

The background features a stylized, orange-toned illustration. A sword is positioned diagonally from the top left towards the center. A shield is positioned in the lower right, overlapping the sword's blade. The shield has a circular design with several smaller circles inside. The overall style is minimalist and graphic.

SWORD AND SHIELD

A REFORMED MONTHLY MAGAZINE

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

Deuteronomy 33:29

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A PILGRIM'S PRAYER

*Let thy work appear unto thy servants, and thy glory unto their children.
And let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us: and establish thou the work of
our hands upon us; yea, the work of our hands establish thou it. — Psalm 90:16–17*

The prayer of a pilgrim who had lived long and hard in this valley of tears. The prayer of Moses, the man of God. This psalm is the only one that we know Moses wrote. It was probably written near the end of his life as the children of Israel were about to enter the land of Canaan and as Moses surveyed the land from the mountaintop.

In this psalm Moses stands at the height of his faith.

Having led Israel for many years, Moses now prays for Israel.

By the Spirit, Moses beholds God. He sees God, the perfection of all beauty and loveliness, the delightful and altogether lovely dwelling place of his people. “Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God” (v. 2). The mountains may be removed and tossed into the midst of the sea, the earth may quake and the whole world be turned upside down, but from everlasting to everlasting God is God.

The eternal God who always was. Even before the beginning, before time, before the worlds, before the mountains, God is. He is eternal: above time and beholding all time as one indivisible present. A thousand years are in his sight as yesterday and as a watch in the night.

What happened a thousand years ago? The church was in the night of the Dark Ages, oppressed by the false doctrine of works-righteousness; the earth was ruled by kings, emperors, tyrants, and popes; the gospel was just coming to our fathers as they worshiped rocks, wood, trees, and the hosts of heaven. To the Lord as yesterday, as a watch in the night, and as a moment ago.

The unchangeable God. Time, like an ever-rolling stream, bears all its sons away and brings with it countless changes to this fleeting world, but God is the same. He is, and he is from eternity to eternity the same in his being and in all his perfections.

Unchanging, then, also with respect to his people. Eternally, before the mountains and before the earth and the world, God is Jehovah, the covenant God. Jehovah, the great I AM THAT I AM. He is the dwelling place of God's people in all generations. He is the house, the refuge, the home of God's people in all generations. Up into his house, graciously and lovingly, God has taken his people

and embraced them with his fellowship and friendship. From eternity he was filled with love and mercy toward his church, whom he chose as his own. From eternity he determined to bless them with the greatest possible blessing, even his own fellowship. From eternity he embraced his people as his own dear children, so that they might dwell with him in his house in the pleasant and blessed fellowship of his company, so that they might behold him and his glory and splendor as their God, and so that they as his people and dear children might be blessed in him.

Then Moses looks back from God to the earth, and he sees man. He sees man as he is lying under the curse and the night of sin and guilt. He sees man even as he is in the generations of God's own people: carried away as with a flood; like sleep in the morning; like the grass that grows and flourishes for a morning and then is cut down and withers. Even the best of our days is labor and sorrow, and they are cut off and we fly away. All this because of sin and the wrath and anger of God. Consumed by his anger, and by his wrath are we troubled. Our secret sins and iniquities are set in the glaring light of his countenance. Who can stand before God? Who can approach him? Who may abide in the shadow of the Most High?

It is in this situation—seeing God, who is from everlasting to everlasting God and the dwelling place of his people in all generations, and seeing man as a mist and a breath of air, fleeting and sinful—that Moses cries out, “Return, O Jehovah! And let it repent thee concerning thy servants.” Instead of consuming us with labor and sorrow and with thy anger, let us taste thy mercy. Make us glad and fill us with joy. Let thy work appear to thy servants and thy glory unto their children. Set thy beauty upon us.

If we see the work of Jehovah, we will be glad. If his glory and beauty are upon us, we will rejoice. We will be satisfied too. We will lack nothing. Then Jehovah establishes the work of our hands too.

A good prayer, then, for pilgrims who face a new year.
Let thy work appear unto thy servants!

Moses calls this work of Jehovah his glory and his beauty. Work, glory, and beauty are all parallel in the text. They are different words for the same thing, though they explain it from different perspectives.

Why is it so difficult for us to see the work of Jehovah?

Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world.

God is a working God. “My Father,” said Jesus, “works hitherto, and I also work.” His labors are all perfect and true. He accomplishes them effortlessly by his omnipotent power and according to his determinate counsel. God works.

His work has many aspects and is rich and manifold. God has many works. The whole world is the work of his hands. In wisdom he made them all. By his almighty power he upholds and governs with his hand the whole world. So all of history and every event great and small are the work of Jehovah. Salvation is the work of God that in the church might be known the manifold wisdom of God. He unites his people to Christ, regenerates, calls, gives faith as a gift, justifies, sanctifies, and glorifies them. Many and manifold are the works of God. The work of the Lord is perfect.

Yet, but one work! One particular work, the central work of God—the work of God around which all his other works are concentrated and of which they are a part and which they serve.

Let *that* work appear to thy servants.

Of that work Moses sang after the Red Sea: “Thou shalt bring them in, and plant them in the mountain of thine inheritance, in the place, O LORD, which thou hast made for thee to dwell in, in the Sanctuary, O Lord, which thy hands have established” (Ex. 15:17).

The psalmist sings the same thing: “He hath made his wonderful works to be remembered: the LORD is gracious and full of compassion. He hath given meat unto them that fear him: he will ever be mindful of his covenant. He hath shewed his people the power of his works, that he may give them the heritage of the heathen” (Ps. 111:4–6).

Concerning this work Paul encourages the church: “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord” (1 Cor. 15:58).

The great work of Jehovah is the work of his covenant. Ever mindful of his covenant! Jehovah is our dwelling place in all generations. God is our God, friend, lord, and sovereign. We are his people, friends, and servants—we and our children.

It seemed that for four hundred years Jehovah had forgotten Israel. He tried and tested the Israelites in the fiery

furnace of Egypt and with the hard bondage of the Egyptians. Then he came to his people by Moses and delivered them from the land of Egypt. He guided them by the hand of his servant Moses through the fiery deserts, and now they stand poised to enter through the door of Canaan. All this Jehovah did because he is the everlasting God and the everlasting dwelling place of his people; because he had loved them and chosen them from all eternity for his people; because he is unchangeable with respect to his promise; because he is ever mindful of his covenant.

A redemption that was wrought through the deep way of sin, death, and misery. That was God’s will. Pharaoh, God raised up to serve his purpose: for this cause have I raised thee up that I might show my power in thee and

that my name might be declared throughout all the earth. In the desert every trial and tribulation was the work of God to try Israel. He was always mindful of his covenant. Everything—Pharaoh, sin and death, trouble and sorrow, affliction and persecution—served the purpose of God for the redemption of his people and his covenant with them.

But a type of his work in Jesus Christ, the greater than Moses. Jesus Christ is the wonder, the work, the glory, and the beauty of God.

Jesus Christ came in our flesh: in him the fullness of the eternal and unchangeable God dwells and tabernacles with us. Wonder of wonders.

He suffered in the fiery furnace of God’s wrath for our sins on the cross. He went down into eternal desolation and misery on the cross for us. What a work!

And he arose and ascended into heaven. What glory and beauty!

He is our wisdom and righteousness and sanctification and redemption; in him is grace and truth, and of his fullness we receive grace for grace; in him who is the BELOVED OF GOD, the FAVORITE, we are made accepted and have access to God. In Jesus Christ by faith, we know and see and have the work, the glory, and the beauty of God.

The whole covenant, our life and blessing, all of the blessings that we enjoy and that make us glad are God’s work, his glory, and his beauty in Jesus Christ. With his own beauty and loveliness, in Christ, God makes us beautiful new creatures created in his image unto good works that God before ordained that we should walk in them.

Let us see that!

From eternity he was filled with love and mercy toward his church, whom he chose as his own. From eternity he determined to bless them with the greatest possible blessing, even his own fellowship.

Do you see it?
It is hard to see it.

We do not see it with the eye of the body.

What we see with the eye of the body is labor and sorrow. We see affliction and heartache and setback. We see death and misery. We see vanity. We see that we live seventy or eighty years and fly away. We see the troubles of the wilderness, and Canaan seems a long way off.

Some in Israel did not see it. They complained to Moses at every hardship and trial. When there was no water, they grumbled. When there was bread, they cried for meat. When Moses was gone a little too long, they sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play and trampled underfoot the blood of the covenant wherewith they were sprinkled. They accused Moses of taking them into the wilderness to kill them. They tempted God, demanding to know whether he was among them or not. They lusted after the things of Egypt. They, too, were brought out of Egypt and through the Red Sea; but they did not see the work of Jehovah, and they perished in the wilderness. With them God was not well pleased.

Even God's own people sometimes were caught up in that. They did not see that the Lord, in Egypt, out of Egypt, and through the wilderness in all the trials and afflictions, was working a great work. It was all his work for them and their children, to bless them and to bring them into his holy habitation.

And that is why Moses weeps in the psalm, "Jehovah, return! Make us glad according to the years in which thou hast afflicted us. Do that by letting thy work appear unto us and thy glory to our children."

Let the beauty of Jehovah be upon us, and show us thy work.

This is the prayer for faith.

Cause us to see thy work by faith. Grant us strong faith to see thy work, for apart from that work of Jesus Christ in our hearts we do not see God's work but see only labor, sorrow, and vanity.

Faith is thy work, not our work. Grant us faith. And with that faith grant us all the blessings of salvation. This is thy work, not our work.

This is the prayer for truth to be preserved among us, especially the truth of the covenant. There is no work of God apart from the truth. If we are to see the work of God, the truth must be maintained among us. Let us see the truth in all its glories and beauties.

Let the glorious confession of the truth and a holiness of life be preserved among us. This is the beauty of the church and of the people of God: they confess the truth and live holy lives.

The church may be ever so full of thin and outwardly beautiful people; she may be ever so outwardly

impressive; but if she denies the truth—gross unholiness in itself—and besides is full of unholiness, she is an ugly church. How ugly it is to say that God loves all men; to say that man contributes to his salvation; to say that our works merit with God; to say that the way to the Father is by works in addition to faith in Christ; to say that we can come to the Father and be received in mercy only by meeting his demands of obedience. That is ugly!

Let thy beauty be upon us, so that we confess the truth and live holy lives.

Upon us thy beauty!

The prayer for the Holy Spirit. That God may dwell with us in and through the Spirit of Jesus Christ. That he may work within us and upon us to see his glory, work, and beauty.

