, and that is Romish. Repentance is necessary for obtaining the pardon of sins. You cannot on the words of the Catechism insert repentance into question and answer 76 without denying the Reformed, Protestant doctrine of justification by faith alone.

Then place Professor Cammenga’s amendment of the creed in the context of the subject in question and answer 76: What does it mean to eat Christ? This is such a compelling question because Christ said that except you eat him, you have no life in you. With that question of eating Christ, we come to the difference between faith and unbelief, heaven and hell, salvation and damnation. When Jesus taught his disciples about eating his flesh and drinking his blood and when by doing that he took away their works, then they all were offended and left Jesus, except for twelve, and one of them was a devil. You must eat Christ, or you have no life in you. And Christ said, and the Catechism says with him, that to eat Christ means in part to believe in him. It also means to be more and more united with his sacred body. But it means to believe in him. The fruit—fruit—of this is that we live and are forever governed by one Spirit.

But Professor Cammenga says that you eat Christ by faith and by repentance. And so Cammenga contradicts the Lord and also does despite to the Reformed creeds that he swore to uphold. That such a man would have the gall to charge others with antinomianism is shocking when he allows himself such wide latitude from his promises and oaths.

To prove that legalism and antinomianism are in essence the same, one only needs to look at the history of

legalism and see that those who bind the church by the law also allow themselves wide liberty to break the law. So Christ told the Pharisees that they devoured widows’ houses and dishonored their parents while claiming to be the most scrupulous about the observance of the law. And Rome, where one had to work his way to heaven by grace, was a stable of vices and wickedness.

And that tells you what Professor Cammenga’s doctrine is. Whatever our doctrine might be, his doctrine is without a doubt Romish and legalistic to the core, and he adds to his offense a cavalier and evil twisting of the Reformed creeds.

A better definition of *legalism* that fits all its forms is that legalism teaches that man’s activities by grace are decisive in salvation. That is legalism. That has been legalism all through history. That is legalism as it has morphed and took on different forms. This was the legalism of the Arminian, for instance, as that was described by the Synod of Dordt:

Error 4: Who teach that the new covenant of grace, which God the Father, through the mediation of the death of Christ, made with man, does not herein consist that we by faith, inasmuch as it accepts the merits of Christ, are justified before God and saved, but in the fact that God, having revoked the demand of perfect obedience of the law, regards faith itself and the obedience of faith, although imperfect, as the perfect obedience of the law, and does esteem it worthy of the reward of eternal life through grace.

Rejection: For these contradict the Scriptures: Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood (Rom. 3:24, 25). And these proclaim, as did the wicked Socinus, a new and strange justification of man before God, against the consensus of the whole church. (Canons of Dordt 2, error and rejection 4, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 165)

It is essential for the Reformed man not merely to contend with the legalism of Rome, which teaches that good works merit righteousness and among which is the act of repentance, but the Reformed man must also contend with legalism in the covenant of grace. It is the doctrine of the covenant that is uniquely Reformed, and it is the doctrine of the covenant that Satan attacks through false teachers by a species of legalism. The legalism of the Arminian doctrine at the Synod of Dordt was that the act of faith and the obedience of faith, although imperfect, were regarded as perfect and rewarded with eternal life by grace. Dordt pointed out that this was a new and

strange doctrine of justification—legalism—like the doctrine of the wicked Socinus. The legalism of the Arminian doctrine was that the activities of man—faith and obedience—were decisive in salvation.

And it is this same legalism that has destroyed the PRC. The activities of man are decisive in salvation. Ask any Protestant Reformed man in the pew: Is there that which man must do to be saved? He will answer yes. Ask him: Can God forgive if a man does not repent first? He will say no. Ask him: Must a man do good works to have the blessing of God? He will reply yes. Ask him: If a man does more good works, can he attain more of the fellowship of God? He will say of course. This is all legalism, man-first, Arminian theology.

That Is Not Antinomianism

Professor Cammenga then goes on to define *antinomianism*: “The teaching of the antinomians is that God forgives our sins *apart from our repentance*” (98, 18:419).

This definition is simply self-serving, and Professor Cammenga assumes what he needs to prove. The definition allows him to take a teaching and then to label it without any proof that it is antinomianism. Neither is the definition historically accurate. I know that Professor Cammenga stands in a long line of men who have attempted throughout history to label the gospel as antinomianism by pointing to certain doctrinal characteristics that supposedly lead to antinomianism or are antinomian. Professor Cammenga has labored hard for the Protestant Reformed Churches to buy into that theory. For one, it frees them from the obvious question: If they are antinomians, where is their lawlessness?

What an antinomian is is not hard to understand. Antinomians taught that the grace of God that delivers the sinner so delivers the sinner that he is free from the obligation to obey the law of God. The antinomians said, “We are delivered to do all this wickedness,” and consequently they lived lawless lives. The scriptures define antinomians as those who turn the grace of God into lasciviousness and use Christian liberty as a pretense for the indulgence and satisfaction of their own lusts (see Jude 1:4; Gal. 5:13).

Professor Cammenga goes on and on about antinomian tendencies and about antinomianism changing its form. But nowhere does he establish that his definition of antinomianism is, in fact, correct. In an attempt to bolster his definition, he quotes from John Flavel, who wrote that one of the main errors of the antinomians was “that believers are not bound to confess their sins, or pray for the pardon of them; because their sins were pardoned before they were committed; and pardoned sin is no sin” (98, 20:470).

Professor Cammenga knows that this has absolutely nothing to do with the present controversy. No one in the Reformed Protestant Churches teaches that because sins are forgiven before they are committed that no one is bound to confess their sins. The issue is not whether or not confession of sin is necessary. The issue is whether God, in fact, can forgive sins before repentance is performed by a man. The issue is whether repentance is first and that without repentance God cannot and does not forgive sins. The issue is whether there is forgiveness and justification of the sinner wholly and completely apart from his repentance.

Flavel was against this idea, and so is Professor Cammenga. Flavel condemned as an antinomian error the idea that sins are forgiven before men repent:

Now as to their errors about justification, the most that I have read do make *Justification to be an immanent and eternal act of God; and do affirm, the elect were justified before themselves or the world had a being*. Others come lower, and affirm, *The elect were justified at the time of Christ's death*. With these Dr. Crisp harmonizes.⁸

According to Flavel it is an error, and an antinomian error, to teach that men are forgiven in eternity or that they are forgiven at the cross. By that standard he would have condemned Abraham Kuyper, Herman Hoeksema, John Heys, and other Reformed stalwarts as antinomian.

Flavel was also a teacher of wretched Puritan doubt. He wrote that the antinomians erred when they taught, “That men ought not to doubt of their faith, or question, Whether we believe, or no: Nay, That we ought no more to question our faith than to question Christ (*Saltmarsh of Free Grace*, p. 92, 95).”

Flavel also wrote that a dread error of the antinomians was that

they will not allow the new covenant to be made properly with us, but with Christ for us; and that this covenant is all of it a promise, having no condition on our part. They do not absolutely deny that faith, repentance, and obedience are conditions in the new covenant; but say, They are not conditions on our part, but Christ's; and that he repented, believed, and obeyed for us (*Saltmarsh of Free Grace* p. 126, 127).

Flavel did not like the unconditional covenant and viewed it as antinomian. Flavel, then, knew about as much about antinomianism as Professor Cammenga does. Flavel would fit very well into the Protestant Reformed Churches of today. They might even make him

⁸ This quotation and the following quotations of Flavel are taken from *The Whole Works of the Rev. Mr. John Flavel*, six vols. (London: W. Baynes and Son, 1820), 3:556–57.

a professor of theology. However, Professor Cammenga should do some more reading in Hoeksema and Kuyper if he wants to understand what Reformed men believe. John Flavel in his book against antinomians was an earlier Mark Jones and Professor Cammenga: in criticizing

many as being antinomian, Flavel revealed that he did not understand or was terrified of the gospel.

I have written enough now. I will deal with more of Professor Cammenga's theology next time.

—NJP

UNDERSTANDING THE TIMES

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

A DISTORTED DOCTRINE OF PRAYER (2)

Introduction

We considered last time the distorted doctrine of prayer that is taught currently in the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) by Prof. Ronald Cammenga. We examined especially his idea of the “sincere desires” of question and answer 116 of the Heidelberg Catechism. In this article we will pick up our critical examination of this distorted doctrine of prayer as it has flooded every corner of the PRC.

This distorted doctrine of prayer featured large in the controversy that led to the formation of the Reformed Protestant Churches (RPC). It was the teaching of Rev. David Overway that prayer is “required in order for us to enjoy God’s grace, in order for us to enjoy His Spirit, His blessing.”¹ Reverend Overway’s teachings were judged by the Protestant Reformed synod to be improper, ambiguous, and as introducing a new purpose for good works; but the false doctrine was never eradicated. Reverend Overway’s doctrine of prayer is exactly what is being spread and spewed out of the PRC today, although some ministers cloak it better than others with beautiful words and true phrases. For God to give his grace and Holy Spirit in one’s consciousness depends upon one’s asking in prayer. In the way of prayer, one receives God’s grace consciously. By means of the activity of prayer, or through prayer, one receives all that one needs from God for body and soul. This teaching is conditional theology. It is a gross distortion

of the doctrine of prayer and a departure from the Catechism’s instruction on prayer. It is a sick and twisted doctrine of man.

We will approach the doctrine of prayer using the Catechism’s layout of the doctrine of prayer: first, by properly explaining the necessity of prayer, and second, flowing out of the necessity of prayer, by explaining the principles of all true prayer. May God bless these labors as we seek to recover the true doctrine of prayer that God’s name alone be glorified, and may God make us a people who have understanding of the times.

Chief Part of Thankfulness

In 1 Thessalonians 5:16–18 we read, “Rejoice evermore. Pray without ceasing. In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.” That praying without ceasing is our entire lives of thanksgiving. We live our whole lives in the Spirit consciously before the face of God in Jesus Christ. We live our lives seeking God’s glory. In that life of prayer there is the activity of prayer, and that activity of prayer is the concern of the Catechism in Lord’s Day 45. Lord’s Day 45 begins by asking the question, why is prayer necessary?

Q. 116. Why is prayer necessary for Christians?

A. Because it is the chief part of thankfulness which God requires of us; and also, because God will give His grace and Holy Spirit to those only

¹ David Overway, “Prayer: Required of Baptism,” sermon preached December 14, 2014, as quoted in *Acts of Synod and Yearbook of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America 2018*, 166–67.

who with sincere desires continually ask them of Him, and are thankful for them. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 134)

The Catechism's question itself is startling. Why is prayer necessary? Prayer is as necessary for a Christian as it is for a living creature to breathe air. Prayer is not optional. Prayer is essential to the life of the Christian. Prayer is the breath of the soul. If one does not breathe air or if one does not pray, the result will be the same. Prayer is as necessary for the regenerated Christian as food, drink, sleep, and air are necessary for living creatures.

The question of the Catechism is meant to expose us in how little we actually pray. That we need to be taught that prayer is necessary shows that there is something dreadfully wrong with us. We are so carnal and depraved that we have to be taught that it is important for us to breathe. Every time the Catechism is preached through, we have to be taught that prayer is necessary and essential as the breath of our souls. We need to learn about prayer. We need to know its importance in our lives. We need to be told just how carnal we are when it comes to prayer. We need to know how weak we are in prayer and how indifferent to prayer we are by nature. The question itself exposes our wickedness and lack of prayer.

The Catechism then gives its answer that prayer is necessary because it is the chief part of thankfulness. Immediately, the Catechism cuts off Professor Cammenga's and the PRC's distorted doctrine of prayer. The fact that the Catechism calls prayer the chief part of thankfulness opposes the use of Lord's Day 45 by the PRC.

Lord's Day 45 is in the section of the Catechism on thankfulness. Thankfulness shows itself in a life of good works. Good works are those that "proceed from a true faith, are performed according to the law of God, and to His glory" (Heidelberg Catechism, A 91 in *Confessions and Church Order*, 122). The activity of any good work cannot obtain from God in any sense. A God-wrought activity cannot obtain a God-wrought blessing. The performance of a good work cannot obtain any blessing of salvation in one's conscious experience. Good works are not and can never be the means or the way of any part of salvation, because good works are the fruits of faith.

Prayer is a good work. It is the chief good work, yet prayer is still a good work and is not an exception. We must understand prayer from the point of view of Lord's Day 32. In no sense is the activity of prayer a means unto or the way of receiving something from God. It is not something we do to get something. Thankfulness stands opposed to being a means. Thankfulness is not what man must do first before he gets something from God. Thankfulness is not the God-ordained way to obtain a God-wrought blessing.

Thankfulness is the result of God's eternal decree. It is

the result of election. It is the result of the grace and Holy Spirit of God. Thankfulness is the result of the redemption given in Jesus Christ by his perfect work on the cross. Thankfulness is the result of being renewed by the Spirit of Jesus Christ. Prayer is the result of the blessing of God. The fact that we even pray is itself a blessing of God. He gives our thankfulness to us (Joel 2:14; Eph. 2:10). He foreordained our prayers that we should walk in them. He gives us all our obedience and prayer. God gives his grace and Holy Spirit to his people, and out of that grace flows the chief part of thankfulness.