Also, upon our children! Threescore and ten, perhaps fourscore, is the number of our years. What remains is God's covenant. The covenant of God, his work, is with us and our children. Not only grant all these things to us, but also grant that they be preserved in our generations, among our children, so that God's covenant continues among us.

Let them see thy work, and let thy glory and thy beauty be upon them too.

Prosper our work then.

We must first understand that it is all God's work.

If we see that...

If we understand that...

If we will not scoff at and ridicule that...

Our whole lives, all our labors in his covenant, in his church, and in his kingdom, every gift of grace that we have received, all that is delightful and pleasant in the covenant—marriage, children, family, and friends in the Lord—is all God's work.

If the Lord shows that to us and sets his beauty upon us—graciously—we know, too, what it means to pray that God will establish the work of our hands.

In his covenant he gives us a work. Work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is the Lord who works in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure. He calls us to work because it is God who works in us both to will and to do of his good pleasure.

It is work in connection with truth and sound doctrine. There is no work that the Lord establishes apart from the truth. He curses work apart from the truth and brings it down into vanity and the grave. If work is not on the basis of the beauty, work, and glory of the Lord, all that work is vain and futile. It is vain and futile because it is not rooted in the truth of the gospel. Not being rooted in the truth of the gospel, it is not labor in the Lord. Not being labor in the Lord, it is not the work of the Lord. And the Lord curses those works, and the works perish with those who work them.

The work of our hands is that share of the Lord's work

that he gives to us in the covenant and church and home and school. It is all his, and he gives us to labor in it.

The work of the Lord is the work of the church institute. It is the work of preaching the gospel to all nations. The work of the Lord is the preaching of the gospel, both in the established churches and on the mission fields. It is the work of training men to be gospel preachers. It is the work of administering the sacraments. It is the work of the church in discipline and in ruling the church by the elders. It is the work of the deacons in taking up and distributing the alms. This is the great and central work of the Lord.

The work of the Lord is the work of the entire life of the believer. It is the work of the daily fight against sin, the daily sorrow over sin, the daily renewed zeal to fight against sin and to live a life of holiness to the Lord. The work to confess the truth and to reject the lie. It is the enduring of persecution and mockery for the sake of the gospel.

It is the work of a man who labors to support his family and the poor and the causes of the church, the school, the covenant, and the kingdom of Jesus Christ. It is the work of raising our children in the fear and admonition of the Lord in the truth. Mothers at home, who shun careers in the world, are laboring in the work of the Lord. It is

the work of the mother teaching her children at home the truth of God's covenant and the vanity of seeking this life.

This includes importantly the Protestant Reformed schools. It is the work of the teachers in the Protestant Reformed Christian schools to teach our children God's covenant.

Establish thou the work of our hands; yea, the work of our hands, establish thou it. Except Jehovah build the house, they labor in vain who build it.

And so make us glad and satisfy us early with thy mercy, so that we, in the midst of this life of labor and sorrow, may rejoice and be glad all our days—in the Lord and because of his beauty and glory and work—knowing that our labors are not in vain in the Lord.

And he does establish our work. Moses prays twice for the same thing. Not in doubt but in the assurance of faith that the Lord will establish it. The prayer of faith rooted in the truth of God and of his everlasting covenant and made sure in the cross of Jesus Christ.

He is our dwelling place in all generations. From everlasting to everlasting he is God—our God—and we are his people.

—NJL

EDITORIAL

OUR PRESENT CONTROVERSY (6)

Introduction

Throughout the summer and fall, these editorials have been explaining the present controversy in the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC). The controversy is whether the believer's fellowship with God is by works or by grace. Or, as these editorials have put it, the controversy is whether a grace principle or a works principle governs the believer's conscious experience of salvation and fellowship with God.

In the last regular issue, I began to lay out the path forward for the PRC to come to the end of our controversy and to be united in the truth. The first calling is for the churches officially to instruct their members in synod's decisions regarding the controversy. The churches' work is not finished when synod has made a decision regarding doctrine. That decision must yet be brought to the churches for their confirmation and establishment in the faith. This is the pattern given to us by the Holy Spirit following the Jerusalem council.

22. Then pleased it the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of

their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas; namely, Judas surnamed Barsabas, and Silas, chief men among the brethren:

23. And they wrote letters by them after this manner...
30. So when they were dismissed, they came to Antioch: and when they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered the epistle:
31. Which when they had read, they rejoiced for the consolation.
32. And Judas and Silas, being prophets also themselves, exhorted the brethren with many words, and confirmed them.
33. And after they had tarried there a space, they were let go in peace from the brethren unto the apostles.
4. And as they went through the cities, they delivered them the decrees for to keep, that were ordained of the apostles and elders which were at Jerusalem.

5. And so were the churches established in the faith, and increased in number daily. (Acts 15:22–23, 30–33; 16:4–5)

There is plenty of instruction possible, for our present controversy has come to five synods since 2016. If consistories want to begin with only one synod, they could profitably bring to their members Synod 2018, which dealt extensively with many of the threads of the controversy.

The second calling, which can be pursued right alongside the first, is that the churches fight against our own lie, which means fighting against our own selves. In order to finish the controversy, we must engage in the controversy. In order to come to the end of our fight, we must not stop fighting but fight harder. This calling to engage in internal polemics stands over against the idea that peace will be found through silence. Jesus Christ is our peace, and the lie has no place with him. Peace in the churches will not be achieved by finding a way for the grace principle and the works principle to live in silent harmony in the churches, but by the grace principle driving out the works principle. If anyone has been under the impression that it is gossip to discuss the controversy or that it is schismatic to speak against our own doctrinal errors where and when they appear, then remember how publicly the prophets and apostles spoke against false doctrine. It is not gossip or schism to speak about our own errors, to discuss them with family and friends on the phone and over coffee, to condemn them in the strongest terms, to abhor them, and to glory in the truth over against them. Our calling over against our error is not to keep silent but to fight with might and main for the faith. Our calling is earnestly to contend for the faith: “Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints” (Jude 3).

In the last editorial, I promised to turn our attention to the ways that we have minimized our doctrinal error as churches. In the meantime, Rev. Nathan Langerak has taken up that argument powerfully in his defense of *Sword and Shield*, which article occurs elsewhere in this issue. I highly recommend that article to our readership, with the prayer that God may use it to open our eyes to the danger in our churches and to the necessity of *Sword and Shield*.

In this editorial I continue to lay out the way forward for the Protestant Reformed Churches.

Repent

The way forward for the Protestant Reformed Churches is repentance. Let all of the members of the PRC, all of the officebearers, all of the men and women, the young and the old, hear this call: Repent.

Repent!

We are a denomination that has compromised the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are a denomination that has displaced the perfect work of Christ. We are a denomination that has compromised the truth of the unconditional covenant. We are a denomination that has compromised the truth of justification by faith alone.

Do we know this? Do we believe this? We compromised the truth of justification by faith alone! False churches compromise the truth of justification by faith alone. Rome compromises the truth of justification by faith alone. And the Protestant Reformed Churches compromised the truth of justification by faith alone.

Repent!

Our compromise of the gospel was sin. Among other sins, it was the sin of lying, for we took the beautiful truth of Jesus Christ and his perfect work and twisted it into the grotesque lie of man’s works obtaining gifts from God. By teaching, defending, and tolerating this lie for years, the PRC did what God accused the prophets of Jerusalem of doing: walking in lies (Jer. 23:14).

De we know this? Do we believe this? The PRC walked in lies! The lie of false doctrine is a disgusting sin. God calls it spiritual adultery (v. 14). Even in our sex-saturated and divorce-riddled culture, we still find adultery to be a gross sin. This is how gross false doctrine is to God. Even more, God says regarding the lying prophets of Jerusalem and all whose wicked hands were strengthened by them that “they are all of them unto me as Sodom, and the inhabitants thereof as Gomorrah” (v. 14). How revolting were the homosexuals of Sodom, who were so filled with Sodomite lust that even after the angels struck them with blindness, they still wearied themselves to find Lot’s door so that they could force themselves on his guests. This is how revolting the teachers of false doctrine and the pupils of false doctrine are to God. And the PRC taught and learned false doctrine.

Repent!

Our compromise of the gospel was a sin of the entire denomination and not merely of a few individuals. It was a sin of the denomination through the official decisions of classis, which, among other things, defended false doctrine by not sustaining appeals against that doctrine, adopted false doctrine by approving the work of the committee that wrote the doctrinal statement, and lied about an appellant by falsifying her words.

Our compromise of the gospel was also a sin of the denomination through the attitude of many toward the controversy. Many dismissed the controversy as a clash of personalities or as a Grand Rapids problem that didn’t affect anyone else or as a debate merely about words. The gospel was at stake for the entire denomination, but many of us yawned it off as no big deal.

Our compromise of the gospel was also a sin of the denomination through the awful leadership of our ministers, elders, and professors. This is not any disrespect to our officebearers, who are appointed of God to their offices. This is simply a recognition of the fact that we officebearers did not lead the sheep well through this controversy. We who are watchmen were slow to recognize the danger, we were too often silent when the danger was identified, and we often played the part of the enemy by promoting and defending the lie and the liars. In fact, it is not impossible that some of the officebearers in the PRC through this controversy are actually wolves themselves, who have spoken perverse things against the truth of the gospel to draw away disciples after them. Don't be shocked that this might be the case, for Christ's apostle told us it would happen. In a life-and-death battle for the gospel of Jesus Christ, it behooves us as a denomination to be on the lookout for wolves in our midst.

28. Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.
29. For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock.
30. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them.
31. Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears.
32. And now, brethren, I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified. (Acts 20:28–32)

Our compromise of the gospel was also a sin of the denomination through our wicked assumption that the protestants and appellants in the controversy were troublemakers. To this day, men and women in the PRC hate those humble saints who took a stand for the truth. Even after these protestants and appellants have been proven right, and even after God used them to preserve the gospel among us, men and women still speak of these protestants only to revile them and to tell the most slanderous stories about them. You protestants and appellants who have been reviled by the PRC for your defense of the gospel, you are blessed. Our Lord himself said so: "Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for

so persecuted they the prophets which were before you" (Matt. 5:11–12). But we Protestant Reformed members who have both secretly and openly reviled the protestants, we are not blessed. We have murdered God's people in our hearts and with our tongues. Our land is full of their blood, and our house is ripe for the judgment of God. "Then said he unto me, The iniquity of the house of Israel and Judah is exceeding great, and the land is full of blood, and the city full of perverseness: for they say, The LORD hath forsaken the earth, and the LORD seeth not. And as for me also, mine eye shall not spare, neither will I have pity, but I will recompense their way upon their head" (Ezek. 9:9–10).

Do we know this? Do we believe this? As a body of churches united in a denomination, we share corporate responsibility for our compromise of the gospel. There may be no excuse by an individual that the controversy has nothing to do with him. Let the man who makes such an excuse reproach himself and be ashamed. Let him ask himself how his love for the gospel could be so cold that when the gospel was compromised in his own denomination, he said, "But that has nothing to do with me." Let him ask himself how his love for his God and his brethren could be so cold that when men were compromising the gospel to their own destruction, he said, "But that is their problem, for I've always believed the right thing."

Repent!

What is this repentance for our sin of compromising the gospel? It is to hear and to receive the rebuke of God's word against our sin as a sword-thrust through our hearts. When we read in the *Acts of Synod 2018* that "Classis East failed to deal with doctrinal error" (61), that is a rebuke to every single member of the PRC. On the basis of God's truth, synod speaks through the months and years to us as we sit here today and says, "You did this!" Repentance is to hear that rebuke and to be pricked in our hearts (Acts 2:37). Repentance is to hear that rebuke and to be exposed by it, to be searched out and opened up by it (Ps. 139:23–24). Repentance is to hear that rebuke and to be pierced and divided by the word, even to the discerning of the thoughts and intents of our hearts (Heb. 4:12).

Being pricked by the rebuke of God's word, we sorrow after a godly sort and are sorry after a godly manner (2 Cor. 7:9, 11). We cry and weep, though not with the empty sorrow and tears of the world, which are selfish and vain. Rather, we sorrow that we have sinned against our God. We compromised his gospel! How dare we! We displaced the perfect work of his Christ! How dare we! We compromised the truth of the unconditional covenant and justification by faith alone, both of which are rooted in the cross of his Son! How dare we! We have sinned, and we have sinned against our God! "Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight" (Ps. 51:4).

Do we know this? Do we believe this? Our repentance as a denomination must be holy sorrow and must not be accompanied by a rickety wheelbarrow full of holey excuses. Repentance is defenseless, not defensive. Repentance says, “For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me” (v. 3). Repentance does not say, “For I acknowledge my transgressions, but in my defense...” Excuses dull the heart of the child of God and dampen his spiritual sensitivity. Excuses steal the word away from the child of God, which word exposes him for his profit, and replace the word with man’s own earthly reasoning, which reasoning self-justifies him unto his destruction. A Reformed denomination that has walked in lies cannot hide her shame under the rotten rags of her excuses, for her rags are full of holes. Members of the Protestant Reformed Churches, rend your hearts.

Repent!

Away with the excuse that the protests and appeals were too long. After Classis East had failed to deal with doctrinal error, thus defending and tolerating the compromising of the gospel; after Classis East itself had displaced the perfect work of Christ by its doctrinal statement; and while an appeal against the heresy of Classis East was coming to Synod 2018; the popular mind of the PRC, as represented in the *Standard Bearer*, could only be roused to say this about it all:

Also at Synod are four protests of statements or actions of the Synod of 2017, and an appeal of a decision of a classis. These protests make up 264 pages of the 427-page agenda. Synod may be forced to appoint a study committee to address the problem of ballooning protests and appeals. There is no good reason that protests or appeals should number in the scores, much less hundreds of pages. All consistories are willing in good faith to assist members so that they can bring the clearest, most precise protest/appeal with all the supporting documents needed. It is positively detrimental to overload the ecclesiastical assemblies with a mountain of documents. To put it into perspective, how many of us recently picked up a book of 427 pages, and not only *read* it in a month, but *studied* it in order to be qualified to discuss and make decisions on its content? That is what we are asking all the delegates to synod to do. (Russell Dykstra, “PRC Synod 2018, Agenda,” *Standard Bearer* 94, no. 16 [May 15, 2018]: 367)

While the denomination was actively walking in lies! While the denomination was busy selling its Reformed heritage of sound doctrine for the sickly poison of salvation by works! And what were we revolted by? Not by the error! Not by that false doctrine that stank of the

brimstone of the pit! No, we were revolted that the documents were too long. And so important did we consider that point that it was the one and only thing that we could say about all of the controversial material coming to Synod 2018. But true repentance does not and will not cast blame on the protestants’ documents.

Repent!

Away with the excuse that the doctrines were too deep. After Synod 2018 had condemned the lie and had set forth the truth, a popular explanation of the doctrinal issue included this:

Let it be stated at the outset—these are some deep theological waters, for many of the terms in the controversy have not been defined in Protestant Reformed theology or even discussed in the Reformed confessions. The experience of covenant fellowship? The enjoyment of covenant fellowship? Are these the same as simply “covenant fellowship”? How is our experience of or enjoyment of fellowship with God related to a life of obedience? (Russell Dykstra, “Synod 2018: Obedience and Covenant Fellowship,” *Standard Bearer* 94, no. 18 [July 2018]: 415)

Whatever theological questions may have been raised in the course of the controversy, the heart of the issue was as simple and as clear as could be: Is fellowship with God by works or by grace? I daresay most elementary school children in the denomination could answer without hesitation: “By grace!” The appellant—a housewife and mother in Israel—understood the controversy in its simplest terms from the beginning: “So the essential question that needs to be answered is this: Is our experience of the covenant conditional or not?” (*Acts 2018*, 103–4). It should be instinctive for members of the Protestant Reformed Churches to answer that question, “No! Nothing about the covenant is conditional!” The problem in the controversy is not that the doctrines are too deep to understand. Oh, yes, certainly, it is necessary to study, to read, to analyze, to meditate, to pray. Even the simplest theology cannot very well be digested and comprehended during commercials between innings. But the doctrinal issue itself is the ABC’s of the gospel and the 123’s of the covenant: Fellowship with God is by grace and is unconditional. For us to say, after the fact, that we compromised the gospel because the theology was so deep is just an excuse, and a rather silly one at that. The controversy did not reveal that the theology is too deep, but that our denomination is too shallow. Beware lest we fall into a puddle and drown.

Repent!

Away with the excuse that the decisions of Synod 2018 constitute the repentance of the Protestant Reformed

Churches. This is perhaps the most popular of all our excuses. When someone calls for the PRC to repent of our false doctrine, almost immediately someone else calls back, "But we already did that. Synod 2018 corrected the error, and now it is finished." It is true that God gave the PRC a marvelous victory of the truth over the lie at Synod 2018. It is true that Synod 2018 set forth true doctrine over against the false doctrine that had infected the PRC. But as important and good as synod's decision was, synod's decision is not repentance. Your repentance and mine does not happen on the pages of synod's paper but in our hearts. Repentance is a piercing and pricking and exposing and dividing and rending of our hearts. Repentance is sorrowing and prostrating and confessing in our hearts.

Not only that, but when a denomination compromises the gospel with such vigor for so long, she has a serious spiritual problem. She does not compromise the gospel out of the blue, but her compromise of the gospel is a symptom of an existing spiritual problem. What is our existing problem in the PRC? Is it that we have lost our first love (Rev. 2:4) and that we received not the love of the truth (2 Thess. 2:10)? That would explain the strong delusion sent upon us, that we should believe a lie (v. 11). Is it that our denomination has grown tired of being hated of all men for Jesus' name's sake (Matt. 10:22) and that we are finally ready for all men to speak well of us (Luke 6:26)? That would explain our toleration of false prophets (Luke 6:26). Is it that our hearts are waxen fat with the pleasures of this earth (Deut. 31:20; 32:15)? That would explain why we forsook God who made us and lightly esteemed the Rock of our salvation by displacing his perfect work (Deut. 32:15). What is it with you and with me? What is it with our denomination? Don't point to Synod 2018 as the end of the matter, but as the beginning of our spiritual self-examination and repentance.

Not only that, but it is possible for a denomination to have a right decision without living up to that decision. She makes her decision more or less because she feels she has to, but she immediately moves on from her decision as though it were a distraction from the real problem that she imagines in the churches. From the very beginning of our controversy, there were Protestant Reformed men proposing that our real problem in the PRC is antinomianism. These men were rebuffed time and again at synods. These men could not move on fast enough from Synod 2018. Now let the PRC listen and read. You will hear once again men gnashing their teeth on supposed antinomians. A new project in the PRC is getting underway to hunt antinomians, which is just the continuation of the old project that was interrupted for a spell by synod. That project reveals impotence and unbelief with regard to the gospel. Don't

point to Synod 2018 as the end of the matter, but live up to that decision as the revelation of the true doctrinal error in the PRC. Not antinomianism but works righteousness.

Repent!

The repentance of the PRC will show itself. Repentance is always manifest in the actions of the penitent child of God. He does not have to be dragged to repent, step by step, sullen and recalcitrant all the while. He does not take umbrage at one who rebukes his sin. He does not respond to a rebuke with the observation that his rebuker has sin as well. When he does repent, he does not merely say a few words and shed a few tears, which are easy, and then carry on with his sin, which is easier. He does not repent as a ploy to make a counter-charge against another, playing the game of, "Here's my apology; now where's yours?" Rather, he is grieved by his sin and ashamed of his sin; he bemoans his sin; and he turns from his sin. An onlooker does not even have cause to wonder whether the penitent child of God is truly sorry, for the repentant sinner leads the charge against his own sin. Christ's apostle describes it thus:

9. Now I rejoice, not that ye were made sorry, but that ye sorrowed to repentance: for ye were made sorry after a godly manner, that ye might receive damage by us in nothing.
10. For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death.
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. (2 Cor. 7:9–11)

To illustrate this, imagine that the PRC had fallen into the false doctrine of evolution. Imagine that a Protestant Reformed minister taught evolution repeatedly in sermons, that consistories and a classis defended and tolerated those sermons, that a classis wrote a doctrinal statement that also taught evolution, and that finally a synod declared that evolution was a doctrinal error that was out of harmony with the confessions. What would the response of the PRC be to such a decision? Would we draw fine distinctions between error, false doctrine, and heresy and try to fit evolution into one box but not the others? Would we declare that, although the doctrinal error was out of harmony with the confessions, it did not contradict the confessions? Would we allow the minister to teach evolution again, and then start the whole process of defending and tolerating his errors all over again?

Would we allow the men who wrote the doctrinal statement in favor of evolution and the men of the classis that approved such a thing to melt away into the background, only for them to reappear as church visitors and presidents of synods? And on the other hand would we badger and hound and finally kill the servants who called us to repentance? If we did all of that, we should not be surprised if an onlooker would conclude that our denomination was not repentant for our sin of false doctrine. We should not be surprised if an onlooker would conclude that we had uncircumcised ears (Jer. 6:10), that we had hard and impenitent hearts (Rev. 2:5), and that we were a spiritually adulterous denomination: “Such is the way of an adulterous woman; she eateth, and wipeth her mouth, and saith, I have done no wickedness” (Prov. 30:20).