Grace and Holy Spirit

The Catechism continues its answer of why prayer is necessary for Christians. "And also, because God will give his grace and Holy Spirit to those only who with sincere desires continually ask them of Him, and are thankful for them." This is the phrase. It is precisely this part of the answer that has been made into a prerequisite and a condition. It is this corruption of the doctrine of prayer that has been spread through the PRC in regard to the experience of forgiveness of sins, the conscious enjoyment of salvation and the covenant, and the conscious experience of God's grace and Holy Spirit. The truth of this Lord's Day has been handled violently and deceitfully.

The language of the Catechism must be understood correctly. The Catechism is not teaching that we must pray before God does something in response. It is not teaching first prayer, then grace. It is not teaching that in the way of prayer God grants us his grace and Holy Spirit consciously. It is not teaching the activity of prayer first and by means of prayer God gives a blessing. It is not teaching that man does his part of praying and then God does his part of giving his grace and Holy Spirit. God did not give prayer as a prerequisite for the regenerated Christian to perform before God would give the next installment of salvation in the Christian's experience. God's blessing does not rest on our prayers or come in the way of our prayers or by means of our prayers.

The proper way to understand the answer of the Catechism that prayer is necessary "because God will give His grace and Holy Spirit to those only who with sincere desires continually ask them of Him, and are thankful for them," is that God will have us know and understand how completely, entirely, and wholly dependent we are on him. God would have us understand that we are nothing without him. We cannot take one breath or move one finger apart from God. We can do nothing without him. God causes us to know and understand how thoroughly dependent we are upon his grace and Holy Spirit.

We are utterly empty and destitute. By nature we are blind and ignorant of God the Father. We cannot know his name or the holiness of that name. We cannot bring

the kingdom. We cannot do his will. We cannot supply our daily bread. We have no righteousness. We have no holiness. We have no strength to fight against the powers of darkness. We are ignorant and rebellious creatures. We ask God for his grace and Holy Spirit not because we do not have it but because we desire it more and more out of the knowledge of our deep need and lack.

We ask God for his grace and Holy Spirit, and that is the confession that we need grace. The prayer of the child of God can be summarized in three words: I need grace. I am dependent upon that grace entirely. I need grace to pray. I need grace to know God. I need grace for the coming of God's kingdom. I need grace to do his will. I need grace to assure me of my justification. I need grace for the battle in this spiritual warfare. Prayer is the confession of the child of God that he needs grace. The activity of prayer does not obtain that grace.

The Christian prays out of the knowledge of that deep need and profound sense of lack. We are nothing. We have nothing. We can do nothing. We desire to be filled. We take our little cups to the inexhaustible fountain of all goodness to drink of the goodness of God by faith. We do not go to that fountain to add anything to God. We do not go to God in our prayers as the instruments with which to receive. Prayer is the expression of our emptiness. All of what we lack and need comes from God. God is our fullness, and of his fullness we receive grace for grace. That is the teaching of Reverend Hoeksema in *The Triple Knowledge*.

Nevertheless, let us never imagine that at any time in the process of our salvation we are first. The opposite is true. God creates in us the need. He creates in us the hunger and thirst after righteousness by His Holy Spirit and grace. He causes us to pray, to ask, to seek, to knock. And while we consciously seek and ask and pray to the God of our salvation, He answers our prayer and fulfills the need and fills us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ forevermore.²

God will not give his grace and Holy Spirit to one who does not ask. Why? Not because prayer is a means and if you do not pray, then you cannot receive from God. But the Catechism gives the answer that if one does not pray, he is unthankful. Why would God give his grace and Holy Spirit to an unthankful man? That man's confession is that he does not need God's grace and Holy Spirit. A thankful man is one who prays, and he is

thankful because he has received and continues to receive all the blessings of salvation by faith alone in Jesus Christ. That is the significance of the last phrase of answer 116 of the Catechism. It takes away the pretension and discards the notion that prayer is a means.

Prayer Distorted as Means

Professor Cammenga distorts the Catechism's doctrine of prayer by teaching it as a means.

Then by means of prayer also, we receive God's grace and Holy Spirit. Prayer, as we are going to see in the coming weeks, is the means by which we receive from God everything that we need. It doesn't take away from God's sovereignty, his determination in his will and counsel, to give us whatever it is. But God is pleased—the God who ordains what we will have is pleased to use prayer as the means. God is always a God of means.³

God has not only ordained everything, but he has ordained to do these things in the way of and by means of prayer. You see, God's decree does not only embrace the end, the goal, the ultimate and eternal goal, let alone the goal of, let us say, someone who is sick getting better. But God has also decreed the means to the goal. The means is prayer.⁴

And Professor Cammenga's distorted doctrine of prayer as a means is the doctrine of the PRC across the board.

This is the teaching of Rev. E. Guichelaar on Lord's Day 45:

What this is talking about is the continued enjoyment and the continued conscious experience of God's grace and Holy Spirit. It's talking about the knowledge and assurance of the forgiveness of sins and of being righteous through the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ. It's talking about the joy of salvation, having strong faith, having a certain hope of everlasting life. The child of God loses the enjoyment of these things and will not grow in knowledge and confidence when he's not praying for God's grace and for God's Holy Spirit...

Our God is a God who uses means...And he uses the prayers of his saints as the instruments, as the means, whereby they come to taste and to see that the Lord is good...And God says..."For I am the God who uses means. Do not expect

2 Herman Hoeksema, *The Triple Knowledge: An Exposition of the Heidelberg Catechism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1972), 3:462.

3 Ronald Cammenga, "In the School of Prayer (1): Why Pray?", sermon preached in Hudsonville Protestant Reformed Church on March 19, 2023, <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=319231925416178>.

4 Ronald Cammenga, "In the School of Prayer (3): Why Pray?", sermon preached in Hudsonville Protestant Reformed Church on April 23, 2023, <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=423231926506373>.

spiritual growth except in the way of asking for it. Prayer determines your spiritual growth.”⁵

This is the teaching of Rev. J. Engelsma on Lord's Day 45:

The grace that is being referred to here is the grace of God which sustains us consciously throughout our life as regenerated Christians. God is pleased ordinarily to provide us with what we need in the way of our asking those things of him in prayer. We ask, we seek, we knock, and he is pleased to provide.⁶

Reverend Engelsma attempts to hedge against the objection that this is “man-first theology.” Let me be the first to tell him that this is, in fact, “man-first theology.” One can understand the PRC’s use of the phrase *in the way of* to be *by means of* or *because of*, which does in fact make the activity of a prayer a prerequisite for the conscious experience of salvation in the covenant of grace. Man’s activity of prayer is the means for the obtaining of some blessing of God. That is the definition of “man-first theology,” to use Reverend Engelsma’s own words.

This is the teaching of Rev. M. De Boer on Lord's Day 45:

He is pleased to provide all our needs through prayer. He is pleased to provide what we need through prayer, and that includes even his grace and Holy Spirit...We need God’s grace and Holy Spirit to continue to work in us...He is determined to provide our need in the way of our praying for them.⁷

Throughout this section of the sermon, Reverend De Boer teaches this same thing multiple times, though couched by true and orthodox phrases. The thrust of this section though is that God provides for the needs of his people through prayer or in the way of prayer.

This is the teaching of Prof. B. Huizinga on Lord's Day 45:

That explains why the Christian desires to pray, and as we pray to God, consciously asking for his grace and Spirit, God is pleased to continue to perform his gracious operations by the Holy

Spirit in us in that way of prayer. That’s how God works. God works by means of prayer.⁸

This is the teaching of Rev. R. Barnhill on Lord's Day 45:

But it is referring to the grace throughout our lives that is applied to us, that grace that we consciously enjoy...In the way of our asking, he provides us with what we need.⁹

This is the teaching of Prof. R. Dykstra on Lord's Day 45:

That is not conditional theology. Conditional theology teaches that there is something that depends on the man’s activity in order to get something. It depends on his activity. God does not depend on us. Our asking does not earn something. Our asking is not the ground for getting anything. It is simply, this is the way God works. Ask, and you will receive. Ask. That’s what he demands of us. And he promises to give...

This is the way God works. The preaching is the chief means of grace. Sit under the preaching; God will give you grace. Prayer is the way that we go to God for the blessings of salvation.¹⁰

I could keep going, but I do not want to weary the reader, and I have limited space. It would take up an entire issue of *Sword and Shield* to print everything that I found in a simple search of Protestant Reformed sermons on Lord's Day 45. The point is that Professor Cammen-ga’s distorted doctrine of prayer as a means is widespread among Protestant Reformed ministers and leading theologians. There is no safety in the PRC. There is no room to say, “Not my minister. Not my church.”

For the PRC prayer is necessary in order for one to consciously enjoy God’s grace and Holy Spirit. One can have the experience of the covenant by means of the activity of prayer. The teaching of the PRC is prayer first, then grace. Pray, then grace is consciously received. But even after regeneration, the believer has no ability to obtain a God-wrought blessing by means of, in the way of, or through the good work of prayer. What the Protestant

5 Erik Guichelaar, “True Christian Prayer,” sermon preached in Grace Protestant Reformed Church on April 2, 2023, <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=4523022331711>.

6 Joshua Engelsma, “The Soul Lifted Up to God,” sermon preached in Crete Protestant Reformed Church on March 12, 2023, <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=31223165404098>.

7 Matthew De Boer, “Praying to Jehovah,” sermon preached in Edgerton Protestant Reformed Church on January 15, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=God0mOmcvSo>.

8 Brian Huizinga, “Learning Prayer,” sermon preached in Kalamazoo Protestant Reformed Church on July 4, 2021, <https://www.sermonaudio.com/saplayer/playpopup.asp?SID=742117842882>.

9 Ryan Barnhill, “The Basics of Prayer,” sermon preached in Peace Protestant Reformed Church on January 9, 2022, <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=19221654144626>.

10 Russell Dykstra, “The Believer’s Necessary Prayer,” sermon preached in Byron Center Protestant Reformed Church on April 30, 2023, <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=5123034482601>.

Reformed ministers and professors are teaching is conditional theology over against their repeated assertion that this is not conditional theology. It is the theology of Reverend Overway. It is the theology of the Special Committee to Assist Hope. It is the theology of the Protestant Reformed Churches from top to bottom in her clergy.

And the PRC's false doctrine of prayer lays the foundation for her false doctrine of forgiveness, which is that one must first repent, and then one is forgiven. The party line in the PRC is that one has forgiveness on the basis of Jesus Christ, by means of faith, and in the way of one's repentance or confession of sin. If you try to tell a member of the PRC that his church teaches forgiveness by means of repenting, he would insist, "No, no, the means is faith. But God requires us to repent before we are forgiven because God is a God of order, and that is the way God works." But look at what Protestant Reformed ministers and professors are teaching! Prayer is the "means" or "way" or "instrument" by which one receives blessings from God. And when do we repent or confess our sins? In prayer. Thus making our good work of repenting the means to receive blessings of God, particularly the forgiveness of sins in one's conscious experience.

The PRC's distorted doctrine of prayer makes God a vending machine. If you input a request through prayer, then God will give you the desired output. J. Gresham Machen, an early contemporary of Herman Hoeksema, had the following to say about that:

There is one desire that is loftier still. It is the desire for God Himself. That desire, too often, we forget. We value God solely for the things that He can do; we make of Him a mere means to an ulterior end. And God refuses to be treated so; such a religion always fails in the hour of need. If we have regarded religion merely as a means of getting things—even lofty and unselfish things—then when the things that have been gotten are destroyed, our faith will fail...God is not content to be an instrument in our hand or a servant at our beck and call. He is not content to minister to the worldly needs of those who care not a bit for Him.¹¹

Faith Is the Means

The PRC have turned the activity of prayer into a means to obtain God's grace and Holy Spirit in one's conscious experience. But that is a distorted view of prayer and is conditional theology. The only means that scripture and our Reformed confessions speak of for appropriating the riches of Christ is true faith or saving faith.

Faith is God's gift (Eph. 2:8–9). Those who have faith are given that gift according to election (Canons of Dordt

1.6). Faith is union with Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 6:17). Faith is a living, organic union with the whole Christ. Being in him, we are blessed "with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ" (Eph. 1:3). Faith is the means whereby the ungodly are justified (Rom. 4:5).

Our Reformed confessions repeatedly teach that faith is the means. It is the only means whereby we receive every heavenly grace and blessing of salvation.

Belgic Confession article 22:

Those who possess Jesus Christ through faith have complete salvation in Him...

[Faith] is only an instrument with which we embrace Christ our righteousness...Faith is an instrument that keeps us in communion with Him in all His benefits. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 50–51)

Lord's Day 7:

Q. 20. Are all men then, as they perished in Adam, saved by Christ?

A. No, only those who are ingrafted into Him, and receive all His benefits, by a true faith. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 90)

Lord's Day 20:

Q. 53. What dost thou believe concerning the Holy Ghost?

A. That He is also given me, to make me, by a true faith, partaker of Christ and all His benefits. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 103)

Canons of Dordt 1.4:

But such as receive it [this gospel], and embrace Jesus Christ the Savior by a true and living faith... (*Confessions and Church Order*, 155)

In Lord's Day 45 all these concepts are taught about faith. The "only" in answer 116 refers to election. Only the elect, regenerated child of God prays, as he is the only one given faith. He is the only one who must pray, can pray, may pray, and will pray.