However, if we were truly repentant, we would be filled with zeal and indignation against ourselves. An onlooker would not even have time to tell us how to rid ourselves of the error of evolution, for we would be exacting godly revenge against ourselves in holy fear. We would be deposing officebearers who taught and defended evolution. We would be insisting on the preaching and

teaching of the truth of creation. We would be clamoring for our seminary and our magazines to teach us the truth and to condemn the lie. We would probably even start a new magazine that would have a special interest in the controversy. Pierced with the rebuke of our sin, sorry before God for our transgression, we would bring forth fruits meet for repentance (Matt. 3:8).

Which of those scenarios best describes the Protestant Reformed Churches, five years into our actual controversy? Repent!

Let everyone hear this call: Repent.

And let everyone that has been pierced by the word and brought by God to smite upon his thigh in sorrow for his sin be bound up with the balm of his Savior:

28. Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.
29. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.
30. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (Matt. 11:28–30)

—AL

FROM THE EDITOR

We are seven months and ten issues into the publication of *Sword and Shield*. We marvel at how God has cleared the way for our little magazine. Being mere men, it is hard for us to see the whole battlefield and our exact place in it. But I would have to guess that *Sword and Shield* is somewhere near the forefront of the battle lines in its contention against error and its stand for the truth. I say that because Satan’s attacks against the magazine have rained down hard and heavy from the first issue and continue unabated as this tenth issue goes to press. I say that also because the doctrines that *Sword and Shield* deals with are at the very heart of the gospel. Whether we are actually near the forefront of the battle or whether we are only in a distant skirmish somewhere, our Lord directs the battle and gives us the privilege to fight where and when he pleases.

Satan, of course, doesn’t really care about *Sword and Shield*. He has seen hundreds of magazines come and go in his time. But he hates with unholy anger the cause of *Sword and Shield*, which is Jesus Christ and his truth. Satan makes war against Christ because God himself put enmity between the Seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. Where the cause of Christ appears, there Satan must go to make war against him.

To all of the members of Reformed Believers Publish-

ing, to the board members, to the readers, and to the writers, take heart when you see the gates of hell assembled against our paper. Christ has called us to the battle, and he goes before us valiantly and victoriously. The white horse of the gospel truth rides forth conquering and to conquer (Rev. 6:2). God’s truth is the unbreakable shield and buckler of his people, so that armored in his truth, they are not afraid for the terror by night, nor for the arrow that flies by day, nor for the pestilence that walks in darkness, nor for the destruction that wastes at noonday (Ps. 91:4–6). God’s truth is great unto the clouds, far greater than the lions, the sons of men who are set on fire, whose teeth are spears and arrows and their tongue a sharp sword, who have prepared a net and digged a pit (Ps. 57). God’s truth endures to all generations (Ps. 100:5).

We welcome to this issue Dr. Sonny Hernandez. Dr. Hernandez knows of *Sword and Shield* through his close friendship with Professor Engelsma and has become a supporter of the magazine. He has submitted an article on the ancient heresy of Nestorianism, providing us with a good opportunity to marvel at the truth of our incarnate Savior.

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

—AL

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

A DEFENSE OF *SWORD AND SHIELD* (4): Necessary

I have been advancing a defense of *Sword and Shield*. I have answered the opponents of the magazine regarding their fallacious condemnation, based on article 31 of the Church Order, of the mildest statement in the magazine relating to synodical decisions. On the basis of their arguments, the Christian Reformed Church was right for casting out the fathers of the Protestant Reformed Churches, who when the truth was at stake did exactly what the opponents of *Sword and Shield* condemn. Those fathers would not sacrifice the truth and their convictions for ecclesiastical procedure, especially not corrupt procedure. These opponents of *Sword and Shield* should write letters to the Christian Reformed Church, in which they apologize for their fathers' schismatic behavior.

I will not sign my name to any such letter. I think our fathers were courageous for the stance they took, even if now some are apparently embarrassed about how those fathers defended their actions.

The understanding of the Formula of Subscription by many of these critics is, to put it mildly, atrocious—one that is simply an invented and self-serving interpretation of the venerable Formula to bolster their attempts to denigrate the *Sword and Shield* magazine as schismatic.

All the hubbub about article 31 and the novel interpretation of the Formula of Subscription are manufactured distractions. Everyone knows where this magazine stands on the important synodical decision of the Protestant Reformed Synod of 2018. The magazine was started in part to explain that decision, not to criticize it: to explain it, *not* to criticize it! The manufactured controversy about the magazine and criticism of the magazine are wholly unjust, and the critics know this. The critics know that the editors of *Sword and Shield*, by their protest and blog writing, were involved in the controversy that led to the decision of Synod 2018. The critics also know that the editors, by letters to the *Standard Bearer*, were also involved in the aftermath of the 2018 synod. Nothing we wrote then is any different than what we write now. The critics know that the editors of *Sword and Shield* rejoiced when the 2018 synodical decision was taken and have labored hard to see to it that it was *upheld*. Yet the critics stubbornly persist in denigrating

the magazine, caricaturing it, smearing it with false criticisms, and whipping up unfounded fears about criticism of ecclesiastical decisions.

By continuing to do this, the critics bring suspicion on themselves that their criticism and opposition to the magazine are not principled at all, as they would make them out to be, but rather, that their criticism and opposition arise out of malice, use fearmongering as a weapon, and amount to little more than unrighteous agitation against a holy endeavor. No one who is honest can possibly doubt that the magazine has nailed its flag to the mast of the Reformed truth and intends to teach it vigorously and polemically. Opposition to the magazine is opposition to the propagation of the truth.

The opposition is also hypocritical because, while the opponents vociferously state that the editors should protest if we see the things we see and authoritatively insist that protesting is the *only way* to deal with disagreement in the churches, they freely fling the mud of accusations of schism, slander, agitation, radicalism, and antinomianism—all via public letters and articles, oftentimes without the candor to name those against whom they are writing. Charges of sin fly freely. Sometimes they are merely threatened and other times they are made, and then the men who make them, encountering a little resistance, retreat and do not even have the principle to retract their charges but let them lay.

I am not surprised by any of these reactions and accusations. I do not regret them either, and they will not turn us from our purpose. I expected them and worse when I signed up for this work.

My questions to our critics are these: Why all the fear about a magazine that is committed to explaining a settled and binding synodical decision that the editors believe is in harmony with the Reformed confessions and Church Order? Do the opponents of the magazine not want this decision brought up any more? Do they not want the decision explained and its implications pointed out? Do they want people to remain ignorant about the decision?

This was part of the problem leading up to the formation of *Sword and Shield*. Those who had the responsibility and the forum to explain the doctrinal controversy utterly

failed to do so. Indeed, they could not have explained, for many of them were responsible for the decisions that had to be overturned.

Ignorance of what Synod 2018 decided and its seriousness cannot continue.

And regarding the broader purpose of the magazine to comment on attitudes and practices, also in the Protestant Reformed Churches, and to explain Reformed doctrine and life, what could possibly be objectionable in a magazine with these goals? What could possibly be harmful in having a forum that freely expresses the truth and its application to every area of life? Only someone committed to censorship and ecclesiastical elitism and hierarchy, in which only a select few are accorded freedom to express themselves, could object to such a magazine. Only those gripped by an unreasonable and unfounded fear could be troubled by such a magazine.

All this unjust, unfounded, hypocritical, and unprincipled opposition to *Sword and Shield* has merely served to convince me more and more that the magazine is necessary. I did not know how much ignorance there was of principles that I had understood were taken for granted in the Protestant Reformed Churches. I did not understand how much opposition there was to explaining a synodical decision of these churches and calling the doctrine that was condemned exactly what it is: a lie; a compromise of the doctrine of justification, which men cannot compromise without endangering their souls and the souls of those who hear the lie; a threat to the unconditional covenant, which is supposed to be Protestant Reformed peanut butter and jelly; and a false doctrine that *displaced the perfect work of Christ* (!) as the only foundation of the believer's approach to God. I did not understand how readily men gave in to the temptation to be political in the church and to use disreputable tactics to attack something they fear without reason and to shut up believers from exercising their liberty to confess Christ. Now I do. And it makes me more committed than ever to continue to exert myself against that evil spirit that would silence the truth of God and the condemnation of the lie.

Sword and Shield is necessary as well in connection with the defense of the doctrines of justification by faith alone, the unconditional covenant, and the sufficiency of Christ's work over against a false doctrine that threatened them. *Sword and Shield* is necessary over against attempts, first, to minimize that threat and, second, to change the enemy and battlefield in that controversy from a works principle of salvation to antinomianism—attempts that are ongoing.

The minimization of the false doctrine and thus of the doctrinal threat to justification and the unconditional covenant began before Synod 2018 and continued at Synod 2018 itself.

Prior to Synod 2018 the popular line was that the disputed statements did not constitute a denial of the faith, an attack on the doctrines of grace, and serious false doctrine, but that the critics of those statements were antinomian. Or, in a milder form, the popular line was that the statements were not wrong—no new doctrine was being taught—but it was just a confusion about words, an unnecessary controversy whipped up by radicals. The word was that everyone involved basically was teaching the same doctrine, but perhaps only with a different emphasis. The word very loudly was that we definitely were dealing with a very serious threat of antinomianism in this controversy. The very introduction of the charge served to minimize the real issue and the serious false doctrine at the heart of this controversy.

At Synod 2018 a speech was given on the floor of synod in which the delegates and all those in attendance were instructed that there were not two sides in the issue before synod and that we all believed the same thing. Shortly after Synod 2018, the substance of that speech was printed in a *Standard Bearer* editorial, part of which I quote here:

The other point of this history [of the conditional covenant controversy in 1953] is that the Protestant Reformed Churches are well grounded on the doctrines of sovereign grace and the unconditional covenant. Coming to synod were not two groups of elder and minister delegates with opposing theologies. No one may imagine that in the PRC one group wants to have works contribute to salvation, and another group does not. It is not that one group has leanings toward Federal Vision theology, and another group opposes it. It is not that one group teaches justification by faith alone and another justification by faith and works. It is not that some want an unconditional covenant, while others want to make room for conditions in the covenant. All the delegates of synod, representing the churches well from a theological point of view, were and are committed to the theology of justification by faith alone and an unconditional covenant, rejecting Federal Vision and all such like heresies. (Russell Dykstra, "Synod 2018: Obedience and Covenant Fellowship," *Standard Bearer* 94, no. 18 [July 2018]: 414)

I, for one, did not agree. I was not one with, and never would be one with, the doctrine that had to be judged at synod and that had been approved by so many. The fact is that the protested doctrine represented *a side*—a side that had to be condemned. Some believed it. Some thought that to oppose it was antinomian. Some could not condemn it

and were not offended by it but bent every effort to explain it as orthodox and good Protestant Reformed theology: a consistory, a classis, and many highly-placed men, for example.

It was a strange speech because it prejudiced the judgment of the delegates at synod before they had a chance to deliberate on a committee's advice that would shortly come before them. If we all believed the same thing and there were not two sides to the issue, why was the matter before synod, and why was there so much controversy? If it was true that no controversy existed, then the doctrine that synod was called upon to judge could be explained away as fitting into accepted Reformed theology and the creeds, as a consistory and many classes had already decided.

The speech also struck me as proud. If we were so well grounded in the truth of the unconditional covenant and so well understood the truth of justification by faith alone, why did the churches have this problem? Why could many not understand that the statements of the protested sermons were false doctrine that compromised justification by faith alone? And still more, the speech seemed to proceed from the very dangerous and proud attitude that Paul warned against in 1 Corinthians 10:12: "Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall." It seemed to me that we thought that we were so well grounded and so well instructed that we could not possibly err in these doctrinal matters. But we had, and we did, and many came to that synod thinking that the protested doctrine was perfectly fine. The vote for the decision was not at all unanimous.

That attitude continued in a speech after the synodical decision to condemn the doctrinal statement of Classis East because it "contains...the similar doctrinal error of giving to our good works a place and function out of harmony with the Reformed confessions" (*Acts of Synod 2018*, 80). In this speech a delegate informed all the delegates and many witnesses that he believed the doctrinal statement, had taught the theology of it all his ministry long, and intended to keep doing so. For all I know, he has made good on his threat of rebellion against synod.

Minimization of synod's decision to condemn the doctrinal error continued when a July 2018 *Standard Bearer* editorial instructed: "Synod did not declare this error to be heresy. Synod did not state that this teaching denies the unconditional covenant or justification by faith alone."

And, ratcheting up the rhetoric, an ugly threat was added:

Let this be clear. Anyone who, from this date on, concerning the minister, consistory, committee to assist the consistory, or Classis East, anyone, I say, who alleges that those individuals or ecclesiastical bodies taught heresy, or justification by faith and works, or Federal Vision, or a

conditional covenant, is guilty of slander. Such a one must be rebuked. Slander against office-bearers, such serious slander, is the devil's tool to divide the church of Jesus Christ. This is the sin of schism, a sin so serious that officebearers are deposed for it. And members excommunicated for it. ("Synod 2018: Obedience and Covenant Fellowship," 415)

So the problem now is not the false doctrine—displacing the perfect work of Christ, giving to the believer's good works a place and function out of harmony with the Reformed confessions, and compromising the doctrine of justification by faith alone—but the problem is anyone who actually takes that false doctrine as seriously as it should be taken. These now are the dividers-in-chief. Not the false doctrine *but those who would call it that*. If someone compromises justification by faith alone, what other option is there except to teach justification by faith and works? But again, that is not the problem. But if you call the teaching of justification by faith and works heresy, then *you* are the problem.

The editor continued this same line in answer to a letter questioning his analysis:

In that light ["that heresy is a deliberate deviation from or contradiction of fundamental teachings of Scripture as expressed in the confessions"], then, synod spoke not of heresy—teaching that directly contradicted the confessions, or teaching that clearly deviated from the confessions. Rather, synod spoke of certain doctrines being "compromised." The word "compromise" can have various shades of meaning. The sense that best captures it here, I believe, is "injure." Perhaps an illustration is in order. One can speak of a human body's immune system being compromised by a virus. One can speak of a virus compromising the security of a computer. Something is present that ought not be. Something needs to be stopped. If it is not, it will do serious damage to the entire system—take over the body's immune system, or, permanently shut down the computer. This is a serious matter. (Russell Dykstra, "Response," *Standard Bearer* 95, no. 1 [October 1, 2018]: 12)

So we are told that synod did not speak of heresy, which is defined as a teaching that directly contradicts the confessions or clearly deviates from the confessions. But the statements condemned by synod so clearly deviated from the confessions as to be shocking and glaring in their deviation. If one rereads the statements or hears them read, they make the believer's heart quiver in fear for the offended honor of God and glory of Jesus Christ

and in terror at the thought of approaching God by our works. But we are told that the condemned statements are not a clear deviation from the confessions.

Then again we are instructed:

So likewise, the teaching which Synod 2018 rejected compromised other doctrines and had to be stopped. If the teaching went farther and the logical conclusions were completely drawn out, it would eventually contradict these doctrines as set forth in the confessions. As such, the statements were injuring these important truths—creating confusion or contradictions regarding the place and function of works in justification and the covenant. Nevertheless, *the statements did not explicitly contradict the confessions*. Partly this is due to the fact that *these were statements on matters that the confessions had not spelled out*. So, to use synod’s language, while the statements did not contradict the confessions, they were not “in harmony” with the confessions’ teaching on the place and function of good works. (“Response,” emphasis added)

This analysis would be laughable if it was not so dead serious. The doctrine condemned by synod “did not explicitly contradict the confessions”? There were “statements on matters that the confessions had not spelled out”? Are we to believe that the confessions do not spell out the doctrine of the perfect sufficiency of Christ’s atonement, the doctrine of justification by faith alone, and the truth of the unconditional covenant? How could this even be written and taken seriously as a legitimate analysis of what happened for four years in the Protestant Reformed Churches? Besides, some of the condemned statements were in sermons on specific Lord’s Days of the Heidelberg Catechism, in which the clear teaching of the Catechism was corrupted by the false doctrine of works. Still more, synod used the confessions, and nothing but the confessions, to condemn the doctrine. If the doctrine did not contradict the confessions, how could it even be condemned?

All of this served to weaken and undermine the seriousness of the false doctrine condemned by synod and the seriousness of synod’s condemnation of the erroneous statements. This has been the line ever since. There was no serious false doctrine but only the beginnings of a deviation that had to be stopped before there was a real problem. Thankfully, we stopped it and can now move on. This has been the attitude because where, if not in *Sword and Shield*, has that decision ever been explained?

Whether or not synod called the erroneous statements heresy is beside the point. Whether or not a man intended to compromise the truth in statements he made is immaterial to the analysis of *the statements themselves*. Whether

or not a man *deliberately* teaches heresy—and so is a heretic—is unrelated to whether what he teaches is heresy. The only authority for the definition of heresy is scripture, specifically as summarized by the Reformed creeds. Synod’s condemnation of the erroneous statements as displacing the perfect work of Christ and compromising justification by faith alone and the unconditional covenant is what matters.

The apostle Paul and the Holy Ghost name the compromise of the doctrine of justification by faith alone by anyone—though he be an angel from heaven or the apostle Paul himself—and for whatever reason as heresy and pronounce a fearsome anathema on those who impenitently do that (Gal. 1:8–9). By good and necessary consequence, since justification is the heart of the gospel of the covenant of grace, the apostle Paul and the Holy Ghost pronounce the compromise of the unconditional covenant to be *heresy*. The apostle and the Holy Ghost also teach that such a heresy makes Christ of no effect; and if you are justified by law—which was what was being taught—you are fallen from grace (5:4). It is not ours to decide whether a particular *form* of the denial of these doctrines is heresy or not. When a teaching is condemned as compromising the doctrine of justification, we are called to submit ourselves to the Spirit’s analysis and likewise condemn it as heresy, regardless of the what, why, or who of the compromise.

Regarding contradicting the creeds, synod’s statement that the erroneous doctrine was out of harmony with the creeds is what matters. To be out of harmony with the creeds is the same as contradicting the creeds. It is unbecoming word games to teach an essential difference between the two. Both describe deviation from the teaching of the creeds. The deviation in this case was from the creedal, Reformed doctrines of justification, the atonement, and the unconditional covenant, so that the disharmony was of the greatest importance. To use a musical allusion for the language of synod, the disharmony was a jarring dissonance from the central melody of the gospel, totally out of place and a corruption of the melody of the gospel.

There is nothing more serious and nothing with greater consequences—eternal consequences for the minister and his hearers—than compromising the doctrines of justification and the unconditional covenant. There is nothing more serious for the office of a Reformed minister than being out of harmony with the creeds. The Formula of Subscription does not allow officebearers to be out of harmony with the creeds. For being out of harmony with the creeds, officebearers are put out of their offices. There is nothing of greater consequence for the true church of Christ in the world than the compromise of justification by faith alone because that article marks the standing or falling church.

Worse, in my mind, for grappling with the seriousness of the false doctrine involved was the introduction of the charge of antinomianism into the controversy. The whole charge of antinomianism was a stinky red herring, its introduction even more inexcusable in light of the original sermon on John 14:6 and protest of that sermon, which started the whole controversy. If there was a text in which a minister could be excused for *never* bringing up

the works of the believer at all, or better, for condemning those works as having nothing at all to do with access to the Father, it is a sermon on John 14:6. Christ in the text points at *himself* and declares, “*I am the way,*” and says by implication, “*You are not!*”

But that is not what happened. To that we turn next time.

—NJL

A WORD IN DUE SEASON

A man hath joy by the answer of his mouth: and a word spoken in due season, how good is it!—Proverbs 15:23

HERESY (2)

Solution: Love of the Truth

As we have seen, there is a great deal of confusion about terms that are used to define and distinguish doctrinal departure away from the truth of God’s word. What is the proper solution to this confusion? Can this confusion be properly solved by attempting to draw careful definitions for each term that is involved, distinguishing categories of these departures? Then is it necessary to relate these categories to one another, perhaps ranking them from bad to worse in their distance of departure from the word or in the damage that they cause to the church in its stand for the truth? Can this confusion be solved by saying some errors are chief errors and others are secondary errors?

To properly solve the confusion, it is first necessary to understand the purpose of deliberative assemblies in their treatment of doctrines. Their purpose is to defend and maintain the truth against error. Their responsibility is to keep the churches free from errors that are destructive of the truth and the faith of God’s people and that will keep the people from ascribing all honor and glory to the God of truth. Their duty is to distinguish truth from error and to do so on the basis of God’s word.