The "sincere desires" is the Spirit of Jesus Christ as he dwells in the heart of the believer. The Holy Spirit is the bond of faith that unites the elect child of God to Jesus Christ and brings the elect child as a rational, moral creature into conscious communion with Jesus Christ. And because faith is the Holy Spirit, then it is the Holy Spirit who is praying for more of God's grace and more of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Of God in Christ through the Spirit, we receive grace for grace.

The "continually" is the unbroken fellowship of that faith. Faith is in constant communion with Jesus Christ

11 J. Gresham Machen, *What Is Faith?* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991), 73.

and all his heavenly graces. “In sweet communion, Lord, with Thee I constantly abide.” The first verse of psalter 203 is a versification of Psalm 73:23, which reads, “Nevertheless I am continually with thee: thou hast holden me by my right hand.” This unbroken communion is wholly ascribed to the sovereign grace of God.

Our activities of prayer cannot be the means. That teaching would flatly contradict the teaching of scripture and the confessions that faith is the means. A good work, any good work, even the chief good work, can never be a means to receive something from God. That is the truth of the Reformed faith. Prayer does not avail a thing as far as our reception of heavenly graces. If our prayers were the means to obtain the conscious reception of grace and the Holy Spirit, it would be better if we never prayed. The simple understanding of prayer is that it is the fruit of faith. Prayer proceeds out of faith as a good work and therefore cannot be a means.

Preaching, Prayer, and Singing

Professor Cammenga and Professor Dykstra make an interesting comparison between prayer and the preaching of the gospel. In Professor Cammenga’s defense of his distorted doctrine of prayer as a means, he begins listing various examples throughout scripture.

God had determined to save the Ninevites, but God used the preaching of the word through Jonah the prophet to save them. God had decreed that Daniel would survive being cast into the lion’s den, but God used Daniel’s prayers to shut the mouths of those lions. Hezekiah—“Put your house in order; you are going to die”—before he had a male heir so that the line of David would be continued, besought God in tears to spare his life for the sake of the seed. God heard his prayers and granted him fifteen more years. God uses prayer as the means to give us what we need.¹²

Daniel’s prayer did not stop the mouths of those lions. Nor did Hezekiah’s prayer add fifteen years to his life.

This is what John Calvin remarks about these two events in his commentary on Hebrews 11:33:

It was by faith that David so many times returned home as a conqueror; that Hezekiah recovered from his sickness; that Daniel came forth safe

and untouched from the lions’ den, and that his friends walked in a burning furnace as cheerfully as on a pleasant meadow. Since all these things were done by faith, we must feel convinced, that in no other way than by faith is God’s goodness and bounty to be communicated to us.¹³

The comparison that Professor Cammenga makes between the preaching of the gospel as the means of grace and the prayers of the saints as a means to receive God’s grace and Holy Spirit is specious. Our Reformed confessions know of only two means of grace, namely, the preaching of the word and the administration of the sacraments (Lord’s Day 25; Belgic Confession 33). The Westminster Larger Catechism, which confession neither the PRC or the RPC holds to, does include prayer as a means of grace, but in Reformed theology the only means of grace proper are the preaching of the gospel and the sacraments.¹⁴

Professor Dykstra also makes the same error as Professor Cammenga, but now in defense of the statement that God is a God of means.

This is the way God works. The preaching is the chief means of grace. Sit under the preaching; God will give you grace. Prayer is the way that we go to God for the blessings of salvation.¹⁵

God confers grace by the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments by means of a true faith. Prayer is not a means, and it should not be compared to the work of God in the gospel. Not the activity of prayer but the gospel is the power of God unto salvation (Rom. 1:16).

Professor Cammenga and Professor Dykstra bring up the preaching of the gospel as a means of grace in connection with prayer. Rev. A. Lanning is doing the same thing with regard to singing the psalms.

The preaching of the gospel is the chief means of grace. The sacraments also are a means of grace added to the gospel to teach God’s people his work. But now added to that is also the singing of the church.¹⁶

Our Reformed confessions combine prayer and singing as essentially one element of worship (Lord’s Day 38). Singing and prayer are both the speech of a child of God. Prayer and singing are both good works. Singing as the speech of the believer could also be considered properly

12 Cammenga, “In the School of Prayer (1): Why Pray?”

13 John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul to the Hebrews*, trans. John Owen (repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979), 303.

14 Question and answer 154 of the Westminster Larger Catechism teaches the following: “What are the outward means whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of his mediation? The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicates to his church the benefits of his mediation, are all his ordinances; especially the word, sacraments, and prayer; all which are made effectual to the elect for their salvation.” <https://opc.org/lc.html>.

15 Dykstra, “The Believer’s Necessary Prayer.”

16 Andrew Lanning, “Let the Word of Christ Dwell in You Richly,” doctrine class given for Remnant Reformed Church on July 26, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rrS-SCI9qfE&t=2104s>.

as the chief part of thankfulness. Reverend Lanning, Professor Cammenga, and Professor Dykstra are striving to make prayer and singing a means of some sort of grace in addition to the preaching and the sacraments. The appeal is made to the means of grace in defense of a distorted doctrine of praying and a distorted doctrine of singing. These men have no business calling themselves Reformed.

Principles of Prayer

Flowing out of the necessity of prayer are the requisites or principles of prayer. They are the governing principles of all true prayer. These requirements are not things that we have to do in order to have an acceptable prayer. They are not requirements that we do or perform in a certain way to get something from God or that God's hearing our prayer depends upon these three steps. It is important to know that the Catechism is giving instruction to the ignorant and the blind. The Catechism is exposing us again that we do not know how to pray.

The governing principles of true prayer are given in question and answer 117.

Q. 117. What are the requisites of that prayer which is acceptable to God and which He will hear?

A. First, that we from the heart pray to the one true God only, who hath manifested Himself in His word, for all things He hath commanded us to ask of Him; secondly, that we rightly and thoroughly know our need and misery, that so we may deeply humble ourselves in the presence of His divine majesty; thirdly, that we be fully persuaded that He, notwithstanding that we are unworthy of it, will, for the sake of Christ our Lord, certainly hear our prayer, as He has promised in His word. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 134–35)

The three principles of all true prayer can be easily summarized. God is everything. Man is nothing. And God will certainly hear us, unworthy of ourselves, for the sake of Jesus Christ alone. Even more simple than that, we can say that the principle of prayer is true faith. All prayer proceeds from faith. True prayer is the fruit of faith. We could say that the Catechism is teaching us the attitude of faith in prayer.

Faith knows God rightly. Faith knows how nothing and how miserable we are, that we are totally depraved and entirely carnal, sold unto sin until the perfection of the kingdom (Rom. 7:14). Faith clings to Jesus Christ for his heavenly graces of forgiveness, eternal righteousness, and holiness. Faith comes before God and draws near to him. Faith asks of God for all things necessary for body and soul. Faith knows how to pray. We do not know how to pray or what to pray for, but faith knows because faith is joined to Jesus Christ and receives his life.

To elaborate, the first principle of prayer is that we pray to the one true God only. We pray to the God who has revealed himself in his word. Our prayers are guided by a right knowledge of God in the face of Jesus Christ as Christ is revealed in the scriptures. Faith stands upon and is convicted of the word of God. We come before that one true God, who will surely hear and answer his people. We come before him as our God on the basis of Christ's work as the servant of Jehovah. He is the mediator in whom God is pleased to reveal himself as gracious, merciful, and righteous. And being in Christ, we are declared righteous and have all his heavenly graces poured out upon us by the operation of the Holy Spirit.

The second principle of prayer flows naturally out of the first. We must "rightly and thoroughly know our need and misery, that so we may deeply humble ourselves." We cannot know how utterly miserable and nothing we are unless we know the one true God only. Faith knows and understands who we are by nature. Faith understands that we are nothing, less than nothing, and vanity (Isa. 40:17). We are not something. We transgress every law of God. We sin endlessly. We rebel against God even after we are given his grace and Holy Spirit. We have no claim to any of God's gifts. We have no right to one sip of water or one breath of air; and certainly then, we have no right to perfect righteousness and eternal life. We come as beggars. We come before God dead in ourselves. We come having nothing and in great need of absolutely everything from God.

We are humbled before him. It is from this deep humility that we cry out to God. We cannot cry out to him apart from that position. We have an infinite debt. Our throats are parched, and only God's goodness can slake that inexhaustible thirst. God hears the cry of the man who has nothing. God hears the man who is ungodly. God hears the man who is a worm, grass, and has no strength. God does not hear the man who has something. God does not hear the hypocrite who is conceited in his own self-righteousness. That hypocrite has some strength of himself. He is not nothing. That is why God does not hear the prayer of the impenitent sinner. He is a man who is still something. He is a man who has not been broken by his sin. He is a man who does not have faith.

The third principle of all true prayer is that it is fully persuaded. This is again pointing to a true faith. Faith knows the only true God, faith is humbled before his divine majesty, and faith is fully persuaded. This means that we do not come with any of our good works, even the activity of prayer itself, as the means for us to obtain with God. As totally depraved sinners we pollute that good prayer that proceeds from faith as soon as the prayer touches our flesh. We are not good. We have no obedience or anything good to bring to God.

Faith is fully persuaded that our own unworthiness

and wickedness cannot hinder God from hearing our prayers. God does not hear us because we prayed in a certain way, followed the right steps, or had enough emotion and feeling. The living God hears us for Christ's sake. God hears us for Christ's perfect work on the cross.

Our prayers are not perfect. We are weak and carnal and are often indifferent to prayer as the breath of the soul. But Christ's prayers were perfect. He prays perfectly as our intercessor before the throne of God, presenting his perfect work constantly before God's face. Our mediator beseeches God for all the blessings of the covenant, including our experience of the covenant and including the blessings of God's grace and Holy Spirit in our consciousness.

And with that knowledge and confidence of faith; receiving all the blessings of salvation; by the power of the Holy Spirit living in his heart, the child of God prays! He cannot *not* pray, for as an elect child of God regenerated by the Holy Spirit and renewed unto good works, his soul *must* breathe prayers to God just as surely as his lungs breathe air. That is why prayer is necessary for the Christian.

Faith is fully persuaded of Jesus Christ. There may be doubts in our flesh, but there is no doubt in faith. Faith understands and knows; faith believes and trusts in God alone. Faith is assurance, and that assurance does not rest on the activities of faith but on the one true God. Faith's assurance rests on the promise of God in Jesus Christ alone. God is everything, man is nothing, and God will hear us for the sake of Jesus Christ alone.

Conclusion

Prayer is the chief part of thankfulness. Prayer is never a means. Thankfulness stands opposed to the idea of prayer as a means. It is this distorted doctrine of prayer that has found deep roots in the PRC. This concludes this series on that distorted doctrine of prayer. May the Lord of hosts strengthen us in the battle against that distorted, man-centered doctrine.

"Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God" (Phil. 4:6).

—TDO

OUR DOCTRINE

Till I come, give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine.—1 Timothy 4:13

THE REFORMED DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION, FORGIVENESS, AND REPENTANCE

Not unto us, O LORD, not unto us, but unto thy name give glory, for thy mercy, and for thy truth's sake. Wherefore should the heathen say, Where is now their God? But our God is in the heavens: he hath done whatsoever he hath pleased. Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men's hands. They have mouths, but they speak not: eyes have they, but they see not: They have ears, but they hear not: noses have they, but they smell not: They have hands, but they handle not: feet have they, but they walk not: neither speak they through their throat. They that make them are like unto them; so is every one that trusteth in them. O Israel, trust thou in the LORD: he is their help and their shield. — Psalm 115:1–9

Introduction

The topic that you have assigned me to speak on is a most important topic, and I could not think of a more important topic that you could have

given me to speak on this morning.¹ You may not forget the absolute importance of this doctrine. This doctrine of justification and forgiveness explains why you exist in the world as a separate church. This doctrine explains why you

¹ This is an edited transcript of a speech given July 23, 2023, for Berean Reformed Protestant Church in Singapore. The speech can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EKFiuyvK6vM&t=973s>.

could not remain in the CERC (Covenant Evangelical Reformed Church), and why you had to be reconstituted as Berean Reformed Protestant Church here in Singapore.

When we talk about the doctrine of justification and forgiveness, we are dealing with the heart of the gospel. If a man or if a church corrupts this doctrine, they lose their understanding of scripture. When this truth is taken away by false doctrine, the key to understanding God's word is lost and thrown away; and a man cannot understand, and a church will not understand, God's gospel. You might as well preach out of the Bhagavad Gita, for there is no word of truth that can be expounded in the church if the church does not hold to and believe this truth of justification and forgiveness by faith alone.

So important is this doctrine that a man who would teach otherwise and deny the truth of justification and forgiveness and embrace another doctrine is no true teacher. He has not been sent by God, and he is a false prophet used by Satan to draw away from Jesus Christ and into the false church and the whore, which is essentially Babylon. A church that does not teach or confess the truth of justification and forgiveness is not a true church of Jesus Christ; she is a false church. And so important is this doctrine that if a man believes otherwise, he will not be saved. That is the importance of what we consider this morning.

There is no more glorious doctrine either. Blessed is the man, happy is the man, unspeakably blessed is the man, to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity and whose sin is freely forgiven.

You must not forget this importance because as a church that stands for this doctrine in the world, you will lose much. You have already lost much. And a church that holds to and contends for this truth in the world may even lose her own life and forfeit her place in this world. But you have to understand that the church that loses all things in this world for the sake of this truth loses absolutely nothing. When a man has the righteousness of God in Jesus Christ, he has absolutely everything. That man has the right to eternal life; he has a place in the everlasting kingdom; and he will dwell with God forever and stand in God's presence. And a man may have absolutely everything in this world, every coin of gold and silver—he may possess the whole world—but if he has not the righteousness of Jesus Christ and the forgiveness of sins, he has absolutely nothing.

Thus we consider this important doctrine of justification and forgiveness. I do so especially in the light of a doctrine class that was given a couple of months ago.²

The speech at that class was not the wisdom of God. The speech was full of the cunning and craftiness of Satan. It was full of damnable heresies, which begin and end in hell. And Reverend Tan singlehandedly did much to overthrow the truth of justification and forgiveness, and he did much to confuse that doctrine in the minds of those who heard him. And if CERC believes Reverend Tan's doctrine and loves that doctrine and embraces that doctrine, her end will be in hell. So serious are the lies that Reverend Tan taught. And he did much to slander the doctrine of those who left CERC. I will stand with those who left CERC and defend that doctrine, the truth of justification and forgiveness—and now repentance too—over against all that Reverend Tan said.

If there are any who heard Reverend Tan's doctrine who will also hear this speech, let them give heed. And let them judge the words that I say in light of the creeds and of scripture. And if they find what I teach to be the truth—and it is the truth—then let them repent and join themselves to the church where God proclaims that truth.

Let us consider the topic “The Reformed Doctrine of Justification, Forgiveness, and Repentance.”

I would like to begin by giving us the proper starting point. When we deal with doctrinal controversy like this, there is a proper starting point. You will end up with only a bunch of confusion if you do not have this proper starting point. This was the proper starting point of the sixteenth-century reformers. This was the proper starting point of our fathers at the Synod of Dordt. And this was the proper starting point of our fathers in the PRC (Protestant Reformed Churches), who were contending with common grace and the well-meant offer and later the conditional covenant. I will begin by talking about what the proper starting point is. Secondly, the Reformed doctrine of justification, forgiveness, and repentance as such. And then, finally, I will conclude with the importance of this doctrine.

The Proper Starting Point

I am no mighty theologian. I am not a dogmatics professor, and I am no well-read scholar. There are a host of men who could fill up an entire semester's worth of study in this particular topic. They could review what Augustine said and what Calvin said and what Luther said and what Hoeksema said and what the church has said throughout history and in light of controversies. I say that they could fill up a whole semester's worth of study in this particular topic. And in light of such men, I am a little child.

But there is one starting point where a child begins.

² Josiah Tan, “Doctrinal Development since 2018, CERC 7th Controversy Class.” The speech given at this class in Covenant Evangelical Reformed Church is no longer available on CERC’s website, but the speech was recorded and can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3EzI0WrYoyk>. All the quotations in this article from Reverend Tan are from the speech at the above class.

And in this starting point, he has the wisdom of heaven and is wiser than all the sages of the world. This is the starting point that we teach our children time and time again. And the child who is taught this, when he grows old and has to battle against lies, has a good beginning.

The starting point is *God is God*. That is the essential starting point for all of our doctrine. That is the only starting point for our doctrine. That is always the starting point for our doctrine. And that is the Reformed starting point.

God is God.

And that stands over against what is the common starting point in the theology of today. The common starting point in the theology of today is man's experience: man's experience of the covenant, man's experience of covenant life in his own family and in his own relationships. That was Reverend Tan's starting point, and I would say that it is the starting point for CERC's sister, the PRC, as well.

At the end of Reverend Tan's doctrine class on forgiveness and repentance, there was a confused man, a man who had a genuine question. After listening to Reverend Tan's speech, I do not blame that man for his confusion. Reverend Tan threw his congregation out to sea and tossed them with every wind of doctrine. But that man was confused at the point of reconciling who God is as an eternal God—who has determined the end from the beginning—and how in time God works all things after the counsel of his own will. The man was confused about how God is absolutely determinative of all things and how that squares up with what Reverend Tan had taught about forgiveness and repentance. The man was troubled and tried to reconcile this: "God, who is an eternal God, and our election, which is in eternity..."

And I stop here.

This man had a good starting point. This man was starting with who God is,

with God, who is an eternal God, and our election, which is in eternity, and then reconciling it with how in time God comes, shines his favor, doesn't shine his favor, forgives us, doesn't forgive us, not depending but in the way of our repentance. And it's just a bit hard for me to wrap my head around that.

Well, no doubt. When someone is confused about how God in one respect forgives, and in another respect he does not forgive; in one respect he does not depend, and in another respect it is in the way of—he is confused in his mind. He does not understand.

Then that confused man went on to say, "Christ's death on the cross was sufficient." Amen. "We believe that his death was enough to cover all of our sins." Amen.

"But then each time we repent, do we obtain remission? How does this work in time vis-à-vis the death of Christ on the cross?"

And he was confused here exactly because of what Reverend Tan had taught. Let there be no doubt about that. Where there is confusion, there is the devil. And where there is not an understanding of the heart of the gospel, of God's freely forgiving the sinner for the sake of Christ's merits alone, there is the work of the devil.

Where did Reverend Tan begin? Did he let God be God? And did he start with the truth that God is God?

He said this: "Let me try to explain it to the best of my ability with regards to my personal experience." If a man begins there, he has lost his way, and he will never come to an understanding of the truth.

Our proper starting point is that God is God.

God is God.

If I told you that a horse is a horsey thing, I have said absolutely nothing about what a horse really is. I must elaborate: a horse is a mammal that has a mane, a long nose, a tail, and four legs. And then I begin to describe to you what a horse really is.

But to God belongs no genus, and God cannot be defined by any definition exactly because God is God. He is a one, pure being. And you can begin to list all of the things that God is—God is mercy; God is truth; God is grace; God is love—and you can go on and on and list all those things, or you could simply say this: "God is. I AM." And when you say that, you say all that God is in all of his perfections because he is the implication of all of his perfections, all at once. He is altogether the incomparable one. "To whom will ye liken me, and make me equal, and compare me, that we may be like" (Isa. 46:5)? God is simply God, high and lifted up, elevated above the creature.

And you are composed of parts. I could cut off an arm, and you would still be you. But you cannot do that to God because God is God. He is all of his infinite perfections at once and not composed of parts. If you deny God's mercy or you deny God's justice, then you deny God. You deny him as he truly is. And if you worship something other than what God really is, you worship no God but the imagination of your own mind.

God is God.

Belonging to the idea that God is God—yeah, a fundamental idea of the Godhead—is God's *aseity*. Perhaps, we have not heard that term very often or maybe not even at all. God's *aseity*. Certainly, you have heard of God's immutability and sovereignty. What stands behind these things is the *aseity* of God. *Aseity* is a Latin term that comes from the combination of the preposition *a* and the pronoun *se*: *a se* [ah say]. God is *a se*. He is from himself, literally, or of himself. Another word that we commonly

use is this: God is *absolute*. God is absolutely independent. He is not caused by or influenced by or determined by any other creature. He is God.

Belonging to the idea of aseity is who God is *in* himself. God as God possesses his being in himself. No man gave God his being. No man gave God his knowledge. No man counseled God or taught God what God ought to do. No man influenced God's will. God possesses himself of himself in eternity. Christ said, "For as the Father hath life in himself; so hath he given to the Son to have life in himself" (John 5:26). God has life in himself.

The creature is just that: a creature. A creature is created. Yesterday you were, tomorrow you will be, and there will be a difference between what you were yesterday and what you will be tomorrow. But God *is*. He is not determined by anything. He possesses himself in his eternal present, and no one upholds him.

Belonging to the idea of aseity is also how God lives his blessed triune life. God is *a se* in the intimate, covenant relationship between the Father and the Son in the Spirit. In God's life, because God is *a se* and God is not determined or caused by anything, God's blessed triune life is not a life of cause and effect. God's blessed triune life is a life that he *freely* lives. It is a life that is without contingency, a life that is without condition, a life that is without hesitation, a life that has no potential but pure action, a life that has no prerequisite, and a life that is not even in the way of. God is. And he gives of himself freely: Father to Son in the Spirit, and Son to Father in the Spirit.

To elaborate on this further, you would say this: the experience of the Son in his relationship with the Father is that the Son does not experience the Father as potential, as conditional, or as in the way of. There is nothing that the Son has to do in order to know and to enjoy and to experience the embrace in the bosom of the Father. The Father gives of himself freely, and the Son does not have to do anything for that. There is not something that waits upon the Son in order for him to feel the embrace of the Father. There is not some prerequisite that the Son must do in order to know and to enjoy the embrace of the Father. The embrace of the Father is not even in the way of the Son's doing something, exactly because God is *a se*.

This is important because when we are talking about God's triune life, we are talking about the covenant and what the covenant is. We are describing what the nature of the covenant is. And God *will* show forth his covenant. God delights in his covenant. All that God has decreed in this world from the beginning to the end—all people, all nations, every single living thing, and all the things in the world that are not living—he uses to show forth his covenant. And he will cause his people—his covenant people,

those people whom he has loved with an eternal love—to know and to enjoy that covenant and to know *what is the nature* of that covenant. They will know that the covenant is without condition. They will know that the covenant is without contingency, without hesitation. They will know that God gives of himself freely, that God does not give of himself in the way of. They will know that God gives the covenant and every blessing of the covenant freely, that there is no potential in that covenant life. They will know that there is no hesitation in God's giving of himself to man *because* God delights in his covenant, and he *will show* man his covenant.

Then too because God is *a se* in himself, he is *a se* in all of his works *outside of* himself. God manifests his name in all of his works. He manifests that he is absolutely independent and not caused by or influenced by any other thing in his works outside of himself and all that he works in this world. And you know that, and you can understand that, for you live and you move and you have your being because God gives being to you freely. There is not something, there is not some activity, that you must do to possess the next moment of your activity. God gives it. And God can take it away freely too. I breathe and I speak right now because God wills that I breathe and I speak. And he could take my life away at any moment because I am absolutely dependent upon him. But my life does not influence him at all because he is absolutely independent of me. In all that God works in the world, he is *a se*—not caused by or influenced by anything.

That holds true now for the life of the covenant. That is what we are interested in with this topic of justification and forgiveness and repentance. When we are talking about these things—justification and forgiveness and repentance—we are talking about blessings of the covenant. And we must do covenant theology.

That is another issue and problem with Reverend Tan's speech. He simply did not do covenant theology. He did not work from the truth that God is God, and he did not work from God's unconditional covenant. To teach the covenant is simply to be Reformed. Reformed theology is covenant theology. And if a man will not teach the unconditional covenant and will not use that as the template for all of his instruction about blessings of the covenant, he simply departs from the Reformed tradition.

We are dealing with the covenant: God's covenant of grace, the covenant that he has willed in his good counsel, that he will show unto man. And the nature of that covenant of grace that God has with man differs not one whit from the nature of God's blessed triune life. As God lives with himself, God will also live with man. God will show himself to man freely, and he will give of himself freely in every benefit without contingency, without condition,

without prerequisite, without hesitation, and without *in the way of*. There is no potential and dependency in that covenant life.

And it is a remarkable thing if you look back through history in times of controversy and times when the church was wrestling with salvation and with the doctrine of justification that she appealed to God's independence, and she appealed to the fact that God is *a se*. That was the appeal of the sixteenth-century reformers. That was the appeal of the fathers at Dordt over against the Remonstrants. That was the appeal of our Protestant Reformed fathers in 1924, when they were dealing with common grace and the well-meant offer, and then again in 1953, when they were dealing with a conditional covenant.

And a while ago I came across a quote that I wrote down, and I came across it again as I was preparing for this speech. I do not know where it is in the *Standard Bearer*, but it is in the *Standard Bearer*. And this is the quote:

All the disputes between us and the Arminians may be reduced to these two thoughts: (1) Is God dependent on man, or is man dependent on God? (2) Is man a debtor to God, or is God a debtor to man?³

That is simple, but that is profound. And that confronts you with the question, where are you going to start now with your theology? Are you going to start with the fact that God is absolutely independent and that God is a debtor to no man? Then you have the Reformed understanding, and that will guide you in your understanding of justification and forgiveness and repentance. Or if you are going to start now with man's experience, you are inevitably going to end up with this—whether you teach it explicitly or not, you at least give an implicit idea that is left in the minds of those who hear you—that God is in some sense a debtor to man, and God is in some way dependent upon man.