That this is the purpose of deliberative assemblies is clear from the Formula of Subscription, to which every officebearer must subscribe by attaching his signature. After a solemn declaration of belief that the doctrines of the three forms of unity “do fully agree with the Word of God,” signatories promise “diligently to teach and faithfully to defend the aforesaid doctrine” (Formula of Subscription, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 326). On the credentials of classis and synod, the authorization is given the delegates by the consistories and classes sending them “to take part in all the deliberations and transactions... transacted in agreement with the Word of God according

to the conception of it embodied in the doctrinal standards of the Protestant Reformed Churches” (*Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches*, 2020 edition, 145–46).

A clear understanding of this purpose makes other debates as meaningless as they are detrimental to the cause of truth in the church of Jesus Christ. How many people might be upset by a decision taken? How might a decision for the truth and against error affect reputations of ministers or their influence in a denomination? What if decisions mean certain ministers will be subject to suspension and deposition? What will happen if decisions of a consistory or consistories are declared to be in error, that what they defended as truth was not truth at all but error?

From these viewpoints the questions we faced earlier fade away into their deserved obscurity. What is the difference between heresy and false doctrine? Between error and unorthodoxy? Misunderstanding and confusion? Heretic and nice? Heretic and misunderstood? What merit do such arguments have when the truth is under attack? Which is more important: truth or persons?

We might try to think of such debates applied to church history. What about Nestorianism or Eutychianism? What about Arianism? What about Pelagianism? Did church councils spend their time asking whether these were heresies or errors or false doctrines? Did church councils ask whether the promoters or adherents of these doctrines were confused or misguided, or malicious and evil? Did the Synod of Dordt entertain any such debates over the Remonstrants?

To be sure, we grant that there is such a thing as a false accusation. Even the apostle Paul was accused of being an antinomian (Rom. 3:8). He was accused by some in the

church of Corinth of being two-faced (2 Cor. 1:17–18; 10:10). However, when and where the truth is clearly preached, understood, believed, and confessed, everything else becomes clear. False accusation becomes clear. Heresy also becomes clear. It is also clear that confusion is the devil's tool to introduce false doctrine. As is evident from the epistles of Romans and Galatians, the slander that Paul was an antinomian was first brought against him, and on the heels of that discrediting of the apostle, the way would be clear for legalism that would drive out the gospel of grace (Gal. 4:16; 5:1–12). In all this warfare, the apostle expressed the simple confidence that God would vindicate his truth. Therefore Paul committed all things into God's divine hand.

Confusion abounds in doctrinal controversy when deliberative assemblies become mired in discussions and debates over order, legality, and polity. Is the tone appropriate? Are things written that should not have been written? Should an individual have taken a different approach? Have all past decisions been properly consulted and represented in documents? Has too much been written? Too little? Have there been enough meetings? Is there any misrepresentation? There are hundreds of questions that can be asked. There are as many trails to pursue and on which to get lost.

How is this confusion to be eliminated? How are the distractions to be minimized?

Scripture itself knows no gradations of error. Error is always condemned and never tolerated. Error is always explained as an enemy of the truth and a plague from which the church always needs to be cured. Error is everywhere rebuked in the strongest of terms.

I can cite two cases from scripture. The first case is found in Galatians. The false teaching against which the epistle was written was the demand that a believer must be circumcised in order to be saved (5:2). Let us be honest about this. We might be inclined to pass our judgment: "Is that all? How is that something to get worked up over? Doesn't the law require it?" But that is not what Paul writes about the error. He does not minimize it. He does not call it a misunderstanding or confusion. Nor does he call it a heresy. A label is not his point, nor the Bible's point. Read what he does write in Galatians 5:2–4: "If ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing. For I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do the whole law. Christ is become of no effect unto you...ye are fallen from grace." What does Paul say about those who promoted this error? He does not identify them by labels or names. He does not "tag" them. He says, "I would they were even cut off which trouble you" (v. 12).

In addition, the same book contains Paul's sharp words

to Peter, which Paul spoke before the church. When Peter had separated himself from the Gentiles, no longer eating with them because of certain Jews who came from Jerusalem to Antioch, Paul did not speak of confusion or misunderstanding but said to Peter, "Why compellest thou the Gentiles to live as do the Jews?" (2:14). Paul spoke earlier in the same verse of what he saw in Peter's action: "I saw that they walked not uprightly according to the truth of the gospel."

The gospel determined and defined the error, its awful nature, and the necessity of dealing with it, not tolerating it. It did not matter that it was Peter, an apostle, who changed his eating companions. It did not matter that the fellowship of the Galatians was going to be disturbed by this epistle, which attacked certain teachers and leaders in the church. The truth of the gospel was what mattered.

The second case is in the book of Colossians. What is striking about this epistle is that a definite teaching is not named or strictly described. Only its broadest outlines are given. It was evidently a form of Gnosticism, the teaching that a special knowledge of doctrine and ritual that is extra-biblical is necessary for salvation, in addition to Christ. But the point of scripture is not that the error has a name or a certain set of teachings. The point is that it denies the fullness of Christ for salvation.

In these two cases we are taught by example what really matters. For the sake of maintaining the truth of the gospel in the church of Jesus Christ, whatever is opposed to that truth must be rejected and repudiated. Those who introduce and maintain such teachings and doctrines must be opposed. They must be called to repentance and cast out of the fellowship of the church for their refusal to turn. It matters not who they are or how much trouble the church may endure in dealing with them. The church must find such teachers and their teachings intolerable.

The love of the truth is the power to cut through the knots and tangles of distractions, to get to the heart of doctrinal controversy. Zeal for the glory of God that is manifested by the truth is the power to burn away all the fog of confusion in which error hides and thrives. The fear of God that trembles before his holy word of truth disregards the effects upon persons and institutions for the sake of maintaining and defending the truth against error. The fear of God breaks down the respect of persons and the fear of man behind which false doctrines are easily hidden and fostered.

In this same respect article 80 of the Church Order is instructive. "Sins" are the reason for the deposition of officebearers in the church. These sins are identified in a list, to which others can be added. The words "among the gross sins" indicate that what is specifically listed is by no means exhaustive. The members of this list have one thing

in common, besides being sins: they are grounds for the punishment of “suspension or deposition from office.”

In this list two sins are set side by side: “false doctrine or heresy.” These two, heading the list of “principal ones,” certainly must mean different things. Much more can be written about the difference between the two, which writing could always be found to be controversial. However each may be identified, one thing must be clear: both are stated as being “worthy of being punished with suspension or deposition from office.” It is simply a moot point of which one an officebearer might be guilty. Just as “false doctrine” is a gross sin rendering its perpetrator worthy of suspension or deposition, so is “heresy” (Church Order 80, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 402–3).

A high spiritual regard and deep love for the truth has two powerful results in the church of Jesus Christ. First, it brings a clear and sharp discernment of the truth from false doctrine and heresy. Second, it produces a highly motivated willingness to defend and maintain the truth through the use of Christian discipline against officebearers and members guilty of deviation from the truth. This spiritual regard and deep love for the truth does not engage in a debate about terms or helplessly wring its hands over anticipated casualties. It understands clearly that “the truth is above all; for all men are of themselves liars and more vain than vanity itself” (Belgic Confession 7, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 28).

—MVW

CONTRIBUTION

CHRISTOLOGICAL HERESY—NESTORIANISM

Regenerate believers who take Christology seriously know that the Chalcedonian formulation—two natures united in one person—is not a doctrine of adiaphora; it is an essential doctrine of the Christian faith. It is necessary to everlasting salvation that one rightly believes that Christ is *homoousios* (*homo*: same + *ousios*: substance) with the Father and is one person or *hypostasis* who has two distinct, unmingled, and inseparable natures.

The Council of Chalcedon (451) repudiated several heresies that attacked the deity of Christ, such as Eutychianism, Apollinarianism, and Nestorianism. Mainly, the controversies were concerning the person of Christ and his two natures. Thus, the Chalcedonian Creed undeniably and unequivocally teaches that Christ is God of the substance of the Father, and although he is wholly God and wholly man, he is not two, but one person. Take the time to examine the Chalcedonian Creed.

We, then, following the holy fathers, all with one consent teach men to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man, of a rational soul and body; coessential with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the manhood; in all things like unto us, without sin; begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead, and in these latter days, for us and for our salvation, born of the Virgin Mary,

the mother of God, according to the manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one person and one subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, and only begotten, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ; as the prophets from the beginning have declared concerning Him, and the Lord Jesus Christ Himself has taught us, and the creed of the holy fathers has handed down to us. (Creed of Chalcedon, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 17)

Rejecting the historic Chalcedonian definition of the hypostatic union, which refers to the combination of Christ’s two natures in one person, is a foul heresy. One such attack on the divinity of Christ is called Nestorianism. This heresy opposes what was confessionally established at Chalcedon: “the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one person.” Put another way, the crux of the issue surrounding Nestorianism is that it maintains that Christ is not one person but is two distinct persons or *hypostases*.

Nestorianism derives its name from Nestorius, a patriarch of Constantinople from 428–31. Nestorius’

Christology was called into question and scrupulously interrogated because he believed that Mary should be called the mother of Christ (*Christotokos*; Christ-bearer) and not the mother of God (*Theotokos*; God-bearer). This was due to the fact that Nestorius, like many today, failed to comprehend the hypostatic union, which teaches that the divine *Logos* *σὰρξ ἐγένετο* (“became flesh”) and is truly God and truly man, not divided into two persons, but one and the same Son and only begotten, God the Word.

Nestorius was not able to palliate his teachings that Mary was the mother of Christ, not the mother of God, or that Christ was two persons, not one. Nestorius’ views on Christology were not only anathematized at the Council of Ephesus (431) but were also condemned as heresy at the Council of Chalcedon (451). Consequently, the Creed of Chalcedon states that Christ was “born of the Virgin Mary, *the mother of God*”; and regarding his two natures, it teaches, “the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in *one person* and one subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons, *but one and the same Son*” (emphasis mine).

Even though Nestorianism was condemned as heresy centuries ago, there is a proliferation of professing Christians in the twenty-first century who regard Nestorianism as a trivial matter or a tertiary doctrine that can be overlooked so long as the one propagating the two-person heresy (that is, Nestorianism) is popular. This is due to the fact that many are ignorant about the tri-personality of God, Christology, and church history, or they simply don’t care that the doctrine of the person of Christ is maligned. Examine the following three ways to avoid being deceived.

First, Nestorianism is regarded by many scholars as a polysemic term; therefore, Christians should not be surprised when Nestorians are ambiguous or inconsistent in defining their terms. Nonetheless, the crux or the underlying issue of the Nestorian heresy is that it teaches that Christ’s deity and humanity were divided and split into two distinct persons living in one body. This is the heresy of Nestorianism that must be rejected.

Second, most modern-day heretics who teach a two-person Christ will deny being Nestorians, in the same manner that most heretics will not admit that they teach heresy. Even Nestorius denied that his two-person Christ dogma was erroneous, as many will do today.

Therefore, just because one says he is not a Nestorian, Christians should never hastily exonerate him of heresy unless he unashamedly rejects the Nestorian heresy, which taught that the incarnate Christ was two persons, one divine and one human.

Third, don’t be duped by Nestorians, either admittedly or not, who try to redefine the meaning of *person* in order to maintain their two-person heresy. A person is an individual *hypostasis* that says “I” and is a moral and rational subsistence that can be distinguished by personal properties. The Bible will concur. For example, the Holy Spirit is called “he” in John 16:13, and the Holy Spirit says “me” and “I” in Acts 13:2. In John 14:26 Jesus spoke in the first person (“my”) about the Holy Spirit and spoke about the Father in the third person. Additionally, the Bible teaches that the Spirit loves and has fellowship (Rom. 15:30; 1 John 1:3); the Spirit commands (Acts 10:19–20; 13:2), and the Spirit grieves (Eph. 4:30). All three persons of the Godhead can be distinguished by their personal properties: the Father is neither begotten nor proceeding; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father before all ages (not made or created); and the Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son.

Therefore, if you meet a Nestorian or read about one who is adamant that previous theologians throughout the church did not properly define the word *person*, don’t be duped by his philosophical claptrap but realize that his argument does not prove the point he has tried to make; all his argument proves is that he does not like what has been confessionally established and taught throughout scripture. Christ is never regarded as two persons in the Bible, and albeit he is both truly God and truly man, he is not two persons but one person, and he is completely one in the unity of his person, without confusing his natures.

In closing, this article has explained that it is necessary to everlasting salvation that one rightly believes in the person of the Son and why Nestorianism is heresy. The controversy surrounding the completeness of Christ’s two natures was settled at the Council of Nicea in 325 and Constantinople in 381, and as previously mentioned, Nestorianism was condemned as heresy at the Council of Ephesus in 431 and at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. Therefore, don’t be duped by this heresy that was condemned long ago.

—Dr. Sonny Hernandez

Christ is never regarded as two persons in the Bible, and albeit he is both truly God and truly man, he is not two persons but one person, and he is completely one in the unity of his person, without confusing his natures.

SETTLED AND BINDING

Why don't they just give up? The Protestant Reformed Churches have spoken. Synods have decided. They have treated protests and appeals. According to article 31 of the Church Order, those decisions are settled and binding. It is simply understood that those who are bound together in denominational ties submit to the decisions of synod.

If anyone complain that he has been wronged by the decision of a minor assembly, he shall have the right to appeal to a major ecclesiastical assembly, and whatever may be agreed upon by a majority vote shall be considered settled and binding, unless it be proved to conflict with the Word of God or with the articles of the Church Order, as long as they are not changed by the general synod. (Church Order 31, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 390)

So why don't they just give up?

Why continue as if those decisions were not made or are not settled and binding? Why is there a continual "witch hunt" for offenders against these decisions? Why such a readiness to pin the labels of "heresy" and "heretic"? Why be schismatic in stirring up trouble, as if there were those who contradict those decisions? Why not be agents of healing? Why not promote peace and unity?

What decisions?

B. Recommendation: That synod sustain the appeal of Mr. Meyer against the charge of Hope's consistory, and the decision of Classis East, that he "maintains and teaches antinomianism." (*Acts of Synod 2016*, 53)

That synod not sustain the protest of Prof. Cammenga to overturn Article 38 [of Synod 2016].

Grounds:

a. To overturn Article 38, a protestant must prove conclusively that Mr. Meyer maintains and teaches antinomianism. This Prof. Cammenga does not do. He alleges that these statements are "indications of antinomianism," "indicative of antinomian leanings," "sweeping statements,"

and examples of "typical antinomian reasoning." However, these do not conclusively confirm the charge of maintaining and teaching antinomianism.

b. Maintaining and teaching antinomianism implies that Mr. Meyer embraces some coherent and consistent form of the heresy, which can be demonstrated to be contrary to the confessions. Prof. Cammenga has not so demonstrated.

c. Although Prof. Cammenga challenges a few unrelated and unorthodox statements of Mr. Meyer, this challenge does not attain the level of certainty required to classify him as an antinomian and overturn Article 38. (*Acts of Synod 2017*, 89)

That synod sustain the protest of Mr. N. Meyer to rescind the decision of Article 88, B, 1 in 2017 (*Acts 2017*, p. 88). Ground: Synod 2017 erred when it entered into the statements of Mr. Meyer while at the same time not sustaining the protest of Prof. Cammenga which charged these statements with antinomianism. Carried. (*Acts of Synod 2018*, 97)

Three different synods decided.

A consistory had charged one of its elders with the heresy of antinomianism. Classis had rejected this elder's appeal against his consistory, upholding that charge. Synod 2016 sustained the elder's appeal and cleared him of the charge of antinomianism. A professor protested that decision of Synod 2016 to Synod 2017, and his protest was not sustained. Even though Synod 2017 made decisions on several statements the professor brought to its attention, the following Synod (2018) recognized that Synod 2017 had erred when it "entered into the statements."

A consistory said antinomian and antinomianism! A classis agreed. A seminary professor insisted it was so and protested a synodical decision. But synod said no. Synod said no twice, if not thrice.

A settled and binding decision?

A settled and binding decision against which one may not agitate?

A settled and binding decision against which public agitation should be considered mutinous, if not downright schismatic?

* John Calvin, *Commentary on Acts*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh: The Calvin Translation Society, 1844), 2:258.

Consider the material presented in the November 15, 2020, issue of the *Standard Bearer*.

Publicly, on the ground of statements made in his letter, a brother in good standing in one of the Protestant Reformed churches is charged with antinomianism, his statements said to be antinomian. This charge comes from no less than a seminary professor. Not the first time.

What did this brother in good standing write that brought upon him this charge of antinomianism? He wrote in rejection of free will. In that rejection of free will, he took exception to article 9 of the Second Helvetic Confession. And it must be observed that the brother took exception to that article of the Confession *as interpreted and applied by the professor*.

Because of that rejection of free will, the disagreeing brother brought these words upon himself:

By denying that *the regenerate* will the good and do the good, brother Doezema is making the same kind of error as saying that Noah did not build the ark. It is the error of contending that either God built the ark or Noah built it, rather than Noah by the grace of God working in him. And both these denials are symptomatic of antinomianism, which denies the “can” and the “must” of good works because it fears that good works then somehow contribute to our salvation. (Ronald Cammenga, “Response,” *Standard Bearer* 97, no. 4 [November 15, 2020]: 85)

These words are then followed by a more general warning: “Antinomianism in all its forms is a grievous error that the Reformed faith recognizes and repudiates. It is an error that the Protestant Reformed Churches must guard against and reject in all its forms” (“Response,” 85).

Look at the phrase that is attributed to the brother: “By denying that *the regenerate* will the good and do the good.” Where did the brother write these words? I read something completely different. What I read is this: “so such willingness to will the good in the third regenerated stage...” He does confess and state that the regenerated child of God in this life is given by God’s grace and Spirit “such willingness to will the good.” His disagreement is whether “such willingness to will the good” is “a freedom that is ‘restored’” or “the freedom that Prof. Cammenga teaches is restored.”

Why were the brother’s words confused? I don’t believe they are confusing at all.

I suppose that some confusion over the term *free will* is possible. Certainly rejection of free will itself cannot be condemned as antinomian. In such a case Martin Luther, for writing *The Bondage of the Will*, must be charged with antinomianism just like Agricola, against whom Luther

wrote. In such a case the Canons of Dordt also must be charged with antinomianism for denying the free will of the Remonstrants. And certainly the Protestant Reformed Churches, standing in the line of Dordrecht, must be condemned as antinomians.

I cannot believe that a seminary professor would be unable to distinguish between the will of the regenerated person who is freed from the bondage of the will to the delightful service of his redeemer and the free will of Arminianism, semi-Pelagianism, and full Pelagianism.

But what to believe?

I believe this misunderstanding stems from a failure to understand and apply the settled and binding decisions of Protestant Reformed synods in 2016, 2017, and 2018. It is appropriate here to reference part of the grounds of one of those decisions by Synod 2016 in article 38. Synod had something to say about the *need to define antinomianism properly* before charging a man with it. In the following quotations synod gave several concrete examples of antinomianism:

1) “Antinomianism...reduces all salvation to and equated it with its acquisition, thereby eschewing all works.”—Herman Bavinck

2) “The antinomian claims that the preaching of the law is dangerous because, according to him, it tends to create a certain superficial idea of righteousness, and must inevitably leave the impression with the people of God that they can keep the law perfectly. It is dangerous, too, because it tends to leave the impression that somehow we must be saved by our works, rather than only by the blood of Jesus Christ our Lord.”—Herman Hoeksema

3) “...it cannot be denied that Antinomians of every shade are inclined to minimize, to say the least, the significance of the law of God for the Christian, and the calling of the people of God to walk in sanctification of life.”—Herman Hoeksema (*Acts of Synod 2016*, 53)

Perhaps if the professor had been mindful of these descriptions of antinomians, quoted by Synod 2016 as part of its settled and binding decision, he would have been restrained from concluding that the brother was displaying symptoms of antinomianism.

Yet there was an even greater restraining force in the same decision of synod. The following grounds provide a sharper warning:

a. Hope’s consistory misrepresents Mr. Meyer’s position on the commandments as a guide of thankfulness...

b. Hope's consistory overstates Mr. Meyer's position regarding the law...

c. Hope's consistory prejudices itself against Mr. Meyer simply because he disagrees with their pastor's preaching. (*Acts of Synod 2016*, 54–55)

Especially that last point is noteworthy. Disagreement with a pastor or seminary professor is no reason to suspect the orthodoxy of a brother, let alone to level a charge of antinomianism against him.

Should not this settled and binding decision of Synod 2016 be taken as a warning against hastily applying the label "antinomian"? Do not misrepresent! Do not overstate! Do not be prejudiced!

Yet there should be more than simply accepting these synodical decisions as settled and binding. There should also be a willingness to receive the brother's grievances hospitably and charitably. Then it might have been easily recognized that the brother is no antinomian at all, but that he has a deep and abiding love for sovereign, particular grace, the grace that indeed justifies and also sanctifies, the grace that not only enables the will to believe but also gives the act of believing. His use of Canons of Dordt 3–4.14 is the clearest indication that the label of antinomian in no way applies to him.