And it was the Arminian who made a distinction in God's will and who loved to think of things in terms of God's doing something, and then man's doing something, and then God's doing something, and then man's doing something. All that transpires in this world is just a long series of causes and effects where God has willed something, and man did what God has willed, and God then willed something subsequent, and man does what God willed. Indeed, they traced back this idea to God's immutable will, and they created a distinction in God's immutable will.

And the Arminian taught this: there is in God an antecedent will by which God has willed something

to the rational creature before every or any act of that creature. And then the Arminian taught that there is a consequential will of God—we are speaking about the same will now—by which God wills something to man after some act of man.⁴ Or to make it more explicit: God wills that man do something in order to know and to enjoy the experience of his justification, to know that he is forgiven, and man does whatever God's antecedent will requires. And, consequently, God then wills that man enjoy and experience his justification. But they thought in terms of that: God's willing, man's doing, and then God's willing the next thing. For them the interaction between God and man was a one-for-one exchange. And that is how they conceived of salvation: a long chain of causes and effects.

This idea denies the aseity of God, that because he is *a se* God freely gives all of the blessings of salvation to the members of his covenant—those whom he has elected in Jesus Christ—without contingency, without condition, without prerequisite, without dependency, without *in the way of*, and without potential.

This aseity of God is absolutely fundamental. It must govern our interpretation of passages of scripture that come up time and time again in controversies related to this topic. For example, the passage of Professor Engelsma: "Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you." How will you begin? Will you begin with man's experience? Will you take your starting point in the realm of man? Or will you start from the truth that God is God, that God is *a se*, and that it is exactly because God wills that his people know him and enjoy him that he promises and assures and then by that promise effectually draws them to himself to know his covenant? It is the truth that God is *a se* that must govern your understanding of such passages of scripture that have come up time and again on this topic.

God is God.

Reformed Doctrine of Justification, Forgiveness, and Repentance

With that proper starting point, that essential starting point, we consider the truth of justification and forgiveness and repentance—the Reformed doctrine. Let me begin by simply saying that there is not a shred of difference between justification and forgiveness.

It has been the great work of the devil to confuse the two, to strive to create a large disjunction between the two in the minds of the people of the church, to make

³ This quote originated with Augustus Toplady. See Augustus Toplady, *The Works of Augustus Toplady: A New Edition Complete in One Volume* (London) 541, https://www.google.com/books/edition/The_Works_of_Augustus_Toplady_A_New_Edit/1-VUAAAAcAAJ.

⁴ See Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982) 404–405, particularly under the section "Absolute and Conditional Will."

justification this abstract thing that you put away in the closet and separate from forgiveness. But there is absolutely no difference between the two. And the devil is having a field day with the formation of this large disjunction between the two. He had a whole controversy at the time of the sixteenth-century Reformation over the doctrine of justification by faith alone. He had many lies that subverted that doctrine. And now he can take all those same lies and just use them again against the truth of forgiveness. He does not even have to come up with new lies. He can simply change the terms—change the term from *justification* to the term *forgiveness*—and he can ship in all this false doctrine from before. But there is no difference between the two.

What is justification?

Justification is that act of God's grace—that *glorious* act of God's grace—whereby he imputes to the sinner—the sinner who is in himself condemned and worthy of all damnation, but that sinner who is elect in Jesus Christ—the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ and acquits him of all guilt and punishment on the basis of Christ's merits alone and gives to that elect sinner the right to eternal life. That is the doctrine of justification, the truth of justification.

Important then is the idea of *whom* God justifies. God does not justify a good person. God does not justify a repentant person. God does not justify somebody who has anything to boast in himself. God justifies the *ungodly*, the one who is in himself—in his own mind and consciousness—guilty and condemned and worthy of hell, worthy of that fearsome and astoundingly terrible wrath of God. The sinner—the sinner who is absolutely nothing but ungodly in his own mind and consciousness—that is the one whom God justifies.

And justification is legal. Justification changes that man's state. That man, whereas he stood before God, even in his own mind and consciousness, as condemned, God declares about that man, "He is innocent." And God does not impute to that man any of his sins. He imputes to that man perfect righteousness that conforms with God's own holy being and measures up to God in every respect, so that that man is not condemned, but he is at peace with the judge and unspeakably blessed.

And forgiveness is justification. To be more explicit, forgiveness is a part of justification. Justification is the imputation to the sinner, but the one who is elect in Jesus Christ, the righteousness of Jesus Christ and the acquittal of punishment and guilt. And that acquittal of punishment and guilt is forgiveness. So forgiveness is justification; forgiveness is a part of justification.

To use an analogy, you can speak of a hired hand, and you are referring to a worker on a farm. And you are

not just simply referring to the hand of that worker, but you are referring to the whole worker. You are referring to the part to which you wish to draw emphasis, to the part of the worker that does a lot of the work, which is his hand. So too when you speak of forgiveness, you speak of justification. And when scripture speaks of the remission of sins and it speaks of forgiveness, it is speaking of justification. It is speaking of forgiveness as a part of the whole. So these two are interchangeable. There is no significant difference between the two, but the two are the same.

And that stands over against what Reverend Tan taught. He made a great deal of difference between forgiveness and justification. He wanted, in the minds of those who hear, to make that difference as large as possible. This is what he said:

It's very important to distinguish between the state of justification and ongoing forgiveness for our sins. We must distinguish the state of justification and ongoing forgiveness for our sins.

Let me emphasize that. "We *must* distinguish the state of justification and ongoing forgiveness of our sins." For Reverend Tan you would go awry and you would have all sorts of problems if you mingled and confused the two.

Well, let me be the first to mingle and confuse the two because there is absolutely not a shred of difference.

And a man has to be intentionally and willfully blind to teach otherwise. The fact that forgiveness is justification stares at him in the clearest language possible in Belgic Confession article 23. The title is "Justification." This article has to deal with our justification, which is the truth that God imputes unto the elect sinner the righteousness of Jesus Christ and acquits the elect sinner of all his guilt, and it frees him from the liability to punishment. And what does the first sentence say? "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" (*Confessions and Church Order*, 51). Remission of sins is forgiveness. And your salvation is in the forgiveness of sins. And forgiveness of sins is justification.

A man is no longer Reformed and he does not hold to the truth of the Reformed creeds if he needs to make a huge distinction between justification and forgiveness, for there is none.

Now, where does repentance fit in all this?

The doctrine today is that repentance is necessary for the forgiveness of sins. And Reverend Tan creates a boogeyman with the Reformed Protestant Churches' doctrine of repentance. He tries to scare his flock with the assertion that the Reformed Protestant Churches do

not teach repentance. I quote: "I'm going to make it very, very practical..." He is now speaking of the practical implications of our doctrine of forgiveness. "I'm going to make it very, very practical as a way to help you see the gravity and the seriousness of the error of those who have followed a schismatic group." That refers to us.

What they're actually doing is telling people, "You don't have to call others to repent. You don't have to call others to repentance. You don't have to call others to faith." That's the reality of what they're saying.

And let it be abundantly clear that this is patently false. The Reformed Protestant Churches teach repentance! We teach repentance as that profoundly spiritual work in the whole soul of the child of God, so that that child of God who according to his nature loved all that is perverse and wicked and sinful and lusted after all that is opposed to God and all that hates God; that sinner who by all of his work was an enemy against God and turned to God and spit in God's face and cast God away from him as much as he was able and said about God, "You are not good. There is other good besides you"; that man who loved his sin and delighted in the ways of sin—this man now stands over against himself and with God condemns himself and says about himself, "I am ungodly. I am wicked, and I am depraved. There is not one good thing that dwells in me." That man loathes and humbles himself; that man too has a new stirring up from his heart, so that he truly loves God; he loves the name of God; that man can speak God's name in truth and says about God's revelation of himself, "That is beautiful, that is delightful, and I love to meditate upon God"; and that man has a beginning of new obedience. That is the repentance that we teach. There is a real spiritual turning. Man first said about God, "God is evil," because man loved sin. And now this repentant man says, "God is good," and the man says about his sin, "Sin is bad." A real spiritual turning of his soul.

And we teach repentance as absolutely necessary. That is the urgency of the call of the gospel when the gospel is proclaimed. The gospel reveals men as they truly are—as depraved in themselves and who have no hope in anything that they do; the gospel sets forth Jesus Christ as the only way of salvation; and that gospel commands, "Repent and believe." And there is urgency to that call. There is seriousness to that call. The true minister proclaims in the name of Christ, "Repent and believe." And then the minister warns that all who do not repent and do not believe will surely be damned. We teach repentance as absolutely necessary. We just do not teach that repentance is necessary for forgiveness.

And there are those who slander the Reformed Protestant Churches, as they slandered the Reformation church and said about the Reformation church, "You teach justification by faith alone. You do not want men to walk in good works. You take away from them the impetus for their walking in good works." We hear the same charge today, "You deny the call to repentance. You are not going to teach the call to repentance."

"Simply listen," is our response, "to Reformed Protestant preaching, and you will hear a call to repentance." We just do not teach repentance as necessary for forgiveness.

This is what we teach: God justifies the ungodly, the one who is in his own mind and consciousness ungodly, a man who is totally needy and impoverished for anything. He has not one thing to hold on to. He has not one deed of love; he has no activity of repentance; he has no tear that he clings to, not even his activity of believing; he is in whole need of the salvation of God and says about himself before God, "I am that sinner; I have hated you; I have despised you; and I have not done one good thing in your sight. Before thee not one man is justified; before thee not one man can stand and not I. I am evil, born in sin. I am a sinner. Have mercy on me."

That man God justifies. That man God forgives. God forgives that man in his own mind and consciousness, so that he knows the blessedness of God and tastes the goodness of God in God's not imputing unto him his sins. God forgives the man who is guilty and in himself condemned but elect in Jesus Christ. This is whom God forgives.

And that stands now in direct opposition to Reverend Tan's teaching about forgiveness. This is what Reverend Tan taught: "What is forgiveness?..." And now Reverend Tan is going to give his definition of forgiveness. Never mind that forgiveness is explained in the creeds. You could search *forgiveness* on Google and get a better definition than Reverend Tan's. Forgiveness is the acquittal of guilt and punishment. But this is Reverend Tan's doctrine:

What is forgiveness? Forgiveness by its very definition is this: It is God's speaking the gospel to the soul of a penitent sinner. God's speaking the gospel to the soul of the penitent sinner. It is literally in the definition of what forgiveness is that one has to be penitent.

That is absolutely astounding. That is a damning statement and doctrine about what forgiveness is. There is so much false doctrine trucked into that definition, and that then permeated the minds and thinking of those who heard that doctrine. I do not know where he got this definition. I do not know if he made it up himself. Perhaps, he even got it, I do not know, but if he got his

definition from the seminary, then men in the PRC ought to storm the seminary and cast out their professor. There is no place where you can find this as the definition for forgiveness: “Forgiveness by its very definition is this: It is God’s speaking the gospel to the soul of the penitent sinner.” Consider, first of all, who is forgiven according to Reverend Tan. It is the *penitent*. At least Reverend Tan put the word *sinner* in his definition. It is the “*penitent* sinner.” Keep in mind that it is not what Romans says, that God justifies the ungodly, the one who stands in himself condemned. God justifies the “*penitent* sinner.” Reverend Tan did not even include election in his definition, election which is the power and the source for the knowledge and the enjoyment of forgiveness. He emphasized *over election* that one must be repentant to know his forgiveness. It is in the very essence of the definition, he said, that one must be repentant to know his forgiveness. That is shocking and appalling.

And then you can understand what the devil does with that. Reverend Tan had in mind what forgiveness is. And Reverend Tan said that God forgives a person for the sake of Christ’s merits alone. But snuck into that statement was the idea that man still has to repent for forgiveness. So he taught what would seem on the surface to be true doctrine, all the while undermining the very heart of the gospel.

God does not forgive the penitent sinner. Let me be very explicit. If a penitent sinner asks God for forgiveness and says, “God, be merciful to me a penitent sinner,” God will not forgive that person. God does not justify that man. God justifies the ungodly.

This is Reformed Protestant doctrine, which is the gospel, which is the truth of your salvation, and which is the reason for your existence in the world: God forgives without repentance. I am not going to qualify that. I am not going to immediately add a *but*. I am going to leave it right there.

That doctrine will be slandered as antinomian, and that doctrine will be condemned. But that doctrine is the truth because God is God, and God is *a se*. God freely gives the covenant and every blessing of the covenant without contingency, without condition, and without prerequisite. There is no hesitancy in the giving of the covenant and of blessing. There is no potential for the enjoyment of the covenant and that blessing. God gives it. There is no *in the way of* for the blessing and the experience of the covenant. God gives it. God freely gives according to his will and by his sovereign working the knowledge of one’s forgiveness.

And then as a blessing of his covenant, God also works repentance. It is all free, freely given by him, because God will show forth his covenant, and he will have his people know his covenant and his own blessed life.

If God were to work in any other way, then he is not God. He works forgiveness freely, and he works repentance freely exactly because he is God. That is what I mean, that we let the doctrine *God is God* control our understanding and govern our doctrine of justification and forgiveness and repentance.

I am not going to take the time now, but you can scour Belgic Confession article 23, and you can scour the teaching of the Heidelberg Catechism when it deals with our justification and the forgiveness of sins (see Lord’s Days 7, 11, 23, 26 [Q&A 69–70a], and 27), and you will find not one mention of your works, of your repentance. That is because God justifies, and God forgives the ungodly.

There is one more aspect that I want to bring out about Reverend Tan’s speech, and that has to do with sanctification. Justification and sanctification are twin benefits of the cross. Yet you may never confuse the two. You can confuse and mingle forgiveness and justification all you want, but you may not confuse and mingle justification and sanctification.

The two certainly go together. If there is a criminal who was condemned and sits in prison, and the judge reverses his judgment about that criminal and says about that man who is a criminal, “I pardon you. I forgive you. I do not impute unto you your sins and your trespasses, and I release you from all condemnation,” then that man still has to be released from his prison cell. This mirrors the relationship between justification and sanctification. God justifies the guilty and in himself condemned sinner. *Because* God justifies him, God also releases him from the power and the pollution of sin. God sends his Spirit, and the Spirit takes up his abode in the heart of the justified man and works in this life the new beginning of obedience. That is the relationship between justification and sanctification. They are twin benefits of the cross. But you may never confuse the two.

It is the error of Rome to mix that relationship between justification and sanctification. Rome teaches that a man has to be sanctified. Rome teaches that a man actually has to be made good. And that man who is made good becomes righteous before God by man’s own works. And by that Rome turns the whole gospel over on its head.

I bring this up because there was the beginning of that mingling in Reverend Tan’s speech. It had to be that way. When a church departs from the gospel truth in one aspect, she is going to corrupt the whole truth. The truth is one, and if you deny the truth in one aspect, you are going to deny the whole truth. Reverend Tan in his doctrine class about forgiveness and repentance mingled justification and sanctification. And I quote: “What is sanctification? Sanctification is the Spirit of Christ

working in us so that we more and more conform to the image of Christ. And how does the Spirit work that?" Now, keep in mind that Reverend Tan was still describing what sanctification is, and he said, "First, the Spirit exposes our sin. Then we repent; then God forgives."

Who is the man whom God forgives, according to Reverend Tan? The man whose sin has been exposed, the man who has hated sin and who has taken his place with God and condemned himself and said, "I am a terrible sinner," and the man then who has turned from sin and who has cleaved to God. That man first repents, then he is forgiven. Sanctification then justification.

They can deny my charge all they want; but when you bring forgiveness into the doctrine of sanctification, you flip the whole gospel over on its head.

The Importance of This Doctrine

Now, what is our starting point for doctrine and for understanding scripture? God is God. That is where we always start. That is where we always begin. And you will not go wrong with your doctrine when you start from the truth that God is God, that God is *a se*, that God is not caused by or influenced by any other creature, and that the nature of God's covenant is always without

contingency, without condition, without prerequisite, without *in the way of*, without dependency, and without any potential.

In this truth God is glorified as God. Not unto us, O Lord of heaven, but unto thee be glory, to thee belongs mercy, to thee belongs covenant faithfulness, and to thee belongs truth. With this Reformed doctrine God is glorified as God.

And the god that Reverend Tan taught is a work of his own hands. He has fashioned for himself a stock. He has imagined for himself a god that has eyes and a god that has ears and a god that has hands and feet and a god that has a nose. With the doctrine that Reverend Tan taught, he prays to a god that will not hear. He asks god to see what that god cannot see. And he asks god to work with his hands that which that god cannot work, for that god is blind and that god is deaf and that god is impotent. And so are those who make that god.

Our trust, beloved, is in Jehovah. He is our help and our shield. And he will show his name and truth. And he will show us his covenant because that is his delight. And he will teach us what is the nature of his covenant because that is his will and his good pleasure.

—LB

RUNNING FOOTMEN

And ye shall chase your enemies, and they shall fall before you by the sword.—Leviticus 26:7

A WHALE OF A SCRUPLE

Introduction

The story of Jonah is probably one of the most intriguing stories to hear as a child: a prophet called by God to do God's work, a prophet who turned the other way; a raging sea; the strong mariners; a great fish; a mighty city brought to repentance; a flourishing gourd plant that withered and died; and a prophet who wished to perish because he did not have things go his way. For a young child hearing this story with a mind full of imagination, a vivid picture is easily painted. A father would tell his child what a great God our God is that he so controls the mighty beasts of the sea that even they do his bidding. A mother would tell her child how

God gave life to a small gourd seed that germinated and grew in one day and was destroyed by a tiny worm the next. What an amazing contrast! From a great beast in the sea to a tiny worm, that child would know the majesty and glory of the creator of the heavens and earth, who holds all things in his hand. And that child would know that this all-powerful God works everything on this earth for the good of his children, and that child would hear the truth of Lord's Day 1: "Without the will of my heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from my head" (*Confessions and Church Order*, 83). The book of Jonah is a wonderful treasure. The sovereign, mighty hand of God is on full display, and Christ is revealed there.

There is little information known about Jonah. In 2 Kings 14:25, we learn that Jonah was a prophet who prophesied of the restoration of the coast of Israel from “Hamath unto the sea of the plain.” Although we do not know when the prophecy was made, the prophecy was fulfilled during the reign of Jeroboam II. In the first verses of the book of Jonah, the word of the Lord came to the prophet Jonah and said, “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me.” When Jonah was commissioned to go south to Nineveh, he spurned God’s will, boarded a merchant vessel in Joppa, and went north by sea along the Mediterranean coast, headed to Tarshish. Tarshish was the same city that the apostle Paul was from. Tarshish would have been in the area later known as Cilicia, and today this city would be in the country of Turkey.

Why did Jonah attempt to run away from this commission of God? One might picture Jonah preaching to the chosen nation of Israel and then Jonah being called away by God to go to the great and wicked city of Nineveh. The Ninevites would certainly not listen to the word of the Lord when it would be brought. And one can imagine how even a Jew in the old dispensation might have viewed the book of Jonah. Picturing all the Old Testament scrolls, one can see the Hebrew skipping past the story of Jonah, maybe even viewing it with a little disdain. A message of repentance was brought to a great, wicked city that was not of the chosen nation of Israel. The word of God was brought to the uncircumcised!

Even today, men might pass over the book of Jonah because of the incomprehensibility of the event that God wrought in sustaining a man for three days and three nights in a fish’s belly. Man tries to rationalize the event. Man tries to find a scientific way to make what was a miracle something that could have been possible according to the laws of nature. If man cannot come up with some sort of explanation, then he tries to avoid the whole narrative as if it were too far-fetched. What must be known is that the preservation of Jonah was beyond a natural occurrence. His preservation was miraculous. God’s splendor was on full display over his creation, causing the sea to rage and to be stilled, guiding the path of the great fish, and giving Jonah the victory over the tomb into which he was swallowed.

Jonah’s Scruple

It is understandable that Jonah would not want to bring God’s word to the Ninevites because they were outside of Israel, but in Jonah 4:2 Jonah revealed his thoughts as to why he disobeyed God:

O LORD, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore I fled before unto

Tarshish: for I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil.

Jonah had been commissioned by God to cry against the city of Nineveh. As we just read in verse 2, Jonah said that he knew that if he were to cry against the city and say to the city that destruction was coming in forty days, that God, being gracious, merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, would not bring that destruction. Jonah had a vehement zeal for the grace and mercy of God, which are certain and true, but Jonah denied God’s sovereign will and good pleasure. Jonah felt as though God’s name would be blasphemed when his message to the Ninevites was unfulfilled and they were not destroyed and also that he, Jonah, would be called a liar as the bearer of that false message. So Jonah was telling God here that *he* knew better all along, *he* had a better plan, and *he* had a better will than God’s will. Jonah had a feeling, and that feeling was even guided by a principle, but he was denying God’s appointed course of action and God’s secret plan. Jonah had a scruple. In all of this we can see the danger of a man’s scruple, when one takes a wonderful and amazing truth such as the truth of God’s grace and mercy and uses that truth for one’s own invention. Jonah had a vehement zeal for those attributes of God and used that feeling to try to justify denying God’s commission for him. Jonah’s own invention was to flee, standing on the principle that God is merciful and gracious. Jonah took something amazing and true and used it for his own plan.

Understanding why Jonah fled from God reveals something about how God deals with his people. Jonah had an imperfect repentance. Even after his chastisement and the fulfillment of his commission to cry against the city of Nineveh, he continued to maintain his scruple. Does Jonah’s repentance match the definition of repentance given in 2 Corinthians 7:11?

For behold this selfsame thing, that ye sorrowed after a godly sort, what carefulness it wrought in you, yea, what clearing of yourselves, yea, what indignation, yea, what fear, yea, what vehement desire, yea, what zeal, yea, what revenge! In all things ye have approved yourselves to be clear in this matter.

Did Jonah show himself in *all* things to be clear in the matter? Not by that description. Jonah did the Lord’s work for him and cried against Nineveh. But even after Jonah had run from God and was swallowed by the fish, even after Jonah had been saved from the fish’s belly and was delivered to dry land, even after Jonah had brought the cry of judgment through the streets of Nineveh to all the city and they repented, Jonah had the nerve to go

before the face of God and say, “See?! This is why I fled in the first place, back when I was in my home country. I knew it was going to go this way, and now your name is blasphemed. Now take my life”—as though he knew better than God. This is man. He never truly knows the gravity of his sin. Man thinks he knows the right pathway. He thinks he knows better than God. Even through trials and the Lord’s clear direction for him, man continues to harbor his own sentiments. Jonah maintained his scruple even after he had been swallowed by the fish and delivered to dry ground and God’s word to preach to Nineveh had come to him a second time. Yet God continued to deal with Jonah by grace, even with Jonah’s imperfect repentance. God had restored that commission to Jonah to cry against the city, and God continued to deal with Jonah in loving-kindness.

So why would God use Jonah? Why did God treat Jonah only in loving-kindness? We know that God uses earthen vessels to fulfill his will. “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28). God loved Jonah. Jonah knew the promises of God. Jonah knew the grace and mercy of God. Jonah continued to question God’s sovereignty and will even to the point that Jonah wished his life would end, yet God continued to care for Jonah through God’s friendship and fellowship with Jonah. Not because Jonah had repented well enough, not because Jonah was reasonably righteous all in all but because God saw in Jonah someone greater than Jonah, someone who was perfectly righteous. God looked at Jonah and saw God’s Son. And that is how God dealt with Jonah. Jonah was sinful. We are sinful too, yet God loves us, and we stand with Jonah before God justified because there was one with no sin.

The tender care of God for Jonah is a wonderful comfort for the child of God. Even as we are continually sinning against God, he loves us unconditionally. Psalm 103:10: “He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.” Jonah had faith. Jonah was united with Jesus Christ. The lot for Jonah and the lot for you and me is death and destruction except for Jesus Christ and his perfect work. The same destruction that God had told Jonah to cry against Nineveh is what we deserve. Praise the Lord for his perfect work of salvation in Jesus Christ! Faith in Jesus Christ is the reason God dealt with Jonah, and all of God’s people, in his grace and mercy. Not Jonah’s faith *and* Jonah’s repentance. Jonah’s repentance was imperfect, but he was united with Christ, who perfectly atoned for the sins of his people even though he himself had never sinned. Jonah had faith, and through faith alone he was a partaker of the promises and was dealt with in grace.

The Song of Jonah

A glorious truth has been recovered in the Reformed Protestant Churches. Christ is in the psalms. Instead of reading a psalm and finding oneself, the psalms are taught and preached to show forth Christ. For example, take Psalm 24:3–5:

3. Who shall ascend into the hill of the LORD? or who shall stand in his holy place?
4. He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart; who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity, nor sworn deceitfully.
5. He shall receive the blessing from the LORD, and righteousness from the God of his salvation.

One could corrupt these verses and teach the sheep that if they desire blessings from the Lord and righteousness from God, then there is something they have to do, or they must live a certain way to have clean hands and a pure heart. But there is no Christ in that teaching! Either the sheep will be discouraged because they know themselves to be who they really are—totally depraved—or they will be full of self-righteousness, thinking they could actually accomplish that great task. Now read the verses and see Christ. Jesus Christ and his clean hands ascends the holy hill. Jesus Christ with his pure heart stands in the holy place. Jesus Christ is our righteousness. He has fulfilled all things for us! That is the gospel! To make the charge that that will make us careless and profane is to be afraid of the gospel. Instead, hearing the gospel, the child of God will live a life full of gratitude and thanksgiving.

Christ can be found in the prayer of Jonah 2 just as Christ is found in the book of Psalms. In fact, does not Jonah 2 sound exactly like a psalm?

1. Then Jonah prayed unto the LORD his God out of the fish’s belly,
2. And said, I cried by reason of mine affliction unto the LORD, and he heard me; out of the belly of hell cried I, and thou heardest my voice.
3. For thou hadst cast me into the deep, in the midst of the seas; and the floods compassed me about: all thy billows and thy waves passed over me.
4. Then I said, I am cast out of thy sight; yet I will look again toward thy holy temple.
5. The waters compassed me about, even to the soul: the depth closed me round about, the weeds were wrapped about my head.
6. I went down to the bottoms of the mountains; the earth with her bars was about me for ever:

yet hast thou brought up my life from corruption, O LORD my God.