Then the discussion or controversy could be centered about not what antinomianism is or is not, but what the real issue is with article 9 of the Second Helvetic Confession. The real question worth debating and discussing is whether or not the Second Helvetic Confession is at odds with the Canons of Dordt.

The possibility may not be ignored. It is possible that the Second Helvetic Confession—written in 1566, prior to the rise of Arminianism in the Netherlands and the powerful answer to it by the Synod of Dordt—has a defective view of the relationship between the grace of God and the will of man. It is possible that just as the Protestant Reformed Churches reject and repudiate the Westminster Standards' doctrine of the covenant of works and remarriage after divorce that they might also reject and repudiate what the Second Helvetic declares about the will of man in article 9. Such a rejection and repudiation ought not to be thought "extremely presumptuous" but abiding with and honoring the doctrine of salvation by grace alone.

(Philip Schaff, a Lutheran church historian, says that the Second Helvetic "is rather a theological treatise than a popular creed" [Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom* (New York: Harper and Row, 1931), 3:233]. And it can be kept in mind that in the Bolsec controversy in Geneva, Heinrich Bullinger, author of the Second Helvetic Confession, refused to support Calvin's stand on reprobation at Calvin's pleading.)

In short, it is not difficult at all to lay out what the standard certainly must be, the standard by which article 9 of the Second Helvetic must be judged. It is the standard adduced by the brother, our standard of the Canons of Dordt, 3–4.14. It is the standard that there is no good thing done by the will *of itself*, but only by the continual working of God's grace, giving both the willing and the doing of faith and of every good work of faith following. That grace of God in Christ never leaves the will to do anything *of itself*.

I believe it is possible to come to some conclusions by looking carefully at the Latin adverb *sponte* in article 9 of the Second Helvetic, which translates *sponte* as "of its own accord." If this adverb is taken to mean *of itself*, then the declaration of this article must be rejected as unorthodox. It must be clearly rejected on the basis of John 15:5: "Without me ye can do nothing."

However, perhaps *sponte* means that the graciously restored will can then act in harmony with its own nature, that is, *in accordance with itself*. In this case the meaning is orthodox. It means then that the grace of God does not do violence to the will but sweetly and mysteriously restores it. It is the same truth confessed in Canons of Dordt 3–4.12. If *sponte* means this, we find it represented in that article in these words: "Whereupon the will thus renewed is not only actuated and influenced by God, but in consequence of this influence becomes itself active" (Canons of Dordt 3–4.12, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 169).

However, what follows in the same issue of the *Standard Bearer* gives us great pause. For his declaration that this grace of God makes the will of man active, Bullinger brings out a quotation from Augustine: "God is said to be our helper. But no one can be helped unless he does something" (Ronald Cammenga, "Of Free Will, and Thus of Human Powers," *Standard Bearer* 97, no. 4 [November 15, 2020]: 90).

Can this be?!?! Has Augustine turned into Pelagius? We can hardly imagine. In his *Anti-Pelagian Writings*, Augustine in a multitude of ways overturns and overthrows the doctrine of his adversary. Over and over Augustine declares that the will of man cannot be merely assisted by God in order to will anything good. Grace must entirely renovate the will of man before man can will or do anything good. We must think it impossible that Augustine could write in the sense of a time relationship—man must do something before he can receive help from God. Instead, Augustine takes up the same line of argument found so often in John 14–16, arguing from result to cause. In this case the cause is God's help. "God is said to be our helper." The effect of God's help is that "he [man] does something." Again, this is represented

well in the Canons of Dordt 3–4.12. God’s irresistible grace heals and restores the will, so that with the will the believer himself believes. That same truth of sovereign grace is carried into the fullest scope of the believer’s life of faith, so that by sovereign grace alone he both wills to believe and actually believes. God is so man’s helper that man, being helped by God, does actually believe.

But the question faced in the professor’s response to the brother is, where is this truth of sovereign grace applied?

The response applies it to antinomianism and charges a brother with that heresy. But that leads to the further question: what kind of antinomianism?

Is it the antinomianism *identified* specifically by the decisions of the Protestant Reformed synods? Or is it the misapplication and false charges of antinomianism that were *rejected* by the decisions of those synods?

As the statements in the brother’s letter come nowhere near the descriptions of antinomianism adduced by article 38 of Synod 2016, the charge may not stick but must fall away. It seems to this writer that the charge is the result of misrepresentation, overstatement, and prejudice. The reader of the *Standard Bearer* must wonder whether the decision of the synod *is truly considered settled and binding*.

But wonderment is only one implication.

Implied are the further questions: What exactly is the difference between the corresponding brother and the responding professor? Is it only over the label “antinomian,” or is there something larger at stake? What is the orthodoxy that is the opposite of antinomianism?

It may be helpful here to take note of the charge that has been laid against the Protestant Reformed Churches by their detractors in neighboring Reformed and Presbyterian denominations. Through all its history the Protestant Reformed Churches have been accused of antinomianism, as well as of hyper-Calvinism and rationalism. I remember that Professor Hanko informed his seminary students in a class that Rev. Herman Hoeksema had been accused in the *Banner* of pantheism.

Why the accusation of antinomianism? Because the Protestant Reformed doctrine of sovereign and particular grace was accused of denying the responsibility of man to willingly choose to believe the gospel. Because the Protestant Reformed Churches denied the necessity of man’s believing in order for a man to be saved. Because these churches taught and preached that man’s obedience and good works are all the result of sovereign grace alone, not of the cooperation of God and man. Because these churches denied that God brought man so far in salvation but left something for man to do. Because the Protestant Reformed Churches denied conditions in the covenant of grace.

So it was charged, “The Protestant Reformed Churches make men into stocks and blocks.”

Is the charge of antinomianism against these churches true? Has it ever been true?

In spite of every strenuous denial and every careful explanation by the Protestant Reformed Churches, the charge is still maintained.

Might it be that the brother’s letter featured in the November 15, 2020, issue of the *Standard Bearer* was taken as an opportunity to explain that, no, these churches are not antinomian? Might it be that, in the service of that explanation, the Protestant Reformed brother had to be labeled as an antinomian in order publicly to demonstrate that the professor answering him cannot be an antinomian?

However the above may be, the implication is that of a shift or movement. The danger involved in shifting and moving the label of antinomianism is not in the label. The Protestant Reformed Churches have borne that label for the duration of their history without damage. The danger is that when the label is shifted and moved in these churches themselves, the definition changes. But not only is the definition of the heresy of antinomianism changed; the even greater danger is that what previously was defined as orthodox must also change.

What must also change?

Is the change in the opening up of room? Must we now have a distance? Must God’s grace bring the regenerated elect child of God so far? So far in faith? So far in obedience? So far in good works? So far in life? So far in will? So far in deed? So far in activity? So far in fruit?—so far, so that now something is left up to man really to will or choose? Left for him actually to act upon and perform? Left for him to sacrifice? Left for him to accomplish? Left for him to increase or neglect?

The synods of the Protestant Reformed Churches in 2016, 2017, and 2018 expressed themselves decidedly on these questions. The definition of antinomianism is not to be changed. The definitions of orthodoxy are not to be changed. All the good the regenerated believer has is from the grace of God in Jesus Christ, the complete savior. Grace and grace alone, without his works, brings the believer completely to heaven, gives him all assurance and confidence of heaven, and is the ground of every reward that he receives. Simply put, “Obedience never gains us or obtains anything in the covenant of God” (*Acts of Synod 2018*, 73).

May God grant us grace actively, fervently, and arduously to cling to his grace alone, the grace that frees us, body and mind, heart and soul, to serve him with wondrous, boundless gratitude for that blessed grace!

—MVW



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FINALLY, BRETHREN, FAREWELL!

These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world. — John 16:33

The world is all the powers of opposition against God and Christ. The kingdom of Satan is in the world. The world is man fallen in sin and lying under the curse. The world is the false church that rejects the truth and ascribes more power and authority to her decrees than to the word of God. In the world the dear church of God shall have tribulation.

No wonder. The wicked are like the troubled sea, whose waters cast up mire and dirt. No peace, says my God, to the wicked. In the world and outside of Christ is only darkness, enmity against God, and hatred of Christ and the truth. Seeing the eternal power and Godhead manifested unto them in all creation, the world insanely holds the truth under in unrighteousness. So the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against that ungodliness and unrighteousness of men. Such also is God's purpose: to leave all men without excuse.

That all men might be shut up to the revelation of the glory of God in Jesus Christ as the only way of salvation. So the gospel comes as light to poor, ignorant, damnable sinners. But the darkness comprehends it not.

So the gospel came to the Jews. The gospel came in the flesh, even Jesus Christ, in whom dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily and in whom all of God's promises are yes and amen. Nothing so stirred up and unified the world like the presence of Christ. Can you imagine more unlikely allies in wickedness than Pilate, Herod, and the Sanhedrin? Jews and Gentiles came together to revile and crucify the Lord of glory, to break God's yoke from them, and to cast his bands asunder.

Folly! If they had known God's wisdom, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. In passing sentence for his crucifixion, they condemned themselves. The bruising of Christ's heel crushed Satan's head and his seed. The stone the builders refused became the head stone of the corner! King of kings, lord of lords, head of his church. God put all things under his feet.

Crucified and risen, he poured out his Spirit on his church. And where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is the Lord. Christ in his people and they in him. In him, made one body and one plant with him, they have peace: peace of conscience; peace with God; unspeakable peace that passes understanding; assurance of their salvation, of God's love, of the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice to cover all their sins; and the hope of eternal life. They live and cannot die!

By his word that he speaks to them. The gospel is not to them a mere word, but in power, the means by which Christ speaks peace to their hearts. In him peace!

In the world tribulation.

Bitter, heart-wrenching, relentless tribulation for any who bear his name and speak his truth. A great fight of afflictions will come to them. They will be made a gazingstock by reproaches and afflictions. They will be abused with the most shameful epithets. Their motives will be maligned; their message shouted down; their names run through the mud by the most venomous speech; Satan will raise against them threats, violence, and persecution. The master of lies will devise against God's word wicked counsels and cunning traps.

But be of good cheer. God has overcome the world! Hallelujah! O death, where is thy sting; O grave, where is thy victory? He has been your plagues, O Satan, O sin, O death and terrible grave! The world has been judged. Satan has been cast out and his head crushed. The victory has been won. The gates of hell cannot prevail against God's church. The outcome of this contest is not in doubt. God will destroy all the works of the devil. Christ's kingdom advances straight on until the day he will appear and make all things new.

—NJL