7. When my soul fainted within me I remembered the LORD: and my prayer came in unto thee, into thine holy temple.
8. They that observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy.
9. But I will sacrifice unto thee with the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay that that I have vowed. Salvation is of the LORD.

Just as we see a clear picture of Christ on the cross in Psalm 22, in Jonah's prayer we see Christ as he endured all of the sufferings for our sins and as he was in the grave, forsaken by God for us. Jonah 2 shows us our savior when he made supplication to God from the grave, having accomplished victory over it before arising from the dead. "Out of the belly of hell cried I, and thou hearest my voice...All thy billows and thy waves passed over me...I am cast out of thy sight." Even verse 5—"the weeds were wrapped about my head"—reminds us of how Joseph of Arimathaea and Nicodemus wrapped a clean linen cloth about Jesus' head for his burial. John 19:40: "Then took they the body of Jesus, and wound it in linen clothes with the spices, as the manner of the Jews is to bury." And John 20:7: "And the napkin, that was about his head, not lying with the linen clothes, but wrapped together in a place by itself."

Jesus himself made certain that the book of Jonah was included in the canon of scripture. One of the key proofs for canonical-inspired scripture is that other parts of scripture are often quoted or referred to by Christ. Jesus tells us in Matthew 12:40, "For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." When Jesus spoke about himself being in the heart of the earth, he was speaking about his time in the grave where he overcame sin and death for his people. A parallel is drawn to Jonah and his tomb in the belly of the great fish. So the child of God can read Jonah's prayer in Jonah 2 and hear Christ!

The second chapter of Jonah is also known as the Song of Jonah. The reason it is called the Song of Jonah is because the chapter is in poetic verse. It contains three movements. Each movement begins with the impossible situation Jonah was in, and each movement ends with an expression of faith. Jonah's prayer is also a song, just as the songs in the book of Psalms are also called the "prayers of David" (Ps. 72:20). Systematizing the wisdom of scripture by the work of the Spirit, the Reformed creeds join prayer and singing in Lord's Day 38 in the phrase "publicly to call upon the Lord" (*Confessions and Church Order*, 128).

Christ Is in the Scriptures

The scriptures are of infinite depth. Jesus Christ himself shows the richness of the book of Jonah. In Matthew 12:39–41 we read,

39. But he answered and said unto them, An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas:
40. For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.
41. The men of Nineveh shall rise in judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it: because they repented at the preaching of Jonas; and, behold, a greater than Jonas is here.

Jesus was speaking here to the scribes and Pharisees. They had asked him for a sign, and Jesus told them that they were not going to be given *another* sign. Jesus was saying to these wicked Jews that all of the Old Testament scriptures testify of him. He was saying that in all of the Old Testament, he is there. The signs and shadows of Christ and the reality of his perfect work, though not yet unfolded in history, are already there. "The Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (Rev. 13:8). But the Jews could not see Christ in his word. He was standing right in front of them; they knew the Old Testament scriptures backward and forward, but they could not see him.

Christ told those Jews that Jonah was a type of himself: "Behold, a greater than Jonas is here" (Matt. 12:41). From this we can take another glimpse into the book of Jonah and see our Lord and savior. Jonah was a type and shadow of Christ in that after Jonah had been delivered from the fish's belly, the gospel was brought to the Gentiles in Nineveh. This was a foreshadowing of things to come, for after Jesus' death and resurrection, the gospel was then preached to the Gentiles.

Through a wonder of God's grace, Jesus Christ is revealed to his people in the word. Jesus Christ is the Word.

What is it that draws God's people to the preaching of the Reformed Protestant Churches? "For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). In the Reformed Protestant Churches, Christ is found in the scriptures and is preached. God be praised! The law is not preached as a means of grace, for if the law were a means of grace, then grace is no more grace. "And if by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it

be of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise work is no more work" (Rom. 11:6).

The church of Jesus Christ hates when man says that to experience salvation there is something that man must do, for then there would never be salvation or the experience of it, which are one and the same. "Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:1). The church hates when faith is made to be man's act, for faith is the bond that unites us to Jesus Christ and receives his finished work; and if faith were the doing of man, then man would never know salvation (see Heb. 11:5). The church hates when repentance is confounded to be part of faith and is not distinguished as a necessary fruit of faith. The church hates when repentance is said to be the means unto the forgiveness of sins, for we have forgiveness already by the means of faith. The church hates man-first theology and anything else that adds to Jesus Christ alone and him crucified. Those who preach and write lies such as these are the scribes and Pharisees of today. The scribes and Pharisees charged Christ that he cast out devils in the name of Beelzebub, which led to Christ's telling of the sign of Jonah later in Matthew 12. In essence they were saying that Christ and his ministry were a wicked thing. The scribes and Pharisees denied the gospel and denied Christ's work. All they could see was man and what man must do and that man is something.

The gospel in the Reformed Protestant Churches is charged today as antinomian: without a doubt! May those charges continue to come, for where the gospel is proclaimed, surely there will be the modern-day scribes and Pharisees. What the church joys in and what the church will demand is that Jesus Christ is preached and him alone. What brings excitement each Sunday is hearing Christ! May God be gracious and continue to show the churches Jesus Christ in the scriptures, so that they proclaim man as nothing and God as everything!

Conclusion

Jonah had cried against Nineveh, and the city repented. Jonah was exceedingly displeased and angry that this had happened, and he prayed to God for his life to end. God could have left Jonah in his anger as he sat sulking outside the city awaiting the destruction that Jonah knew would

not come, but God did not forsake Jonah. God taught Jonah a lesson by raising up a small gourd tree to shade Jonah and then sending a worm to destroy that tree the next day. This made Jonah faint and wish to die.

9. And God said to Jonah, Doest thou well to be angry for the gourd? And he said, I do well to be angry, even unto death.
10. Then said the LORD, Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for the which thou hast not laboured, neither madest it grow; which came up in a night, and perished in a night:
11. And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle? (Jonah 4:9–11)

God showed Jonah that Jonah had no right to wish for the destruction of Nineveh, for he had no part in the growth of that large city and no knowledge of God's plan for that city and the people there. God sent Jonah to bring God's word to that city. Certainly, the word of God is efficacious and never comes back to him void. God had his children there. God showed Jonah that even the cattle there belonged to him and were in his care.

10. For every beast of the forest is mine, and the cattle upon a thousand hills.
11. I know all the fowls of the mountains: and the wild beasts of the field are mine.
12. If I were hungry, I would not tell thee: for the world is mine, and the fulness thereof. (Ps. 50:10–12)

God had sent a great fish to swallow up Jonah to instruct Jonah of God's will, and then God sent a tiny worm to Jonah to show him the error of his scruple.

We do not know what was the end of this earthly pilgrimage for Jonah. Scripture does not reveal it to us. The book of Jonah ends with Jonah and his discourse with God. Despite Jonah's sin and his stubborn scruple, God shows in the book that he is Jonah's covenant friend. Jonah spoke with God, and God cared for Jonah in his tender loving-kindness as he does for all his children for Jesus' sake.

—Eddie Ophoff

THE BEATITUDES (1): BLESSSED POOR

Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. — Matthew 5:3

Introduction

The beatitudes are those declarations of blessing by Jesus Christ that took place at the very beginning of what is commonly referred to as the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus went away into a mountain, and there he could view the multitude that had followed him. While there might have been others off in the distance, those disciples of the multitude were the audience proper for this sermon. Those disciples who gathered and came to Jesus were not only the twelve whom Jesus had chosen and whom he would later send to preach, but the disciples were also those who had heard Jesus and followed him. There on the mountain the Lord Jesus took a seat and preached to those disciples, for it was often customary in those days for teachers in the synagogue to instruct their audiences in a seated position.

However, it is far less important for us to know the setting in which the sermon was preached than it is to know the central theme of the sermon, which very simply stated is the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of heaven was the constant refrain of Jesus throughout the sermon. Indeed, the kingdom of heaven would be of particular importance throughout the rest of Matthew's gospel account. Therefore, it should come as no surprise to the reader that Jesus' preaching of his own kingdom-doctrine came at the very beginning of this first sermon recorded for us in the book of Matthew.

In the first beatitude Jesus declared that the poor in spirit are blessed. And what is the reason for their blessedness? "For theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:3). In verse 19 we read regarding the kingdom of heaven,

Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

And then again in verse 20, we read, "For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven." Reaching near to the

end of Jesus' sermon in Matthew 7:21, we read, "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven." The gospel that Jesus preached was always the gospel of the kingdom of heaven (Mark 1:15).

The coming of the kingdom is the essence of the gospel message. The gospel is the good news of the kingdom, for in the coming of the kingdom is revealed the salvation of the entire elect church. This kingdom of heaven was promised throughout the entire Old Testament, was typified in the type and shadow of the Davidic line, and came in its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. One might say that the kingdom of heaven was right under the noses of the Jews or before their very eyes. And while many in Israel claimed that they were looking for a coming kingdom, they were not looking with the eyes of faith and thus were only seeking a carnal, earthly kingdom.

Meanwhile, there was Jesus, the prince and only true king of his church, who came with a different kingdom-doctrine than the kingdom-doctrine that the Jews were accustomed to hearing from the religious leaders of the day. Therefore, Jesus instructed the people on the most basic principles of the kingdom and its citizens in order to instruct those who were ignorant of the truth and to expose those who would not preach to the people the truth but preached merely an earthly kingdom, emphasizing man and his will and works over against the will and salvation of Jehovah God.

Beginning in Matthew 5:3 Jesus Christ gave the first, most basic principle of those who are citizens of the kingdom of heaven: they are poor in spirit. For a man or woman to be a citizen of the kingdom of heaven means, first, that he or she is poor in spirit. Only the one who is poor in spirit is blessed. That much is clear from the text. Not all men are poor in spirit, but only those who are blessed are poor in spirit. What must be noted first about the poor in the text is that they are God's elect. They are those in whom God delighted from all eternity and whom God appointed unto salvation in Jesus Christ and thus to citizenship in the kingdom before they were even born or had done any good or evil. The eternal choice

of God is determinative for the blessedness of the one who is a citizen of the kingdom of heaven. This must be kept in mind throughout the rest of the beatitudes as well. According to the eternal decree of election, Jesus Christ pronounced blessings upon the disciples. Those pronouncements of blessing were not offers or pleas for the church to do something to be blessed, but they were declarations of blessing upon those whom God willed to bless. Some God blesses, and they are poor in spirit. Others God curses, and they are not poor in spirit.

Additionally, it is of crucial importance for us to understand these beatitudes in their proper context. Some seemingly well-intentioned theologians have made the issue more complicated than it needs to be by describing the beatitudes in their connection to one another as a series of steps in Christian virtues. This understanding can easily become a snare to the exegete. While there is a logical connection that exists when one considers the beatitudes in relationship to each other, that connection is not to be understood in a temporal sense. For example, a man or woman is not to be considered poor in spirit who does not also mourn or is not merciful. Logically, no man or woman mourns who is not also poor in spirit. One must also necessitate the other. However, the beatitudes are not to be treated as steps in the Christian experience as rungs on a ladder, so that a man ascends higher and higher up that ladder until he has reached the very top or the pinnacle of Christian virtues.

Instead, all the beatitudes relate to each other and belong in their totality to the citizens of the kingdom as the beatitudes are all the manifold blessings of God that he gives to those who are made the citizens of the kingdom in Jesus Christ. A man or woman who is lacking in any one of these blessings is in no wise to be considered a citizen of the kingdom of heaven. It is in this first beatitude that we consider what is the most basic principle concerning the citizens of the kingdom: they are poor in spirit.

The Identity of the Poor in Spirit

First, what does it *not* mean that one is poor in spirit? It does not mean that one is poor in this world's goods. There is a certain idea that tends to float around in the church from time to time that it is more virtuous for someone to suffer want than to be wealthy. This idea at the very least suggests that it is harder for the rich man than the poor man to enter the kingdom. This is simply untrue and a gross misrepresentation of scripture. God has determined from eternity to make his power known in saving rich and poor, bond and free, male and female, and all without distinction or respect of persons. The kingdom of heaven possesses those who have much of this world's goods and those who have little.

The thought that the blessed man is the one who is poor in this world's goods is simply ludicrous. For if that were

true, then we would have to say that men such as David and Solomon were lesser members of the church because they possessed exorbitant amounts of wealth. Indeed, Solomon possessed so much wealth that the queen of Sheba said, "The half was not told me: thy wisdom and prosperity exceedeth the fame which I heard" (1 Kings 10:7). There is nothing inherently more holy or righteous about someone who is poor in this world than someone who is rich in this world. It is this kind of superficial interpretation of the text that lends itself to attacking the church's liberty in Christ, which is a threat to the very foundation of the kingdom. One might have little of this world's goods and not be poor in spirit. Neither is the text teaching that voluntary poverty itself is something to be honored. That is the teaching of Rome. Rome has its patron saints whom Rome regards as the only persons who alone conformed to the rule of being "poor in spirit" because they deliberately made themselves poor. However, they were conceited and simply do not fit the scriptural definition of spiritual poverty that we read of in Matthew 5:3.

What then does it mean to be poor in spirit? The key word of the phrase is "spirit." This is crucial for a proper understanding of this verse. In the beginning man was created a physical-spiritual creature. Unto every man belong both a physical side and a spiritual side. Man's physical side is that aspect of man's existence in which he stands in relationship to the earth. Man is of the earth earthy—taken up from the dust of the ground. Yet man also possesses a spiritual side. The spiritual side of man is that other aspect of man's existence in which he stands in relationship to God. It is this spiritual side of man that distinguishes him from the animals, which also live, move, and have their being but are not spiritual. The spiritual side of man is the innermost part of man's being, or what is also referred to by the Canons of Dordt as "the glimmerings of natural light" (Canons 3–4.4, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 167).

The idea of man's spiritual side is not the same as being an image-bearer of God. The devil and his demons are also spiritual creatures, although they are not physical. However, it would be blasphemous to suppose that for the mere reason that the devil and his hosts are spiritual creatures that they bear the image of God. For one to be spiritual is not sufficient to make one an image-bearer of God. To be an image-bearer of God requires that one be made after the likeness of God in every respect in true knowledge, righteousness, and holiness to will and to do in perfect agreement with the will of God. Rather, man as a spiritual creature is a rational, moral, and ethical creature who possesses a mind, will, and a conscience. As a man's spirit is, so is that man.

In the beginning God created man good and upright, so that in all his thinking and willing he existed in perfect

harmony with the living God. Adam and Eve stood in relationship to God in covenant fellowship with him because Adam and Eve had been created in God's image and likeness. They possessed the ability and the desire to live in perfect conformity to the will of God. They were filled with the knowledge of God, so that they saw God in the creation in all the beasts, birds, plants, trees, and the starry heavens; glorified him as God; and were thankful. For the goodness of Adam and Eve was that they knew God and themselves in relationship to him. And it was in Adam and by means of Adam's transgression in the garden that man became utterly impoverished and lost all that original goodness.

In Adam man became a debtor. That was quite a debt! God judged all men in Adam, so that in him and on account of his transgression, death passed upon all men (Rom. 8:12). In all man's thinking, willing, and planning, man by nature became the servant of sin and the devil. The will of man was bound under sin, so that man can only ever produce corruption. Forfeiting the image of God, which was man's goodness, man was wholly stripped of all those qualities and powers that God had given man to serve God.

However, it does not end there. In Adam man was not merely brought, as it were, to ground zero. Man was not merely made nothing. Surely, man is nothing. A man who thinks himself to be something when he is nothing is insane and puffed up in his own conceits. But nothing is not all that man is. Man by nature is a debtor. Man by nature owes an infinite debt to God that man simply cannot begin to repay. And it goes even further than that. Man, as he stands in relationship to God, is set at enmity against God and only ever increases his debt. Here we begin to see the greatness of man's misery. Man has been in arrears for some six thousand years and only ever daily increases his debt. This debt is a debt that man has no right or ability of himself to repay. For this reason there is no more garden of Eden. The way into the garden was closed off to man. There is no more tree of life, so that man cannot go back to the garden and say, "I can make it up with God. I can do better next time." No! For man only ever increases his debt.

How utterly poor is man! This poverty is also true of those who are regenerated. We do not deny that God's elect people who have been regenerated do good works. Later in the sermon Jesus went on to declare the blessedness of those who mourn, who hunger and thirst after righteousness, and who are peacemakers. However, even by the very best of our good works we only ever daily increase our debt. It could even be said that it is *especially* by our good works that we only ever increase our debt. As soon as we begin to think otherwise, we deceive ourselves.

Moreover, it is because man's debt is with God that man's condition by nature is utterly hopeless as far as man is concerned. For if our debt were merely with another man, then perhaps we could wiggle our way out of repaying that

debt. Men can be impressionable. Men can also be bribed. Eventually, it could even be possible to fully pay off a debt if that debt were with another man. However, this is not the case with God. Having our debt with God, we cannot so much as lift a finger in the hope of paying off our debt. When the law comes and condemns even the best of our works, we concede to the law's judgment that it is good and exclaim, "Who shall deliver us?"

Indeed, with what can we repay God? We are not only nothing, but we also have nothing wherewith to commend ourselves to God. We have only our miserable selves—spotted, tainted, torn, broken, and utterly polluted with all the filth and defilements of sin. How then could we even begin to measure out the debt that we owe to God on account of both our original and actual transgressions? For such a debt that is against the infinite God is of inestimable cost. Even an eternity of hells could never fully satisfy the debt that we owe to God, for on account of even a single sin, we deserve to perish everlasting. Before we ever sin once, we are worthy of condemnation in Adam. That is the reality of the debt that we owe to God. That is some debt!

The identity of the one who is poor in spirit is not discovered by merely stating an abstract fact about mankind's condition in Adam. For then all men would fit the description of the blessed poor. Certainly, the one who is poor in spirit is not rich in spirit. Neither is a man who believes that he can merit with God poor in spirit. The one who is poor in spirit is not the same as the person who is constantly berating himself in public, nor does he go out of his way to let everyone around him know how much of a nobody he is.

Rather, the identity of the one who is poor in spirit is revealed because the one who is poor in spirit knows himself as poor. The one who is poor in spirit is one who knows himself by nature and by very deed to be a debtor with God. The one who is poor in spirit does not busy himself with trying to make up his sins to God. He knows his own nothingness, that he is only a debtor. That man confesses about himself that he has no righteousness with which to commend himself unto God. That man does not merely confess this about himself to other men, but he confesses this about himself to the living God. That man who is poor in spirit as he has been made to stand before God acknowledges his sins and misery and that there is no hope of salvation in himself or in his works. He confesses that he is worthy only of condemnation on account of his sins.

The Explanation of This

What then explains that there are those who are poor in spirit? The poor in spirit are blessed according to eternal election. Those whom God chose from eternity and to whom he willed to reveal himself savingly in Jesus Christ, they are the poor in spirit. The poor in spirit are such according as they are blessed by God. That blessing of

God is not temporal, but the blessing is eternal, rooted in God's sovereign will and good pleasure. Eternally, God willed that he should bless his elect people whom he would make poor in spirit.

How is that will of God made manifest? We read of this when the text says, "For theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Those who are poor in spirit are citizens of the kingdom of heaven. They are poor in spirit who belong to the kingdom. The kingdom has laid hold upon them and translated them out of darkness into God's marvelous light. The kingdom is heavenly. The blessings of the kingdom are from God unto men, so that God reaches down from heaven in his grace and blesses those who are the citizens of his kingdom. It is the kingdom that God conceived of in his eternal counsel. The kingdom of heaven is the gracious rule of the covenant God in Jesus Christ. As such we can make a distinction between that rule of God over all created things by his sheer might and his rule of grace in his church. Especially with that in view, we consider the kingdom of heaven. The most basic principle about the kingdom of heaven is that it is a kingdom of grace.

Being a kingdom of grace, the kingdom possesses those who are poor. There is grace revealed. This is what the Lord Jesus would have us know about the kingdom. The kingdom of heaven is a gracious gift to men and women who have nothing in themselves except for a mountain of debt. Citizenship in the kingdom means to have salvation and every blessing in Jesus Christ. The first benefit of the kingdom is that work of God whereby God by his gracious rule confronts the man who is running far from God and lays hold upon that man. Laying hold upon that man, God causes him to stand in God's presence and to confess his own nothingness. God causes that man to confess the immensity of his debt and the utter hopelessness of paying that debt to God.

The kingdom of heaven possesses those who are poor in spirit, so that they become the proper citizens of that kingdom through the forgiveness of their sins. For the poor in spirit know about themselves and confess that by nature they have no right to a name and a place in the kingdom of heaven. That is their confession about themselves, not merely in the presence of other men but also unto the living God before whose presence they have been made to stand. The poor in spirit confess that their name and place in the kingdom of heaven were merited for them by Jesus Christ. They who are themselves poor are made rich. They alone are blessed. Only the poor in spirit are blessed.

The Blessedness of the Poor in Spirit

The poor in spirit are blessed because they have been given a wide entrance into the kingdom in Jesus Christ. This is the ground of their blessedness and of their comfort.

The hope and confidence of the poor in spirit are not in themselves, for the poor in spirit know themselves to be debtors. Rather, the hope and confidence of the ones who are poor in spirit is Jesus Christ. For their sakes Jesus Christ became poor—unspeakably poor. The Lord of glory traded the sapphire throne of heaven for the humble cattle trough of Bethlehem. The Lord from heaven came into this world as nothing and with nothing. "Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?" the people said. His whole life long, Jesus humbled himself and was made nothing before the eyes of God and men. Christ's humiliation culminated when he went to the cross. There at the cross Jesus Christ truly became nothing, even less than nothing. Jesus Christ became a debtor. For the sake of God's elect people, whose debt Jesus bore, he made himself responsible for their sins and thus liable to temporal and eternal punishment on account of those sins.

At the cross Jesus Christ bore the immensity of the wrath of God that was due against our debt. All the debt that God's elect people accumulated during the six thousand years that fallen man has been in arrears and which debt has increased daily throughout the lifetimes of God's elect people was nailed to that cross. There was the perfect satisfaction of the infinite justice of God for all the original sin and actual transgressions of all of God's people. There was forgiveness of all our debt. It was there on the cross that Jesus Christ established for us perfect righteousness on account of which a wide entrance was ministered unto us into the everlasting kingdom of heaven.

For our sakes Jesus Christ became poor in order that we might be made rich—unspeakably rich. Here we can see the other side of the blessedness of those who are poor in spirit. Christ has entered into their hearts by his Spirit and word and applies to them all the riches of the kingdom of heaven. The blessings of the kingdom are heavenly blessings. The poor in spirit are given to know the full and free pardon of their debt and that righteousness is as certainly theirs as if they personally had obeyed all the commandments of God. The poor in spirit are blessed. They are not blessed because they are poor in spirit. Rather, it is the living, indwelling reality of those whom God eternally blesses that they are poor in spirit. That they are poor in spirit is itself the blessing of God. They know themselves and their own indebtedness before the righteous tribunal of God. They are blessed. And they know it. The poor in spirit know that whereas they deserve only temporal and eternal punishment on account of their sins, God has reached down to them in his grace and has revealed himself graciously in Jesus Christ as the one who has paid for all their debt. "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

—Garrett Varner



Reformed Believers Publishing
325 84th St SW, Suite 102
Byron Center, MI 49315

FINALLY, BRETHREN, FAREWELL

O LORD, are not thine eyes upon the truth?—Jeremiah 5:3

An astounded prophet uttered these words. He turned away from the people and with upturned eyes appealed his cause to Jehovah. Jeremiah was astounded at the terrible hardness and unbelief of the nation to whom he ministered. God had stricken the people, but they did not grieve. God had consumed them, but they refused to receive correction. Not only were they hardened and unteachable by even the severest chastisements of God, but they also paraded about with a religious cloak for their maliciousness. They said, “The LORD liveth.” Shall we say that they made a certain confession to the truth? The name of Jehovah was ever on their lips, so that their conversations, actions, and decisions had a show of deep piety. They said, “The LORD liveth,” and by that they acknowledged him as God alone, as the judge who sees and rewards good and evil, as the savior of Israel, and as the Lord of all. One, it seems, could hardly find a more faithful and religious people in all the earth than the inhabitants of Jerusalem. But they swore falsely! There was not a religious or faithful person to be found in truth among the poor people or among the mighty nobles. All were spiritual adulterers.

And the proof? They refused the word of Jehovah. He came to them through his prophets, and he spoke to them concerning himself and his glory, concerning them and their sins and the way of repentance and salvation. He warned, exhorted, rebuked, and called to them. He rose up early and sat up late to teach them. And their reaction? There is no word of God in what the prophets speak, and everything they speak against us will become an empty wind and vanity and fall to the ground and become harmless. So they said, “There is no truth in what the prophets say. They threaten us with sword and famine, but they shall not happen to us. Do the prophets not hear how we confess the truth and that we are the people of God?” Indeed, they said that all that the prophets threatened against them would instead happen to the prophets. And in so reacting to the word of God sent unto them, they lied against Jehovah, and they said, “He does not live, and he is not God!”

Strange contradiction! At one and the same time to use the name of Jehovah and to confess to know the truth and to be an utter atheist who says, “God is not!” When one says with the lips, “The LORD liveth,” and so makes a certain confession of the truth and then reacts to the word of God preached by saying, “There is no word of God in it,” then in reality the person is an atheist who says, “God does not live!” Such is the state of every hypocrite and apostate from the truth who rejects the word of God that comes to him. For the faithful infallibly receive the word by the power of the Spirit that is in them because the Spirit in them recognizes and receives the word of the Spirit that comes in the preaching. But being without the Spirit, the apostate rejects the word and says, “There is no word of God—no truth—in it.”

Terrible spiritual state! For God’s eyes are on the truth. It is always before his face. He loves truth, for it is his Son! Truth is always precious to God. And being his word, truth never returns to him void. Thus he makes the people who hear it wood, and he makes his word a fire, and it devours. The word accomplishes the purpose to which God sends it. For indeed he sent it for the salvation of some, that they might receive instruction and correction. And he sent the word for the damnation of others, that hearing they might hear and not understand.

—N.J.L.